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Americans Distrust Government, but Want It to Do More *NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll Points to Paradox*

Americans may say they distrust government, but a new survey by NPR, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government casts doubt on what they really mean when they say that: Most Americans, the survey found, want more government involvement and more government regulation to solve the nation's problems.

The survey found that nearly a quarter of American adults believe that the federal government is a major threat to their personal rights and freedoms, and nearly half think it is at least some threat. Likewise, the survey found that nearly six out of 10 Americans believe that the federal government does what is right only some of the time, and another 10 percent say it *never* does what is right. Despite those negative feelings, however, Americans are more confident than they were five years ago that the federal government can be effective, and they would like to see the government do more in a wide range of areas.

Although Americans don't seem to draw many distinctions between different levels of government, they not surprisingly feel they have more control over their state and local governments and generally trust those governments more than the federal government. Nevertheless, the NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll found that more Americans feel the federal government has a lot of impact on their daily lives than feel that way about their state or local governments.

The poll found that African-Americans are much less likely to trust their state and local governments than whites are. Only about a quarter of African-Americans say they trust their state government to do what is right just about always or most of the time; more than 40% of whites feel that way. Latinos are more likely to trust all levels of government.

The poll found the November election to be particularly fluid, not only because 5-10% of Americans say they have yet to make up their minds, but also because nearly a third of voters who have made up their minds say they might change them before Election Day.

Reports on the survey begin on NPR News programs on July 28.

Key findings include:

Views on the Role of Government

- **Government as sausage-making: Americans like what government does, but hate the way they think it does it.** In many ways Americans' love-hate relationship with government is the difference between the specific, which they "love," and the general, which they "hate." For instance, 60% of Americans say government has gone too far in regulating business and interfering with the free enterprise system, but when asked about specific areas that the government now regulates or could

regulate — from automobile safety to health care to TV content — Americans are much more likely to say there is not enough regulation than they are to say there is too much.

Indeed, most Americans have positive views about many federal government programs, from education programs (66%) to drug enforcement (59%) to food stamps (53%). In many areas they want more government involvement — for example, to reduce poverty (69%), to ensure clean air and water (67%), and to set minimum education standards (64%) — and very few Americans want less or no government involvement in the areas surveyed. But when asked general questions about government, Americans have extremely negative views. Only 29% trust the federal government to do what is right almost always or most of the time. And a majority of Americans (55%) considers government corruption a very important problem (another 34% think it is a somewhat important problem, and only 9% think it is not very important or not important at all).

- **Americans offer a wide range of reasons for why they don’t trust the federal government.** As major reasons for their distrust, a majority points to government waste and inefficiency (73%), partisan bickering (68%), special interests having too much influence (65%), a lack of honesty and integrity among elected officials (64%), and high taxes (57%). Given a list of 11 possible reasons for distrust, fewer than 20% said any one of them was not a reason.
- **Confidence in government efficiency has increased in the last five years.** In 1995, only 39% of Americans said that when the government in Washington sets out to solve a problem, they are confident the problem will actually be solved. Today that number is 51%. This is not a historical high, just well above the mid-’90s figure. What’s more, a large majority (62%) says that religious, charitable and community organizations can do a better job than government of providing services to people in need.
- **Nearly half of all Americans believe that the federal government threatens their personal rights and freedoms.** Nearly a quarter of all Americans (23%) think this is a *major threat*. Fewer Americans think their state and local governments threaten their personal rights and freedoms. But there is a significant racial difference here. Although whites and African-Americans are equally likely to think the federal government is a threat, African-Americans are significantly more likely to think their state and local governments are a threat. Interestingly, Latinos are not particularly likely to believe that *any* government is a threat. Nearly a third of Republicans (32%) say that the federal government presents a *major threat* to them.

Government Threatens Personal Rights and Freedoms

Percent answering major or minor threat

| | Total | White | Black | Latino |
|----------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Federal | 46 | 48 | 45 | 37 |
| State | 31 | 29 | 42 | 25 |
| Local | 26 | 24 | 39 | 25 |

- **The survey found similar racial differences when respondents were asked how much they trusted different levels of government to “do what is right.”** African-Americans were significantly less trusting of their state and local governments than whites were.

