

# IN THE PUBLIC WE TRUST

*Renewing the Connection between the Federal Government and the Public*

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PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

GALLUP CONSULTING®

## THE PROBLEM

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For years, the prevailing attitude of Americans toward our federal government has been best reflected by the famous line from President Reagan's first inaugural address, "...Government is not the solution to our problems; government is the problem" – a sentiment Americans agreed with by a two-to-one margin as recently as this fall. Clearly, government needs to do better. But a pre-election poll by the Gallup Organization with the Partnership for Public Service suggests the possibilities of changing public perceptions following the election of a new president may be far greater than have been commonly realized. The findings of this research reveal a unique opportunity for the next administration to rewrite many of the old clichés about government; to inspire the federal government to improve processes, portals and interactions with the public; and to usher in a new era where Americans see government as part of the solution, not the problem.

Broad public support for our federal government has been lacking for decades. A decline in government's standing began with the Vietnam War, gained momentum during Watergate and never really recovered. Despite occasional improvements in public attitudes, high-profile failures and the steady drumbeat of bureaucrat bashing from elected officials on both sides of the aisle have limited any significant, long-term improvements.

A sustained lack of faith in government carries its own costs. Public support is one of the key pillars of effective government. Negative views of government diminish stakeholder interest in solving government's operational issues and undermine the ability of federal agencies to attract and retain top talent.

## WHAT GETS MEASURED MATTERS

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The Partnership for Public Service partnered with Gallup and its nationally representative household panel to examine the public's attitudes toward government performance. In order to provide deeper insight than existing public opinion research on government effectiveness, this study asked Americans to focus their opinions specifically on federal government agencies and civil servants, rather than attitudes about the President and elected officials, or the federal government as a whole.

This work is part of a broader effort by the Partnership for Public Service to gauge the health of our federal government. The Partnership's *State of the Public Service* project is based on the premise that good government starts with good people. It will provide a report card on how well government is addressing the core components of an effective federal workforce: the right talent, an engaged workforce, strong leadership, effective systems and structures, and public support.

The long-term nature of *State of the Public Service* means the questions asked in this Gallup survey of attitudes toward government will be repeated annually. The fact that this survey was conducted before the presidential

election provides a baseline that will allow researchers to see how much the change in administrations moves the needle of public opinion.

**GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE**

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This research confirms that most Americans continue to think poorly of their government in general. When asked to assess the performance of various levels of government, fewer than one-third of Americans give a positive rating to the departments and agencies of the federal government (27 percent), and just over one-third are positive about the performance of civil servants in the federal government (37 percent).

**TABLE 1**  
**HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE OVERALL PERFORMANCE OF EACH OF THE FOLLOWING GOVERNMENT SECTORS, OFFICIALS AND EMPLOYEES?**

	Good/Excellent	Fair/Poor	Don't Know
Men and women in military	90%	6%	4%
U.S. military	79	17	4
Local government elected officials	46	47	7
State government elected officials	40	56	4
Men and women in federal government	37	52	11
Departments/agencies of federal government	27	66	7
Current U.S. President/administration	24	75	1
Elected members of Congress	22	74	4

When asked to rate specific functions of the federal government, Americans provide the highest ratings for security of air travel, and protecting the nation from military threats. Given that the survey was conducted in the midst of the economic crisis and the Congressional vote on the financial rescue plan, it is not surprising that protecting our financial system is one of the areas where government receives the lowest performance ratings.

**TABLE 2**  
**HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE JOB THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS DOING ON EACH ISSUE?**

	Good/Excellent	Fair/Poor	Don't Know
Providing security for air travel	70%	28%	2%
Protecting our nation from military/terrorist threats	69	28	3
Responding to public health emergencies	52	40	8
Administering federal tax collection	52	38	10
Regulating safety standards for workplaces	52	37	11
Running the country's national parks	51	36	13
Ensuring the safety of food, medicines and other products	49	49	2
Responding to natural disasters in the U.S.	47	52	1
Providing Social Security benefits	44	53	3

	Good/Excellent	Fair/Poor	Don't Know
Researching cures for diseases	41	51	8
Upholding Americans' constitutional rights	40	58	2
Providing loans for college and vocational training	37	55	8
Protecting the environment	32	65	3
Providing a safety net for the needy	31	64	5
Caring for our nation's veterans	26	71	3
Providing healthcare for children, elderly and the disadvantaged	26	70	4
Protecting consumers from identity theft and related scams	25	65	10
Improving the quality of education	21	77	2
Enforcing immigration laws	13	83	4
Protecting the nation's financial system	12	85	3

## OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE PERCEPTIONS

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The survey's most interesting findings reveal a broad range of opportunities to dramatically improve the public's experiences with, and therefore opinions of, government. The potential to re-engage the public in transforming our federal government is rooted in six key findings from the new survey.

