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New Poll Shows Americans Anxious About Privacy

Latest Allstate/National Journal Heartland Monitor Poll Reveals Skepticism, Resignation about Data Collection and Surveillance and Varying Degrees of Trust in Institutions to Responsibly Use Personal Information

Washington, D.C., June 13, 2013 – Big Brother is watching and Americans know it. New figures from the quarterly **Allstate/National Journal Heartland Monitor Poll** show that most Americans exhibit a healthy amount of skepticism and resignation about data collection and surveillance, and show varying degrees of trust in institutions to responsibly use their personal information. Recent headlines focusing on government collection of telephone records within the United States may further stoke the underlying worries that the American public has about data privacy.

Watch a live briefing on key findings from the latest Heartland Monitor Poll today at 8:30 a.m., ET at <http://www.nationaljournal.com/events>, featuring Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN), member of the Bipartisan Congressional Privacy Caucus; Jon Leibowitz, former chairman of the Federal Trade Commission; and other privacy experts.

The 17th quarterly Allstate/National Journal Heartland Monitor Poll investigates American attitudes and opinions on the collection and use of their personal information by various groups and institutions and how “big data” affects their personal privacy. The poll asks Americans their impression of the likelihood that their personal information is available to the government, businesses, individuals, and other groups without their consent – and to what extent people believe they can control how much personal information is shared.

A full 85 percent of Americans believe their communications history, like phone calls, emails and Internet use, are accessible to the government, businesses, and others. Two in three (66 percent) feel that they have little or no control over the type of information that is collected and used by various groups and organizations. Fifty-nine percent, meanwhile, feel that they are unable to correct inaccurate personal information.

The poll – conducted days before the disclosure of top-secret government surveillance programs – also finds that just 48 percent of Americans have “some” or a “great deal” of trust in the government when it comes to the use of their personal data. Similarly, cell phone and Internet service providers are trusted by just 48 percent of the public. Healthcare providers and employers were seen as the most trustworthy institutions with respect to responsible use of information, with 80 percent of all respondent and 79 percent of employed respondents saying they have “some” or a “great deal” of trust in them, respectively

The survey finds that Americans are also divided on possible steps to improve national security, with just 10 percent supporting expanded government monitoring of phone and email activities. Rather, the public is more likely to favor increased use of camera surveillance of public places, with 44 percent supporting the measure, followed by 16 percent of respondents in favor of

“increased censorship of websites and less freedom to access sources on the Internet.” However, a full 42 percent of respondents said they oppose all three options.

With respect to privacy in the future, nine in ten poll respondents said they feel that they have less privacy than previous generations and expect the next generation will be even worse off. Meanwhile, a clear majority (88 percent) favors a federal policy to require the deletion of online information and nearly four in ten (37 percent) report they have personally experienced fraudulent use of their personal information to make purchases without their consent.

Importantly, a wide majority of Americans (79 percent) believe that IRS scrutiny of the political activities of certain groups is typical and has probably happened under previous administrations.

When asked to weigh the relative benefits and drawbacks of personal data collection, Americans generally believe the practice has a mostly negative impact. More than half (55 percent) say the collection and use of information is “mostly negative” because the information can be collected and used in a way that can risk personal privacy, peoples’ safety, financial security, and individual liberties. A minority (38 percent) believe it is “mostly positive” because more information can result in better decisions about how to improve the economy, grow businesses, provide better service, and increase public safety.

Despite an overall sense of discomfort with information collection and usage, Americans do recognize they could receive some transactional benefits or advantages in exchange for their personal information. More than two in three Americans believe that the collection and use of their personal information is likely to result in a greater ability to stay in touch with friends and relatives, receive more information about interesting products and services, and result in access to lower prices.

“Americans are understandably concerned that the fundamental American right to privacy is no more,” said **Marci Kaminsky**, senior vice president of public relations for Allstate Insurance Company. “A majority of Americans aren’t happy or comfortable about the collection and use of their personal information, and they have mixed feelings about whether they can trust that their information is being used responsibly. Protecting privacy and rebuilding trust with Americans will require shared accountability and compromise among the public and private sectors, as well as among individual citizens.”

“This survey found Americans teetering between anticipation and anxiety as they sort through the implications of the brave new world of communications, connectivity, and surveillance,” added **Ronald Brownstein**, editorial director of Atlantic Media. “Just as revealing, follow-up interviews with respondents found that many people feel as if they have no real opportunity to personally determine whether the benefits of the new communications world justify the cost: since few see opting out of the Internet and connectivity revolution as a real option, many of those interviewed project the sense that the erosion of privacy is another broad trend, like the decline of employment security, that is being imposed on average Americans by forces beyond their control. In that way, these new findings strongly echo perhaps the central chord of the previous 16 Heartland Monitor surveys: the widespread belief among Americans that they are ‘paddling alone’ without support from any institution as they navigate the turbulence of modern life.”

Key findings from the 17th Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Poll follow and are available via [PDF](#). Additional information on the entire polling series can be found at: <http://www.theheartlandvoice.com/category/insights>.

Key Findings

1. Americans recognize and expect that a wide array of information about them is being collected by various groups and organizations. And, most feel they have very little control over the collection and use of this information.

