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RE: Crosstab Highlights from National Survey of Adults Regarding Public Service

Methodology

This analysis represents the findings of a survey of 1,071 American adults, with an oversample of adults ages 18-29, weighted to reflect a nationally representative sample of 1,000. Interviews were conducted by telephone June 24 to June 27, 2013, using random-digit-dialing sample including both cellular and landline telephone numbers. The margin of error for this survey is +/- 3.1% at a 95% level of confidence, with a higher margin of error for subgroups.

Overview

Our just completed national survey finds that Americans are more interested in performing community service than in working or engaging in politics. When asked specifically if they think “the best way to make major positive changes in our society is through local, state, and federal governments” or “through community involvement,” adults choose community involvement by a two-to-one margin (60 to 28 percent). These adults overwhelmingly favor incentives to encourage public and community service and to provide support for people who volunteer, and they support “requiring every American between the ages of 18 and 25 to serve one year in public or community service” by a 57 to 39 percent margin.

Keeping these findings in perspective is important when interpreting the results. Some questions yield very low percentages of interest, such as only 14 percent of American adults indicating that they have seriously considered running for public office. Yet that 14 percent translates into roughly 40 million Americans who have seriously thought about public office. Forty million people will fill up a lot of legislatures, school boards, and county councils.

Attitudes Toward Government, Public Affairs, and Public Service

Americans think community involvement is a better way to make major positive changes than through government, by a 60 to 28 percent margin, a margin consistent by age, party, and other demographic groups. Adults who never attend religious services are notable in their relatively small margin of agreement, although even they agree that community involvement is better by a 53 to 34 percent margin (65 to 24 percent among those who attend religious services at least

weekly and 62 to 29 percent among those who attend a few times a month or year). Interestingly, there is no real difference on this question between adults who say the federal government is an advocate (62 to 31 percent) and those who say it is an adversary (63 to 28 percent).

These adults narrowly say the federal government is an advocate for them and their family rather than an adversary, 42 to 38 percent, including a similar split, 41 to 39 percent, among adults 18 to 29. Whites (by a 45 to 38 percent margin) and men (45 to 37 percent) say the federal government is an adversary while black adults (62 to 17 percent), Hispanic adults (46 to 27 percent), and women (46 to 32 percent) say the federal government is an advocate. Responses on this question follow an expected pattern by income, with adults earning up to \$50,000 saying the federal government is an advocate (42 to 35 percent), adults earning \$50,000 to \$100,000 splitting evenly (45 to 44 percent), and adults earning \$100,000 or more saying the federal government is an adversary (51 to 37 percent). The expected partisan pattern emerges as well, with independents (46 to 38 percent) joining Republicans (54 to 31 percent) in saying the federal government is an adversary while Democrats say it is an advocate (55 to 22 percent).

Adults are far less evenly split on how often they think they can “trust the government in Washington to do what is right,” with over three-quarters saying either only some of the time (64 percent) or none of the time (13 percent). Even among adults who say the federal government is an advocate for them, just 34 percent say they trust the government just about always or most of the time, while 63 percent trust the government only some of the time or never.

Interest in following “what’s going on in the government and public affairs” is higher among adults 45 and older (57 percent say they follow it most of the time) than among those 30 to 44 (43 percent) and those 18 to 29 (30 percent). By party, interest is highest among Republicans (52 percent follow it most of the time), followed by independents (48 percent) and Democrats (45 percent). Not surprisingly, interest is higher among those adults who say involvement in politics and government is the best way to make change (55 percent versus 45 percent among those who say community involvement is the best way to make change). Looking just at 18- to 29-year-olds, interest is higher among men (37 percent versus 24 percent among women) and among those with a college degree (39 percent versus 26 percent among those without).

American Values

American adults are notably more likely to rate having a good relationship with a spouse or partner, having a close family with children, and having a career as either one of the most important or a very important value (90 percent, 84 percent, and 72 percent, respectively) than more civic-minded values such as giving back to the community, state, or nation (64 percent), being part of the political process (50 percent) and being active in their community (50 percent).

By age, it is no surprise that 18- to 29-year-olds place a higher emphasis on career (83 percent one of the most important or very important) than 30- to 64-year-olds (73 percent) and seniors (59 percent). These young adults are also least likely to place an emphasis on being involved in the political process (39 percent say one of the most important or very important, compared to 53 percent of those 30 and older).

The most notable differences by gender are that men are more likely to place an emphasis on career (77 percent one of the most important or very important, compared to 68 percent among women), while women are more likely to place an emphasis on giving back to their community, state, or nation (68 percent, compared to 60 percent among men). Those results also are notable for the fact that women place the same emphasis on these two values, while there is a 17-point gap among men.

