



U.S. Polls: Public Opinion and Right-Wing Extremism

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Abstract

This research explored whether trends in right-wing political violence in the United States are related to trends in national polling data for issues linked to right-wing grievances. Repeated poll items related to right-wing extremism were identified in the American National Election Survey and the General Social Survey from 1970-2006. The Global Terrorism Database (GTD) was used to identify incidents of domestic right-wing terrorism over this same time period. The poll items were examined in relation to (1) changes surrounding the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the deadliest right-wing incident in the U.S. to date, and (2) relationships over time with the prevalence of right-wing incidents in the GTD. Results suggest that polling trends—particularly trends in items tapping feelings that (1) government is out of control, (2) government is doing too much for minorities, and (3) financial circumstances have worsened—may provide new insight into trends in right-wing violence in the United States. Limitations of the study are discussed.

Introduction

The nature of the relationship between right-wing political violence in the U.S. and public attitudes on relevant issues is uncertain. In one view of the relationship, public opinion leads right-wing violence. This view leads to two possibilities. The first possibility is that increasing public hostility toward the federal government and its policies provides an increasing base of support for right-wing violence and thereby makes such violence more likely. A second possibility is that decreasing public hostility toward the federal government and its policies provides a decreasing base of support for right-wing causes and thereby makes right-wing violence more likely as extremist groups despair of policy change by non-violent means.

It is important to note that these two possibilities are not necessarily inconsistent. Both increases and decreases in public support for minority issues may increase the likelihood of minority violence. Increasing public support can bring increased expectations for progress on minority issues, and if progress then occurs slower than expected, the result can be a perception of relative deprivation that leads to violence (Gurr, 1970). And decreasing public support can bring a “five minutes to midnight” desperation such as produced the terrorist attack at Luxor (Wheatley & McCauley, 2009).

Another view of the relationship between right-wing violence and U.S. public opinion is that right-wing violence leads public opinion. One possibility here is that right-wing violence may produce a public reaction that turns against right-wing issues. The contrary possibility is that right-wing violence may produce an inciting and exciting effect on public opinion – as its perpetrators hope (and as terrorists always hope). In this account, right-wing violence makes right-wing causes more salient and increases support for these causes.

Still a fifth possibility is that there is no relationship: that right-wing violence is the result of group dynamics endogenous to right-wing extremist movements and has nothing to do with trends in public opinion. Given the importance of group dynamics as a mechanism of radicalization (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008), this no-relation possibility must be taken seriously.

In an effort to further illuminate these possibilities with empirical data, the research described here explored whether trends in right-wing political violence in the United States are related to trends in national polling data for issues linked to right-wing grievances.

Right-Wing Extremism: Threat and Definition

Scholars and law enforcement agencies are in general agreement that domestic terrorism from right-wing extremists poses one of the most significant terrorism threats to American citizens. LaFree, Dugan, Fogg, and Scott (2006), for example, have documented that domestic attacks outnumber international attacks against the United States by a 7 to 1 ratio. Chermak, Freilich, & Shemtob (2009) note that:

There are many case examples that can be discussed that support the significance of the far right threat. Besides 9/11, the most lethal attack that has occurred on American soil is the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Other examples of the threat include Erik Rudolph's bombings at the 1996 Olympic games at Centennial Park, abortion clinics, and gay bars, the "Sons of Gestapo" train derailment, Matt Hale's plan to murder a federal judge, and the arrest and conviction of William Klar, a white supremacist and anti-government extremist. Klar pled guilty to possession of a weapon of mass destruction after the FBI discovered he possessed sodium cyanide, over 500,000 rounds of ammunition and nearly 70 pipe bombs.

There is substantially less agreement about the *definition* of terrorism in general or, more specifically, terms such as "right-wing extremism," in part because right-wing extremism is a broad category that spans a variety of domestic groups that vary substantially in their specific concerns and agendas. Hewitt (2003), for example, argues that there is no agreed upon definition for contemporary right-wing extremism and he notes that "the movement is multifaceted" (p. 41). Smith (2009) describes right-wing terrorist groups as generally "those that adhere to a 'backward-looking' ideology, one that advocates a return to a political or social system that is perceived to have existed previously in the U.S. Typically associated with extreme conservatism, examples include the KKK, white supremacy groups like the Aryan Nations or groups like the Sheriff's Posse Comitatus that oppose centralized federal power" (Footnote 6).

For the purposes of this project, a useful description of the key characteristics of the domestic far-right, especially as it relates to political violence and terrorism, is provided by Freilich, Chermak, and Caspi (2009):

The domestic far-right is composed of individuals or groups that subscribe to aspects of the following ideals: they are fiercely nationalistic (as opposed to universal and international in orientation), anti-global, suspicious of centralized federal authority, reverent of individual liberty (especially their right to own guns, be free of taxes), believe in conspiracy theories that involve a grave threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty and a belief that one's personal and/or national "way of life" is under attack and is either already lost or that the threat is imminent (sometimes such beliefs are amorphous and vague, but for some the threat is from a specific ethnic, racial, or religious group), and a belief in the need to be prepared for an attack either by participating in paramilitary preparations and training and survivalism. It is important to note that mainstream conservative movements and the mainstream Christian right are not included.

This is a very broad characterization of the far right, broad enough to include groups as varied as the Ku Klux Klan, the Patriot Movement, and Christian Identity churches. The ideologies and motivations of these groups may indeed vary to such a degree as to require separate analyses but, for our purposes in identifying issues related to far-right groups, the broad definition offered by Freilich et al (2009) is an advantage.

Our research involved three key components.

- First, the identification of repeated items from national polls that met specific criteria and were theoretically linked to the grievances of right-wing extremists.
- Second, an examination of the relationships among the longitudinal trends of these items and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the single most deadly incident of right-wing domestic terrorism in U.S. history.
- Third, an examination of the relationships of these same items and the frequency of incidents of right-wing domestic terrorism over three-plus decades based on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

Identifying Relevant Items from National Polls

In order for national polling items to be of value for this project, items were required to meet

two key criteria. First, because the project focused on longitudinal trends, the poll items of interest were restricted to those that have been repeated at regular intervals over time, thereby enabling trend analysis. Second, the items had to assess – directly or indirectly – public sentiment about the issues described above that are known to be important to right-wing extremist groups.

A range of archives was searched for U.S. national polling items that met these criteria. This process led to the determination that the American National Election Survey (ANES; <http://www.electionstudies.org>) and the General Social Survey (GSS; <http://www.norc.org/GSS+Website>) were distinctive in providing potentially useful items – items linked to right-wing grievances that have been repeated at regular intervals over a period of decades. The ANES and the GSS are the flagship polls of U.S. academic social scientists. As a general observation, commercial polls (e.g., Gallup, Harris, etc.) tended to include items of potential interest only *after* specific noteworthy events had already occurred, so that comparisons before and after the event were not possible. Commercial polls also tend to discontinue items after a few years of use, whereas the ANES and GSS continue using many of their items over decades.

The ANES polls have been conducted biennially (in the September to December timeframe) since 1948 under the aegis of various institutions. According to their website (<http://www.electionstudies.org/overview/overview.htm>), the mission of the ANES is:

To inform explanations of election outcomes by providing data that support rich hypothesis testing, maximize methodological excellence, measure many variables, and promote comparisons across people, contexts, and time. The ANES serves this mission by providing researchers with a view of the political world through the eyes of ordinary citizens. Such data are critical, because these citizens' actions determine election outcomes.

Of particular relevance to the current research, the ANES includes items that assess social and political values and opinions on public policy issues.

The GSS (<http://www.norc.org/GSS+Website>) was first administered by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) in 1972. Until 1994, it was administered annually during the February-April

timeframe except for the years 1979, 1981, and 1992. Since 1994, it has been administered during even numbered years only. According to the NORC website, the GSS is the second most frequently analyzed source of information in the social sciences (the U.S. Census is first). The GSS contains a standard core of demographic and attitudinal questions, plus topics of special interest. Of relevance to this research were the core items repeated over time that assess political values, attitudes, and perceptions.

Selecting Relevant Repeated Items from the ANES and GSS

Repeated items from the ANES and GSS were reviewed and selected using the two primary criteria described earlier. First, the items needed to have been included in the survey often or always over multiple decades. For our study, the most recent survey year for the ANES was 2004 (the ANES time series poll was not conducted in 2006; the 2008 time series data were not available at the time of data analysis for this report); the most recent year for the GSS was 2006. Second, the items needed to be relevant, on the basis of face validity, to issues identified in the literature as key concerns of right-wing extremists, as described earlier.

With these criteria in mind, 12 ANES items and 9 GSS items were identified for review in the study. Table 1 and Table 2 present these ANES and GSS items respectively, along with their item codes; the response alternatives that were combined to determine a percentage endorsement value for each item are also indicated. Table 3 shows the percentage endorsement values for each item, as defined in Table 1 and Table 2, for the years 1970 to 2006.

Table 1. ANES (1970-2004) Repeated Items Relevant to Right-Wing Grievances

- VCF0450--Do you approve or disapprove of the President's performance? (% *Disapprove*)
- VCF0604--How much do you trust the federal government to do what is right? (% *Some of the time or None*)
- VCF0605--Is the federal government run by a few big interests or for the benefit of all? (% *Few big interests*)
- VCF0606--How much does the federal government waste tax money? (% *A lot*)
- VCF0608—How many government officials are crooked? (% *Quite a few*)
- VCF0609--Public officials don't care what people like you think? (% *Agree*)
- VCF0613--People like you don't have any say in what the government does? (% *Agree*)
- VCF0809--Should the government see to it that everyone has a job and good standard of living? (% *No: Each person on own*)
- VCF0830--Should the government help Blacks and minorities or should they help themselves? (% *Should help themselves*)
- VCF0870--Has the nation's economy gotten better or worse over the past year? (% *Worse*)
- VCF0880--Has your financial situation gotten better or worse over the past year? (% *Worse*)
- VCF0992--Do you approve or disapprove of the performance of Congress? (% *Disapprove*)

Note. Items are paraphrased for clarity.

Table 2. GSS (1970-2006) Repeated Items Relevant to Right-Wing Grievances

- CONFED-- Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in the executive branch of the federal government? (*% hardly any confidence*)
- CONLEGIS-- Would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in Congress? (*% hardly any confidence*)
- EQWLTH—Should the government in Washington reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor? (*% should not reduce; 5,6, and 7 combined*)
- FINALTER-- During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, worse, or has it stayed the same? (*% getting worse*)
- HELPNOT— Some people think that the government in Washington is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and private businesses. Others disagree and think that the government should do even more to solve our country's problems. Still others have opinions somewhere in between. (*% should be left to individuals*)
- HELPPPOOR-- Some people think that the government in Washington should do everything possible to improve the standard of living of all poor Americans...Other people think it is not the government's responsibility, and that each person should take care of himself. (*% each person should take care of himself*)
- NATFARE-- Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on welfare? (*% too much*)
- NATRACE-- Are we spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving the conditions of Blacks? (*% too much*)
- TAX-- Do you consider the amount of federal income tax which you have to pay as too high, about right, or too low? (*% too high*)

Note. Items are paraphrased for clarity.

Table 3. Percentage Endorsement Levels for ANES and GSS Items (Part 1, 1970-1987)

	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
ANES																		
VCF0450			27		35		33		31		56		46		34		35	
VCF0604	44		45		62		63		68		73		65		54		59	
VCF0605	50		53		66		66		67		70		61		55			
VCF0606	69		66		74		74		77		78		66		65			
VCF0608	32		36		45		42		39		47				32			
VCF0609	47		49		50		51		51		52		47		42		52	
VCF0613	36		40		40		41		45		39		45		32			
VCF0809			40		37		39		44		41		41		38		47	
VCF0830	40		38		37		36		42		41		39		33		41	
VCF0870											83		70		24		35	
VCF0880	34		23		41		31		36		42		38		28		27	
VCF0992											48		49		35		38	
GSS																		
CONFED				19	43	30	25	14	27		35		25	30	29		23	27
CONLEGIS				16	22	26	27	18	22		35		23	23	22		20	18
EQWLTH									31		36			35	33		30	34
FINALTER			18	16	22	28	23	22	19		25		31	27	22	22	21	19
HELPNOT							30							36	33		30	27
HELPPOOR							24							26	23		23	22
NATFARE				54	43	45	63	63	62		59		51	49	40	46	42	46
NATRACE				23	22	26	28	26	27		26		22	21	16	22	17	16
TAX							62	69			73		73		65	63		61

Table 3 (Continued). Percentage Endorsement Levels for ANES and GSS Items (Part 2, 1988-2006)

	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
ANES																			
VCF0450	38		34		56		46		31		26		31		30		49		
VCF0604	58		71		70		77		67		59		56		44		53		
VCF0605	64		71		75		76		69		64		61		48		56		
VCF0606	63		67		67		70		59		61		59		48		61		
VCF0608	40		48		46		52		44		41		36		30		35		
VCF0609	51		63		52		66		61		62		56		31		50		
VCF0613	41		54		36		56		53		42		41		29		43		
VCF0809	43		37		41		42		46		36		49				42		
VCF0830	44		44		45		50		53		49		50				46		
VCF0870	31		74		72		28		17		15		17		72		45		
VCF0880	25		32		35		28		25		21		12		26		32		
VCF0992	34		55		63		62		48		45		34		36		42		
GSS																			
CONFED	28	21	24	22		34	36		44		37		35		21		31		38
CONLEGIS	20	22	23	26		42	40		44		31		29		26		26		34
EQWLTH	32	29	26	29		34	39		34		37		37		34		34		32
FINALTER	19	18	21	22		27	23		21		16		17		23		26		22
HELPNOT	29	30	27	28		31	36		35		34		36		26		29		28
HELPPOOR	24	23	21	22		25	28		27		30		30		25		25		24
NATFARE	43	43	38	39		57	62		58		46		39		41		41		38
NATRACE	17	17	16	16		17	22		21		18		17		18		15		16
TAX	58	58	63	59		56	66		68		67		67		62		61		58

Note. All item values are rounded off to the nearest whole number and reflect endorsement levels in the “right-wing” direction. Further descriptions of the items can be found in Table 1 and Table 2.

Because the ANES in particular and the GSS to a lesser degree have not been administered every year, there are many “holes” in this survey data. To address these limitations, especially relevant to the analyses described later involving annual data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), wherever an ANES or GSS item had a missing annual observation between two otherwise consecutive years, we interpolated the mean value of those two near-consecutive years and used that value for the intervening missing value (e.g., if 1994 and 1996 data were available but an observation for 1995 was missing, we interpolated a value for 1995). We did not extend this strategy to fill in larger gaps between data points (e.g., if 1994 and 1998 had values but 1995 through 1997 were missing, we did not interpolate and instead left these values as missing).

Also, because the individual ANES and GSS items differed substantially in their average level of endorsement (in part because the average depends upon the specific cut-points used to categorize responses), we used z-score transformations of all item scores. That is, for each item the mean and SD of available percentages (including interpolations) was calculated, and each percentage expressed as plus or minus deviation from the mean *divided by* the SD. This approach serves to facilitate the comparisons among items in regard to the magnitude of longitudinal changes.

Survey Item Trends in Relation to the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing

To date, the single most deadly domestic incident of right-wing terrorism was the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building on April 19, 1995: 168 people were killed and hundreds more were injured. This event occurred during the time period in which right-wing militia and patriot movements had gained prominence, in part as a response to two earlier incidents in the 1990’s--events at Ruby Ridge, Idaho in 1992 and Waco, Texas in 1993. A brief description of this context is useful before examining the trends of national polling data over this period.

During the early to mid-1990s, confrontations involving federal government agents at Ruby Ridge, Idaho (1992), and Waco, Texas (1993) coincided with the rapid growth of the militia/patriot movement (e.g., Berlet & Lyons, 2000; Potok, 2004; Wright, 2007) and preceded Timothy McVeigh’s bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1995. The violent events at Ruby

Ridge, Waco, and Oklahoma City all occurred within less than a three-year period.

Other important events potentially bearing on right-wing extremist concerns also occurred during this time frame. Of particular note and in chronological order: the first World Trade Center bombing in New York City by Islamic radicals (February 26, 1993); Congressional passage of the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA; November 17, 1993); and gun control legislation enacted through the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act (signed into law November 30, 1993) and the Federal Assault Weapons Ban (September 13, 1994).

