

# Poll finds Americans concerned about government secrecy

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Scripps Howard News Service

Most Americans think the federal government operates with "too much secrecy" and overwhelmingly believe that public access to official records is critical to democracy, according to a Scripps Howard News Service poll.

First Amendment advocates hailed the findings of the survey of 1,007 adult residents of the United States conducted at the request of the American Society of Newspaper Editors as part of its observance of National Sunshine Week, which starts Sunday.

"People clearly think that their federal government is more secretive than state or local governments. And they are probably right," said Lucy Dalglish, executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press. "It has become more difficult to get information out of the federal government."

Andy Alexander, chairman of the newspaper editors' Freedom of Information Committee, said the survey confirms that people believe their national government is excessively secretive.

"We commissioned the survey so that we could show, scientifically, what we know anecdotally \_ citizens want the federal government to be more open and transparent," said Alexander, Washington bureau chief of Cox Newspapers.

The survey, conducted by the Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University, found that 59 percent of Americans believe the national government has "too much secrecy." Forty-five percent were as critical of the level of secrecy in their state and local governments.

The findings come at a time when news organizations are challenging hundreds of federal secrets, such as the identities of 500 prison detainees at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, or records in the investigation of CIA agent Valerie Plame's leaked identity.

Former Attorney General John Ashcroft set a new tone for federal secrecy when, shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he issued a memo promising to defend federal officials for deciding "to withhold records, in whole or in part" from the public.

"Right now, all of the incentive is for classifying information," said Lee Hamilton, a former member of the 9/11 commission and president of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. "You might say the motto is: 'When in doubt, classify.' "

In the poll, 86 percent said they are "very interested" or "somewhat interested" in the "actions and activities" of state and local government, while 88 percent expressed similar interest in the federal government. Fifty-two percent said they are "very interested" in federal activities compared to 38 percent expressing the highest level of interest in local and state government.

"Americans are intensely interested in what goes on at all levels of government," Alexander said. "Public officials should take note of that. Citizens want to know more about their government, and they clearly do not want more secrecy."

ASNE is spearheading Sunshine Week, in which various news organizations and civic groups seek to raise public awareness of the importance of open government.

The survey asked: "Do you believe that public access to government records is critical to the functioning of good government, or do you believe that it plays only a minor role?" Sixty-two percent said records access is critical, 25 percent said it has a minor role, and 13 percent were undecided or gave other responses.

Respondents were also asked to rate whether various governments are "open and transparent" or "closed and secretive." Only 10 percent thought that state and local governments tend to be "very secretive" and 30 percent said these governments can be "somewhat secretive." Overall, 55 percent said they think these governments are open to public scrutiny.

But the federal government is regarded with greater suspicion. Only 33 percent said Uncle Sam is "very open" or "somewhat open," while 40 percent said it is "somewhat secretive" and 22 percent said it is "very secretive." In both questions, 5 percent were undecided or gave a different response.

There is almost no opposition to so-called "sunshine" or "freedom-of-information" laws that guarantee public access to government records, official meetings and court records. Only about one person in 20 complained that these laws provide "too much access."

About half of the people polled said freedom-of-information legislation gives the public "the right amount of access" to official information, while more than a quarter complained the laws give them "too little access" to public records. About one in six people didn't know enough about sunshine laws to have an opinion.

The poll found that Americans are divided when asked to select the legal standard to determine when information should be released.

Forty-six percent agreed with the statement: "Government records should be considered public and that information should be withheld only if a government agency can show that release of the information would do harm."

But 42 percent agreed with the statement: "It is the responsibility of the government to protect the information it holds and that records should be made public only if the citizen can make a sound legal case for its release."

Twelve percent were undecided.

People who depend on newspapers \_ rather than television or other sources\_ to tell them about government activities tend to be more insistent that records be made public and to be more critical of government secrecy. Sixty-two percent of people who rely on newspapers said they believe the federal government is too secretive.

The poll also found that Americans rarely interact with their government and infrequently seek records. Among the findings:

\_ 37 percent have attended a meeting or hearing of their local government.

\_ 15 percent have attended a state hearing or meeting.

\_ 8 percent have gone to a federal hearing or meeting.

\_ 12 percent have sought records from City Hall or other local agencies.

\_ 8 percent have asked for state records.