College-educated adults are more likely to say participating in the political process is one of the most important or very important values (61 percent) than non-college educated adults (42 percent). Among 18- to 29-year-olds, college educated adults are more likely to emphasize giving back to their community, state, or nation (69 percent versus 59 percent among non-college educated 18- to 29-year-olds).

Adults who attend religious services at least weekly are more likely to say being active in their community is one of the most important or a very important value (61 percent, compared to 46 percent among those who attend a few times a month or year and 35 percent among those who never attend) and to say giving back to their community, state, or nation is one of the most important or a very important value (71 percent, compared to 64 percent and 53 percent among less frequent attendees and those who do not attend).

By race, black adults are the most likely to say participating in the political process is one of the most important or a very important value (60 percent, compared to 50 percent among white adults and 40 percent among Hispanic adults).

Interest in Volunteer Activities

Americans are more interested in volunteering at their place of worship (45 percent overall say they are extremely or very interested, including 75 percent of those who attend religious services at least weekly), volunteering at a school (45 percent overall, including 53 percent among women compared to 37 percent among men), and volunteering at an organization that helps the needy (41 percent overall, including 45 percent among Democrats compared to 39 percent among independents and 38 percent among Republicans) than in other tested opportunities.

Volunteering with a youth organization or serving on a jury comprise a second tier of interest (29 percent and 26 percent are extremely or very interested in these opportunities), while more political opportunities fall into a third tier (19 percent are extremely or very interested in writing an email or letter advocating for a political position or opinion, 18 percent in helping a political candidate run for office, 17 percent in volunteering at a polling place during elections, 14 percent in attending a political party meeting or political rally), and 11 percent of Americans are interested in being a member of a civic club like Rotary Club or Lions Club.

It is easy to look at these results only in regard to this list and say there is little interest in the political activities. That view needs a broader perspective, however: hearing simply that one-in-six Americans says they are extremely or very interested in volunteering at a polling place during elections would come as a revelation to many county election supervisors. These results may actually reveal a greater-than-expected willingness to serve.

That willingness to serve is notably higher among women than men when it comes to volunteering not just at schools but also in places of worship (50 percent extremely or very interested, compared to 40 percent among men) and helping the needy (47 percent compared to 34 percent among men). By race, blacks are more likely than whites or Hispanics to say they are extremely or very interested in these volunteer opportunities. That is particularly true of the more popular opportunities tested here (for example, 54 percent are extremely or very interested in volunteering at a school, compared to 48 percent of Hispanics and 43 percent of whites), but also true for political activities (28 percent extremely or very interested in attending a political meeting or rally, compared to 15 percent among Hispanics and 12 percent among whites).

While we might think of adults 50 and older as particularly likely to volunteer, that is not always the case in these results. Those 50 and older are generally more likely to indicate an interest in more political activities (23 percent extremely or somewhat interested in working at a polling place, compared to 13 percent among those 18 to 49, and 24 percent extremely or somewhat interested in helping a political candidate run for office, compared to 14 percent among those 18 to 49), but are less interested than younger adults in volunteering at a school (41 percent, compared to 45 percent among 18- to 29-year-olds and 50 percent among 30- to 49-year-olds) or helping the needy (36 percent, compared to 43 percent among 18- to 49-year-olds).

Finally, Democrats are generally more willing to serve than Republicans and independents. Republicans are more willing to volunteer in their place of worship (53 percent extremely or somewhat interested, compared to 45 percent of Democrats and 42 percent of independents), but Democrats indicate more interest in volunteering to help the needy, helping a political candidate, volunteering at a polling place, writing an email or letter advocating a political position, and attending a political meeting or rally.

Interest in Career Activities

Another source of perspective on the interest in the volunteer activities is a comparison to the results for career activities. Keeping in mind that overall interest in career activities is suppressed by lower interest levels among seniors, the only career activity tested that would make the first tier of volunteer activities is owning your own business (46 percent extremely or very interested). Other high-ranking career activities fall between the first and second tier volunteer activities (37 percent extremely or very interested in working for a small business and 35 percent extremely or very interested in working for a non-profit organization).

Working for a non-profit organization is the most interesting opportunity to seniors (29 percent extremely or very interested, compared to 23 percent for owning their own business, 21 percent for serving in the military, and 20 percent for working for a small business).

Not surprisingly, Democrats are the most interested by party to work in federal government (31 percent extremely or very interested, compared to 21 percent among Republicans and 17 percent among independents) and in state or local government (28 percent compared to 20 percent among Republicans and 18 percent among independents), while Republicans are the most interested in serving in the military (29 percent compared to 21 percent among independents and 17 percent among Democrats).