Ruby Ridge, Idaho. A controversial confrontation between Randy Weaver and his family and federal marshals in Ruby Ridge, Idaho, on August 21, 1992, resulted in the death of two family members and a government agent. The federal marshals were attempting to arrest Weaver on weapons-related charges. Weaver was known for his white supremacist beliefs and like-minded associates, and the incident received significant media attention and prompted outrage from right-wing extremist groups and others concerned about the government's apparent abuse of power. A subsequent U.S. Senate hearing in 1995 led to admissions by the FBI Director of agency wrongdoing in the case and the disciplining of the agents involved, and ultimately to wrongful-death court settlements on behalf of the Weaver family.

Waco, Texas. In 1993, less than a year after Ruby Ridge, an even more violent confrontation and siege involving federal agents of the ATF and FBI occurred in Waco, Texas at the Branch Davidian compound of David Koresh and his followers. In February, search and arrest warrants related to weapons charges led to a government raid on the facility. There are conflicting accounts of how events unfolded, but gunfire killed six Branch members and four ATF agents before a ceasefire was agreed upon. A seven-week siege by the FBI followed and, again under disputed circumstances, a final assault on April 19, 1993, led to a fire that destroyed the compound and killed 76 Branch members including Koresh. In the ensuing criminal trial, several members of the group were found guilty of various offenses, but none was convicted on murder-related charges. Although a subsequent wrongful-death suit against the government was dismissed, coverage of the events at Waco--including live

television coverage of the final assault --again caused outrage in right-wing circles (and elsewhere) about governmental abuse of power.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Prior to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, was the deadliest act of terrorism in U.S. history, causing 168 deaths and injuries to hundreds of others. Timothy McVeigh was arrested, found guilty of the bombing at trial, and executed for the crime in 2001. His accomplice Terry Nichols was sentenced to life imprisonment. During McVeigh's trial it became clear that he conceived of the bombing as retaliation for perceived governmental abuse of power at Ruby Ridge and Waco (the Oklahoma City bombing took place exactly two years after the Waco siege ended). Evidence also emerged that McVeigh was sympathetic toward and had loose ties (at least) to the right-wing militia movement in the U.S. Controversy remains as to whether the bombing was a conspiracy among a much broader group than the individuals convicted of the crime (Wright, 2007).

An Exploratory Analysis of ANES and GSS Item Trends in Relation to the Oklahoma City Bombing

Individual longitudinal charts are provided in the Appendix for each of the 21 items from the ANES and the GSS (using z-scores as described earlier). For each item, we examined the trend from 1970 to 2006 to determine whether an endorsement level "peak" occurred within the year before or after the Oklahoma City bombing (i.e., between 1994 and 1996). A peak was defined as a z-score value that exceeded all other annual values for an item or was within 0.10 of the highest value for that item over the 37-year period under investigation.

Table 4 identifies the items that displayed a peak between 1994 and 1996. Overall, 11 of the 21 items had their peak year within this narrow time period. Eight of these peaks occurred in 1994 (before the Oklahoma City bombing) and three occurred in 1996 (after the bombing). Although far from conclusive, this overall pattern suggests that national polling data may indeed have potential value in tracking major incidents of right-wing domestic terrorism in the United States.

Table 4. Peak ANES and GSS Item Endorsements between 1994 and 1996

ANES and GSS Items		Peak Year between 1994 and 1996
VCF0450	Disapprove of the President's performance	-----
VCF0604	I don't trust the federal government to do what is right	1994 (1.76)
VCF0605	Federal government is run by a few big interests	1994 (1.60)
VCF0606	Federal government wastes a lot of tax money	-----
VCF0608	Quite a few government officials are crooked	1994 (1.90)
VCF0609	Public officials don't care what people like me think	1994 (1.92)
VCF0613	People like me don't have any say in what the government does	1994 (2.22)
VCF0809	Government should not see to it that everyone has a job	-----
VCF0830	Blacks and minorities should help themselves	1996 (1.93)
VCF0870	Nation's economy has gotten worse over the past year	-----
VCF0880	My financial situation has gotten worse over the past year	-----
VCF0992	I disapprove of the performance of Congress	-----
CONFED	I have little confidence in the executive branch of government	1996 (1.97)
CONLEGIS	I have hardly any confidence in Congress	1996 (2.22)
EQWLTH	Government should not reduce income differences	1994 (1.80)
FINALTER	My financial situation been getting worse	-----
HELPNOT	Government is doing too much that should be left to individuals	1994 (1.48)
HELPPPOOR	People should take care of themselves vs. help poor	-----
NATFARE	We are spending too much on welfare	1994 (1.62)
NATRACE	We are spending too much on improving conditions for Blacks	-----
TAX	Federal income tax is too high	-----

Note. Item phrasing has been adapted for clarity. Figures in parentheses represent z-score values for items corresponding to their "peak" years.

ANES and GSS Items and the Global Terrorism Database

The trends among our set of ANES and GSS items surrounding the Oklahoma City bombing provided encouraging evidence for their potential broader relevance to incidents of right-wing domestic terrorism across the entire period of interest (i.e., 1970 to 2006). To investigate this possibility further, we relied on the Global Terrorism Database (GTD; <http://www.start.umd.edu/start/data/gtd/>), an open-source database of domestic and international terrorism incidents from 1970 to 2007 produced by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). Our focus was on the U.S. domestic incidents only.

For each domestic incident in the GTD, the listed perpetrator group (the GTD variable called “gname”) was researched and evaluated as to whether it qualified as a right-wing group based on the characteristics highlighted by Freilich, Chermak, and Caspi (2009) and described earlier in this report. In most cases, these judgments were easily made. In cases of uncertainty, the project team discussed the group, reviewed additional online and other reports about the group, and then reached a judgment. Where such judgments were still difficult, the incident was excluded from subsequent analyses.

Table 5 shows the list of domestic right-wing groups identified and the number of incidents for each. The list includes: Americans for a Competent Federal Judicial System, Aryan Nation, David Lane, Ku Klux Klan, Militia Members, Mountaineer Militia, Neo-Nazi Group, National Socialist Liberation Front, Posse Comitatus, Right-Wing Extremists, Secret Army Organization, Sons of the Gestapo, and World Church of the Creator. In total, across the entire period from 1970 to 2007, only 31 incidents were categorized as the actions of right-wing perpetrators. This figure represents only 2.5% of the total of 1,229 incidents of domestic terrorism listed in the GTD. Of the 38 years covered by the GTD, 25 years had no reported right-wing incidents at all (with a maximum of six in a single year).

Table 5. Right-Wing Groups Identified by GTD and Number of Incidents (1970-2007)

Group Name	Number of Incidents
Americans for a Competent Federal Judicial System	4
Aryan Nation	4
David Lane	1
Ku Klux Klan	5
Militia Members	1
Mountaineer Militia	1
Neo-Nazi Group	1
National Socialist Liberation Front	1
Posse Comitatus	1
Right-Wing Extremists	1
Secret Army Organization	3
Sons of the Gestapo	1
World Church of the Creator	7

In the GTD, a large number of incidents (177) are attributed to “anti-abortion” groups. Because of their specific focus, and because there were so many more abortion-related incidents than all other right-wing incidents combined, the abortion-related incidents were excluded from our analyses. Also, there were an even larger number of incidents (335) for which the GTD listed the perpetrator group as

“unknown.” These incidents were excluded as well.

For the statistical analyses, a three-year moving average of the total number of right-wing incidents was used. This moving-average approach was taken for two reasons. First, in the GTD right-wing domestic terrorism incidents were rare events during the multi-decade time period of interest. This smoothing approach served to reduce the “noise” inherent in a time series in which there were so many low or zero values. Second, even though a terrorism incident and the ANES or GSS survey responses may have been coded as having occurred in the same year, it was still possible for a GTD incident to occur *after* the ANES and GSS had already been administered that year, making it impossible for that event to have influenced responses to the survey items. Given both of these limitations, the three-year smoothing approach was adopted.

This moving average was calculated based on the number of incidents for any given year, as well as the number of incidents from the year immediately before and immediately after. At the beginning and the end of the yearly data sequence, a two-year moving average was used instead--the current year and the year after (at the beginning of the sequence) or the year before (at the end of the sequence). This three-year moving average of right-wing incidents, presented in Figure 1 below, was the key measure drawn from the GTD. In addition, a comparable average was computed for all domestic incidents that were not characterized as right-wing (see Figure 2 below) in order to enable comparisons between relationships with the ANES and GSS items.

GTD 3-Year Moving Average of Right-Wing Incidents

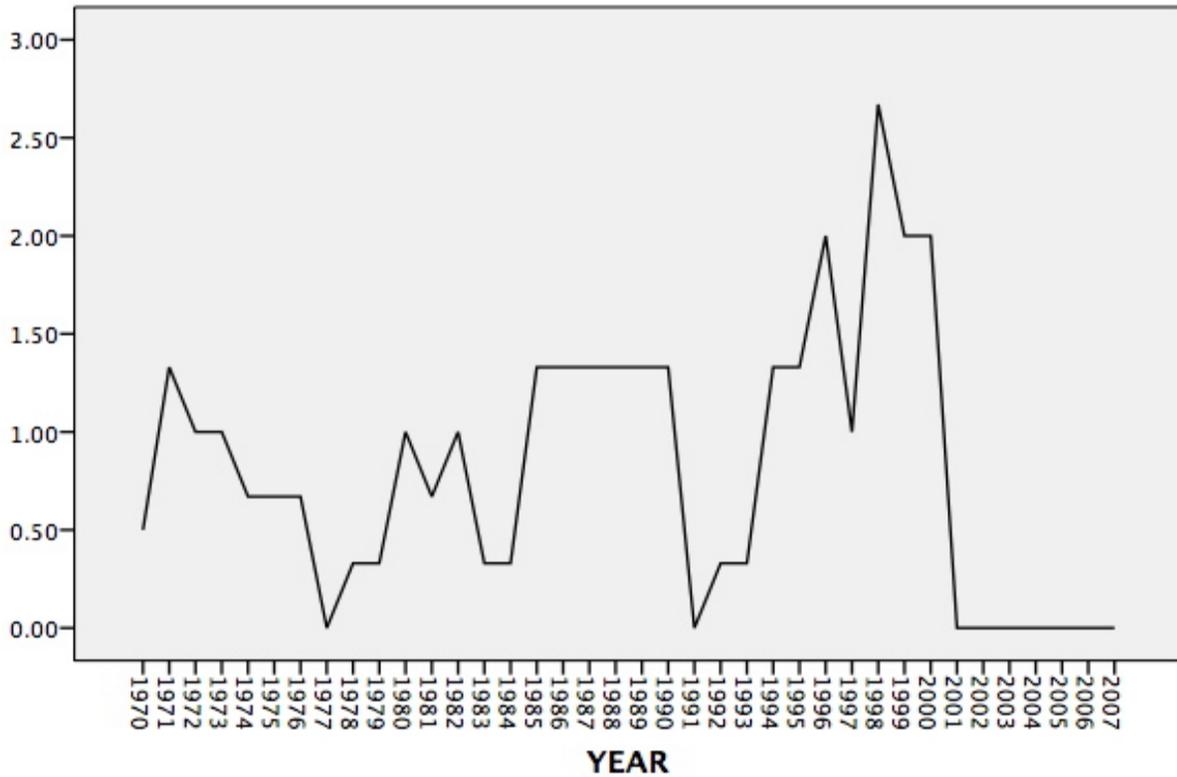


Figure 1. Three-Year Moving Average of Right-Wing Incidents from GTD

GTD 3-Year Moving Average of Non-Right-Wing Incidents

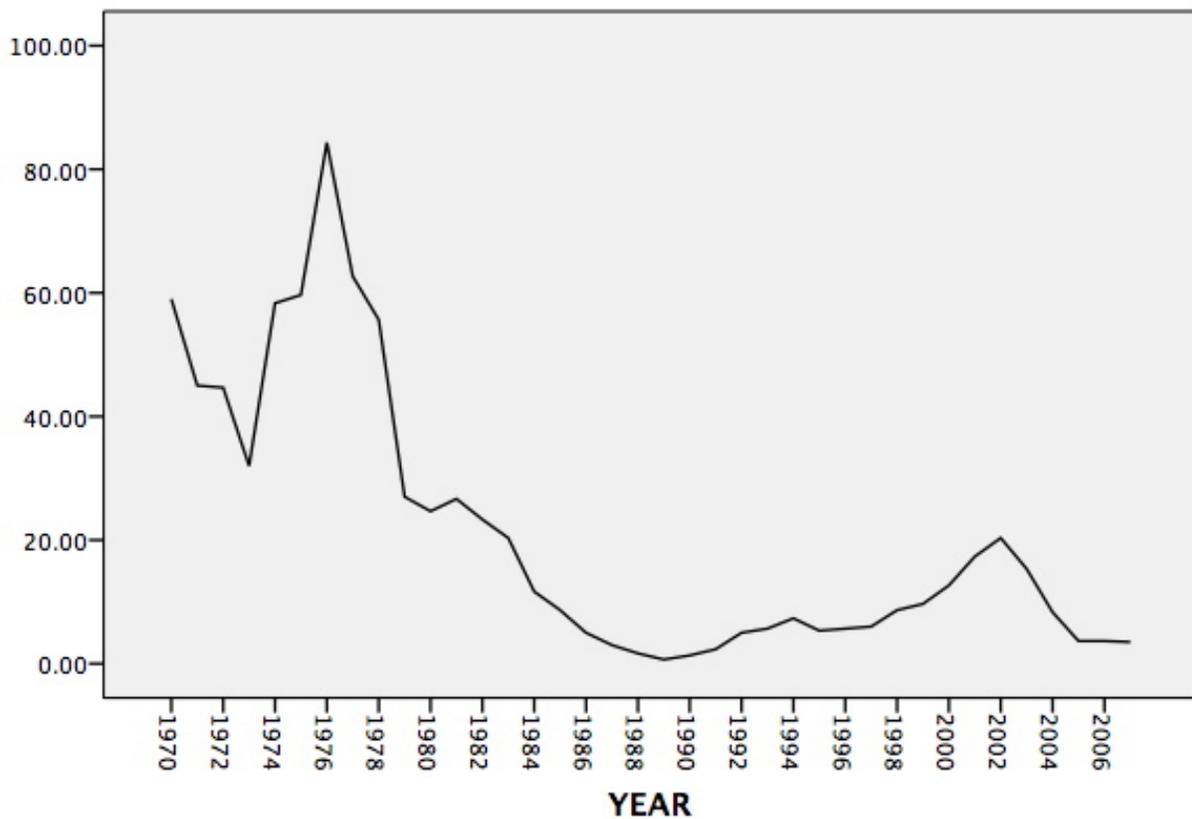


Figure 2. Three-Year Moving Average of Non-Right-Wing Incidents from GTD (excludes incidents with Group Name designated as “Abortion-Related” or “Unknown”)

Table 6 displays the correlation matrix for these two GTD measures of domestic terrorism incidents and the 21 items from the ANES and GTD. Of particular interest are the correlations in Column 1 (GTD right-wing incidents) and Column 2 (GTD non-right-wing incidents).

Table 6. Correlations between ANES and GSS Items and GTD Incidents of Domestic Terrorism

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22
1 GTD-RW																						
2 GTD-Other	-.19																					
3 VCF0450	-.35	-.22																				
4 VCF0604	.08	-.20	.54																			
5 VCF0605	.19	-.25	.43	.95																		
6 VCF0606	-.12	.54	.33	.52	.47																	
7 VCF0608	.24	-.22	.46	.92	.95	.49																
8 VCF0609	.58	-.32	.04	.66	.76	.21	.77															
9 VCF0613	.43	-.30	.06	.68	.69	.21	.74	.86														
10 VCF0809	.24	-.28	.02	.01	.10	-.25	-.11	.12	.26													
11 VCF0830	.48	-.58	.00	.36	.47	-.57	.37	.86	.65	.43												
12 VCF0870	-.59	.40	.64	.20	.03	.32	.12	-.37	-.24	-.37	-.42											
13 VCF0880	-.50	.39	.61	.40	.26	.72	.35	-.18	-.01	-.40	-.51	.78										
14 VCF0992	-.09	-.21	.58	.86	.85	.59	.87	.57	.59	-.32	.34	.34	.49									
15 CONFED	.33	-.20	.03	.26	.27	-.06	.28	.46	.31	.13	.53	-.59	-.17	.19								
16 CONLEGIS	.17	-.31	.28	.49	.50	-.14	.46	.54	.46	.18	.71	-.19	-.15	.62	.72							
17 EQWLTH	.24	.14	-.04	-.13	-.19	-.21	-.15	.06	-.10	.22	.40	-.48	-.39	-.12	.63	.48						
18 FINALTER	-.50	.14	.68	.28	.08	.22	.21	-.30	-.08	-.14	-.31	.65	.65	.36	-.03	.15	-.04					
19 HELPNOT	.53	.08	-.22	.25	.19	.15	.22	.44	.32	.19	.35	-.74	-.44	.08	.66	.48	.67	-.22				
20 HELPPoor	.44	.10	-.36	-.06	-.10	-.31	-.11	.31	.14	.21	.63	-.66	-.68	-.06	.72	.55	.87	-.34	.78			
21 NATFARE	.06	.45	.22	.60	.49	.60	.47	.28	.40	.12	.06	-.04	.38	.56	.07	.32	.35	.15	.57	.39		
22 NATRACE	-.03	.79	-.01	.35	.21	.71	.24	-.04	.10	-.10	-.37	.11	.52	.19	-.04	-.02	.27	.22	.49	.29	.79	
23 TAX	.31	.32	-.05	.14	-.10	.23	-.01	.03	.10	.03	-.08	-.05	.15	-.08	.22	.10	.59	.20	.78	.69	.45	.64

NOTE. *N*s vary from 19 to 35. Correlations in bold are significant at $p < .05$. GTD-RW represents the 3-year moving average of right-wing incidents; GTD-Other represents the 3-year moving average of all incidents *excluding* those designated as right-wing, abortion-related, or unknown. ANES and GSS variable descriptions are provided in Table 1 and Table 2.

