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Poll: Americans have little faith in government

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Americans enter 2014 with a profoundly negative view of their government, expressing little hope that elected officials can or will solve the nation's biggest problems, a new poll finds.

Half say America's system of democracy needs either "a lot of changes" or a complete overhaul, according to the poll conducted by the AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Just 1 in 20 says it works well and needs no changes.

Americans, who have a reputation for optimism, have a sharply pessimistic take on their government after years of disappointment in Washington.

The percentage of Americans saying the nation is heading in the right direction hasn't topped 50 in about a decade. In the new poll, 70 percent lack confidence in the government's ability "to make progress on the important problems and issues facing the country in 2014."

The poll comes about two months after partisan gridlock prompted the first government shutdown in 17 years.

People feel somewhat better about their personal lives. Most have at least some confidence that they'll be able to handle their own problems in the coming year. A narrow majority say they'd do a better job running the country than today's leaders in Washington.

Local and state governments inspire more faith than the federal government, according to the poll, with 45 percent at least moderately confident in their state government and 54 percent expressing that much confidence in their local government.

When asked to name up to 10 world or national problems they would "like the government to be working on" in 2014, Americans chiefly cite issues that have dominated — and often flummoxed — the White House and Congress for five years. Health care reform topped the list. It is likely, however, that those naming the issue include both opponents and supporters of President Barack Obama's sweeping health care overhaul.

Jobs and the economy were next, followed by the nation's debt and deficit spending.

Some issues that draw ample media and campaign attention rank lower in the public's priorities. No more than 3 percent of Americans listed gay rights, abortion or domestic spying as prime topics for government action.

Regardless of the issue, however, Americans express remarkably little confidence that the federal government can make real progress.

For instance, 86 percent of those who called health care reform a top priority said they want the government to put "a lot" or "a great deal" of effort into it. But about half of them (49 percent) are "not at all confident" there will be real progress, and 20 percent are only "slightly confident."

This yawning gap between public desires and expectations is one of the poll's most striking findings. Even on an issue completely within the federal government's control, the budget and national debt, 65 percent of those who called it a priority say they have no confidence in the government's ability to fix it. Another 20 percent are only "slightly confident."

When it comes to the issues people cited as most important to them, 80 percent want the government to spend significant effort working on them. Yet 76 percent say they have little or no confidence the government will make real progress.

But asked generally about the role of government in society, the AP-NORC Center poll finds Americans divided on how active they want government to be. Half say "the less government the better." However, almost as many (48 percent) say "there are more things that government should be doing."

On the economy, an area historically driven by the private sector, the poll finds a clear public desire for active government. Fifty-seven percent of Americans say "we need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems."

Even among those who say "the less government the better," 31 percent feel the nation needs a strong government to handle those complex problems.

Americans don't feel terribly optimistic about their own economic opportunities. Although 49 percent say their standard of living surpasses their parents', most are broadly pessimistic about the opportunity to achieve the American Dream. And they are mixed on whether people like them have a good chance to improve their standard of living.

Few are hopeful that the pieces are in place for the government to improve. About half are pessimistic about the country's ability to produce strong leaders generally. And 61 percent are pessimistic about the system of government overall and the way leaders are chosen.

Kathy Wooters of Houston's Kingwood community is among those who think the federal government should just get out of the way.

"We have too big of a government. I'd like it to be less in control of our lives," said Wooters, 57, a mother of four and grandmother of nine. "We are adults," she said. "We can make wise decisions with our money," rather than have the federal government dictate insurance choices and dole out more assistance to those who "want everything for free."

Wooters, a Republican and tea party supporter, said she taught her children to fend for themselves and avoid debt.

The AP-NORC Center poll was conducted online Dec. 12-16 among a random national sample of 1,141 adults. The survey has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.7 percentage points for all respondents.

The survey was conducted by GfK using KnowledgePanel, a probability-based Internet panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Respondents to the survey were first selected randomly, using phone or mail survey methods, and were later interviewed online. People selected for KnowledgePanel who didn't otherwise have access to the Internet were provided with the ability to access the Internet at no cost to them.