- Eighty-five percent of Americans say it is likely that information about their communications history, like phone calls, emails and internet use is available for businesses, government, individuals, and other groups to access without their consent.
- A solid majority of Americans believe that information about them is collected and used without their knowledge, most notably by communications providers, financial institutions, the government, and insurance companies.
- Two in three (66 percent) feel like they have not very much control or no control at all over the type of information about them that is collected and used by businesses, government, individuals, and other groups.
- Another 59 percent feel that they are unable to fix incorrect information about them or remove unwanted information.
- There is a near universal acknowledgement among Americans that they have less privacy than previous generations when it comes to their personal information (90 percent) and 93 percent believe that the next generation will have even less.

2. Americans express a healthy level of skepticism and concern about the breadth and depth of data collection and use.

- More than half (55 percent) say the collection and use of information is MOSTLY NEGATIVE because the information can be collected and used in a way that can risk personal privacy, peoples' safety, financial security, and individual liberties.
- A minority (38 percent) believe it is MOSTLY POSITIVE because more information can result in better decisions about how to improve the economy, grow businesses, provide better service, and increase public safety.
- Americans report high levels of concern with the use of information about them being used by businesses, government, individuals, and other groups without their consent.
- A majority of Americans (57 percent) are most concerned with having their identity stolen.
- Equal percentages (47 percent) believe that "being able to connect with people all over the world and access information on just about any subject is worth the potential privacy tradeoffs" and that "the ease of communicating and locating information online has made it too easy for personal information to be shared and is not worth the risks."

3. Americans grant varying degrees of trust to different institutions when it comes to responsibly using their information.

- The groups and institutions seen as most trustworthy to use information responsibly are those known to "do good" like healthcare providers (80 percent) and law enforcement

(71 percent) and those with whom people have entered a close, collaborative arrangement like their employer (79 percent) and insurance companies (63 percent).

- The government (48 percent), political parties (37 percent), and the media (29 percent) are on the low end of the spectrum in terms of trust. Given the recent headlines, the IRS is seen as trusted by just over half of Americans (53 percent), with a higher rating than the government (48 percent) as a whole.

4. Throughout the survey, there is a sharp generational contrast when it comes to opinions on the collection and use of information by various institutions.

- Americans 39 and younger are close to evenly split on the impact of the collection and use of information by various sources, with 46 percent seeing a mostly positive impact and 50 percent seeing a mostly negative impact. Among those ages 40 and older, just 33 percent see a mostly positive impact to the collection and use of information while 58 percent see a mostly negative impact.
- Similarly, regarding the collection and use of their personal information, Americans 39 and younger are more comfortable than concerned (53 percent-46 percent) while those 40 and older are distinctly more concerned (36 percent-61 percent).

5. Americans express strong support for control over their online information, believe that security cameras play an important role in protecting the public, and overwhelmingly believe that IRS scrutiny of political activities is a typical activity.

- Internet users are nearly unanimous (88%) in their support for a federal law that would require companies that operate online to permanently delete any personal information or activity if requested by an individual.
- Regarding the recent debate over IRS scrutiny of the political activities of certain groups, a wide majority of Americans (79 percent) believe that this activity is “typical and has probably happened before during previous administrations.”
- Nearly two in three (62 percent) believe that security cameras serve an important role in protecting the public from criminals and terrorists, even if some law-abiding citizens may be uncomfortable being recorded in their daily lives.
- However, just 44 percent say they support increased camera surveillance of public places, only 16 percent say they support increased censorship of websites and less freedom to access certain online sources, and just 10 percent support expanded government monitoring of cell phone and email activities. Four in ten (42 percent) say they support none of these options.

6. Despite an overall sense of discomfort with information collection and usage, Americans recognize that they could receive some transactional benefits or advantages in exchange for their personal information.

- More than two in three Americans believe that the collection and use of their personal information is likely to result in more ability to stay in touch with friends and relatives, more information about interesting products and services, and access to lower prices.
- Most Americans also believe that the collection and use of data will provide them with better information about health risks and news events, and give them the ability to connect with other people of similar interests.

- Americans are of mixed opinions about whether the collection and use of data will result in any increase in safety and security, lower rates on insurance, greater access to public assistance programs, or more professional or business opportunities.

7. President Obama’s approval numbers have not suffered in the face of multiple controversies and questions about his Administration.

- Just 30 percent of Americans believe the country is headed in the right direction. Since the first Heartland Monitor poll in April 2009 showed a plurality of believing the country was headed in the right direction (47 percent-42 percent), that indicator has topped 40 percent just once, in November of last year.
- President Obama’s job approval rating is at 48 percent and has shown remarkable resiliency in the face of recent headlines about the IRS, Benghazi, and the AP news scandal. His approval is actually up 2 points from April and has held between 44 and 51 percent for more than two years.
- Just 17 percent approve of the job Congress is doing, the same percentage measure in April.

8. Americans remain nervous, yet stubbornly optimistic about their personal financial situation.

- There is a clear split between those who say their financial situation is excellent or good (49 percent) and those who say it is fair or poor (51 percent).
- Nearly half (47 percent) now expect their personal finances to improve by this time next year.
- More than eight in ten (82 percent) say that all things considered, including their finances, their family, and their health, that things are generally going somewhat or very well in their life.

Survey Methodology

Since April 2009, the quarterly Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor Polls have explored American attitudes on the changing economy. The most recent Allstate/*National Journal* Heartland Monitor poll was conducted by FTI Consulting, from May 29 – June 2, 2013 among N=1,000 American adults age 18+. Respondents were reached via landline and cell phone. The sample margin of error for a sample of 1,000 respondents is ±3.1 percent.

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