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World Publics Say Governments Should Be More Responsive to the Will of the People

Governments Widely Seen as Serving Big Interests, Not the People

For Release: 21:01 GMT Monday, May 12th

College Park, MD—A WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 19 nations conducted around the world finds that, in every nation polled, publics support the principles of democracy. At the same time, in nearly every nation majorities are dissatisfied with how responsive their government is to the will of the people.

In all 19 nations polled majorities agree with the democratic principle that “the will of the people should be the basis for the authority of government”—a principle enunciated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 60th anniversary is being celebrated this year. On average 85 percent agree—52 percent strongly. On average, 74 percent say that the “will of the people” should have more influence over how the country is governed than it currently does.

“The perception that governments are not responsive to the popular will appears to be contributing to the low levels of confidence in government found around the world,” comments Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org. Kull adds: “Most see their governments as primarily serving big interests rather than the people as a whole.”

The poll of 17,525 respondents was conducted between January 10 and March 20, 2008 by WorldPublicOpinion.org, a collaborative research project involving research centers from around the world and managed by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland. Interviews were conducted in 19 nations, though in three of them not all questions were asked.

Those nations interviewed include most of the world's most populous nations—China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia—as well as Argentina, Azerbaijan, Britain, Egypt, France, Iran, Jordan, Mexico, Poland, South Korea, Turkey, Ukraine, and the Palestinian Territories. These nations represent 59 percent of the world population.

The poll found very strong support for democratic principles. Asked how much their country “should be governed according to the will of the people” (on a scale with zero meaning “not at all” and 10 meaning “completely”), the mean response for all countries is 8.0. In all countries the mean is well above 5.

At the same time, publics polled express substantial dissatisfaction with the level of democratic responsiveness by their governments. When asked to rate how much

influence the “will of the people” has on their government, the mean response is 4.5—well below the mean preferred level of 8.0. In every country polled the mean perceived level of democratic responsiveness is well below the preferred level.

Across all countries overwhelming majorities—on average 3 in 4 respondents—say they want their government to be more responsive to the will of the people than they currently perceive it to be.

The highest levels of dissatisfaction are found in Egypt (97%) and Nigeria (89%). However, high levels of dissatisfaction are also found in long-established western liberal democracies including the United States (83%), Great Britain (77%), and France (73%).

Publics in most countries express low confidence in their government. When people are asked how much of the time they “trust” their national government to “do the right thing,” in eleven of the seventeen countries clear majorities say “only some of the time” or never.

Trust in government appears to be highly related to perceptions of government responsiveness to the will of the people. For the entire sample, among those who give high ratings of their governments’ responsiveness to the will of the people, 64 percent say they trust their government to do the right thing “most of the time” or “just about always.” However, among those who give their government low ratings in its responsiveness to the people, less than half—31 percent—express substantial levels of trust in their government.

Governments are also widely seen as not being run for the benefit of the people. In 15 of 18 nations people say that their country is “run by a few big interests looking out for themselves,” not “for the benefit of all people.” On average, 63 percent give this response. These assessments are also highly related with perceptions of how much governments are influenced by the will of the people.

All over the world there is strong support for democratic elections. In every country polled a majority (on average 84%) agrees that “government leaders should be selected through elections in which all citizens can vote.”

However, most do not feel that elections alone are an adequate means for expressing the will of the people. Asked whether they thought that “elections are the only time when the views of the people should have influence,” or that also between elections leaders should “pay attention to the views of the people as they make decisions,” majorities in 14 out of 17 countries say that leaders should pay attention to the views of the people between elections. On average 74 percent endorse the view that the public should have ongoing influence on the government’s decisions.

Consistent with their support for the government giving ongoing attention to the views of the public, even larger majorities say that leaders should pay attention to public opinion polls. Majorities in all 18 countries reject the frequently-cited argument that “when

government leaders are thinking about an important decision” they “should not pay attention to public opinion polls because this will distract them from deciding what they think is right.” On average 8 in 10 opted for the argument that government leaders “should pay attention to public opinion polls because this will help them get a sense of the public’s views.”

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