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Latest SOSS Results: Michigan’s Trust in Local Government Outpaces Trust in State and Federal Government

Michigan’s citizens are more trusting of their local government than they are of either state or federal government, according to new results from Michigan State University’s State of the State Survey.

In the latest round of the State of the State Survey, 39 percent of Michigan adults said they can trust their local government nearly always or most of the time. Only 19 percent of those responding to the survey said they can trust state government nearly always or most of the time, and just 15 percent said they can trust the federal government nearly always or most of the time.

The latest SOSS results resonate as the country readies to celebrate the national July 4 holiday and as new questions surface about privacy and access to personal information, said Charles Ballard, State of the State Survey director and MSU professor of economics.

“Michigan’s citizens are somewhat wary of government at all levels, but they tend to put more trust in their local government than either the state or federal government,” said Ballard.

“These latest results are the continuation of a trend we have seen for most of the 19 years we have been tracking trust in government.”

The State of the State Survey – also known as SOSS – is a quarterly telephone survey of Michigan adults. Survey questions were asked over landline and cellular phones.

SOSS is conducted by the Office for Survey Research in MSU’s Institute for Public Policy and Social Research. IPPSR specializes in public policy, leadership training and survey research in MSU’s College of Social Science.

The latest round of SOSS, conducted earlier this year, included interviews with 1,013 Michigan adults. The survey carries a margin of error of about 3.1 percent.
“Trust in local government this year stayed close to the average over all years of the State of the State Survey,” Ballard said. “Trust in state government has been fairly stable during the last three years, but the long-term trend remains decidedly negative.”

“Trust in federal government surged upward immediately after the September 11 terrorist attacks,” Ballard said. “It has worsened substantially since then.”

The University of Michigan’s Michigan Public Policy Survey asked local officials the same questions about government trust earlier this year, and this week compared results with SOSS’, Ballard said.

SOSS results are available online at http://ippsr.msu.edu/soss/sossdata.htm


“Our surveys ask the same questions, but they show some sharp differences between local officials and the general public,” said Ballard. “Trust in the federal government is substantially lower among Michigan’s local officials than the Michigan public.”

A striking 59 percent of local officials say they trust the federal government seldom or almost never.

The two surveys found the biggest differences between local officials and the general public in trust of local government, Ballard said.

While 39 percent of Michigan adults say they can trust local government nearly always or most of the time in the SOSS survey, 67 percent of local officials in the U of M report say they trust local governments nearly always or most of the time.

In contrast, local officials and Michigan citizens – about 19 percent of each – are equally trusting of the state government.

The U-M study, conducted April-June 2013, involved surveys sent via hardcopy and the Internet to top elected and appointed officials in all counties, cities, villages and townships in Michigan. A total of 1,350 jurisdictions returned valid surveys, resulting in a 73 percent response rate. The survey had a margin of error of 1.4 percentage points either way.
While Michigan’s local officials may be heartened to know that the public trusts local government more than state or federal government, it’s also true that the public doesn’t trust local government nearly as much as local officials trust local government,” Ballard said.

The two surveys also revealed strong partisan differences, Ballard said. Democrats are relatively more trusting of the federal government led by Democratic President Barack Obama. Republicans are more trusting of the state government headed by Republican Gov. Rick Snyder. The partisan differences tend to be larger among the elected officials than the general public, Ballard said.

SOSS launched its first wave of interviews with Michigan citizens in 1994. CLOSUP first asked local government leaders about trust in local, state and federal government in 2009.

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