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Gallup: Americans' trust in government generally down this year

9/27/2013

At a time when the US is dealing with the federal debt limit, the budget, the rollout of the healthcare law, and the situation in Syria, trust in all three branches of the federal government remains on the lower end of what Gallup has measured historically.

Americans' trust in the executive and judicial branches of the federal government are both down five percentage points in 2013, to 51 percent and 62 percent, respectively. Trust in the legislative branch is the lowest of the three, at 34 percent, and is unchanged from 2012.

Earlier in September, Gallup reported sharp declines in Americans' trust in the government to handle domestic and international problems. The Sept. 5-8 poll was conducted in the midst of debates about whether the US should take military action against Syria.

To some degree, the 2013 decline in trust reflects the dissipation of a surge in trust observed in 2012 after the Democratic National Convention, which helped propel President Barack Obama to re-election.

Trust in the executive branch remains above the 47 percent figure measured in 2011, as well as the historical low of 40 percent found in 1974, during the height of the Watergate investigation.

Trust in the judicial branch, though still high compared with the other branches, is now the lowest Gallup has measured by one point.

And trust in the legislative branch, at 34 percent, is three points above the historical low of 31 percent from 2011, but remains bleak. Americans' trust in the legislative branch has shown a steep drop in recent years, down 28 points from 62 percent in 2005.

This year, for the first time, Gallup measured trust in the agencies and departments of the federal government. Fifty-two percent of Americans say they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in these, which matches the 51 percent trusting the executive branch, of which they are a part, and exceeding the level of trust in elected members of Congress.

Trust in State and Local Governments Also Down

The 71 percent of Americans who express a great deal or fair amount of trust in local government and the 62 percent trusting in state government both show slight three-point dips from 2012. Americans are more trusting in local government than in all three branches of the federal government, and trust in state government exceeds trust in the executive and legislative branches of the federal government. Americans have historically been more trusting in state and local governments than in the executive and legislative branches, but not the judicial branch.

Trust in local government has largely been stable over the years, ranging from a low of 63 percent in 1972 to a high of 77 percent in 1998, averaging 70 percent.

Americans' trust in state government has shown more variation, falling as low as 51 percent in 2009 as states dealt with budget crises during the economic recession and reaching as high as 80 percent in 1998 during the economic boom. The current 62 percent level of trust is just below the historical average of 64 percent.

Republicans More Trusting in State, Local Governments

Americans' trust in federal government branches and state and local governments is responsive to external events, including which party occupies the White House. As such, there is currently a wide gulf in Democrats' (86%) and Republicans' (19%) trust in the executive branch of the federal government. Democrats currently express more trust in the judicial branch, while the parties are more similar in their generally low level of trust in the legislative branch.

A majority of both Republicans and Democrats say they trust their state and local governments, but Republicans express more trust in each.