**1. We're paying attention. Prompted by the economic crisis and two wars, Americans are attuned to government and see its connection to their personal lives.** In the midst of two wars, an economic crisis, and a historic election, it is no surprise that 84 percent of Americans say they are paying attention to what is happening in the federal government. A similar percentage (80 percent) believes the federal government has an impact on their lives. An independent study conducted during a similar period confirms this heightened public attention to government. A September 2008 Gallup Poll reported a 12-year high for Americans saying they follow news about national politics (87 percent).

**2. Our experiences matter. Direct interactions with government move the needle of public opinion.** Overall, more than three-quarters of Americans can recall having had some type of contact with a federal agency in the past (79 percent), with 69 percent of Americans reporting that the interaction occurred in the past six months. Those who come into direct contact with the federal government are more likely to view that interaction favorably (32 percent) than unfavorably (18 percent). Additionally, those who have been satisfied with their contacts with federal agencies are three times more likely to give a positive performance rating to the federal government in general than are those who have been dissatisfied with their interactions (41 percent versus 14 percent). Public interactions with the federal government are therefore key touch points for creating positive experiences that translate to positive feelings about government overall.

### 3. Technology enhances touch. The Internet is the public's initial portal into federal government agencies.

More than half of Americans have visited the Web site of a federal department or agency, with 38 percent having visited such a Web site in the past six months. Additionally, it's not just young people driving this figure. In the past six months, sizable percentages across all age groups say they visited a federal Web site.

TABLE 3

#### INTERNET CONTACT WITH FEDERAL GOVERNMENT BY AGE.

Age Group	Visited a federal agency Web site in the past 6 months
18-24	44%
25-34	52
35-44	46
45-54	40
55-64	34
65+	14

A new president can encourage federal agencies to use the Web to improve the quality of the public's initial contact with government and encourage more repeat usage.

**4. Economic downturn = increased interest in government jobs. The downturn in the economy appears to be favorably impacting the way Americans think of government as a potential employer.** Despite negative opinions about government performance on the whole, most Americans (53 percent) would recommend the federal government as an employer. The main reasons for encouraging the federal government as an employer are job security and benefits. Those who have a positive view of federal government performance are even more likely to encourage employment (68 percent) but nearly half of those with a negative view of federal government would still encourage employment there (47 percent). With tens of thousands of mission-critical jobs to fill in the coming year alone, the federal government may soon find itself well positioned in a buyer's market for top talent.

### 5. Don't forget the process. The new administration needs to think about HOW government gets things done.

The president's policy agenda can influence public attitudes toward government, but this new research suggests public views are strongly correlated to the way government does its job. Across the board, the public gives low ratings of the processes by which government operates (i.e., how government does its work). No more than one-quarter of Americans give a positive rating to any of the nine areas tested for how the federal government does its work.

TABLE 4

**HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT ON EACH OF THE FOLLOWING? PLEASE TRY TO FOCUS ON WHAT FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AGENCIES ACTUALLY DO AND NOT ON THE PRESIDENT OR OTHER POLITICAL FIGURES.**

	Good/Excellent	Fair/Poor	Don't Know
Working to do what's best for the public	22%	75%	3%
Having strong leadership	19	78	3
Solving country's key problems	15	83	2
Attracting the best employees	15	74	11
Being transparent/not hiding the truth	11	86	3
Being proactive/thinking ahead	10	86	4
Not being influenced by corruption	10	85	5
Basing decisions on merit, not politics	9	87	4
Using taxpayer money wisely	6	92	2

On the other hand, Americans consistently rate government performance higher when they believe government gets the process right—by spending money wisely, making decisions based on merit and not politics, hiring talented civil servants, and demonstrating strong leadership, for example. As shown in the table below, those who give positive ratings on *how* government functions are more than twice as likely to say government is doing a good job on the whole than those who feel government is doing poorly on the *how*'s.

TABLE 5

**RATING OF GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE BY RATING OF PROCESS.**

	% saying government performance is good/excellent when they believe ...	
	...This process is good/excellent	...This process is fair/poor
Using taxpayer money wisely	78%	27%
Basing decisions on merit, not politics	63	26
Being proactive/thinking ahead	63	25
Solving country's key problems	60	24
Having strong leadership	57	23
Not being influenced by corruption	56	26
Being transparent/not hiding the truth	56	26
Attracting the best employees	55	24
Working to do what's best for the public	54	22

**6. Media matters. The media have tremendous power to move public opinion.** The media are a key driver of public attitudes about government, particularly for those who have not had direct interactions. Nearly eight in 10 say they have seen news stories about the performance of federal agencies, but only 7 percent describe the coverage as positive. Those who have seen positive stories about government in the press are twice as likely (45 percent to 22

percent) to give a positive performance rating for the federal government, than those seeing mostly negative stories. While traditional print, television and radio sources remain the primary outlets for news about national issues, online media are gaining ground.

