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World Publics See Government as Responsible For Ensuring Basic Healthcare, Food, and Education Needs

But Big Variations on How Well Their Government is Performing

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College Park, MD—A new WorldPublicOpinion.org poll of 21 nations around the world finds that large majorities in every nation say their government should be responsible for ensuring that citizens can meet their basic needs for food, healthcare, and education.

On average, across all nations polled, nine in 10 say that their government has the responsibility to ensure access to food, healthcare, and education.

“Clearly there is universal consensus that governments have a responsibility to address the social and economic needs of their citizens,” comments Steven Kull, director of WorldPublicOpinion.org.

However, the poll found major variations in how well people perceive their governments to be fulfilling these responsibilities. Overall, respondents expressing the highest levels of satisfaction with their government’s performance in meeting such needs are found in China, India, Great Britain, Jordan, Thailand, and the Palestinian Territories. The lowest levels are found in Russia, Ukraine, Argentina, and Nigeria. In assessing their government’s performance, respondents were asked to think in terms of “the limits of the[ir] ...government’s resources,” rather than in absolute terms.

These results show overwhelming public support for the principles presented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which is celebrating its 60th anniversary this year. It states that: “Everyone has the right to...food, medical care... [and] education.” Signatories to the declaration commit “by progressive measures, national and international, to secure” these rights.

Perhaps in response to the recent increase in food prices, access to food is the need for which the largest number of countries (12 out of 21) say that their government is doing a poor job. This is especially true in Argentina (80%), Ukraine (80%), Nigeria (77%), Russia (68%), Egypt (61%), Kenya (59%), Thailand (59%), Indonesia (56%), and South Korea (56%). On the other hand, large majorities express satisfaction with their government’s performance in regard to access to food in China (89%) and Germany (87%).

Among the six developed countries in the poll, the one public that gives their government positive ratings in all categories is Great Britain. The United States gets positive ratings in regard to food and education, but not healthcare. Germans give positive ratings for food and healthcare, but not for education. The French give positive ratings for education and healthcare, but not for food. South Koreans give a positive rating for education, but not for food or healthcare. Italians give poor ratings for food and healthcare, and a divided rating for education.

Among the five middle tier countries, views are consistently negative. Argentines, Russians, and Ukrainians give their countries negative ratings in all areas. Mexicans are negative in regard to education and food, though positive about healthcare. Thais give negative ratings on food and healthcare, though they lean positive on education.

Interestingly, views tend to be the most positive in the ten developing nations—underscoring how governments are assessed relative to their efforts and progress rather than in absolute terms. In China, India, Jordan, and the Palestinian Territories, majorities give positive ratings for all categories. In Turkey, Indonesia, and Kenya majorities are satisfied in all areas except food. Azerbaijanis are satisfied in all areas except healthcare. Egyptians are only satisfied in the area of education, while Nigerians are dissatisfied in all areas.

The poll of 21,321 respondents was conducted between July 15 and September 26, 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. Margins of error range from +/-2 to 4 percent.

Interviews were conducted in 21 nations, including most of the largest nations—China, India, the United States, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Russia—as well as Argentina, Azerbaijan, Egypt, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Mexico, the Palestinian Territories, South Korea, Thailand, Turkey, and Ukraine. Interviews were also conducted in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. The publics included represent 61 percent of the world population.

When asked whether their “government should be responsible for ensuring that its citizens can meet their basic need for food,” or whether “you think that is not the government’s responsibility,” majorities of 70 to 97 percent in all 21 countries say their government should be responsible for this. The average is 87 percent.

When asked the same question about “the basic need for healthcare,” majorities of the same magnitude (70-97%) in all countries polled see ensuring that people can meet their need for healthcare as one of government’s responsibilities. The average majority is 92 percent.

On education, majorities ranging from 64 to 98 percent also see the government as responsible for ensuring that people can meet their basic needs in this area. Across all 21 nations polled, the average majority is 91 percent.

The largest minority saying that the government is not responsible for such needs is in the United States. Twenty-five percent of Americans say the government is not responsible for ensuring access to food, followed by 17 percent among Palestinians, 14 percent of Egyptians, and 13 percent among the French. Twenty-one percent of Americans say the government is not responsible for healthcare, followed, again, by Palestinians (19%) and Egyptians (14%). Egyptians have the largest minority saying the government is not responsible for education (19%), followed by Americans (16%).

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