Americans Exhibit Increasingly Partisan Views of Federal Workers

Poll Shows Overall Confidence in Feds Continues Downward Drift

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Confidence in federal workers resumed its downward drift in 2012—especially among Republicans—according to the latest Politico-George Washington University Battleground Poll. Just 68 percent of registered voters now say they have at least “some confidence” in civilian federal workers, down from 75 percent in 2009. At the same time, 28 percent have little or no confidence in them, up from 21 percent in 2009.

The net decline in confidence has been greatest among Republicans and the disparity between the parties has increased. Today, more than one out of every three Democrats (35 percent) are very confident in federal workers, but only one in ten Republicans (11 percent) report that level of trust. Moreover, the share of Republicans who are highly skeptical and say they have little or no confidence in civilian federal employees has grown from 28 percent in 2009 to 37 percent.

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Falls Church, VA Creates Health and Safety Code Inspection Task Force

Task Force a Multi-jurisdictional Endeavor

Staff from several City of Falls Church, VA, departments dealing with property safety and maintenance found that they were often working with the same properties but going at them from different directions.

So, in 2003, a small group of individuals decided to initiate a meeting that would coordinate their efforts. Originally Zoning, Property Maintenance and Housing and Human Services (HHS) were involved, but before too long they expanded to include the Arlington County Fire Marshal and the Fairfax County Health Department.

The intent was to address issues as a team, increasing effectiveness, avoiding duplication of effort and reducing anxiety on the part of the residents and business owners. This group developed a new way of dealing with trash, rats, fire hazards and hoarding, among other things. As the effectiveness of this management style was proven, their span increased as did participation.

The group began coordinating swimming pool inspections that involved electrical work, chlorine content and more. Restaurant inspections were discussed and any health issues dealt with, and a true inter-jurisdictional partnership was formed. The City of Falls Church achieved its ultimate goals of providing higher levels of service to residents and businesses and more effectively using staff time.

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Citizen Confidence on U.S. Federal Workers Continues to Erode

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in 2012. Only two in ten Democrats (19 percent) voice such a low opinion.

Republican skepticism toward federal workers increased in 2010 in the wake of the Tea Party surge and appears to have intensified by 2012, perhaps due to battles between GOP governors and public sector unions in the Midwest, especially Wisconsin, and anti-bureaucrat rhetoric among aspiring Republican presidential candidates. In March, for example, Mitt Romney famously remarked in San Diego regarding “thousands upon thousands of bureaucrats” in Washington: “Not only do we have to pay for them, but they have to do something every day, so they look at things they can do, places they can interfere.”

In theory, Republicans could trust federal workers yet still aggressively advocate limiting the growth of government spending, the influence of public employee unions, and the size of public employee pensions and benefits. In practice, however, impressions of public employees as natural supporters of government expansion, actively fightingGOP efforts at “fiscal restraint,” may explain increased Republican mistrust of government workers.

In the current polarized climate, perhaps the surprise is that Republican respondents do not evidence more mistrust of the federal workforce overall. Despite recent trends, their mistrust is not pervasive, with a majority of Republicans (60 percent) still having at least “some confidence” in federal workers. Over half (53 percent) of those call themselves “very conservative” and 51 percent among those who identify strongly with the Tea Party report having at least some confidence in federal workers.

Unlike Republicans, the views of Independents have not changed significantly since our surveys began in 2009. However, Independents still are closer to Republicans than to Democrats in terms of being less confident in federal workers, with 30 percent having little or no confidence and only 17 percent being very confident.

Along with political party and ideology, race also correlates with views of federal workers. As was the case in prior surveys, minorities tend to hold the civil service in especially high regard. Among registered voters who are African-Americans, 35 percent are very confident in federal workers compared to only 20 percent among whites; Hispanics are midway at 27 percent.

Otherwise, most demographic groups do not differ dramatically in their assessment of federal workers. Even respondents from households with a union member had nearly the same distribution of opinions as those from nonunion households. Younger adults held slightly more positive views of federal workers than did adults over the age of 65.

How do ratings of federal workers compare to ratings of other parts of the public sector? Because the Battleground question used the standard Gallup language for measuring public confidence (“Would you say that you have a great deal of confidence, a lot of confidence, some confidence, or very little confidence” in a group or institution), the latest Gallup data, also from the summer of 2012, can be used for comparison.

As shown in Figure 1, in the public sector, the military continues to garner the highest ratings by far, followed by the police and the U.S. Supreme Court. The criminal justice system and public schools come next, slightly ahead of civilian federal workers. Elected officials (Congress and the Presidency) are rated lowest of all.

Taken together, these figures can be viewed as neither a clear affirmation nor a widespread censure of federal workers. But the trend does point toward increased polarization in American attitudes toward federal workers. As noted in the growth of government spending, the majority of federal workers (70 percent) are Republicans (52 percent) or Independents (18 percent).

With many MPA, MPP, and other students pondering careers in public service, the Battleground Poll has also tracked American attitudes toward federal careers by asking: “Would you encourage or discourage a young person who was considering going to work as a federal civilian employee?” The minority who would discourage such careers has grown somewhat—from 15 percent in 2009 to 21 percent in 2012—but explicit opposition is relatively rare. Almost three out of four respondents (73 percent) recognize these as good jobs and would encourage such a career (42 percent “strongly encourage” and 31 percent “somewhat encourage”). However, one third of Republicans surveyed (32 percent) would now discourage the choice of federal career, up from 21 percent in 2009.

Telephone surveys were completed August 5-8, 2012, with a random national sample of 1,000 registered voters yielding overall confidence intervals of ±3.1 percent. Comparison data cited here were also conducted in the third quarter of prior years.

George Washington University and Politico.com sponsor the Battleground Poll, a unique joint effort of two leading Democratic and Republican polling firms (Lake Research Partners and The Tarrance Group).

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