Several of these correlations were statistically significant, and it is apparent that the relationships differed between the right-wing and non-right-wing domestic terrorism incidents. Of particular note, the frequency of right-wing terrorism incidents in the GTD was uniquely *positively* correlated with two types of poll items: (1) two items describing perceptions that government is out of the control of ordinary citizens (VCF0609—*Public officials don't care what people like me think* and VCF0613—*People like me don't have any say in what the government does*) and (2) three items expressing a negative view of government welfare programs, which are considered over-reaching and for which the direct beneficiaries are often minority groups (VCF0830—*Blacks and minorities should help themselves*; HELPNOT—*Government is doing too much that should be left to individuals*; and HELP-POOR—*People should take care of themselves vs. help poor*). In addition, there were significant *negative* correlations between GTD incidents and three poll items that tapped into a view that the respondent's financial circumstances have declined (VCF0870—*Nation's economy has gotten worse over the past year*; VCF0880—*My financial situation has gotten worse over the past year*; and FINAL-TER—*My financial situation been getting worse*).

Given these findings, these eight items were used to create three scales: Government Out of Control, Against Aid to Minorities, and My Financial Situation Worse (with shorthand labels of “Government OOC,” “Anti Minority Aid,” and “Financially Worse”). The first two components are readily discernable in descriptions of right-wing extremism such as the one offered by Freilich, Chermak, and Caspi (2009) earlier in this report: “fiercely nationalistic (as opposed to universal and international in orientation), anti-global, suspicious of centralized federal authority, reverent of individual liberty”. The third component, focused on unfavorable economic conditions, has long been cited as an important grievance in the literature on political mobilization (see for example Gurr, 1970), but is not usually seen as associated in particular with right-wing grievances (for a recent exception, see Wright, 2007).

The Cronbach alphas for the three scales were .92, .83, and .90 for *Government OOC*, *Anti Minority Aid*, and *Financially Worse* respectively. The inter-correlations among the scales themselves were $r = .54$ for *Government OOC* and *Anti Minority Aid*, $r = -.22$ for *Government OOC* and *Financially*

Worse, and $r = -.53$ for *Anti Minority Aid* and *Financially Worse*. Table 7 presents the correlations of these three scales with (1) the 3-year moving average of right-wing incidents from the GTD, and (2) the 3-year moving average of non-right-wing incidents from the GTD, excluding the incidents for which the perpetrator group was designated as “abortion-related” or “unknown.” As is apparent from the table, the three public attitude scales had contrasting relationships with the right-wing and non-right-wing incident counts from the GTD. The scales’ correlations with right-wing incident frequency were all statistically significant and in the opposite direction from the corresponding correlations with the non-right-wing incidents, demonstrating a substantial degree of discriminant validity. That is, our three scales are not predicting every kind of terrorist activity equally; rather the scales show different patterns of correlation with right-wing and non-right-wing incidents.

Table 7. Correlations Between ANES/GSS Scales and GTD Incidents.

ANES/GSS Scale	3-Year Moving Average GTD Right-Wing Incidents	3-Year Moving Average GTD Non-Right-Wing Incidents
<i>Government OOC</i>	.51**	-.31
<i>Anti Minority Aid</i>	.52**	-.41*
<i>Financially Worse</i>	-.59**	.28

Note. *Ns* vary from 35 to 37. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

A regression analysis with these three scales as predictors of the GTD right-wing incidents produced a significant $R = .71$ ($F(3,31) = 10.44, p < .01$). However, only two of the predictors—*Government OOC* and *Financially Worse*—made statistically significant contributions in this three-factor model. For comparison purposes, a two-factor model was examined using only *Government OOC* and *Financially Worse* as predictors. This regression model yielded a comparable $R = .71$ ($F(2, 32) = 16.13, p < .01$). It is interesting to note that *Anti Minority Aid* is well predicted by *Government OOC* and *Financially Worse*: $R = .69$ ($F(2,32) = 14.40, p < .01$).

Figures 3, 4, and 5 show the trajectories of the three scales over time. Returning to the time period surrounding the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing when the right-wing militia/patriot movement was flourishing, the figures reveal that these years were indeed characterized by a significant increase and subsequent decline for each scale. As Figure 3 and Figure 4 reveal, public perceptions that the government was out of control and that aid to minorities was unwarranted—both well-documented right-wing concerns—rose to a peak in 1994. The former (*Government OOC*) declined thereafter, while the latter (*Anti Minority Aid*) continued to remain elevated until 2001. The trend for the public's concerns about their economic circumstances was different. It peaked two years earlier, in 1992, and then declined steadily through the year 2000. This variation in timing may be mere noise, but it is also plausible, as suggested earlier, that economic concerns are not as clearly linked to right-wing extremist grievances specifically. In addition, the *Financially Worse* scale may average over important regional variation in economic circumstances (e.g., farm versus industrial areas).

Government Out of Control Scale

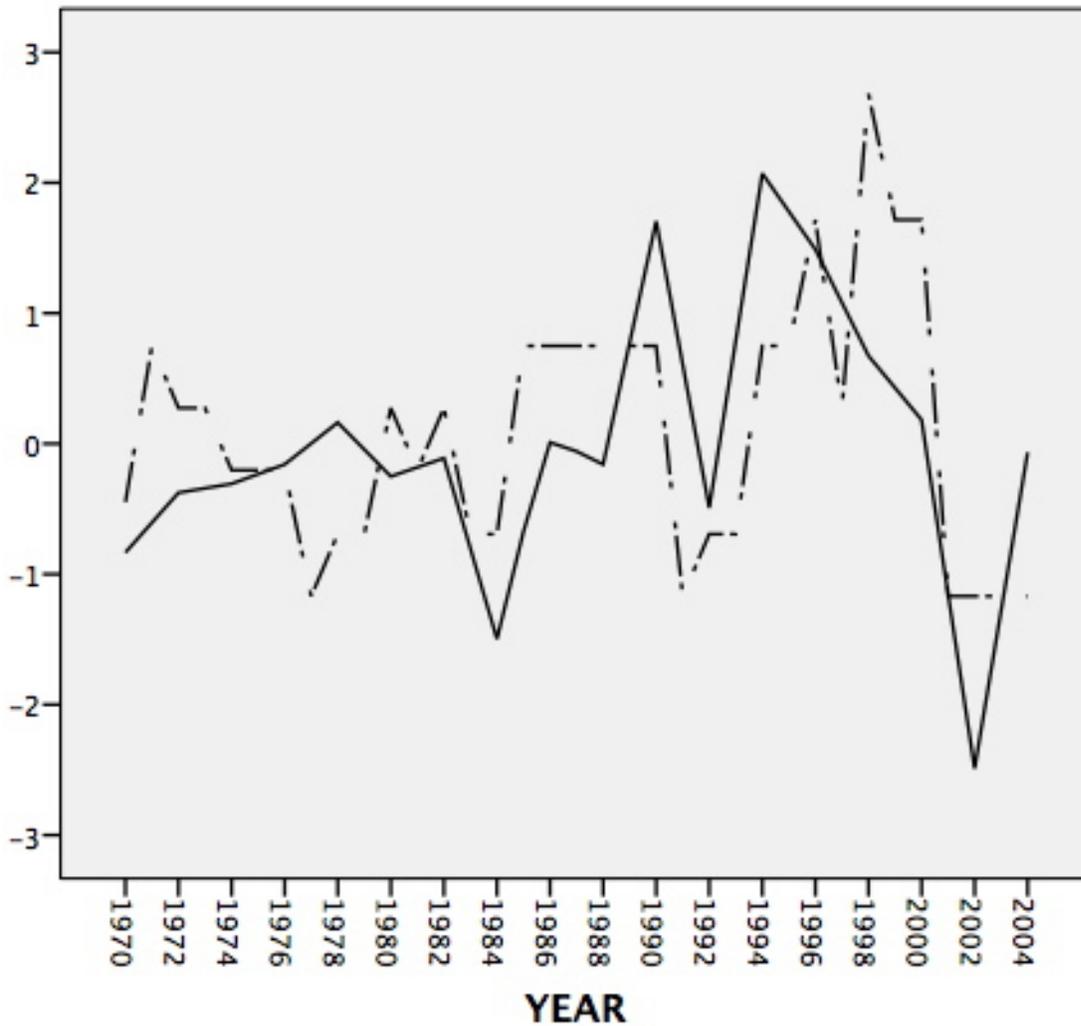


Figure 3. Government Out of Control Scale (z-scores). Dotted line represents right-wing GTD incidents (also as z-scores).

Against Aid to Minorities Scale

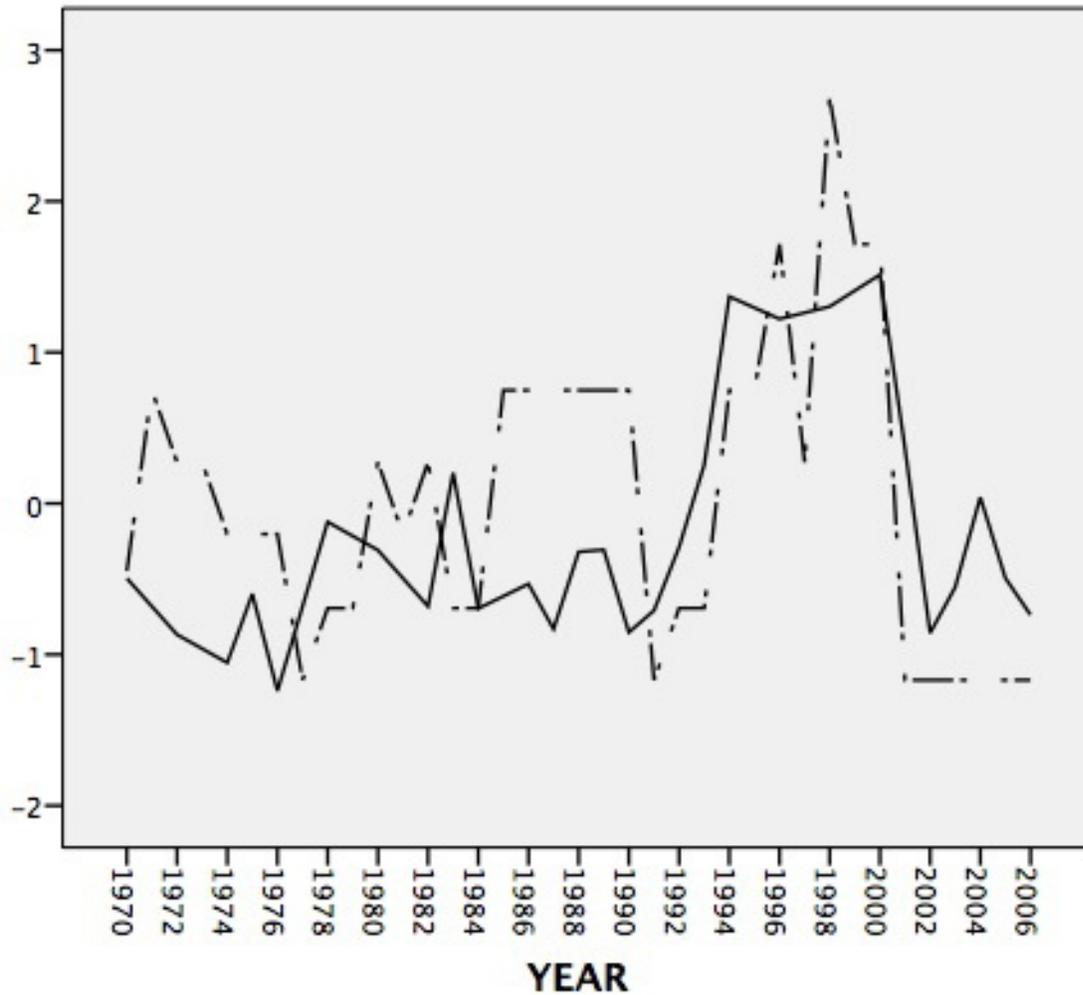


Figure 4. Against Aid to Minorities Scale (z-scores). Dotted line represents right-wing GTD incidents (also as z-scores).

My Financial Situation Worse Scale

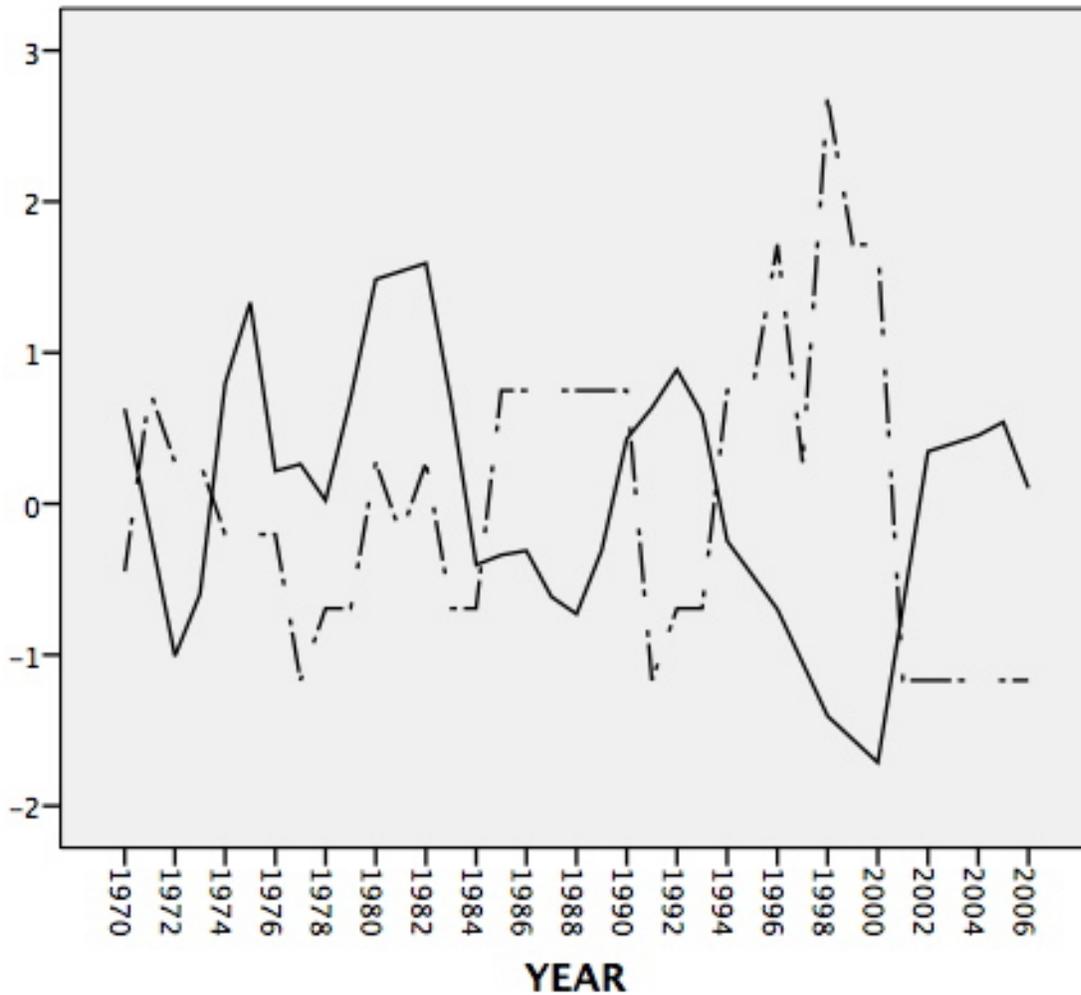


Figure 5. My Financial Situation Worse Scale (z-scores). Dotted line represents right-wing GTD incidents (also as z-scores).

