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Is US public rallying around Edward Snowden?

A new poll shows 'a massive shift in attitudes' on whether government antiterrorism efforts infringe too much on civil liberties, but pollsters caution that Americans' views are 'complicated.'



This photo shows Edward Snowden, who worked as a contract employee at the National Security Agency, on June 9 in Hong Kong. (Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras/The Guardian/AP/File)

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WASHINGTON

Is the US public standing behind Edward Snowden? That's what the results of a new poll appear to indicate. The just-released Quinnipiac survey shows that, by 55 to 34 percent, respondents judged Mr. Snowden to be a whistle-blower, not a traitor.

In what Quinnipiac called a "massive shift in attitudes," respondents said, by 45 to 40 percent, that the government's antiterrorism efforts now infringe too far on US civil liberties. Two years ago a similar Quinnipiac poll found that, by 63 to 25 percent, those efforts did not go far enough to adequately protect the country.

“Americans’ views on anti-terrorism efforts are complicated,” said Peter Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute in Hamden, Conn. “They see the threat from terrorism as real and worth defending against, but they have a sense that their privacy is being invaded and they are not happy about it at all.”

Does this mean that Snowden’s revelations about massive National Security Agency programs to collect US phone metadata and foreign Internet traffic routed through US servers have indeed shocked US opinion? That’s what Snowden has said he wants, and it’s certainly possible that is what has happened.

Snowden’s struggles to find a country that will accept his application for asylum have him in the news, and each story repeats his revelations about the NSA, even if it focuses on his personal travails.

“This strikes me as a big deal – a big shift in public attitudes on civil liberties and counter-terrorism,” writes Benjamin Wittes, a Brookings Institution senior fellow and editor-in-chief of the national security blog, “Lawfare.”

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However, a single poll seldom, if ever, proves a point. And previous surveys dealing with Snowden have shown mixed responses to his role in publishing US secrets.

A June 17 Pew survey found that, by 54 to 38 percent, respondents believed the US government should pursue a criminal case against the person responsible for leaking the NSA information, for example.

At the same time, the Pew result showed that, by a 49 to 44 percent margin, respondents believed those leaks were in the public interest. And a Gallup survey from June 12 showed that Americans disapproved of the NSA activities revealed by Snowden by 53 to 37 percent.

The Gallup survey showed Americans almost split in their views of Snowden personally, with 44 percent of respondents saying he had done the right thing; and 42 percent, the wrong thing.

What’s the bottom line here? Admittedly, the Pew and Gallup polls were taken some weeks ago, and may not reflect a movement in public opinion. But given the paucity of data here, we’ll still go with Gallup’s conclusion: “Results from the Gallup poll indicate that Americans have somewhat flexible views about the government’s surveillance program and/or that they are still forming their opinions on the issue,” wrote Gallup editor Frank Newport.

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