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Poll Shows Concern About Gov't Secrecy Associated Press

Sun Mar 13, 12:34 PM ET

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By *ROBERT TANNER, AP National Writer*

Americans feel strongly that good government depends on openness with the public, with seven out of 10 people concerned about government secrecy, a new poll says.



[Most People Not Open to Closed Gov't Records](#)
(AP Video)

The poll, conducted by Ipsos-Public Affairs for Sunshine Week, a coalition of media organizations and other groups pressing for government access, found that more than half of Americans believe government should provide more access to its records.

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Even more — 70 percent — are either "somewhat concerned" or "very concerned" about government secrecy. Nearly as many felt access to public records was "crucial" to good government.

The results come amid growing debate about openness at all levels of government in the years since the Sept. 11 attacks: Open-government advocates say the government has become more secretive at the price of a healthy democracy, while government defenders say the times demand that national security weigh a little more heavily in the balance between openness and privacy.

A bipartisan bill now in the U.S. Senate seeks to revisit the federal Freedom of Information Act to address many of the open-government complaints.

"A government that inoculates itself so it can operate in secret is not serving the best interests of the country," said Chris Farrell, director of investigations and research at Judicial Watch, a Washington-based watchdog group.

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Among the poll's findings:

_ 52 percent said there is too little access to government records; 36 percent said access is "just about right"; 6 percent said there is too much.

_ 50 percent said access to court records is "just about right," while 33 percent said there is too little and 8 percent said there is too much.

_ When it comes to government meetings and hearings, 48 percent said there is too little access, 42 percent said access is "just about right" and 5 percent said there is too much.

The public attitudes toward open government, records and open meetings were very similar to an earlier poll conducted in February 2000.

"We were surprised to see that there was little change in public thinking on secrecy after the attacks of 9/11," said Andy Alexander, chairman of the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Freedom of Information Committee.

"With the ongoing war and continuing concerns about terrorism, you might think that people would be more tolerant of government's tightening control of information, but these results suggest that's not the case. The survey indicates people are not only concerned about secrecy but also recognize the importance of access to information about their government," said Alexander, who is also Washington bureau chief for Cox Newspapers.

Nearly a third of respondents said they had sought government records about themselves — almost a quarter from local government, one in five from state government, and one in 10 from the federal government. More than two-thirds of those responding said they had never requested such records.

The poll surveyed 1,003 adults from March 4-6 and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

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