Trust Government to “Do What Is Right”

Percent answering “just about always” or “most of the time”

| | Total | White | Black | Latino |
|----------------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| Federal | 29 | 29 | 25 | 36 |
| State | 39 | 41 | 27 | 42 |
| Local | 39 | 41 | 29 | 42 |

- **Latinos are the most positive about the federal government; white Americans are the most critical.** Americans of Latino or Hispanic backgrounds are a diverse group, and other studies have shown that they differ on specific issues. However, this survey supports others that show general agreement in this area. For instance, Latinos (62%) more than African-Americans (52%) and whites (49%) are confident in the federal government's ability to solve problems.
- **White Americans and Latinos are more positive than African-Americans in their views of state and local government.** Whites (66%) and Latinos (64%) have more confidence than African-Americans (56%) in their state government's ability to solve problems. Whites (68%) and Latinos (65%) are also more likely than African-Americans (52%) to have confidence in their local government. In addition, African-Americans have less confidence than other groups in the courts. Nearly two in five African-Americans (37%), compared with one-quarter of whites (24%) and Latinos (24%), have very little confidence in the courts.
- **Contrary to common wisdom, Americans say that the federal government has more impact on their daily lives than their state or local governments.** Indeed, more Americans (41%) say that the federal government has a lot of impact on their daily lives than either their state (30%) or local (30%) governments. This impact may not be positive for everyone, as three in five (61%) of people who say that the federal government has a lot of impact also say it is a threat to their personal liberties. But Americans feel it even though they also believe their voice is more likely to be heard by state or local officials and even though they trust their state and local governments more.
- **There are distinct differences between Republicans and Democrats on what is the proper role and scope of government.** When it comes to activities of the federal government, Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to want more federal government involvement to reduce poverty (85% of Democrats want more involvement compared with 49% of Republicans), to ensure access to affordable health care (88% compared with 53%), and to make sure that food and medicines are safe (84% compared with 59%). Democrats (47%) are also much less likely than Republicans (73%) to say that the government has gone too far in regulating business.

Election Findings

- **A substantial proportion (39%) of adults most likely to vote in the next election say they are undecided or might change their minds before Election Day.** "Soft" voters make up about the same percentage of the Gore (35%) and Bush (34%) camps. Pluralities of these voters describe themselves as Independents (36%) and moderate in their political opinions (40%). Generally, these voters' views tend to coincide with the "hard" voters in their respective camps, with Bush supporters saying that a candidate's leadership abilities or character are more important than issues in determining their vote, and Gore supporters saying that issues are more important. The presidential contest was a statistical dead heat at the time of the poll.
- **The public is divided on whether things in the nation are headed in the right direction (44%) or are on the wrong track (47%).** Americans who see the nation headed in the right direction are, in general, more positive about government at all levels, and they say the main thing going right in the nation today is the economy. They also are more trusting of and more confident in government than are those who think the country is on the wrong track. Foremost in the minds of those who feel that the nation is on the wrong track, on the other hand, is a broad underlying concern with what they see as the social disintegration of the nation. They point to a number of items that touch on this, such as the breakdown of the family, out-of-control youth, corrupt politicians, and so on. Nearly seven in 10 (69%) give the government credit for what's going right, but eight in 10 (80%) blame it for what's going wrong.

- **Satisfaction with the economy is widespread.** Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Americans earning \$50,000 or more (87%) are satisfied with the economy. But fully three in five (61%) of those earning less than \$20,000 — this survey's lowest income category — are also satisfied. These low-income people say they are satisfied with the economy despite the fact that 70% of them say that their own personal financial situation is staying the same or getting worse.
- **In general, respondents are more likely to credit the Democrats for the positive nature of the economy and the Republicans for a better moral climate when they held the White House.** Two in five respondents (39%) credit the Clinton administration for today's prosperity; one-quarter (25%) give credit to the Republican administrations of the 1980s, and about the same proportion (28%) say that other things are more important. However, the Republicans win on another question: Close to half (45%) of all Americans say that the moral climate in the United States was better in the 1980s; only 16% of respondents say that the country's moral climate was better during the 1990s.
- **The public views the two presidential rivals as essentially status quo candidates when it comes to the role of the government.** Neither is seen as wanting to expand or shrink the size of the federal government. Half of those surveyed (49%) say that if elected, Governor Bush will keep government about the same as it is now, and roughly the same proportion (51%) say this of Vice President Gore. Of those who expect some change in the role of government, most believe that Gore will expand the role of government and Bush will shrink it.

Methodology

The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll is an ongoing project of National Public Radio, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Representatives of the three sponsors worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and to analyze the results, with NPR maintaining sole editorial control over its broadcasts on the surveys. The project team includes:

From NPR - Marcus D. Rosenbaum, Special Projects Editor

From the Kaiser Family Foundation - Drew Altman, President and Chief Executive Officer; Mollyann Brodie, Vice President, Director of Public Opinion and Media Research

From the Kennedy School - Robert J. Blendon, a Harvard University Professor who holds joint appointments in the School of Public Health and the Kennedy School of Government; John Benson, Deputy Director for Public Opinion and Health/Social Policy at the Harvard School of Public Health; Stephen R. Pelletier, Research Coordinator for Health/Social Policy at the Harvard School of Public Health

The results of this project are based on a telephone survey conducted May 26-June 25, 2000, among a nationally representative sample of 1,557 respondents 18 years of age and older, including an oversample of 177 Hispanics and 175 African-Americans (results are weighted to reflect the actual distribution in the nation). Field work by ICR/International Communications Research of Media, PA. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points. For results based on subsets of respondents, the margin of error is higher.