



Government snooping proves weak campaign issue

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WASHINGTON — Government spying on American citizens has sparked public outrage, but it has not caught fire as a major issue in this year's congressional election.

"Politicians don't see a lot of votes in the privacy issue because it's something that divides the American people," said Darrell West, founding director of the Center for Technology Innovation at The Brookings Institution. "There are people who are angry about government surveillance, but there are others who believe the government needs to keep doing it to protect the country from terrorists."

In a June poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 54% of Americans surveyed said they disapproved of the National Security Agency's mass collection of millions of Americans' phone records while 42% said they approved. The mass-data collection was revealed in June 2013 by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden.

It's also difficult for congressional candidates to use the issue against their opponents in some of the states with the most hotly contested elections, said Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow and privacy expert at the Cato Institute.

"In a lot of purple states, there's a libertarian streak that cuts across party lines," Sanchez said. "You can find Democratic and Republican candidates who are equally likely to be opposed to government surveillance."

In the tight Colorado Senate race, for example, Democratic Sen. Mark Udall has been a high-profile champion of privacy rights. His opponent, Republican Rep. Cory Gardner, agrees with Udall on the issue and has voted to end the NSA's bulk collection of phone records.

"It's difficult to use the privacy issue to distinguish yourself in a race like that," Sanchez said.

That doesn't mean no one is trying.

In Maryland, Republican candidate Dan Bongino, a former Secret Service agent who is running against Democratic Rep. John Delaney, has denounced the Obama administration for continuing to allow widespread domestic surveillance by the NSA. In Washington state, Republican candidate Clint Didier, who is running for an open seat, says "there is never a justification for the mass surveillance of the American citizenry." And in California, Democrat Ted Lieu, running for an open seat in the Malibu area, ran a TV ad declaring his intent to "stop the National Security Agency from violating our privacy."

Still, the issue has been overshadowed in most races by concerns about jobs, the economy and the battle to stop the Islamic State, West said.

"There are certainly people who are worried about privacy, but it's a smaller circle than those worried about Syria or the economy," he said.

The issue of NSA surveillance has only been raised in a few races, but some analysts say it is contributing to a larger distrust of government by voters, which may help Tea Party conservatives who rail against Big Brother.

A September Gallup Poll showed that Americans' trust in Congress fell to a new low of 28%.

"The latest polls are showing that voters' trust in government, including Congress, is at its lowest since the Watergate scandals of the 70s," said Kevin Bankston, policy director of the Open Technology Institute at the New America think tank. "That renewed distrust is in part due to the revelations of mass spying by the NSA, and that distrust is going to drive a lot of votes in the election — particularly toward Tea Party candidates who will likely ally themselves with (Republican Kentucky Sen.) Rand Paul and other conservative members of Congress who are agitating for surveillance reform."

Paul, who is considering a bid for the GOP nomination for president in 2016, has been railing against NSA surveillance during speeches on college campuses in an effort to attract young voters.

A Pew Research Center poll earlier this year found that 57% of voters ages 18 to 29 viewed Snowden's leak about the NSA phone collection program as serving the public interest. That was 12 percentage points higher than voters overall.

"This is an issue that could attract more attention in 2016 than in 2014," West said. "It could be a winning issue for a presidential candidate trying to woo young voters."