

What Polls Have Shown About Public Attitudes on the Division of Government Responsibilities

by Tom Mather

The central debate in federalism is how power, responsibilities, and taxing authority should be divided among the levels of government. (Although federalism in the strictest sense refers to the division of powers between the federal and state governments, the term is used more broadly here to include local governments as well.) That is, should the federal, state, or local governments take the preeminent role in governing? Should the federal government lead in some areas, such as defense, while taking a lesser or nonexistent role in issues such as public education? Should the government—at any level—refrain and let the marketplace rule on issues such as economic development?

The federalism debate dates back to our nation's founding years. Leaders such as

Alexander Hamilton, the first U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, argued for a strong federal government. Others, such as President Thomas Jefferson, argued for a concentration of power in the states and local governments. Such questions are still relevant today, and a number of polls have surveyed public opinion on them. Recent polls have shown that the public generally supports shifting more power from the federal government to the states, and from the states to local governments. But the public has mixed feelings when it gets down to particular issues. For instance, polls show that public supports strong federal and state roles in protecting the environment. Polls also show that property taxes—which are one of the key sources of revenue for local governments—are among the least popular taxes. Here are some examples of recent polls that have surveyed public opinion on questions related to federalism:

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- 1. The Gallup Poll, Aug. 11–14, 1995.** (Survey of 1,006 adults nationwide; margin of error +/- 3 percent.)¹

“As I read off each of the following, please tell me whether you think it has too much power in the United States today, about the right amount of power, or not enough power.”

	Too Much	About Right	Not Enough	Don't Know
The IRS	63%	32%	3%	2%
The advertising industry	62%	33%	4%	1%
The federal government in Washington	60%	29%	8%	3%
Major corporations	58%	31%	7%	4%
Television news	56%	36%	7%	1%
The entertainment industry	55%	35%	8%	2%
The CIA	42%	37%	9%	12%
Banks and financial institutions	41%	49%	7%	3%
Newspapers	41%	48%	10%	1%
The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms	39%	34%	23%	4%

	Too Much	About Right	Not Enough	Don't Know
The courts, the legal system, and judges	37%	34%	27%	2%
Labor unions	36%	35%	24%	5%
The FBI	32%	48%	16%	4%
The government in your state	27%	58%	13%	2%
Organized religion and churches	23%	46%	28%	3%
The United Nations	21%	35%	39%	5%
The military	17%	57%	23%	3%
The municipal or local government where you live	17%	62%	18%	3%
The local police in your community	13%	55%	31%	1%
The state police in your state	12%	61%	24%	3%

2. **The Gallup Organization, for Phi Delta Kappa, May 25–June 15, 1995.** (Survey of 1,311 adults nationwide; margin of error +/- 3 percent.)²

“Thinking about the future, would you like to see the federal government in Washington have more influence or less influence in determining the educational programs of the local public schools? . . . How about the state government? . . . How about the local government?”

	Federal	State	Local
More influence	28%	52%	64%
Less influence	64%	37%	24%
Same amount	5%	8%	8%
Don't know	3%	3%	4%

“In your opinion, should your state have more say in the way money from federal education programs is spent in your state, less say, or about the same as now?”

More say	48%
Less say	12%
About the same as now	37%
Don't know	3%

“Among those who answered ‘more say’ . . . What if giving your state more say means that less money from the federal government would be available to the state for education? Do you think your state should have more say in the way money from federal education programs is spent if it means less money would be available, or not?”

Yes, more say	64%
No	30%
Don't know	6%

—continues

3. The Luntz Research Companies, for KPMG Peat Marwick, May 2-7, 1995. (Survey of 1,000 adults nationwide; margin of error +/- 3 percent.)³

"Now I'm going to read you a list of issues and I want you to evaluate the job performance of your state government. Is your state government doing an excellent, good, or only fair or poor job...?"

	Excellent	Good	Only Fair	Poor	Don't Know
Attracting new jobs and industries to the state	8%	33%	30%	26%	4%
Maintaining and improving roads and highways	6%	37%	33%	22%	2%
Holding down state taxes	4%	26%	38%	28%	4%
Improving the quality of public education	4%	20%	33%	40%	4%
Slowing the growth of state government	3%	26%	47%	15%	9%
Managing state health care programs and facilities	3%	22%	37%	30%	9%
Reforming state welfare programs	3%	14%	33%	41%	9%

"In your view, which is the greater problem with your state government today, that it spends too much money or that it spends money on the wrong things?"

Spends too much	11%
Spends on wrong things	82%
Don't know	7%

"And, if your state governor could cut one tax, which would you cut first. . . ?"