\_ 6 percent has sought federal records.

Generally, Americans report they found government officials, at all levels, to be either "very helpful" or "somewhat helpful" when they've sought records.

The survey was conducted nationwide by telephone from Feb. 19 to March 3 at Ohio University under a grant from the Scripps Howard Foundation. It has a margin of error of 4 percentage points. (Thomas Hargrove is a reporter for Scripps Howard News Service. Guido H. Stempel III is the director of the Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University.)

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## **NATIONAL POLL FINDS BROAD SUPPORT FOR ACCESS**

PULLMAN, Wash. – Americans strongly support open government and the press' ability to access public records, and that support seems to be increasing, according to a national poll completed March 4 by researchers at Washington State University's Edward R. Murrow School of Communication.

Some eight in 10 Americans agree democracy requires government to operate openly, according to the telephone survey of 403 randomly selected adults from throughout the country, conducted Feb. 19 through March 4.

Two-thirds of survey respondents agreed that open records and meetings keep government officials honest. A majority of Americans said the press should have access to a dozen different types of public records, including traffic accident reports, government officials' expense accounts and email, and property tax records.

The public's support for open government appears to have increased during the past four years. Significantly more people support press access to police records, public utility records, and traffic accident reports on this poll than in a similar WSU poll of Washington state residents in 2002.

"This is good news for those of us who believe open government is the foundation of true democracy," said Dr. Susan Dente Ross, director of AccessNorthwest, the WSU research group that conducted the study.

However, when it comes to privacy and national security, the study found that Americans remain hesitant to give unrestrained support. About two-thirds of Americans said they did not believe the press should have access to driver's license records or divorce court files. Indeed, two-thirds of Americans said they are concerned about their privacy being invaded and the amount of personal information about them on the Internet.

Also, people seem willing to allow some government secrecy if it might protect national security. About three-quarters of Americans said the president should keep some public records secret to help wage the war on terrorism.

"Clearly, it is very difficult for us to judge when the release of government information will truly endanger the nation or our soldiers," Ross said. "The American public has always been more willing to endorse government secrecy during times of war. Today, in spite of revelations about Abu Grahib and Guantanamo Bay, about Enron and Enlay, the public clearly wants to defer to the government to decide a great deal of what we should see. This is a natural human tendency, perhaps, but it has serious implications for our access to fundamental information about or government when the current war on terrorism may last indefinitely, even forever."

The study found that support for access to public records is relatively uniform among Americans. Liberals and conservatives, people from different education levels, and people who have worked for government or not expressed the same level of support for openness in government. However, the people most supportive of open government tend to be older, newspaper readers, and politically active.

The AccessNorthwest study, which has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percent, was paid for in part by a \$5,000 grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation through the National Freedom of Information Coalition. Established in 1950, the Knight Foundation supports journalism education and the arts. The study was conducted by graduate research assistant David Cuillier, who will further analyze the results to examine other factors related toward attitudes toward open government.

“We have a lot more to learn about how people think about open government and public records,” Cuillier said. “This study puts us another step closer, particularly by looking at who supports access and who doesn’t, as well as providing affirmation that Americans still support open government.

“Ultimately, we would like to better know what factors affect attitudes toward access, particularly when it comes to fear of privacy invasion and terrorism.”

AccessNorthwest is a non-partisan Edward R. Murrow School of Communication work group dedicated to research, education and outreach that increase citizen access to and use of government information, particularly by disenfranchised populations, with the objective of enhancing civic engagement and building a more informed electorate for a stronger democracy.

The questions and results can be found online at [www.wsu.edu/~accessnw/news/surveyresults.htm](http://www.wsu.edu/~accessnw/news/surveyresults.htm). For more information, contact David Cuillier at 509-335-2979, [davidc@wsu.edu](mailto:davidc@wsu.edu) or Dr. Susan Dente Ross at [suross@wsu.edu](mailto:suross@wsu.edu).

### **National poll survey results**

Conducted Feb. 19 through March 4, 2006 by WSU graduate research assistant David Cuillier, and sponsored by AccessNorthwest within the Edward R. Murrow School of Communication at Washington State University through a \$5,000 grant by the Knight Foundation and National Freedom of Information Coalition.

