

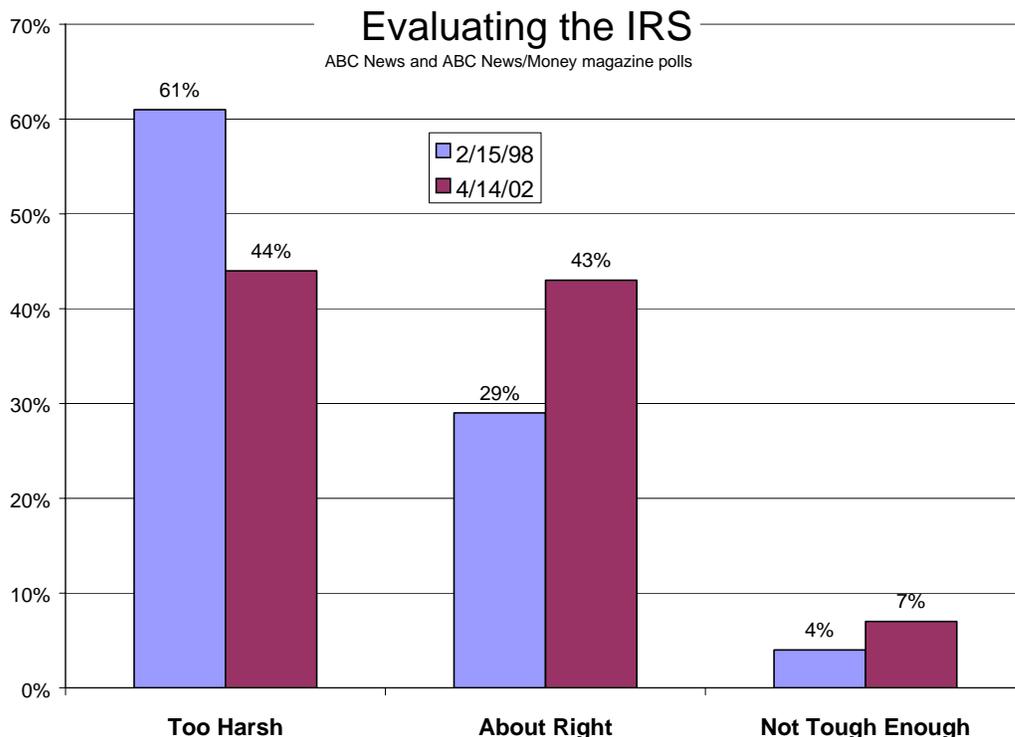
## **IRS' Image Improves as its Audits Decline**

As audits have declined, so has public discontent with the Internal Revenue Service: Forty-four percent of American say the IRS is “too harsh” on ordinary taxpayers, down substantially from 61 percent a few years ago.

But there's still broad skepticism about what the government does with its tax collections, due today. Americans say, on average, that the government wastes 47 cents out of every dollar it collects in taxes. That's about the same as last year, albeit below its peak.

IRS – The improved image of the IRS accompanies a drop in its enforcement activity. Given budget cuts and enforcement restrictions, a study last spring said IRS correction notices, audits, civil suits and criminal complaints have plummeted since the early 1990s.

The service underwent particularly sharp criticism from Congress in 1997 and 1998 for overzealous enforcement, and the charges resonated: In an ABC News poll in February 1998, 61 percent said the agency was “too harsh” in dealing with average Americans. That's now declined by 17 points, while the number saying its approach is “about right” has gained 14 points, to 43 percent. Few say it isn't tough enough on average people.



	IRS tax enforcement on average Americans:		
	Too harsh	About right	Not tough enough
Today	44%	43	7
Feb. 1998	61	29	4
Change	-17	+14	+3

ADMIN – The change in administration since 1998, from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush, looks to have played a secondary part in improved ratings of the IRS. On one hand, criticism of the agency has fallen very sharply among Republicans (a 20-point drop); on the other, it’s also declined, if less sharply (by nine points), among Democrats.

	IRS “too harsh”		
	Today	Feb. 1998	Change
Republicans	42%	62	-20
Independents	44	60	-16
Democrats	49	58	-9

The biggest change is among the roughly one-third of Americans with household incomes over \$50,000 a year. In 1998, 69 percent in this group said the IRS was too harsh; now that’s dropped to 44 percent, a 25-point drop.

WASTE – As noted, Americans now say, on average, that the government wastes 47 cents out of every dollar it collects in taxes; it was about the same, 46 cents, two years ago, and it’s averaged 48 cents in 10 polls since 1985. It jumped to 56 cents in 1998.

Perceptions of waste run highest among lower-income Americans. Among those with household incomes less than \$35,000, average waste is perceived to be about 53 cents on the dollar. That drops to about 46 cents in middle-income groups and 39 cents in \$100,000-plus households.

There’s been little change here among political groups – despite the change in administration, Republicans still think 47 cents on the dollar are wasted, same as two years ago. Perceptions of waste have gained six cents among Democrats.

METHODOLOGY - This ABC News.com survey was conducted by telephone April 10-14, 2002, among a random national sample of 1,043 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:  
<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Here are the full results:

150. Out of every dollar the federal government collects in taxes, how many cents do you think are wasted?

	Average	No opin.
4/14/02	47 cents	13
4/16/00	46	4
1/7/98	56	9
1/29/95	51	7
8/8/93	47	11
2/28/93	46	10
10/21/91	49	5
9/30/90	44	6
5/21/90	46	5
7/29/85	43	13

151. In enforcing the nation's tax laws, would you say the Internal Revenue Service is too harsh on average people, about right, or not tough enough?

	Too harsh	About right	Not tough enough	No opin.
4/14/02	44	43	7	6
2/15/98	61	29	4	5

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