Millions Working to Solve Local Problems, Says Assessment

Minnesota, Montana, Vermont, Alaska, Utah, Washington Top States

Washington, DC—While facing many challenges, Americans are stepping forward to participate in civic life to solve problems and strengthen their communities, according to “Civic Life in America: Key Findings on the Civic Health of the Nation” released by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC).

The Civic Life in America research found that the majority of Americans—nearly 125 million—turned toward problems and helped support their neighbors in times of need. It measures how often America’s engage in a variety of activities including political action, service, social connectedness, belonging to a group and connection to information and current events. Whether volunteering or helping a neighbor find a job, Americans are engaging in activities that help build stronger and more civically involved communities, according to the assessment. Visit http://civicserve.gov to read the full assessment and city and state rankings.

More than a million volunteers have served in the Gulf in the four years since Katrina, providing critical support by gutting and repairing homes, supporting school and youth programs, providing health care and counseling, constructing new homes, and meeting other local needs. Photo courtesy of Corporation for National and Community Service.

Trust in Federal Workers Continues to Erode

Enthusiasm for Federal Careers Suffers as Well

William C. Adams, Donna Lind Infeld

American confidence in federal workers has eroded over the past year. The proportion of registered voters who have at least “some confidence” in civilian federal employees fell from 75 percent in July 2009 to 66 percent, according to the new Politico-

George Washington University-Battleground Poll. Telephone surveys were completed September 7-9, 2010, with a random national sample of 1,000 registered voters. Only about one in five respondents (19 percent) now say they have a “great deal” or “a lot” of confidence in federal workers.

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Partisan Battles Erode Trust in Feds

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While a large majority would still encourage “a young person who was considering going to work as a federal civilian employee” (72 percent), that proportion too has declined over the past year. In the 2009 survey, 79 percent said they would encourage such a career path.

While the ebbing of support is not a huge drop, the declines are noteworthy nonetheless. Both changes attain statistical significance and are thus unlikely to be due to chance. Moreover, since the 2009 level of confidence in federal civilian employees was not very strong, the 2010 decline moves the levels of trust even lower, with more than one in four (27 percent) now saying they have “very little” confidence in civilian federal workers.

While almost three out of four still say they would encourage young people considering federal employment, the decline is statistically significant and surprising. With continued economic uncertainty about the revival of the private sector along with layoffs in many state and local governments, one might have expected federal careers to have enhanced rather than diminished appeal.

The reduced enthusiasm for recommending federal careers was observed across regions, age groups, gender, education levels, religious groups, and most other standard demographic breakdowns—except race. Positive attitudes toward federal employment among African-Americans remained at high levels (87 percent) while support among whites fell 8 percent points to 70 percent. Attitudes continued to differ somewhat based on party identification, with 83 percent of Democrats encouraging young people to consider federal jobs compared to 64 percent of Republicans and 69 percent of Independents.

Turning to the issue of confidence, 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 of confidence, a lot of confidence, some confidence, or very little confidence in these employees?”

This wording adopts the classic Gallup poll language for measuring public confidence in groups and institutions, and specifies “civilian” in order to exclude the military, which outranks all others. In July of this year, 76 percent told Gallup they had “a great deal” or “a lot” of confidence in the military. In contrast, we found only 19 percent had that level of confidence in federal civilian employees. Others that Gallup found at comparatively low levels were newspapers (25 percent), banks (23 percent), TV news (22 percent), organized labor (20 percent), big business (19 percent), HMOs (19 percent), and, at the bottom, Congress (11 percent). These are all substantially below the levels of public confidence in the police (59 percent), small business (66 percent), and, at the top, the military (76 percent).

The year’s decline in confidence regarding federal workers is not difficult to explain statistically. It derives almost entirely from GOP disaffection, with almost four in ten Republicans now expressing “very little” confidence (38 percent in 2010 compared to 28 percent last year), and to a lesser extent from Independents. Only one in seven Democrats (14 percent) have so little confidence in the federal workers, virtually unchanged from 2009.

The partisan shift might have been driven by factors such as the intensified polarization of the parties about the role of government in health care and the economy, viewing federal workers as agents of a now less popular President, spillover from the anti-government rhetoric of the Tea Party movement, and blame toward perceived federal malfeasance both before and after the Gulf oil disaster.

Whatever the impetus, whether trend develops into an even more dramatic split between Republicans and Democrats in their attitudes toward federal workers will merit attention in future surveys. If Republican mistrust of federal workers continues to grow—and does not swing back markedly the next time a Republican captures the White House—that would signal that something deeper than temporary partisan politics is pushing this cleavage.

We plan to continue tracking attitudes toward public service on an annual basis via the Battleground Poll, which is co-sponsored by the George Washington University and Politico. This unique national survey is conducted under the joint leadership of a leading Republican pollster (Ed Goeas, president of The Tarrance Group) and a leading Democratic pollster (Celinda Lake, president of Lake Research Partners).

Started in 1991, Battleground polls earned the distinction of having been the most accurate national poll predicting three of the past four presidential elections.

William C. Adams is a professor of public policy and public administration in the Trachtenberg School at George Washington University in Washington, DC. Email: adams@gwu.edu

Donna Lind Infeld is a professor of public policy and public administration in the Trachtenberg School at George Washington University in Washington, DC. Email: dlind@gwu.edu

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