The telephone survey of 403 randomly selected adults from throughout the country. The margin of error is plus or minus 5 percent. Six call attempts were made for each number. The cooperation rate (AAPOR 4) was 26 percent. People were called by trained undergraduate surveyors and results analyzed in SPSS.

Respondents were asked to provide an answer on a scale from 0 to 10 with 0 meaning strongly disagree and 10 meaning strongly agree. This method allows for better statistical analysis for examining factors related to attitudes toward access. For the purposes of summarizing overall attitudes, the results were collapsed into three categories: Agree (0-4), Neutral (5), and Disagree (6-10), and reported below, along with the 0-10 mean.

The questions focused on the *press'* rights to access public records instead of *citizens'* rights because previous research has found that citizens more strongly support their own access to the point of providing little variance in answers. Also, many debates regarding access to public records involve whether others, such as the press or marketing companies, should have access. Therefore, understanding how citizens think about others' access to records is valuable. Despite the questions focusing on the press' rights, public support was still relatively high.

Results from similar questions from the [2002 poll](#) of Washington state residents are included for some items below as comparison. Note that the samples are different (Washington residents in 2002 and U.S. residents in 2006), and that the question wording is different in a few items.

#### **Democracy requires that government operates openly.**

Agree 81%  
Neutral 11%  
Disagree 8%

#### **Open public records and meetings keep government officials honest.**

Agree 69%  
Neutral 11%

Disagree 20%

**It is OK for the government to keep records secret if it deems necessary.**

Agree 63%  
Neutral 19%  
Disagree 18%

**The President should make some public records secret if it might help in the war on terrorism.**

Agree 73%  
Neutral 12%  
Disagree 15%

**For the following types of government records, please indicate whether you think the press should be allowed access to them or not.**

**Government records detailing dangerous traffic intersections.**

Agree	95%	<b>2002 study:</b>	Agree	61%
Neutral	3%		Neutral	2%
Disagree	2%		Disagree	37%

**Police reports of crimes committed in your community.**

Agree	95%	<b>2002 study:</b>	Agree	76%
Neutral	2%		Neutral	3%
Disagree	3%		Disagree	21%

**The names and addresses of registered sex offenders.**

Agree 88%  
Neutral 4%  
Disagree 8%

**Records of local government officials' expense accounts.**

Agree 87%  
Neutral 7%  
Disagree 6%

**Government records detailing problems with medical physicians.**

Agree 85%  
Neutral 7%  
Disagree 8%

**Government records that identify the type, amount and location of hazardous chemicals.**

Agree 79%  
Neutral 7%  
Disagree 14%

**The annual salaries of public employees.**

Agree 73%  
Neutral 10%  
Disagree 17%

**Records detailing someone's criminal past.**

Agree 66%  
Neutral 16%  
Disagree 18%

**Government records explaining vulnerabilities of dams.**

Agree 64%  
Neutral 13%  
Disagree 23%

**Public utility records, which could include how much water people use for their lawns and irrigation.**

Agree	56%	<b>2002 study:</b>	Agree	32%
Neutral	20%		Neutral	1%
Disagree	24%		Disagree	67%

**Local government officials' work email.**

Agree 53%  
Neutral 19%  
Disagree 28%

**Property tax records, including the value of a person's home and how much was paid in property taxes.**

Agree	52%	<b>2002 study:</b>	Agree	64%
Neutral	15%		Neutral	3%
Disagree	33%		Disagree	33%

**Drivers license records, which include a person's name, address, height and weight.**

Agree	23%	<b>2002 study:</b>	Agree	26%
Neutral	14%		Neutral	2%
Disagree	63%		Disagree	72%

**Divorce court files, which may include family assets and allegations between spouses.**

Agree 19%  
Neutral 18%  
Disagree 63%

**I am concerned about my privacy being invaded.**

Agree 67%  
Neutral 13%  
Disagree 20%

**I am concerned about the amount of information about me in databases held by marketing companies.**

Agree	76%	<b>2002 study:</b>	Agree	80%
Neutral	10%		Neutral	1%
Disagree	14%		Disagree	19%

**I am concerned about the amount of personal information about me on the Internet.**

Agree	68%	<b>2002 study:</b>	Agree	73%
Neutral	8%		Neutral	5%
Disagree	24%		Disagree	22%