



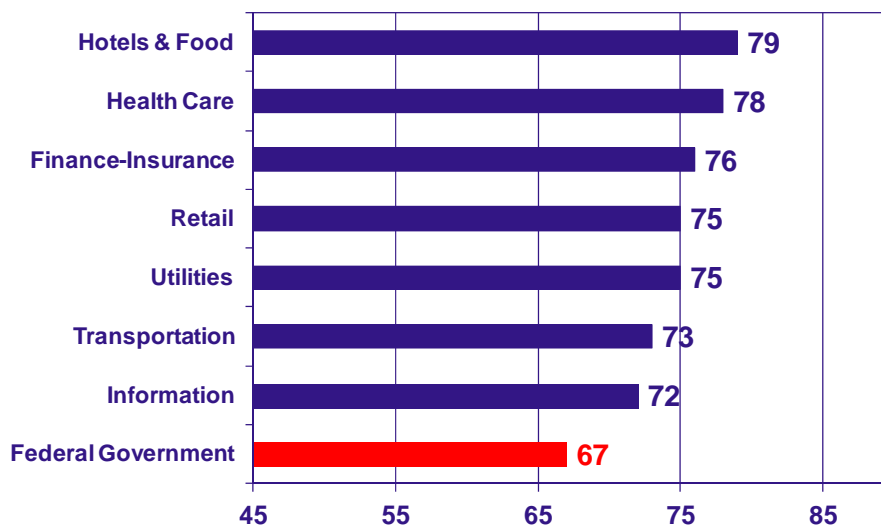
Commentary on Federal Government

January 19, 2012

Citizen Satisfaction with Federal Government Services Rebounds

Following a substantial decline in 2010, citizen satisfaction with the services provided by the U.S. federal government rebounds this year, up 2.3% to 66.9, according to the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI). The gain erases almost half of the large 4.8% decline between 2009 and 2010.

For 2011, the federal government scores 5 ACSI points below the lowest-scoring economic sector (the Information sector at 72.3). The federal government gain, combined with a drop in the Information sector, has narrowed the ACSI gap between public and private sectors. Although government services (both at the federal and local levels) score significantly below private sector services, several federal agencies are comparable to (and in some cases, better than) the private sector in terms of user satisfaction. For example, the Small Business Administration and its Loan Recipients programs, the National Weather Service, and the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs generate ACSI scores on par with the very best private sector firms, such as Amazon.com, FedEx, and UPS.



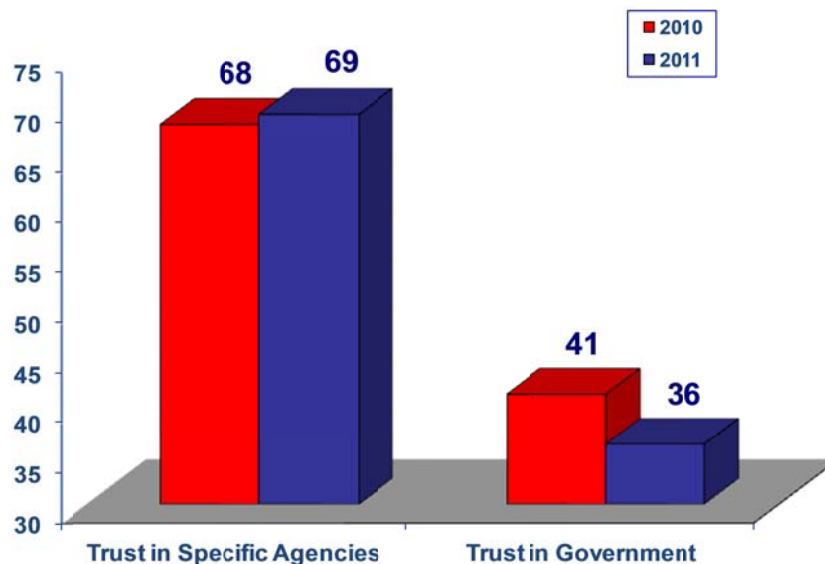
At the department level, citizen satisfaction varies widely. While some departments, such as Defense (76), Interior (74), and State (72), provide satisfaction comparable to the overall ACSI (currently 75.7), others fare worse. For instance, Homeland Security (59) and Treasury (57) score very low, although better than the two worst private sector companies, Pepco Holdings (54) and Delta Air Lines (56). Both departments, however, are responsible for activities not conducive to high levels of satisfaction; that is, Homeland Security's most visible agency is the Transportation Security Administration and Treasury is most strongly associated with the IRS. Moreover, even within low-scoring departments and agencies, user satisfaction is not always weak across the board. Consider the IRS. Among different groups of tax filers, satisfaction varies considerably, with large business and international filers (55) and paper filers (57) well below electronic filers (78) and small business/self-employed filers (65).