The greater interest in volunteer activities among the most religious adults does not extend to the career activities, with a notable difference only seen for interest in working for a non-profit organization (45 percent extremely or very interested, compared to 34 percent among those who attend religious services a few times a month or year and 23 percent among those who never attend). By area description, rural adults are the most interested in owning their own business (52 percent, compared to 48 percent of urban adults, 44 percent of small town adults, and 41 percent of suburban adults) and working for a small business (43 percent, compared to 38 percent among small town adults, 36 percent among suburban adults, and 30 percent among urban adults).

Looking at the political activities, it is again worth noting that 10 or 11 percent of adults saying they are extremely or very interested in serving/running for public office or working as a staff member is not an insignificant result. Adults who have seriously considered running for public office are not just more likely to say they are interested in serving or running for office, but also more likely to say they are extremely or very interested in service in an appointed position (42 percent versus 11 percent of those who have not seriously considered office) and working as a staff member (29 percent versus 9 percent).

Our split sample questions on serving in public office and running for public office – designed to assess a resistant to the difficulty of running campaigns versus serving in office – found little difference between the extremely and very interested percentages (11 percent and 10 percent, respectively). There is, however, a notable difference when looking at adults who are at least *somewhat* interested with 38 percent at least somewhat interested in serving in public office compared to 26 percent who are at least somewhat interested in running for public office. Interestingly, there is no real difference in response among 18- to 29-year-olds (35 and 37 percent for serving and running) but notable differences for older adults (38 versus 22 percent among those 30 to 44, 43 versus 26 percent among those 45 to 64, and 30 versus 13 percent among seniors). Interest in running for public office also sees a notable drop-off among women (from 35 percent to 17 percent) with little drop-off among men (39 to 34 percent).

Democrats are more likely to say they are at least somewhat interested in serving in public office (47 percent compared to 37 percent among Republicans and 34 percent among independents) but are similar in their interest in running for public office (26 percent compared to 28 percent among Republicans and 23 percent among independents). Adults who follow what's going on in government and public affairs are more interested in serving in office (52 percent) than in running for office (35 percent), as are adults who say they have seriously considered running (80 percent versus 70 percent). Even adults who have not seriously considered running for office are twice as likely to say they are at least somewhat interested in serving in office (31 percent) than in running for office (17 percent).

Interest in Running for Public Office

Overall, 14 percent of adults say they have seriously considered running for public office. That consideration is notably higher among men (22 percent) than among women (8 percent) and among those with a college degree (22 percent) than among those without (9 percent). A quarter of Americans earning at least \$100,000 a year say they have seriously considered running for

public office, compared to 15 percent of those earning \$50,000 to \$100,000 and 10 percent of those earning up to \$50,000.

Adults who say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right none of the time are the *most* likely to say they have seriously considered running (21 percent, compared to 14 percent among those who trust the government only some of the time, and 12 percent among those who trust the government just about always or most of the time).

The top reasons given for not running among those adults who have seriously considered running are that it is too time consuming (22 percent, including 25 percent among those 30 and older and 13 percent among those 18 to 29), that politics is too nasty (16 percent, including 23 percent among adults 18 to 44 and 10 percent among those 45 and older), and that it requires too much money and fundraising (16 percent). The dominant reason for not considering running for office is a lack of interest in politics (47 percent), with 11 percent saying they don't have the knowledge or education needed and 10 percent saying it is too time consuming.

Policies to Promote Public and Community Service

Support for policies to promote public and community service far outstrips interest levels in these activities; in this sense, public service may be like public transit, with many citizens thinking it is an excellent idea for *someone else* to do. Still, support of better than two-to-one for the first two tested policies (74 to 20 percent support for providing support through a living stipend or education benefits and 64 to 27 percent support for providing incentives to professions and businesses to allow them or employees to take service sabbaticals) merits investigation of how those policies would work and what the financial cost would be to the government or groups providing them.

The third tested policy, requiring every American between the ages of 18 and 25 to serve one year in public or community service, is well-supported overall (57 to 39 percent), but 18- to 29-year-olds oppose it narrowly (48 to 50 percent support to oppose compared to a 50 to 47 percent margin among 30- to 44-year-olds, a 63 to 32 percent margin among 45- to 64-year-olds, and a 66 to 23 percent margin among seniors). This proposal holds somewhat more appeal for Democrats (61 to 33 percent) than for Republicans and independents (55 to 41 percent and 54 to 43 percent, respectively), and support declines among adults who pay less attention to government and public affairs (62 to 36 percent among those who follow most of the time, 56 to 41 percent among those who follow some of the time, 50 to 42 percent among those who follow now and then, and 48 to 47 percent among those who do not follow at all).