Federal Workers Gain in Public Trust

Survey Finds 73% Have at Least Some Confidence in Civilian Federal Employees

Confidence in federal workers halted its downward drift in 2011, according to the latest Politico-George Washington University Battleground Poll, and showed signs of rebounding. Now 73 percent of registered voters say they have at least “some confidence” in civilian federal employees, close to the 2010 level of 75 percent after eroding to 66 percent in 2009.

Telephone surveys were completed August 28-September 1, 2011, with a random national sample of 1,000 registered voters and confidence intervals of ±3.1 percent. The comparison surveys were also conducted during the third quarter of prior years. In 2011, a total of 20 percent said they have “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in federal civilian workers. Over half (53 percent) said “some confidence,” 23 percent “very little,” and 4 percent undecided. Democrats continue to be much more likely to report some or a great deal of confidence in federal civilian employees than do Republicans, however the latest poll shows increased confidence across both parties compared to one year ago.

How do ratings of federal workers compare to those of other key elements of the public sector? Because the Battleground question

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Mordecai Lee

If states are the American laboratories of democracy, then I have seen the future and it may not be welcome by our field. Ever since Governor Scott Walker proposed legis-

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U.S. Military Continues to Elicit the Most Confidence from Citizens

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used the standard Gallup language for measuring public confidence in groups and institutions ("...would you say that you have a great deal of confidence, a lot of confidence, some confidence, or very little confidence in...") the latest Gallup data, also from the summer of 2011, offer some revealing comparisons.

As shown in Figure 1, the military continues to elicit the most confidence by far, followed by the police and the U.S. Supreme Court. Ranked in terms of at least “some confidence,” civilian federal workers—along with the public schools and the criminal justice system—come next. The bottom tier consists of the presidency and the Congress. Evaluations of the presidency as an institution closely track the standing of the incumbent. Ratings of Congress, regardless of party control, have been very low every year since 2005.

The latest data were gathered following weeks of political acrimony over how to address the federal debt and amid a political season when most republican presidential contenders are attacking the scope and value of many parts of the federal government. So perhaps it is noteworthy that the erosion of confidence in federal workers documented in 2010 during the first “tea party summer” and ongoing Gulf oil disaster did not continue in 2011. When contrasted with an unpopular president and an ever more unpopular Congress locked in a seemingly dysfunctional relationship, the regular federal workforce may well represent a more stable and reassuring component of the national sphere and inspire at least some confidence.

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At the modest threshold of “some confidence,” the relative standing of federal workers is in the middle of the array in Figure 1. However, shifting to a more stringent “great deal” and “quite a lot” of level of confidence casts their standing in a less favorable light (with only one in five very confident) and puts federal workers down near the same low level of Congress. Taken together, these figures can be viewed as neither an enthusiastic endorsement nor a blanket dismissal of federal workers overall. Instead, it suggests that Americans tend to have a cautiously qualified view of federal workers as fairly reliable, neither entirely bumbling nor thoroughly brilliant.

With many MPA, MPP and other students eager for careers in public service, the Battleground Poll has also tracked public opinion regarding federal careers by asking: “Would you encourage or discourage a young person who was considering going to work as a federal civilian employee?” While positive answers had fallen from 79 percent in 2009 down to 72 percent in 2010, the latest survey showed no further decline. Indeed, three out of four respondents (75 percent) said they would encourage such a career direction (39 percent “strongly encourage” and 36 percent “somewhat encourage”). Fewer than one in five (18 percent) would discourage that choice. The rest (7 percent) were undecided.

George Washington University and Politi.co sponsor the Battleground Poll, a unique national survey conducted as a joint effort of two leading democratic and republican polling firms (Lake Research Partners and The Tarrance Group). Initiated in June 1991, Battleground polls have the distinction of having been the most accurate national poll predicting the results in three of the past four presidential elections. William C. Adams and Donna Lind Infeld are both professors of public policy and public administration in the Trachtenberg School at George Washington University in Washington, DC. Email: adams@gwu.edu and dlind@gwu.edu