It should be mentioned that there are a few correlations in Table 6 that defy easy interpretation. Of particular note, two GSS items—NATFARE (*We are spending too much on welfare*) and NATRACE (*We are spending too much on improving conditions for Blacks*)—showed surprising patterns of variation. Both of these items appear to tap into concerns related to the government providing too much aid to minorities and those on welfare, similar to the three items that comprise the *Anti Minority Aid* scale. And yet unlike the scale items, these two GSS items were uncorrelated with the frequency of right-wing incidents of domestic terrorism. Instead these items were strongly positively correlated with the frequency of *non*-right-wing incidents. We have no ready explanation for this pattern. To the extent that non-right-wing terrorism incidents are more likely to include minority group members as perpetrators (e.g., radical black groups), it is possible that these positive correlations could reflect a backlash of sorts by the general public against such activities.

Discussion, Limitations, and Future Directions

The findings reported here suggest that public attitudes may be related to right-wing extremist activity. It is clear that public sympathy for right-wing concerns about government power and minorities increased significantly during the early 1990s prior to the Oklahoma City bombing. This result is consistent with the view that popular support may lead right-wing violence, but inconsistent with the view that right-wing violence is a desperate response to loss of public sympathy for right-wing concerns (see Introduction).

It is also apparent that public endorsement of these right-wing concerns declined substantially after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing (although the decline in concerns over aid to minorities was delayed for several years). This pattern is consistent with the view that extremist violence can diminish public sympathy for the underlying cause or ideology, and it is inconsistent with the alternative view that such acts of domestic terrorism serve to incite greater support for right-wing grievances.

Taken together, trends of public opinion that peak before Oklahoma City and decline after

Oklahoma City suggest a continuing interaction between political events and public opinion, such that public opinion can lead anti-government activity and can as well reflect public reaction to anti-government activity. The null hypothesis suggested in the Introduction -- that public opinion and extremist activity are unrelated -- is *not* supported by the Oklahoma City example.

Beyond the particular example of the Oklahoma City bombing, more general relationships were found across the entire 1970-2006 timeframe. Over this 37-year period, the frequency of right-wing domestic terrorism incidents was significantly positively correlated with ANES and GSS items tapping the public's worries about the federal government being "out of control" and their concerns about too much aid being provided to minorities and the poor. Other survey items assessing public concerns about economic circumstances proved to be *negatively* correlated with incidents of right-wing extremism. This latter finding is provocative, suggesting that incidents of right-wing terrorism occurred *less* frequently during periods of heightened economic worry. It is possible that a larger and more active government is seen as justified when the economy is in trouble, but animus against the government increases when the economy is improving. Even right-wing individuals and groups might join in this turn toward and away from government as the economy moves from worse to better. Of course, whether the tentative potential relationships uncovered here apply more broadly to other settings and time periods has not been established.

Our results and the implications of our results are limited by the weakness of the GTD record of right-wing terrorist incidents. Better measures of right-wing activity are needed to learn more about the relation of public opinion with this kind of extremist activity. Actual acts of domestic terrorism are a critical but limited representation of the extent to which extremist activities and allegiances are growing or ebbing. In our analyses, there were only 31 such incidents identified in the GTD data over the entire period from 1970 to 2006. Predicting rare events is always more difficult. Given the relative rarity of the GTD events to be predicted, it is perhaps surprising that the correlations between public opinion and right-wing events are as strong as they are.

These correlations can be tested further with measures of right-wing activities that fall short

of actual terrorism incidents, such as the number of groups, rallies, and protests related to right-wing causes: Collective Action data base 1960-1990; Walker, Martin & McCarthy, 2008; (<http://www.stanford.edu/group/collectiveaction/cgi-bin/drupal/>).

These correlations can also be tested further with measures of illegal activities that go beyond the GTD focus on terrorist incidents. Data bases of right-wing criminal activity that could be studied in relation to poll trends include the following.

1. American Terrorism Study 1980-2002; Smith & Damphouse, 2002. (<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/4639?q=smith+damphousse>)
2. Extremist Crime Data Base (ECBD); Freilich & Chermak, 2009 March.
3. Hate Crime Statistics, Federal Bureau of Investigation. (<http://www.fbi.gov/hq/cid/civilrights/hate.htm>)

Conclusion

Despite the limitations noted throughout this report, we believe that the findings described may offer considerable promise moving forward. It would have been unsurprising to have found no meaningful patterns given the data-related difficulties described. Yet several intriguing patterns and relationships did indeed emerge. Given the exploratory nature of this project, it remains to be seen whether the results hold up under closer scrutiny and with more and better measures of right-wing activity. However, our findings do suggest that efforts are warranted to learn more about the relationship between public attitudes and right-wing extremism in the United States.

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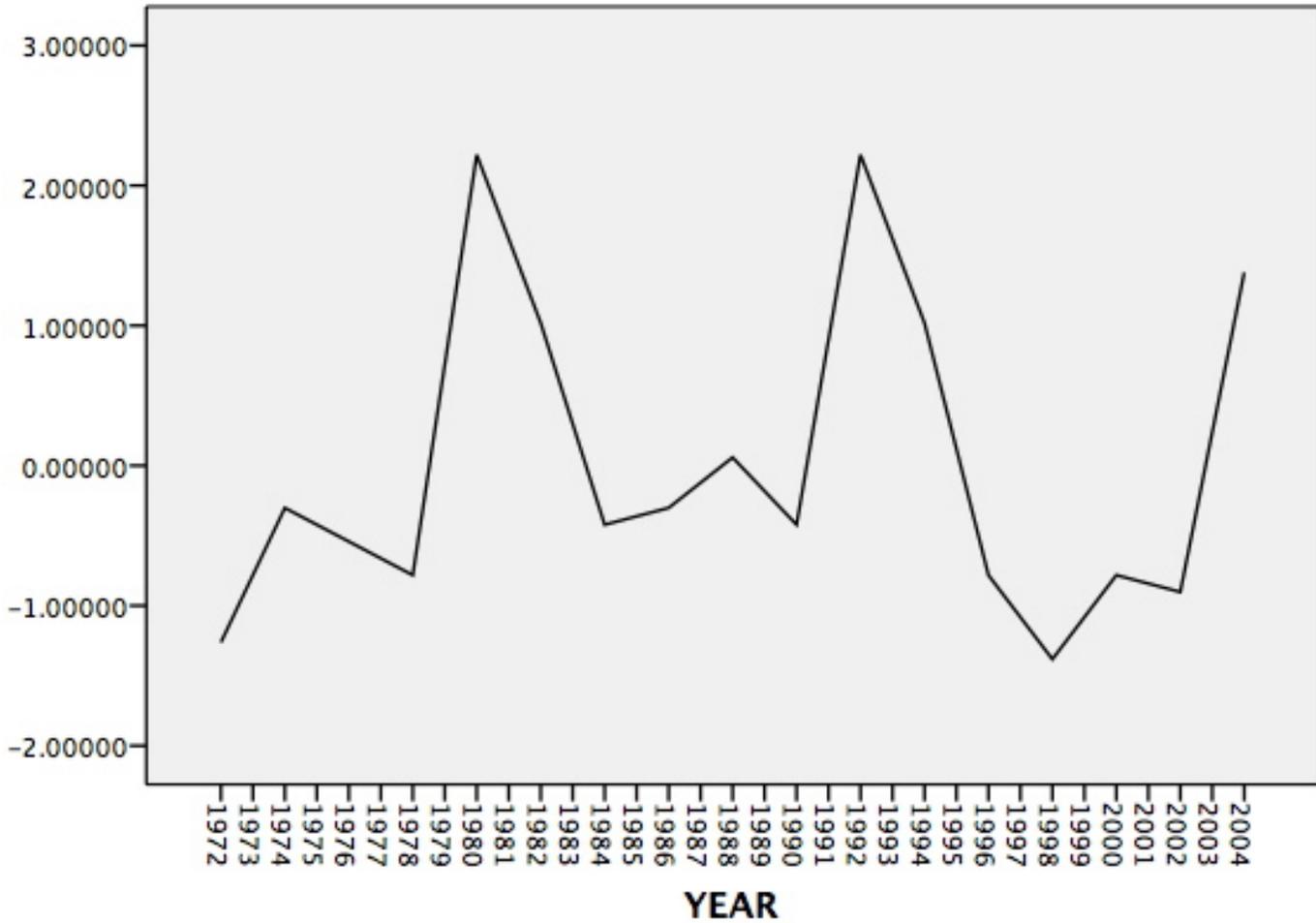
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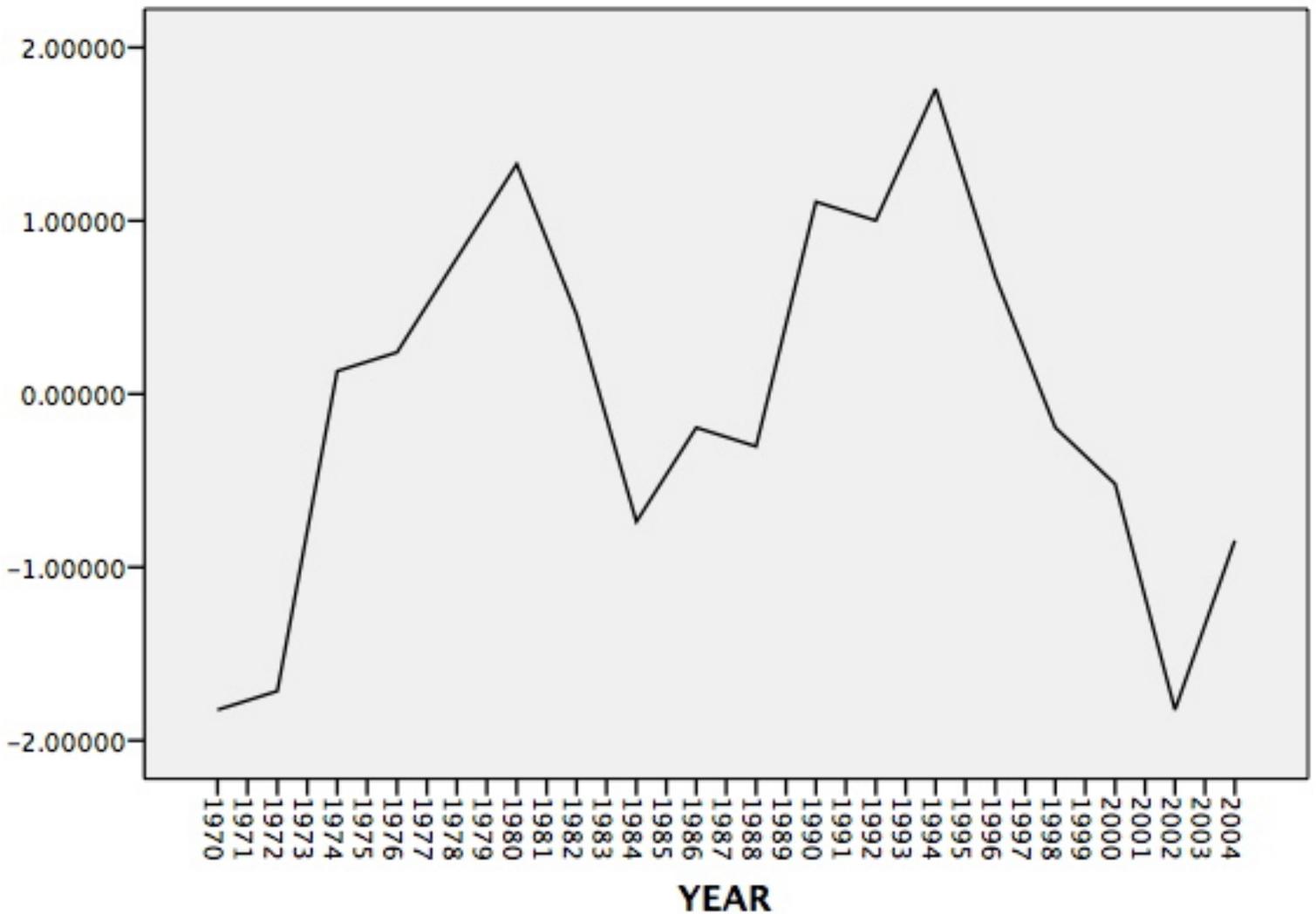
APPENDIX

Graphs of Individual ANES and GSS Items (z-scores) 1970-2006

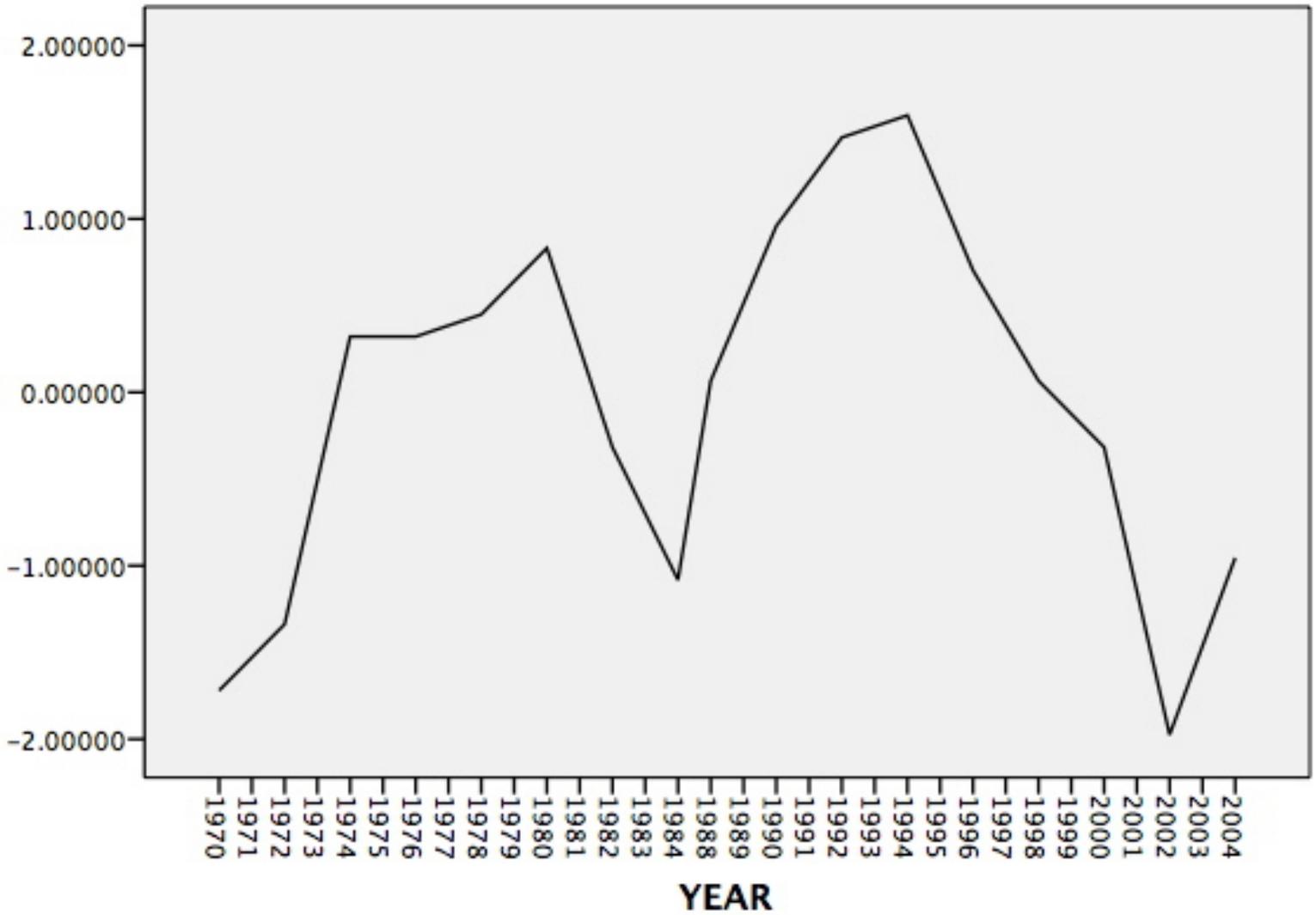
VCF0450 Disapprove of Presidential Performance



