

Center for American Progress



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# Better, Not Smaller

What Americans Want From Their Federal Government

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# Executive summary

Public confidence in government is at an all-time low, according to a major new survey commissioned by the Center for American Progress. And yet clear majorities of Americans of all ages want and expect more federal involvement in priority areas such as energy, poverty, and education, the poll found.

The key lesson embedded in these seemingly paradoxical results: Americans want a federal government that is better, not smaller. CAP's new research shows people would rather improve government performance than reduce its size. And they are extremely receptive to reform efforts that would eliminate inefficient government programs, implement performance-based policy decisions, and adopt modern management methods and information technologies.

The May survey of 2,523 adults conducted by Hart Research Associates found that public lack of confidence in government's ability to solve problems is more closely related to perceptions of government performance than it is a function of partisan affiliation or political ideology. A majority of respondents indicated they would be more likely to support political candidates who embrace a reform agenda of improving government performance, effectiveness, and efficiency.

While recession-fueled record low levels of confidence are sobering, the broader lesson for policymakers is that a better-run government will increase public confidence in public institutions. That, in turn, should expand public support for smart government solutions to pressing social problems. Specifically, the survey found substantial support, especially among the younger generation and minorities but also among independents, moderates, and unlikely constituencies like Republicans and Tea Party supporters, for a government reform plan organized around three core elements:

- Eliminating inefficient programs and redirecting support to the most cost-efficient programs
- Carefully evaluating the performance of individual programs and agencies, and making that information available to the public
- Using more modern management methods and information technologies

Despite the opportunity this new research presents, it also underscores the challenge of overcoming public skepticism of government competence today. Negative feelings toward the government are ascendant in the public mind, and significantly outweigh positive attitudes. Measures of trust in government have declined in recent years, while unfavorable feelings have risen. At a time when so many pressing national problems appear to demand redress from the public sector, the general public appears reluctant to allow stronger government actions.

The conventional interpretation of the recent negative shift in public sentiment toward the federal government is that it reflects an ideological rejection of “big government.” This survey, however, reveals that Americans have not significantly changed their opinion of government’s role. Indeed, clear majorities want *more* federal government involvement in priority areas, and they expect government’s role in improving people’s lives to grow rather than shrink in importance in the years ahead.

Rather than a rejection of big government, the survey reveals a rejection of incompetent government. The government receives mediocre to poor performance ratings from the public both in terms of how effective it is and how well it is managed. There is a widespread belief that government spends their tax dollars inefficiently, and the

## Doing What Works a winner with Americans

What distinguishes this study from other inquiries into public attitudes toward government is a focus on understanding how Americans want government to change. The survey finds a surprisingly high level of confidence that government effectiveness can be improved—poor performance in the public sector is not inevitable, Americans say—and a powerful commitment to realizing that potential for better government. More specifically, the survey gauges public reaction to CAP’s “Doing What Works” plan for improving federal government performance. The public responds positively to all three of our core reform elements:

- Eliminating wasteful programs
- Measuring performance more precisely
- Modernizing government management

See page 5 for a summary of these findings, and the complete analysis beginning on page 10.

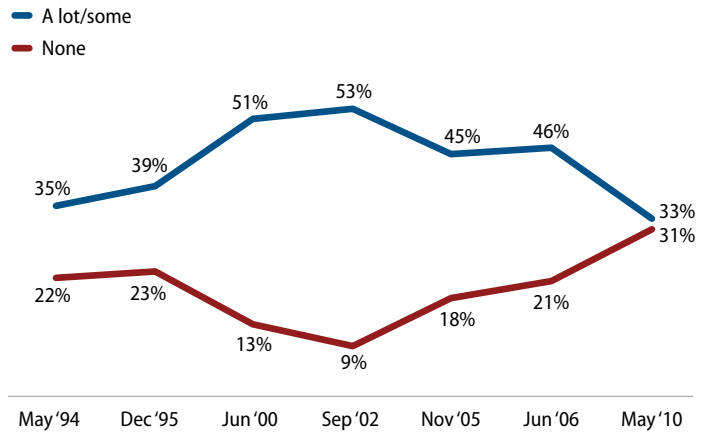
survey explores these perceptions of “wasteful spending” in significant depth. Improving these perceptions, we find, is a central challenge for reform efforts.

The message to politicians and policymakers is clear. Government will not regain the public trust unless it earns it. And earning it means spending taxpayer money more carefully—and doing what works.

Respondents to this survey included an oversample of so-called Millennials, or adults ages 18 to 32. A companion report exploring today’s remarkable generation gap in attitudes toward government is also available at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/07/dww\\_millennials.com](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/07/dww_millennials.com).

## Lowest rating on record for confidence in federal government

Confidence in federal government to solve problems



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