TABLE 6  
**IMPORTANCE OF NEWS SOURCES FOR INFORMATION ABOUT NATIONAL ISSUES.**

	Major source	Minor source	Not a source
<b>Broadcast media</b>			
Television	76%	19%	5%
Radio	39	41	20
<b>Print media</b>			
Newspapers	40	43	17
Magazines	12	43	45
Books	6	32	62
<b>Online media</b>			
Web sites	28	32	40
Blogs	7	23	70
<b>Social media</b>			
Coworkers	21	62	17
Church/religious leaders	7	26	67
Social or community groups	6	31	63

Beyond improving how government works, the new administration should look for ways to communicate its successes through the media, using both traditional and emerging methods of communication.

**IMPLICATIONS**

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The broad implication of this study is that when government does things right and the public notices, this positively impacts public perceptions of government. Therefore, agencies should be focusing on how they deal with their customers and, in particular, the public. Since the public is increasingly interacting with government through technology, agencies need to improve their portals to optimize those interactions.

Beyond the direct interactions, the media are a powerful influencer of opinions and, to the extent that media coverage can be shifted to a more positive light -- highlighting successes and not just failures -- the survey findings indicate this will improve perceptions of federal government’s performance overall.

Finally, government must improve key processes and convey those improvements to the public. No matter what issues the federal government is focusing on, if government is perceived as corrupt, inefficient and wasteful, these

views will likely overshadow any successes. One of the ways to improve how government operates is to bring in talented workers to federal agencies. The data suggest that this may be an excellent time to attract a talented workforce to government, given the volatile nature of the economy and the perceived job security and good benefits.

This research shows that Americans are paying more attention to government now than at any time in the last 12 years. The new administration has a unique opportunity to capitalize on this attention—to change how government operates, to use technology to communicate in new and meaningful ways, and ultimately to improve how Americans experience their government. How will government respond?

### **Methodology**

Results for this study are based on a self-administered survey conducted via mail and Web with 2,808 adult members of the Gallup Panel, including 1,398 responses received via mail, and 1,410 received via Web. The Gallup Panel is a nationally representative multi-mode panel, whose members are recruited from a random digit dialing sampling frame and are then assigned to receive surveys either by mail or Internet (or phone), depending on Internet usage and willingness to provide an email address. Independent samples were pulled for mail and Web such that each would be nationally representative. Data were collected from September 26-October 14, 2008. Mail and Web data were combined and weighted to reflect population estimates from the Current Population Survey, March 2008. The margin of sampling error is +/-2.2 percent for the overall sample, and is larger for subgroups. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

This report is only a preliminary analysis of Gallup's and the Partnership's research for the *State of the Public Service* project. This is the first in a series of planned releases that will offer additional insights about public opinion of government. In particular, it will examine Americans views of specific federal agencies and about government's top priorities. It will also dig deeper into early data discussed in this release. The full report is anticipated to be released in early 2009. After the release, the entire findings will be available upon request from the Partnership for Public Service.

### **About the Partnership for Public Service**

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan nonprofit that works to revitalize our federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership:

- Raises awareness and helps improve public attitudes about government service.
- Promotes government service through outreach to college campuses and job seekers.
- Provides hands-on assistance to federal agencies to improve their operations.
- Advocates for needed legislative and regulatory reforms to strengthen the civil service.
- Generates thought-provoking resources and strategies for workforce challenges facing our federal government.

Visit the Partnership at [www.ourpublicservice.org](http://www.ourpublicservice.org).



**About Gallup**

The Gallup Organization has studied human nature and behavior for more than 70 years. Gallup's reputation for delivering relevant and visionary research on what people around the world think and feel is the cornerstone of the organization. Gallup employs many of the world's leading scientists in management, economics, psychology, and sociology, and its consultants assist leaders in identifying and monitoring behavioral economic indicators worldwide. Gallup consultants also help organizations boost organic growth by increasing customer engagement and maximizing employee productivity through measurement tools, coursework and strategic advisory services. Gallup's 2,000 professionals deliver services at client organizations, through the Web, at Gallup University's campuses, and in 40 offices around the world. For more information, go to [www.gallup.com](http://www.gallup.com).