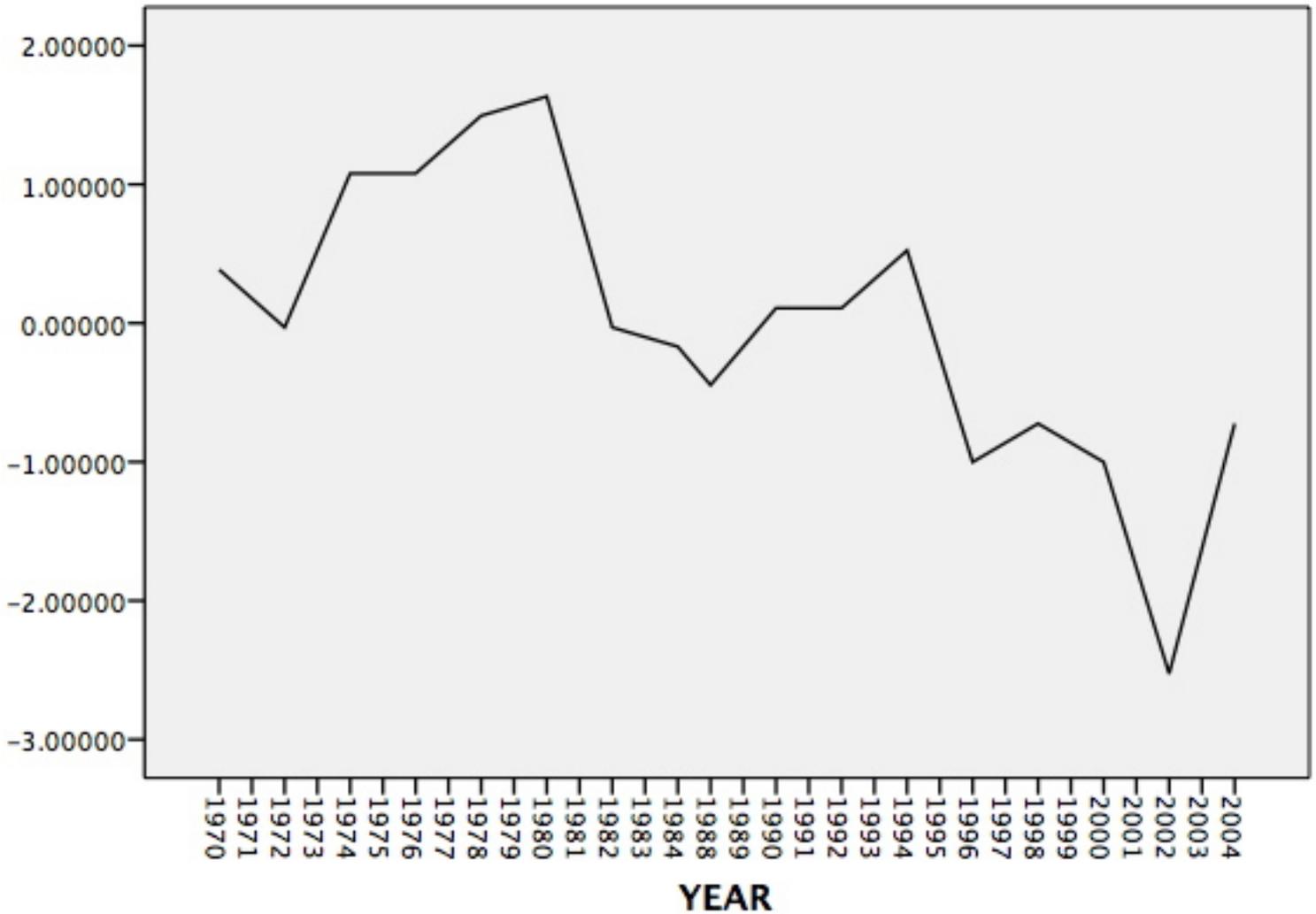
VCF0604 Distrust Govt to Do What is Right



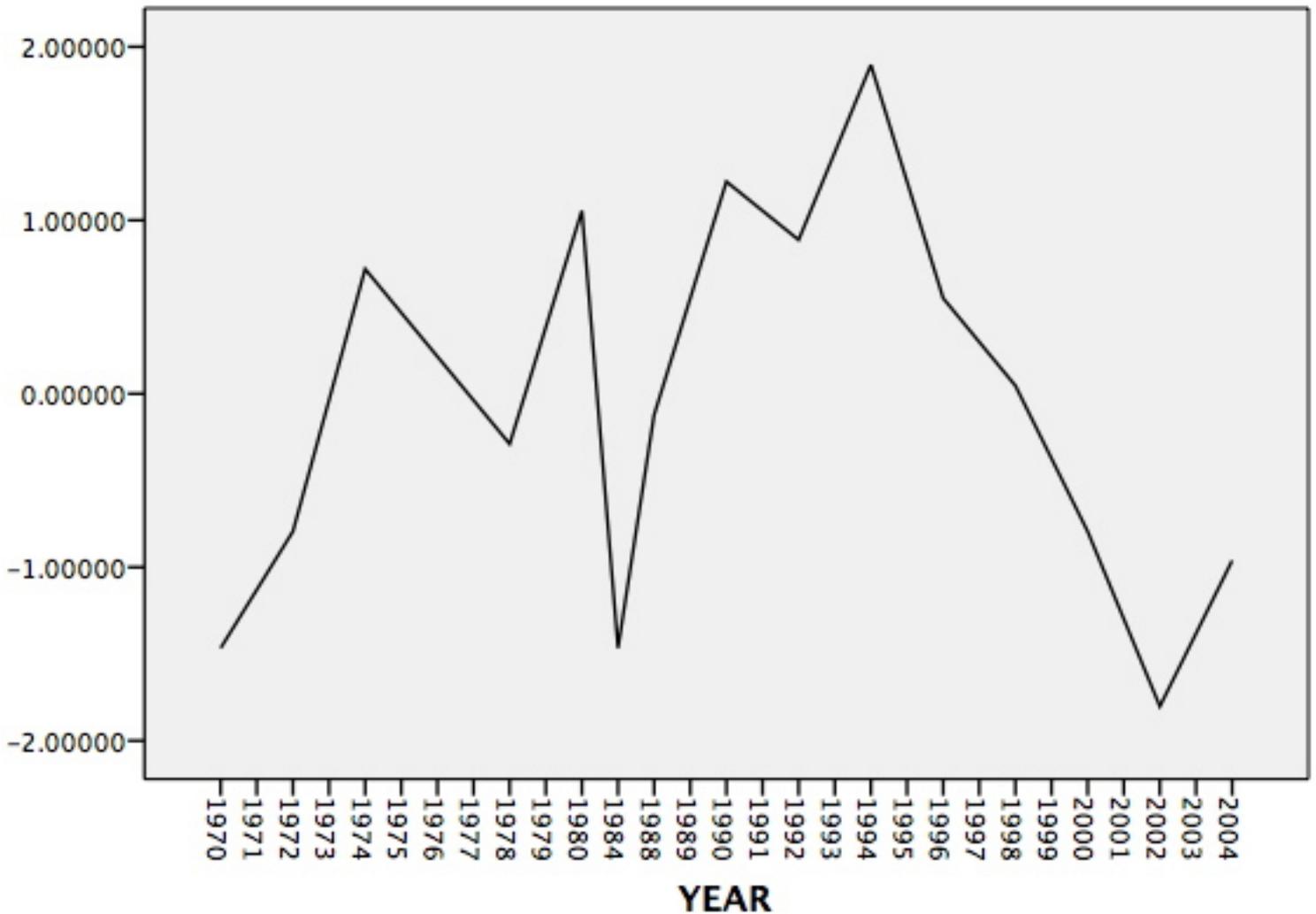
VCF0605 Federal Govt Run by a Few Big Interests



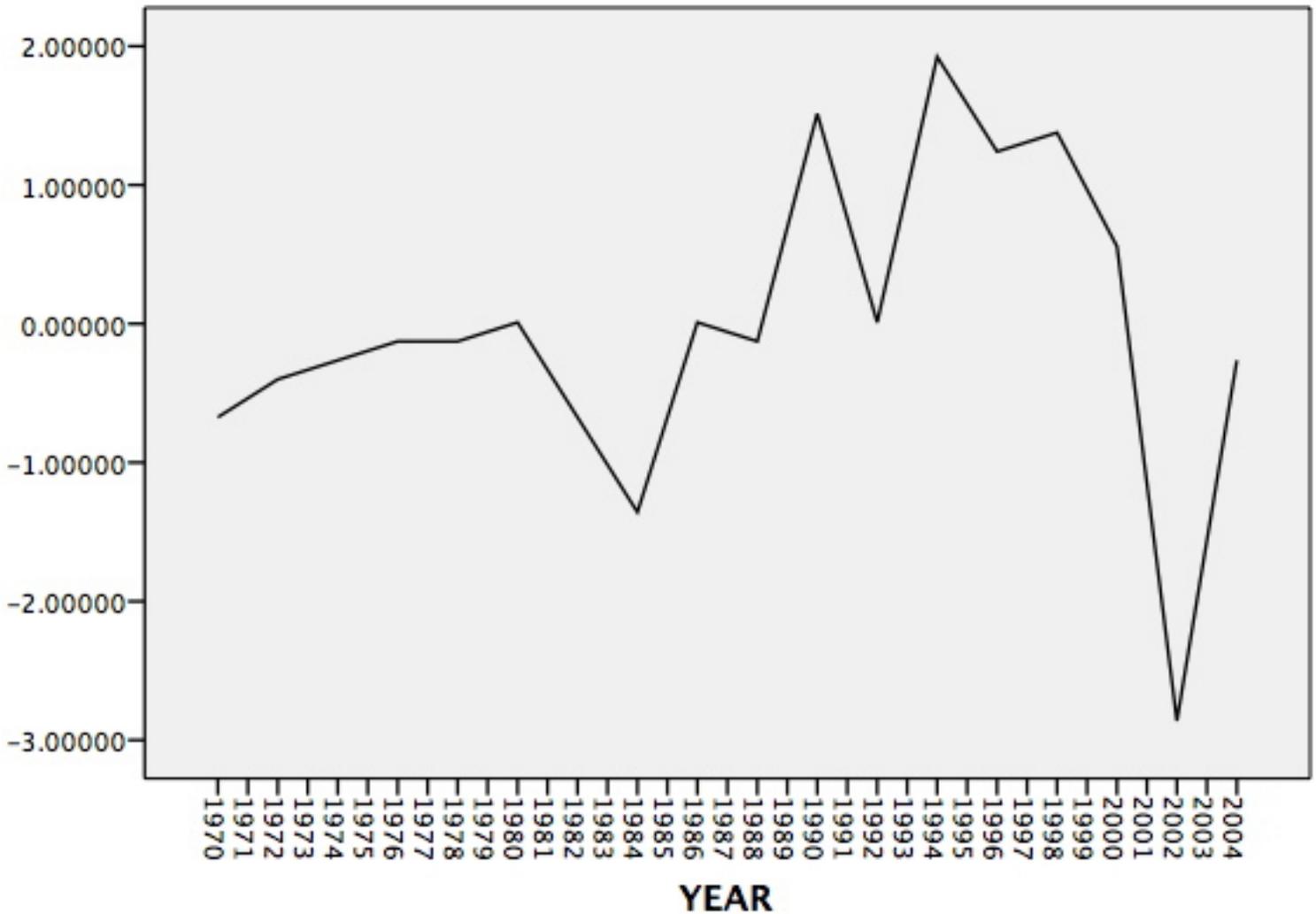
VCF0606 Federal Govt Wastes a Lot of Tax Money



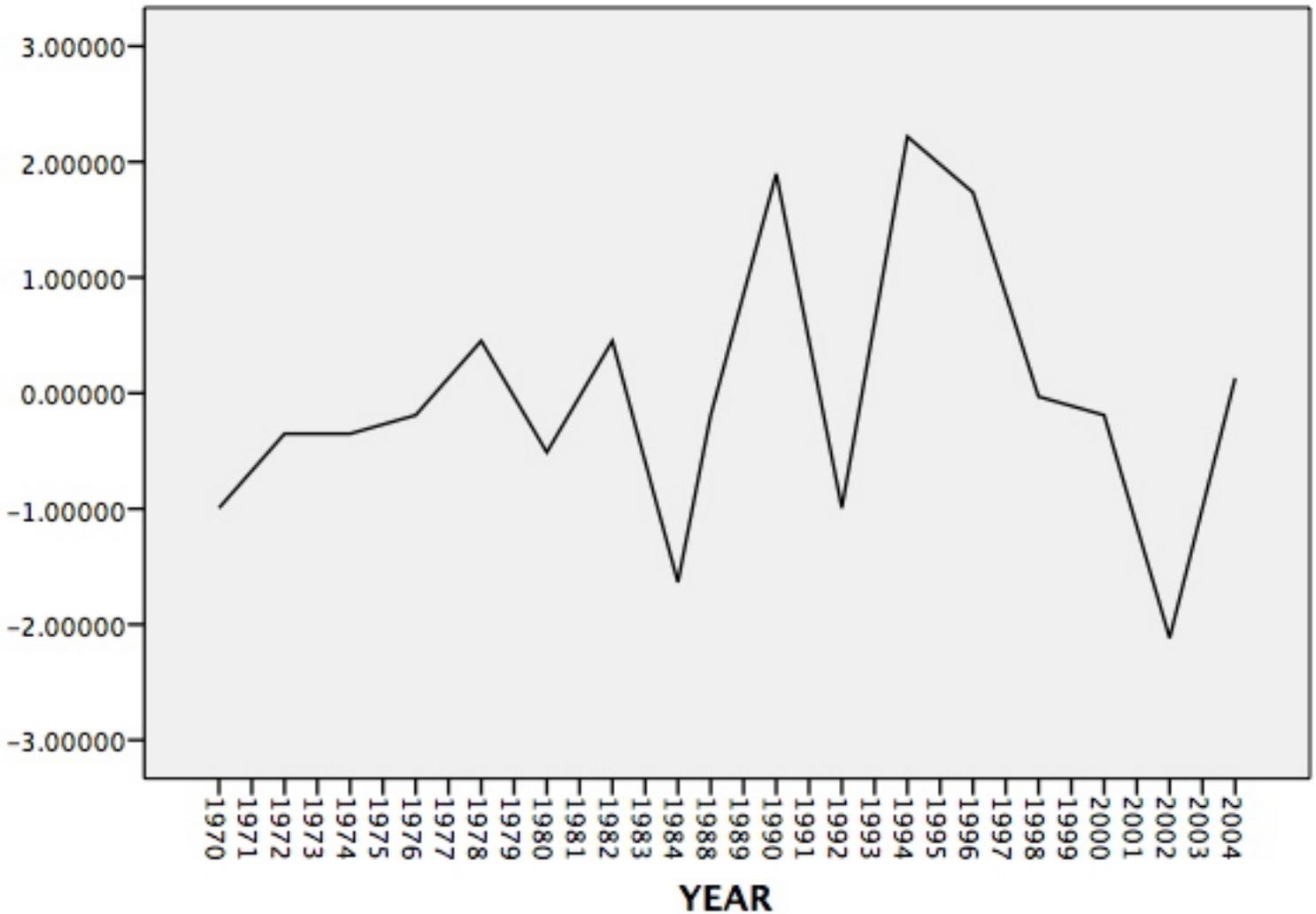
VCF0608 Quite a Few Govt Officials Are Crooked



