

Medicare, Crime-fighting, Social Security, Defense – the Most Popular Federal Government Services

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Foreign aid, immigration & naturalization, and food stamps, the least popular of 13 federal programs

The level of support for most major federal government programs, which rose significantly between 2005 and 2008, remains high.

But there has been a little slippage since last year. Medicare, crime-fighting and prevention and Social Security are the most popular of 13 programs covered in this survey, followed by defense, the national parks, unemployment benefits and federal aid to public schools.

The programs that receive the least public support are foreign aid and immigration and naturalization.

These are some of the results of The Harris Poll® of 2,276 adults surveyed online between December 7 and 14, 2009 by Harris Interactive®.

The main findings of this survey include:

* A 57% majority of adults support the Medicare program "a great deal," and a further 33% support it "somewhat," making a total of 90% who support it.

* Other very popular services include crime-fighting and prevention (88% support, 47% "a great deal"), Social Security (86% support and 53% "a great deal"); defense (83% and 47% "a great deal"); the national parks (83% support and 41% "a great deal"); unemployment benefits (82% support and 39% "a great deal") and federal aid to public schools (81% support and 43% "A great deal").

* Other programs that are widely supported by large majorities, but where those support them "a great deal" are lower are Medicaid (79% support and 38% "a great deal"); intelligence services (79% support and 33% "a great deal") and environmental protection (74% support and 34% "a great deal").

* Two other programs supported by smaller majorities, where fewer people support them "a great deal" are food stamps (64% support and 21% "a great deal"), and immigration and naturalization (55% support and 19% "a great deal").

* The one program supported by less than 50% is foreign aid (37% support and 6% "a great deal").

There has been a modest slippage overall in support for these federal government services over 12 months: the average level of support ("a great deal" and "somewhat") has fallen from 78% to 76%. However, this is still much higher than it was (67%) in 2005.

While the level of support for most programs has not fallen significantly, support for three programs has fallen by five or more percentage points:

- * Immigration and naturalization (from 64% to 55%);
- * Environmental protection (from, 81% to 74%);
- * National parks (from 88% to 83%).

Surprisingly perhaps, the proportions of Republicans and Democrats who support most of those programs are not very different, although the Democrat numbers are stronger on all programs except defense and intelligence.

Majorities of Republicans support all except two services, food stamps (48%) and foreign aid (29%). The biggest differences between Republican and Conservative support are for environmental protection (55% and 88%), and food stamps (48% and 78%).

So what?

It is interesting that while government, and "Washington," are generally unpopular, 12 of the 13 major federal government services are supported by more than half of all adults, ten are supported by more than 70%, and seven are supported by more than 80%.

The differences between Democrats who tend to be "pro-government" and Republicans who are more likely to be "anti-government" are not as large as one might have expected. Most Republicans support 11 of these 13 programs.

A possible hypothesis would explain the trends in these numbers since 2005 “that support for government programs increases as the economy goes south, and is starting to fall now as the economy starts to recover.

Methodology

This Harris Poll was conducted online within the United States December 7 and 14, 2009 among 2,276 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population.

Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments.

Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words "margin of error" as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates.

These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population.

Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

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