Surprising Majority of Americans Endorse Careers in Government

But, Survey Reports, They Don't Entirely Trust Federal Workers

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By an overwhelming margin, 79 percent of Americans say they would encourage "a young person who was considering going to work as a federal civilian employee." Only 15 percent would discourage that career path, according to the new George Washington University Battleground Poll, conducted July 19-23, 2009, with a random sample of 1,007 registered voters nationwide.

At the same time, Americans polled do not voice a strong degree of confidence in the "civilian employees of the federal government." Only 21 percent have a "great deal" or "a lot" of confidence in them. An equal number (21 percent) express the opposite attitude, "very little confidence." In between, 53 percent say they have "some confidence" in federal civilian employees. After applications for graduate study at GW's Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration soared this year, we enlisted the GW-Battleground Poll to start tracking American attitudes toward careers in public service. While not all public service jobs involve working for the government, many NBA and MPP graduates of GW's Trachtenberg School and of other universities are hired by federal agencies. The poll results confirmed that the federal government is widely viewed as a good employer. We will have to wait until later surveys to discover if the high level of...
Gov. Careers Endorsed Across Demographic Breakdowns

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support is due to uncertainties in the private sector this year. But for now, 8 out of 10 of those surveyed would encourage young adults who are contemplating federal employment.

That large endorsement is shared across regions, age groups, gender, education levels, religious groups, and most other standard demographic breakdowns. Attitudes do differ somewhat based on party identification, with 9 out of 10 Democrats (88 percent) encouraging federal jobs compared to 7 out of 10 Republicans (71 percent), but even within the GOP that is still a substantial majority. Among registered voters who are African-American and Hispanic support is higher (88 percent) than among whites (77 percent), suggesting that minorities especially hold the civil service in high regard.

Despite the widespread appeal of federal jobs, the survey reveals a quite limited level of confidence in the people who hold those jobs. Respondents were asked: “Thinking about the civilian employees of the federal government and your view of them, would you say that you have a great deal or a lot of confidence, a lot of confidence, some confidence, or very little confidence in these employees?”

We used the classic Gallup language for measuring confidence in groups and institutions, and specified “civilian” to in order to exclude the military, which now outranks other institutions in public confidence: As of June this year, 82 percent told Gallup they had “a great deal” or “a lot” of confidence in the military. In contrast, we found only 21 percent had that much confidence in federal employees.

Those that Gallup found at comparatively low levels were newspapers (25 percent), TV news (23 percent), banks (22 percent), organized labor (19 percent), HMOs (18 percent), Congress (17 percent), and big business (16 percent). These are all far below the confidence in small business (67 percent), the police (59 percent), organized religion (52 percent), and, at the top, the military (82 percent).

Most demographic groups do not differ much in their assessment of federal workers, maintaining a rough distribution of one fifth decidedly confident, half with “some” confidence, one fifth not at all confident, and a few undecided. One modest but interesting division is between age groups. Young adults (18-44) are nearly twice as likely as older adults (65+) to declare a great deal or a lot of confidence, 29 percent compared to 16 percent. Perhaps some older adults have accumulated a few more bad experiences over the years. In any event, having a more favorable reputation among young adults cannot hurt with potential new hires.

Also confidence is higher among African-Americans and Hispanics (35 percent) than among whites (18 percent). Perhaps those in minorities particularly notice and appreciate federal workers functioning fairly and equitably. Again there is a partisan difference, with Democrats more inclined to be very confident in federal employees (29 percent) than are Republicans (15 percent), but even among Republicans only 28 percent say they have “very little confidence” with most (53 percent) having “some” confidence.

Could underlying skepticism hamper the new administration’s efforts for the federal government to play a larger role in areas such as health care? One opposition “talking point” has been that public sector employees cannot be trusted to manage such a complex and sensitive matter. Peggy Noonan asked in the Wall St. Journal July 25, if “we want the same people running health care who gave us the Department of Motor Vehicles” and “the post office.” A recent article in The Weekly Standard raised the specter of turning health care “over to the tender mercies of the bureaucrats” who certainly cannot be trusted to “tell your doctor just what he may do.”

Our survey results suggest that this line of attack probably resonates among a sizable share of the electorate. Among those with the most confidence in federal workers, a large majority (65 percent) favor the government “insuring health coverage for all Americans.” However, among those with very little confidence in federal workers, only 27 percent want to see the government play that role. Those in the middle with “some” confidence are divided about a bigger government role in health care with 48 percent in favor, and the rest opposed (42 percent) or undecided (10 percent).

George Washington University sponsors the GW-Battleground Poll, a unique national survey conducted during the leadership of a leading Democratic pollster (Celinda Lake, president of Lake Research Partners) and a leading Republican pollster (Ed Goeas, president of The Tarrance Group). Initiated in June 1991, GW-Battleground polls have the distinction of having been the most accurate national poll predicting the results in three of the past four presidential elections. With the GW-Battleground Poll, we expect to continue tracking attitudes toward public service on an annual basis.

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