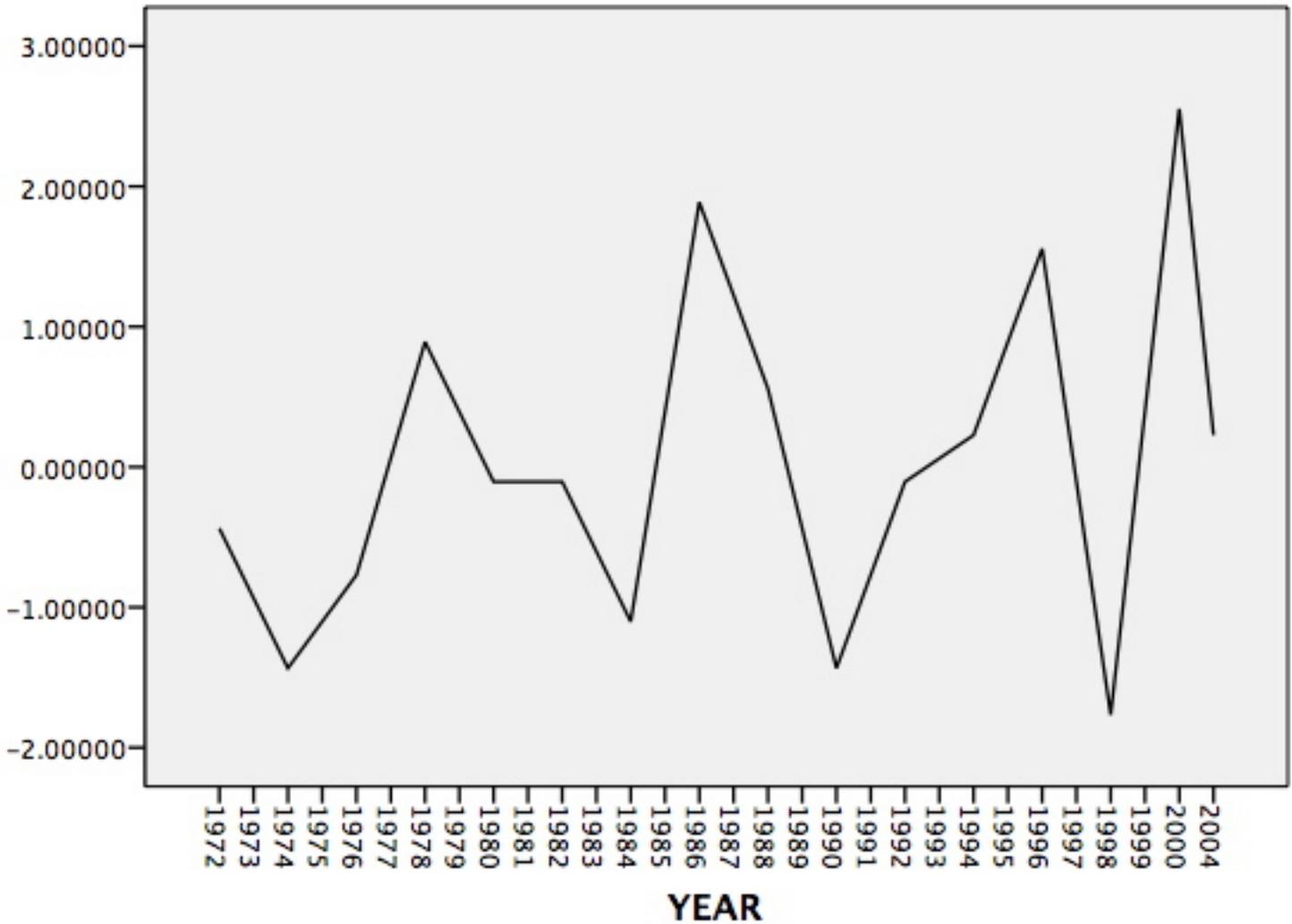
VCF0609 Public Officials Do Not Care What I Think



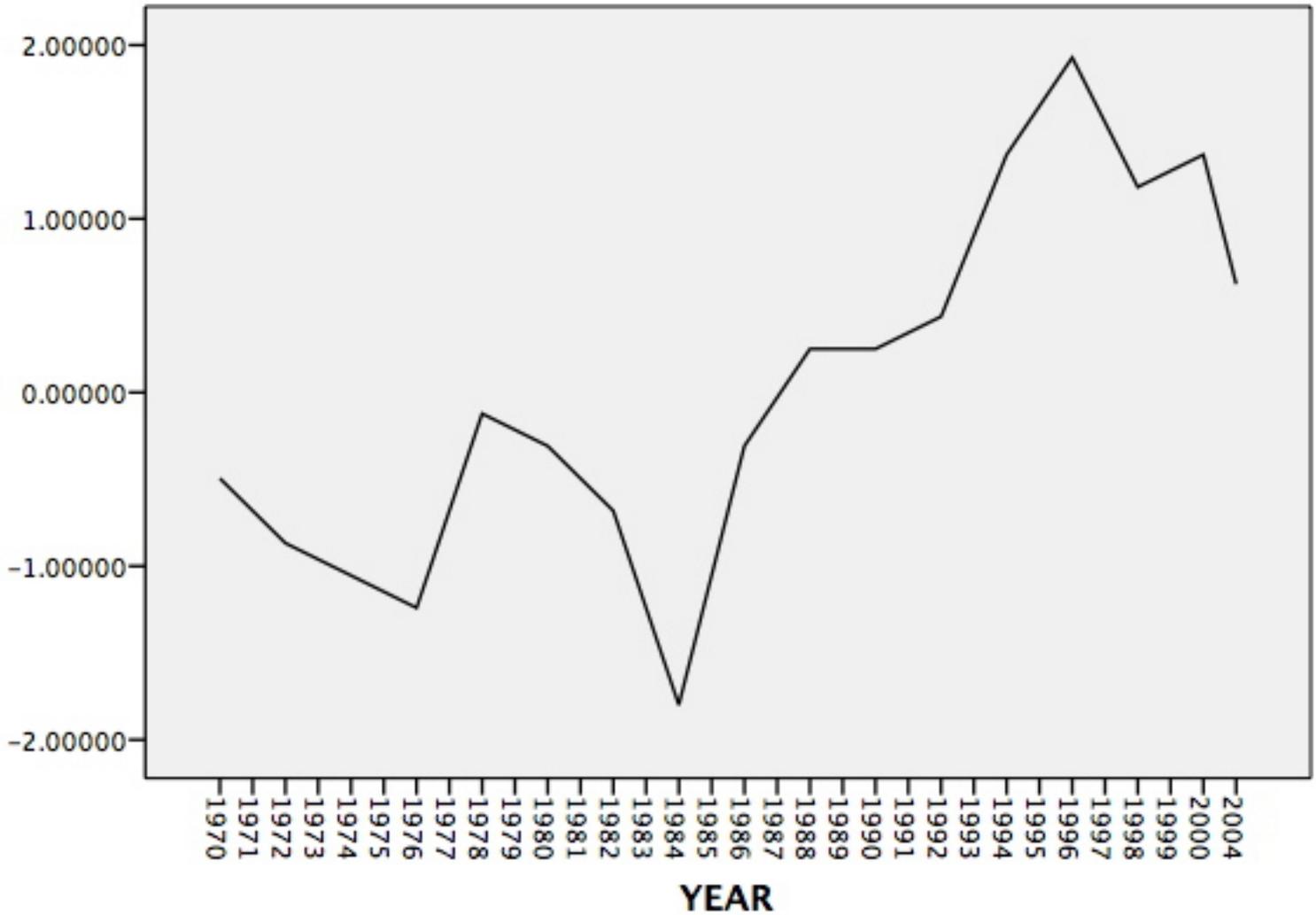
VCF0613 People Like Me Do Not Have Any Say in Govt



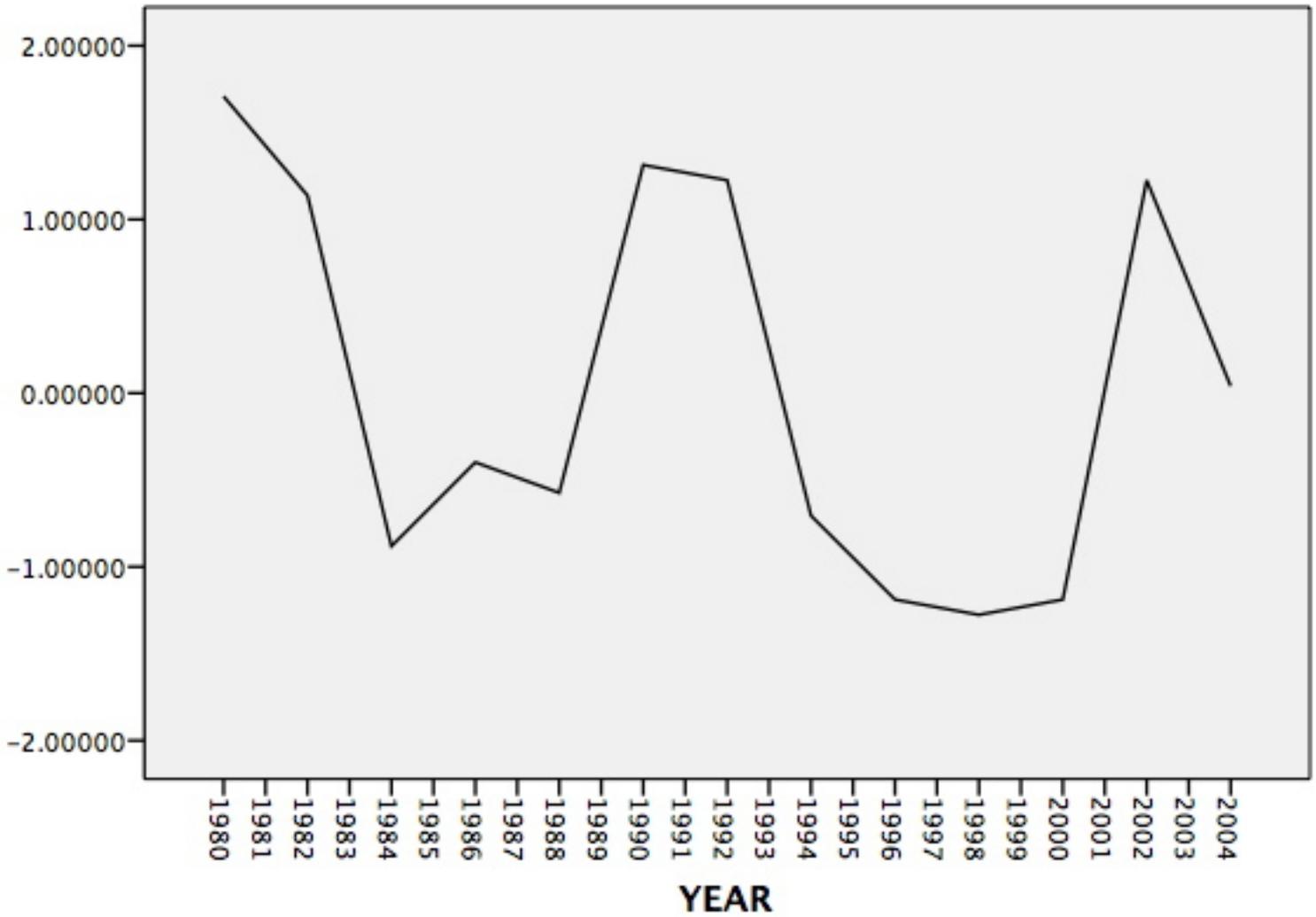
VCF0809 Everyone Should Be on Own to Find a Job



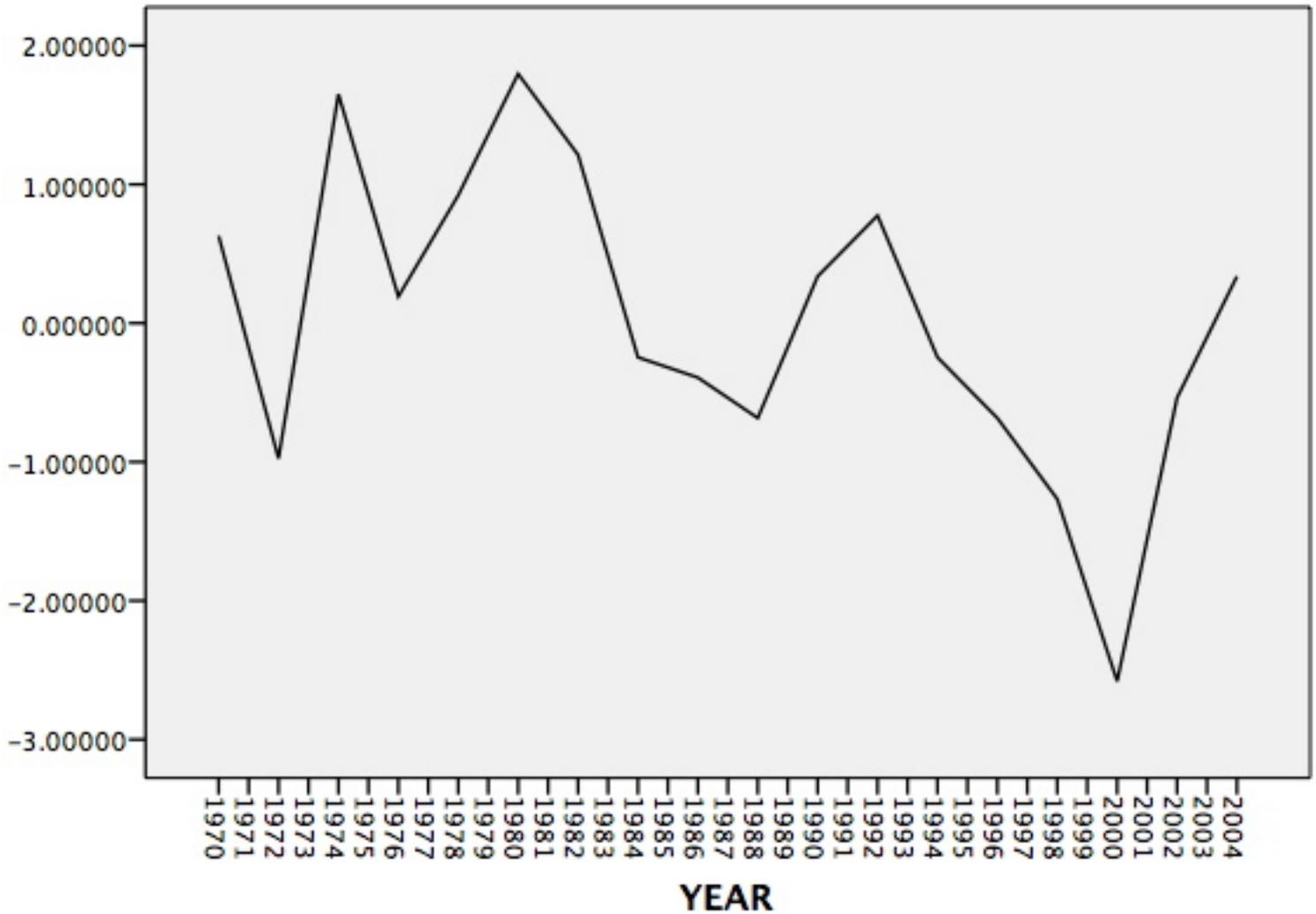
VCF0830 Blacks & Minorities Should Help Themselves