Property tax	36%
Income tax	22%
Sales tax	15%
Gas tax	10%
Business tax	8%
Cigarette and liquor taxes	4%
Other/ Don't know	6%

"Thinking specifically about state government for a moment: Some people think that state governments are trying to do things that should be left to individuals, communities and private companies. Other people think that the state government should do more to help solve the problems of our communities. Which do you agree with more?"

Trying to do too much	46%
Should do more	42%
Both	5%
Don't know	7%

“And which is the greater problem: that state government is too big and bureaucratic to provide quality and efficient service to the public, or that the state government is too small and overburdened to be able to provide quality and efficient service to the public?”

Too big and bureaucratic	64%
Too small and overburdened	23%
Don't know	14%

“In general, is privatization of government services a good thing or a bad thing?”

Good thing	55%
Bad thing	24%
Depends	11%
Don't know	10%

4. Peter D. Hart and Robert M. Teeter, for the Council for Excellence in Government, March 16–18, 1995. (Telephone survey of 1,003 adults nationwide; margin of error of +/-3 percent.)⁴

“I am going to read a list of institutions in American society. Would you tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little confidence?”

	Great Deal	Quite a Lot	Some	Very Little	Not Sure
The military	28%	31%	29%	9%	3%
The church or organized religion	32%	24%	27%	14%	3%
Your local government	11%	20%	46%	21%	2%
Your state government	6%	17%	53%	23%	1%
National news media	6%	13%	38%	41%	2%
The federal government	4%	11%	47%	37%	1%

“Which theory of government do you favor—concentration of power in the federal government or concentration of power in the state government?”

In the federal government	26%
In the state government	64%
Not sure	10%

—continues

“Now I’m going to read you a number of government programs. For each one, please tell me which level of government you think should be most responsible for running that program—federal government, state government, or local government?”

	Federal	State	Local	None/ Not Sure
The welfare system	38%	40%	17%	5%
Improving opportunities for racial and ethnic minorities	35%	30%	28%	7%
Air and water quality control	35%	40%	22%	3%
Public education	21%	47%	30%	3%
Employment and job training	15%	59%	24%	2%
Law enforcement	15%	36%	45%	4%
Cultural facilities, libraries, concerts, museums	9%	35%	53%	3%

“Which of the following levels of government do you think spends your tax money most wisely—the federal government, state government, or local government?”

Federal government	10%
State government	24%
Local government	50%
Not sure	16%

“Do you favor or oppose giving states more responsibility for programs currently managed and funded by the federal government?”

Favor	75%
Oppose	17%
Depends	4%
Not sure	4%

“Currently, Congress is considering giving states more responsibility for certain programs, such as welfare and law enforcement, and granting blocks of money to states for use in funding those programs. Keeping this in mind, which of the following statements do you agree with most?”

States know what they need better than the federal government does, and they should establish their own standards for how the block grants should be spent.	55%
The federal government should shift responsibility for operating these programs to the states, but should continue to set the standards for how the block grants can be spent.	30%
The federal government should not shift responsibilities for programs back to the states, but should continue to manage such programs at the federal level.	12%
None or not sure	3%

5. The Gallup Organization, for the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR), June 17–July 6, 1994. (Survey based on personal interviews of 1,003 adults nationwide, weighted for demographic variables; margin of error +/- 3%.⁵)

“Which do you think is the worst tax—that is, the least fair: federal income tax, federal Social Security, state income tax, state sales tax, or local property tax?”

	1994	1992	1990	1988
Local property tax	28%	25%	28%	24%
Federal income tax	27%	25%	26%	26%
State sales tax	14%	16%	12%	15%
Social Security tax	12%	10%	15%	17%
State income tax	7%	9%	10%	9%
Don't know/No answer	11%	15%	9%	9%

“From which level of government do you feel you get the least for your money: federal, state, or local?”

	1994	1992	1990
Federal	46%	49%	41%
State	21%	16%	26%
Local	19%	18%	21%
Don't know/No answer	13%	16%	12%

FOOTNOTES

¹ “Power,” *The Polling Report*, Nov. 6, 1995, p. 8.

² “Report Card on the Nation’s Schools,” *The Polling Report*, Aug. 28, 1995, p. 7.

³ “State Government,” *The Polling Report*, Aug. 14, 1995, p. 2.

⁴ *A National Public Opinion Survey Conducted for the Council for Excellence in Government*, March 1995, Peter D. Hart and Robert M. Teeter, 1724 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington, D.C., 20009. Also see “The Dimming American Dream,” *State Legislatures* magazine, National Conference of State Legislatures, Denver, Colo., Vol. 21, No. 7 (July/August 1995), p. 7.

⁵ *Changing Public Attitudes on Governments and Taxes: 1994*, Report S-23, ISSN 0272-6017, U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, Washington, D.C., pp. 1–7.