



Poll: Americans Don't Trust The 'Federal Government' — At Least When You Call It That

It would seem that while Americans trust many particular federal institutions, they don't trust the sum of the government's parts.

By: Frederick Reese - October 22, 2013

One can argue that the United States was formed out of distrust of government. The colonial rebellion and the resulting Revolutionary War, for example, amounted to a growing disdain for a government that taxed but did not permit direct input into its affairs. The Civil War — while primarily dealing with the issue of slavery and the sovereign right of the individual — was also fought on the secondary premise of state rule and the right of the people to directly challenge federal rule.

As George Washington put it best, "Government is not reason; it is not eloquent; it is force. Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master." In a way, the recent results from Pew Research — which show that only 19 percent of all Americans trust Washington to do what is right all or most of the time — are not surprising. The level matches polling conducted following the last government shutdown in August 2011.

"The share of the public saying they are angry at the federal government, which equaled an all-time high in late September (26%), has ticked up to 30%," wrote Pew in its poll summary. "Another 55% say they are frustrated with the government. Just 12% say they are basically content with the federal government."

While poll respondents thought negatively of the concept of the federal government, this did not relate to federal workers — who received a 62 percent favorable to 29 percent unfavorable rating. In addition, the anti-government sentiment does not extend to its component agencies — with the exception of the Internal Revenue Service and the Congress. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention received a 75 percent favorability. NASA received a 73 percent favorability, followed by the Department of Defense at 72 percent. The Veterans Administration, the Department of Homeland Security, the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice all received favorability ratings in excess of 60 percent.

Even the IRS — which was criticized for allegedly being discriminatory toward conservative groups in light of a glut of IRS 501(c)(4) applications prior to the 2012 presidential election — received

21 percentage points more in favorability than Congress. This reflects the post-shutdown mood, which indicated that 74 percent of all Americans want most of Congress defeated in the 2014 midterms elections, that 38 percent of all American want their congress members defeated and that 49 percent of all voters indicated they will vote Democratic in their House race in 2014 — compared with the 43 percent who said they plan to vote Republican.

The politics of anger

The shutdown is not the only source of the shift in voters' disposition. A series of leaks showing the NSA eavesdropping on American communiques, political infighting regarding intervention in Syria, continued Tea Party obstructionism and general discontent toward the government contributed to the low rating — one of the lowest since 2011.

Distrust in the government, though low across parties, differentiates when looked at along partisan lines. While 28 percent of all Democrats said that they can trust the government just about always or most of the time, only 10 percent of Republicans agreed. Three percent of Tea Party-leaning Republicans stated that they can trust the government always or most of the time.

“Anger at the federal government is most pronounced among Tea Party Republicans,” read the Pew summary. “Fully 55% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents who agree with the Tea Party say they are angry with the federal government — about double the percentage among non-Tea Party Republicans (27%) and Democrats and Democratic leaners (25%).”

This asks a loaded question: to what degree does political philosophy fuel political disdain? For example, the Tea Party came into power on its cries that the federal government is too big and too intrusive in the everyday citizen's life. “American politics is burdened by big money from lobbyists and special interests with an undue influence on the peoples' representatives. The Tea Party movement is seen as a threat to the entrenched political parties and thus is the continual target of smear campaigns and misrepresentation of its ideals,” read the Tea Party Platform.

In light of such clear-cut anger in expressed intentions, one must ask: at what point do angry intentions yield an angry response? “The seething anger that seems to be an indigenous aspect of the Tea Party movement arises, I think, at the very place where politics and metaphysics meet, where metaphysical sentiment becomes political belief,” wrote J.M. Bernstein for a New York Times op-ed in June 2010. “More than their political ideas, it is the anger of Tea Party members that is already reshaping our political landscape. ... [The] vast majority of House Democrats are now avoiding holding town-hall-style forums — just as you might sidestep an enraged, jilted lover on a subway platform — out of fear of confronting the incubus of Tea Party rage that routed last summer's meetings.”

A distrustful nation

There is nothing wrong, of course, with being angry at government. Thomas Jefferson once expressed that “eternal vigilance in the price of liberty.” One should be suspicious of their government, and one should be willing to challenge their government’s decisions — particularly, if they infringe on the rights of the individual or the political tradition that the nation and its people celebrate.

However, there is a difference between organic anger that grew from a slight or an injustice, and implanted anger used to stir up a political base. “People have always had a kind of healthy skepticism about the bureaucracy,” wrote CNN’s political analyst Gloria Borger. “But what you find now is because people don’t trust government, it provides a political opening for both parties to say – ‘don’t trust the other guy.’ And depending on where you stand, you don’t trust the other guy.”

“The public distrusts the federal government more because of its reservations about the motivations of government than the abilities of government,” wrote Fred Steeper and Christopher Blunt for The Public Perspective. “Most Americans do not go so far as to think the government’s intentions can be characterized as evil and dangerous, but many do believe the government’s intentions are, nevertheless, dishonest and unethical.”

Since 1964 — when trust in America topped out at just shy of 80 percent under Lyndon Johnson — the United States has been generally distrustful of its government. “When you have lower trust in government, you tend to get fewer foreign wars, you tend to get fewer expensive government programs, and you also tend to get fewer abuses of civil liberties,” said Gene Healy of the Cato Institute.

There is a perpetual danger, however, in cultivating the frustrations of others and weaponizing it for personal gain. Such a misuse of political capital threatens the underpinnings of society as a whole. However, for the most part, Americans typically don’t trust their government — whether the distrust be organic or implanted. That healthy disdain for the government’s intention is one of the checks and balances that make the American system work.