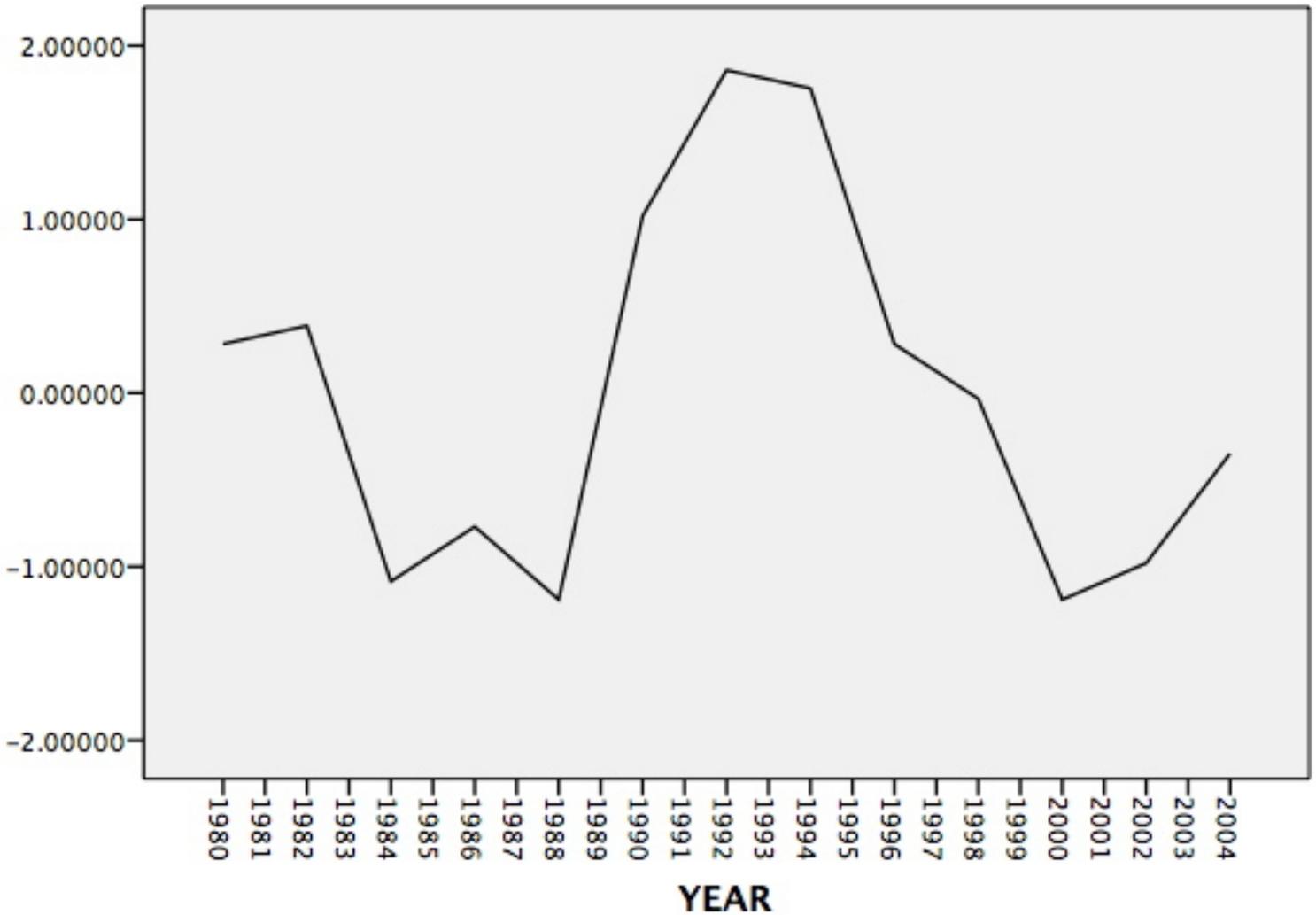
VCF0870 Economy Has Gotten Worse over Past Year



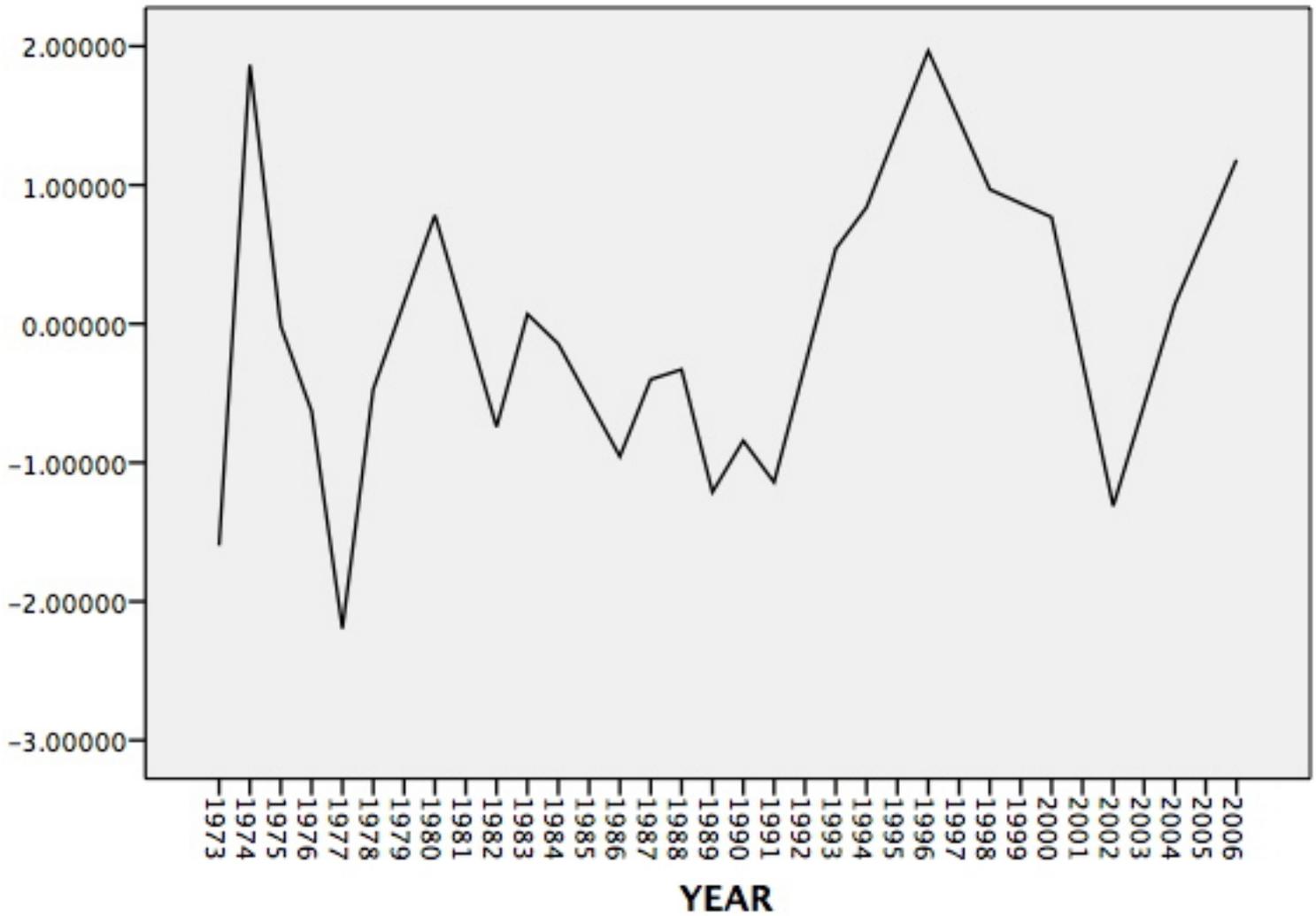
VCF0880 My Financial Situation Worse over Past Year



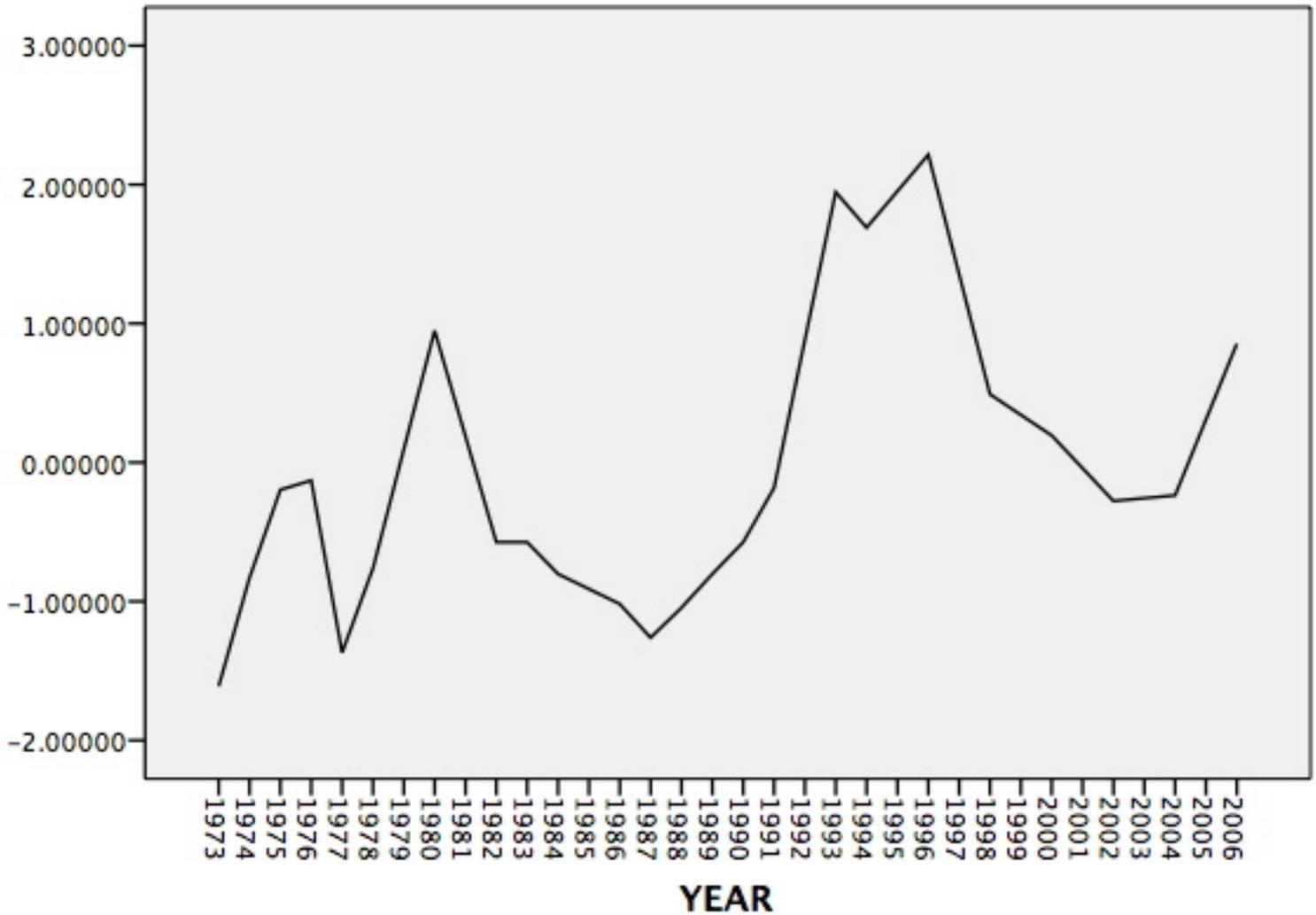
VCF0992 Disapprove of Congressional Performance



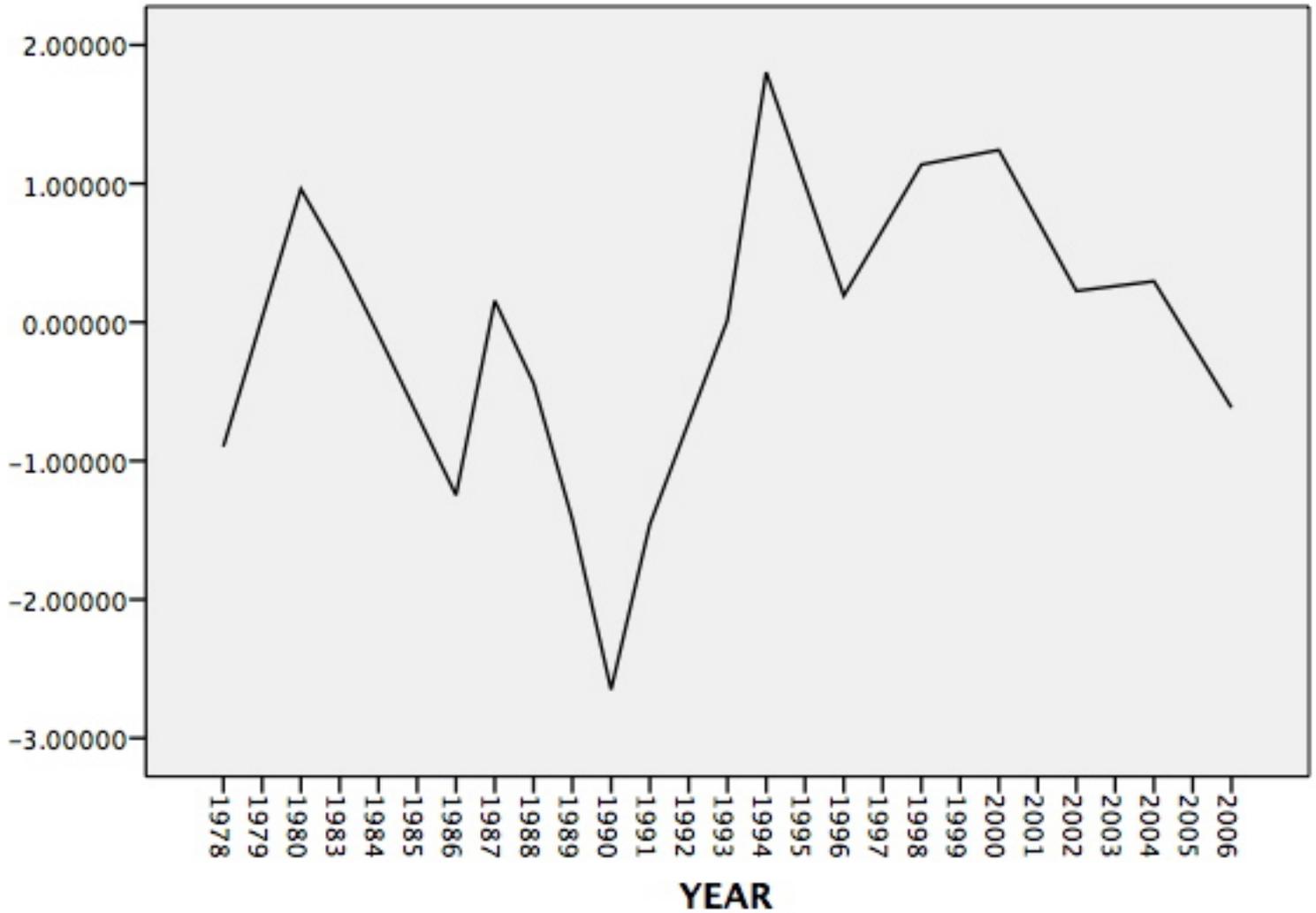
CONFED Hardly Any Confidence in Federal Govt



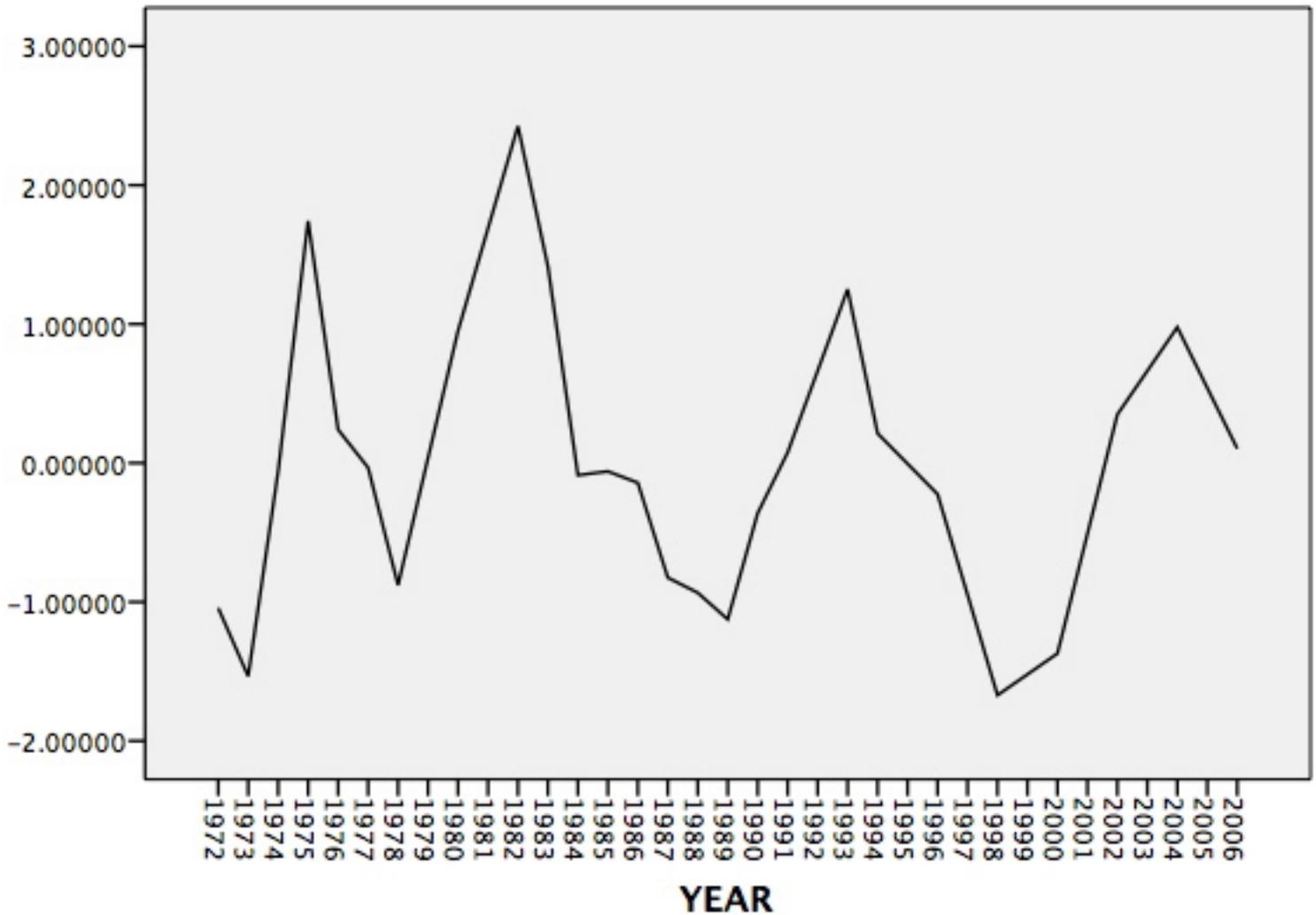
CONLEGIS Hardly Any Confidence in Congress