Complaint Handling Remains a Problem for Government

One area where federal services could use improvement is in the handling of complaints. While relatively few citizens complain (roughly 10% or less than in the private sector on average), government does not do a good job handling these complaints. With a score of 44 out of 100 for complaint handling, there is much room for improvement. In fact, this score is similar to the airline industry (43), which is among the worst at handling complaints in the private sector.

Trust in Government

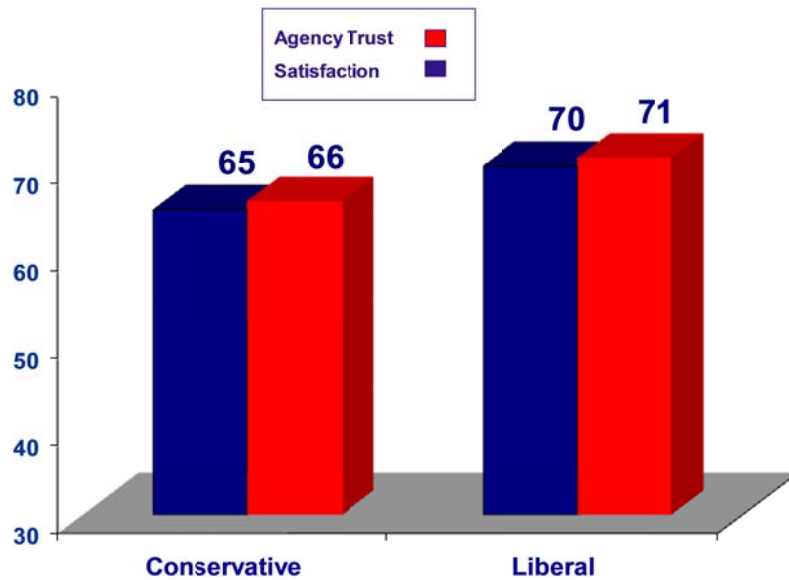
Customer satisfaction in the private sector is essential for driving business outcomes favorable to future economic performance, such as customer loyalty and recommendations. In the public sector, where the "customer" has little in the way of alternatives, the relationship between satisfaction and trust in government is of central importance. ACSI measures trust in specific agencies as well as trust in the federal government overall.



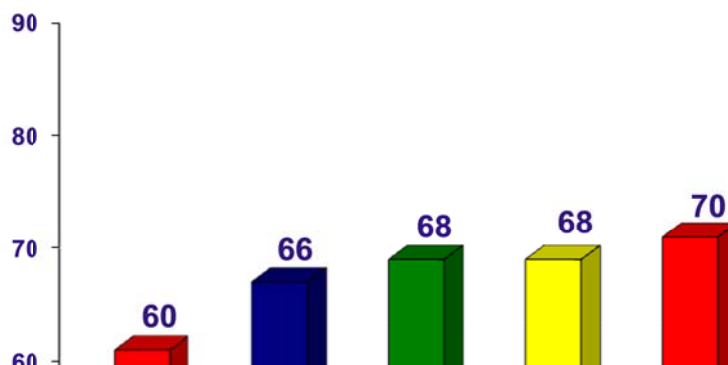
When asked about the federal government as a whole, Americans report very low trust levels (a score of 36, down 12% from 41 in 2010). In contrast, trust in the agencies with which they have been in contact is much stronger (a score of 69, up from 68 in 2010). These results are similar to the approval ratings for Congress, in the sense that while overall approval of Congress is exceedingly low, it is much higher for individual members. Once someone has experienced services from a particular agency, that person tends to look at the agency more favorably and have far greater trust in it. Contrary to popular belief, it seems that the more people come into contact with and receive services from federal agencies and departments, the more they like them.

Ideology and Contact Mode Impact Satisfaction

Political affiliation and ideology affect how people view the public sector. The ACSI includes measures of ideology by having respondents identify themselves as “conservative” or “liberal.” The former have significantly lower satisfaction and agency trust (65 and 66, respectively) than the latter (70 and 71, respectively). These results hold when controlling for demographics (age, education, and income) and the type of agency experienced (regulatory versus benefits-delivering).



Citizens interact with the government through a variety of channels, and over the past several years—following the IT developments that began in the 1990s—the number of channels has grown.



Citizens who interact with an agency using e-government channels are reasonably satisfied. With the exception of face-to-face contact, e-government (websites and electronic mail) does better than telephone (66) and printed materials (60). While these results may be due, in part, to the nature of the issue at hand (for example, using a call center may be a last resort when other alternatives have failed), they do suggest that electronic channels are becoming the way of the future for reasons of both cost efficiency and user satisfaction.