

Trust in Federal Workers Nears High Post-Shutdown Levels

by William C. Adams & Donna Lind Infeld

American confidence in federal employees has stayed close to its relatively high post-shutdown level, according to a new nationwide poll of 1,000 registered voters just released by The George Washington University Battleground Poll. Nearly three-fourths of survey respondents had “a lot” (22 percent) or “some” confidence (51 percent) in federal civilian workers. One fourth (25 percent) voiced “little or no confidence.” (See Figure 1.)

These findings may not be a resounding affirmation of trust but they are significantly better than those recorded prior to the federal government shutdown in 2013. Confidence in federal workers had been declining in the wake of news reports of misconduct and mismanagement at various agencies in 2012 and 2013. However, confidence rebounded after the government shutdown, perhaps prompted by a new-found appreciation of the federal workforce.

<http://www.govexec.com/management/2013/11/analysis-confidence-federal-workers-sharply-after-shutdown/73229/>

International headlines and the waning of news about many executive branch “scandals” (e.g., IRS, NSA, GSA, Secret Service) over the past year may also have provided a less hostile climate. Whatever the driving factors, the latest results come close to hitting the highest points recorded since GW researchers began tracking this opinion measure.

A disproportionate number of the skeptics, as in past surveys, are Republicans. Only 13 percent have a lot of confidence in federal workers, while 36 percent have little or no confidence. Among Democrats, numbers are almost reversed, with only 13 percent having or no confidence and 32 percent having a lot of confidence. In 2011 and 2012, Independents were moving toward the GOP’s degree of skepticism, but now they are back in the middle between the partisans. (See Figure 2.)

As in most previous polls, African Americans and young respondents tended to be slightly more confident in federal workers.

Gallup asks annually about confidence in various institutions – but does not ask about the federal executive branch workforce. Gallup’s most recent poll (July) found that, as usual, Americans have much more confidence in the military and in law enforcement than in other government sectors. GW’s new survey puts opinions on federal civilian workers roughly on par with Gallup’s findings of the public’s views about the Supreme Court, public schools, and the criminal justice system. Political institutions (Congress and the presidency) typically rank lowest. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx#3>

Turning to careers, the latest GW Battleground survey echoed its previous findings that Americans see the federal government as a good place to work. About three-quarters of those polled (73 percent) say they would encourage a young person to consider a federal job. Only one in five (20 percent) would discourage a civil service career.

Again, there is a partisan divide. Democrats would overwhelmingly encourage a federal career (88 percent pro to 9 percent con). Among Republicans, only 56 percent would be supportive, while 32 percent would discourage that direction. African Americans are especially positive toward federal careers (88 percent pro), compared to 70 percent among whites.

George Washington University sponsors the GW-Battleground Poll, a unique national survey conducted jointly by leading Democratic (Lake Research Partners) and Republican (The Tarrance Group) firms. Telephone surveys were completed August 23-28, 2014, with a random national sample of 1,000 registered voters yielding overall confidence intervals of ± 3.1 percent.

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Figure 1: Confidence in Federal Civilian Employees, 2011-14, GW Battleground Poll

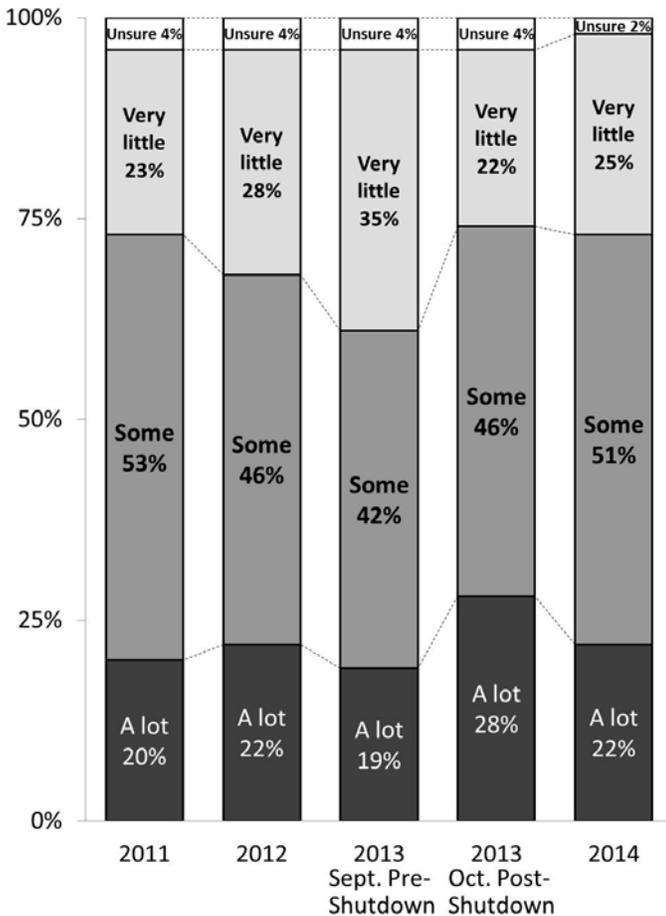


Figure 2: Confidence in Federal Civilian Employees by Party, 2014 GW Battleground Poll