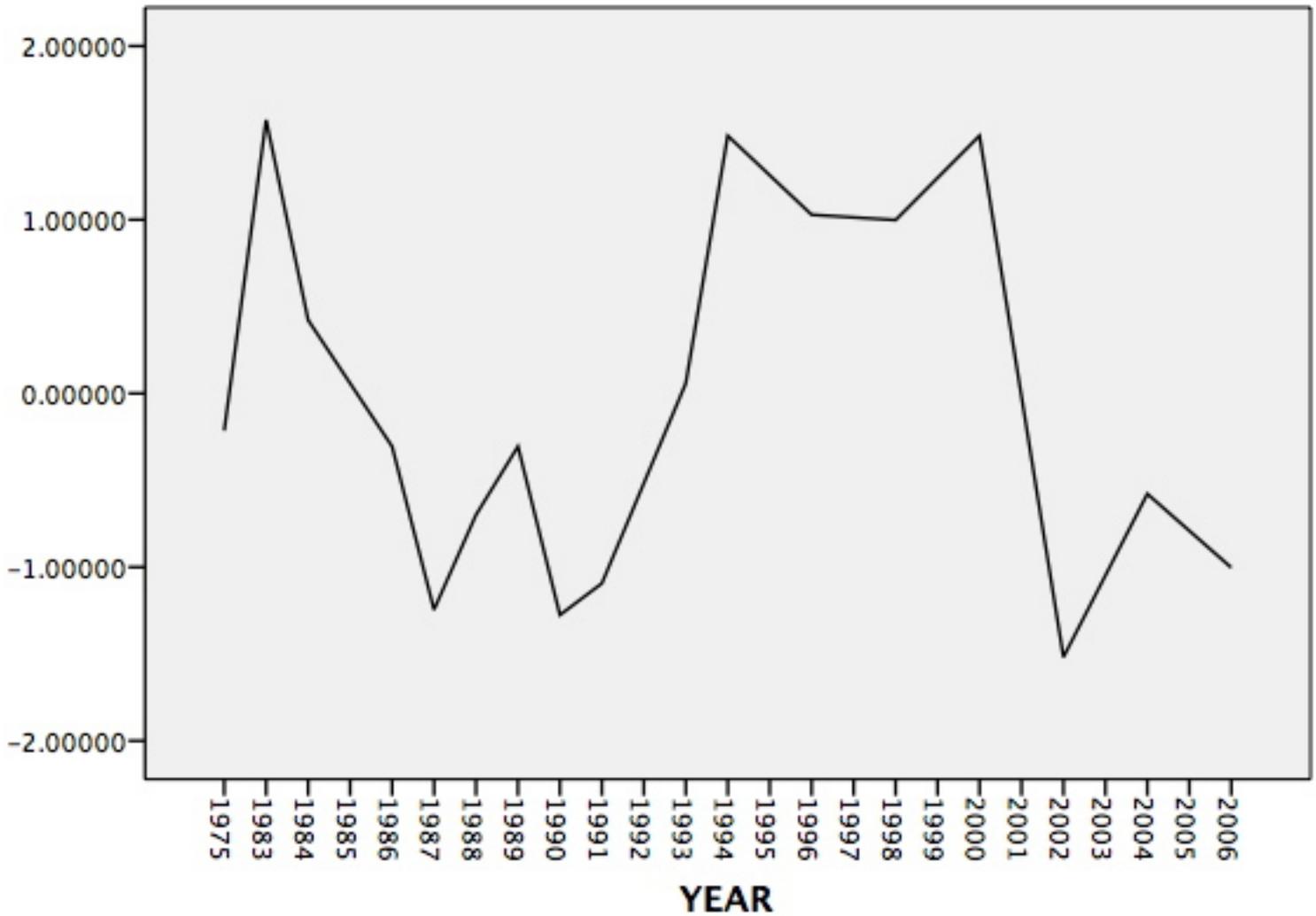
EQWLTH Govt Should Not Reduce Income Differences



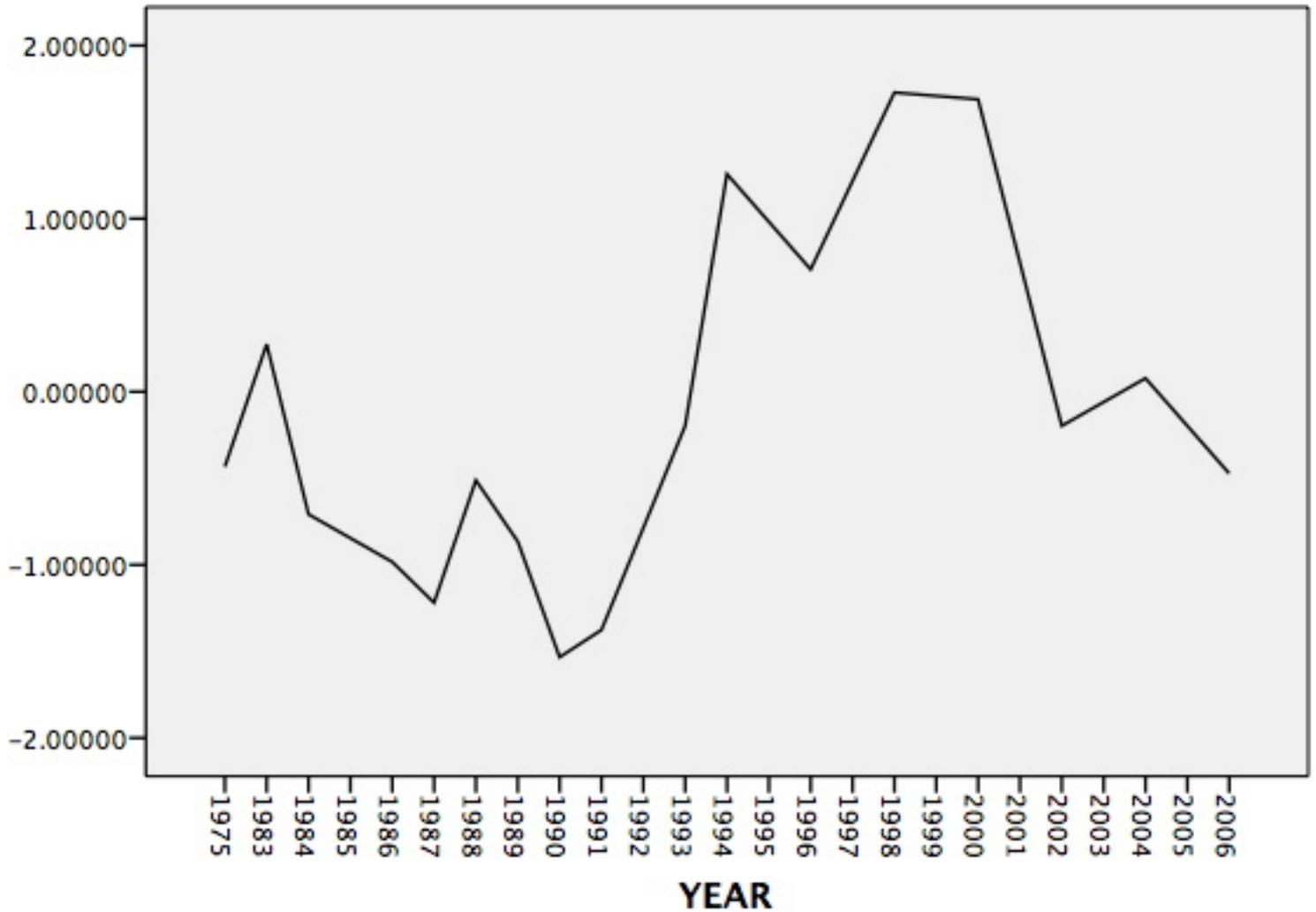
FINALTER My Financial Situation Has Been Getting Worse



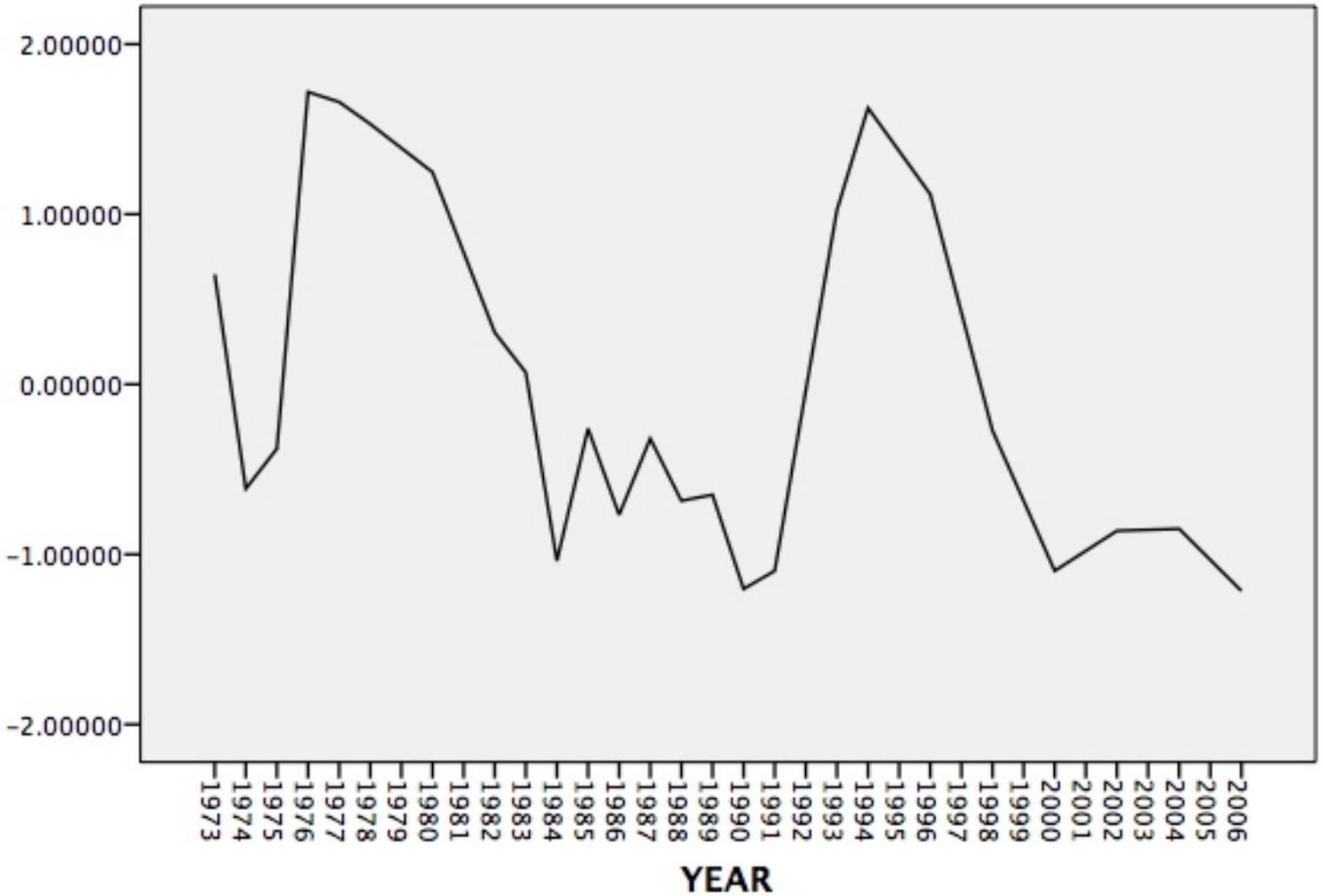
HELPNOT Govt Trying to Do Too Much



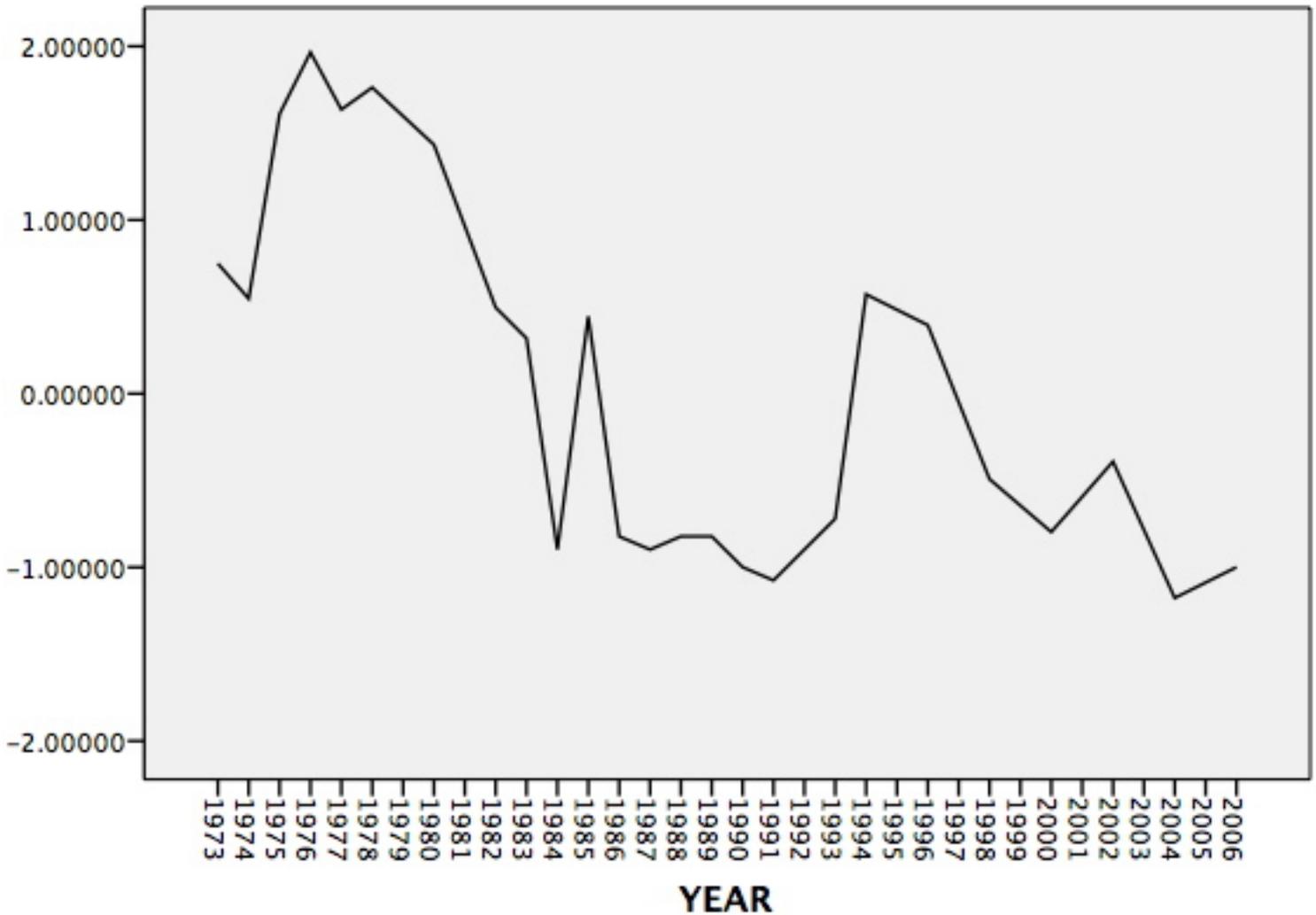
HELPPOR People Should Take Care of Themselves



NATFARE Govt Spending Too Much on Welfare



NATRACE Govt Spending Too Much on Helping Blacks



TAX Federal Income Tax Is Too High

