



Citizen Sentiment Towards Governing Authorities in the US: A Multi-Tiered Analysis of Trust and Perception

Executive Summary

Citizen sentiment toward governing authorities in the United States presents a complex and often paradoxical landscape. Public trust in the federal government has remained persistently low for decades, characterized by widespread frustration and significant partisan and demographic divides. In stark contrast, citizens generally express higher levels of confidence in their state and, particularly, their local governments. This disparity is largely attributable to the tangible nature of local service delivery and the perceived proximity of sub-national authorities.

An analysis of these trends reveals a fundamental tension: while Americans express deep distrust in the federal apparatus, they simultaneously demand its active involvement in a broad array of societal functions. This suggests that public dissatisfaction is often directed at the perceived performance and political dynamics of government rather than a rejection of its essential role. Political polarization and the proliferation of misinformation further exacerbate these trust deficits, creating a challenging environment for effective governance. Rebuilding public confidence necessitates a multi-pronged approach, focusing on enhancing service delivery, increasing transparency, fostering meaningful citizen participation, and actively countering divisive narratives across all governmental tiers.

1. Introduction: The Landscape of Citizen Sentiment in the US

Understanding citizen sentiment is paramount for the health and efficacy of a representative democracy. Public opinion serves as a vital compass, informing elected leaders about the concerns and priorities of their constituents, guiding policy formulation, and acting as a crucial check on governmental power.¹ When public trust erodes, it can impede policy implementation, reduce civic engagement, and undermine the stability of democratic institutions. The United States has experienced a prolonged period of declining trust in its government, a trend that has been observed across various national polls for many decades.²

This report undertakes a multi-layered examination of citizen sentiment, dissecting public trust, approval, and satisfaction across the federal, state, and local governmental levels. It explores the distinct dynamics at play within each tier, identifies overarching factors influencing these perceptions, and highlights the significant variations that exist across different demographic groups and geographical regions. By analyzing these intricate relationships, the report aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of public confidence in U.S. governing authorities.

2. National Trends in Trust Towards Federal Government

Public trust in the federal government has been a subject of extensive scrutiny, consistently revealing a pattern of low confidence that has persisted for decades. This section details the historical trajectory and current levels of trust, alongside the profound demographic and partisan divisions that characterize these perceptions.

Historical Overview and Current Levels of Trust

For nearly two decades, public trust in the federal government has hovered at or near historic lows.² As of May 2024, only 22% of Americans express trust in the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” (2%) or “most of the time” (21%).² While this figure represents a modest increase from 16% in 2023—one of the

lowest measures recorded in nearly seven decades of polling—it still underscores a pervasive lack of confidence.²

Broader measures of confidence in major U.S. institutions by Gallup also reflect this trend, showing a near-record-low average of 28% of U.S. adults expressing "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence across nine consistently tracked institutions as of June 2025.⁵ This marks the fourth consecutive year where average confidence has remained below 30%.⁵ The dominant emotion among Americans toward the federal government is frustration, expressed by a 60% majority. This sentiment has been prevalent for two decades, with significantly smaller shares reporting contentment (18%) or anger (21%).⁴

Analysis of Partisan and Demographic Divides in Federal Trust

A critical examination of trust levels reveals substantial variations based on political affiliation and demographic characteristics. Trust in government typically aligns with the party controlling the presidency.⁴ As of May 2024, 35% of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents reported trusting the federal government, a notable increase from recent years. Conversely, only about one-in-ten Republicans and Republican leaners expressed similar trust.⁴ This partisan divergence is particularly stark when considering confidence in the presidency, where Republicans experienced a significant 73-point gain in confidence, reaching 80%, while Democrats' confidence plummeted by 58 points to just 3% in June 2025.⁵ This creates an 11-point party gap in average confidence across institutions (37% for Republicans versus 26% for Democrats), representing the largest such disparity in 46 years of consistent measurement.⁵

Beyond political leanings, demographic factors also play a role. Asian adults (36%), Hispanic adults (30%), and Black adults (27%) are more likely to express trust in the federal government compared to White adults (19%).⁴ Regarding gender, males (43%) show a slightly higher propensity to trust the government than women (38%).⁶ Educational attainment also correlates with trust, as college graduates (51%) are more likely to express confidence than non-college graduates (36%).⁶ Furthermore, adults under the age of 50 tend to express somewhat less trust (20%) than those who are older (25%).⁴

The following table summarizes these national trust levels by key demographics and

political affiliation:

Table 1: National Trust in Federal Government by Key Demographics and Political Affiliation (May 2024 / June 2025 Data)

Demographic Group	% Trust Government "Just About Always/Most of the Time"
Overall National Average	22% (May 2024) ²
	28% (June 2025, avg. across 9 institutions) ⁵
Political Affiliation	
Democrats/Leaners	35% (May 2024) ⁴
Republicans/Leaners	~10% (May 2024) ⁴
Independents	25% (June 2025, avg. across 9 institutions) ⁵
Race/Ethnicity	
Asian Adults	36% ⁴
Hispanic Adults	30% ⁴
Black Adults	27% ⁴
White Adults	19% ⁴
Gender	
Males	43% ⁶
Females	38% ⁶
Education Level	

College Graduates	51% ⁶
Non-College Graduates	36% ⁶
Age	
Under 50	20% ⁴
50 and Older	25% ⁴

Public Perceptions of the Federal Government's Role, Efficiency, and Wastefulness

Despite the prevailing low trust, public opinion regarding the federal government's role is nuanced. In April 2024, a narrow majority (53%) indicated that the government should do more to solve problems, while 46% believed it was overstepping its bounds by doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals. This division has remained relatively stable over recent years.⁷ However, a significant proportion of Americans (56%) characterized the government as wasteful and inefficient in April 2024, compared to 42% who felt it often performs better than credited.⁷

This presents a compelling dynamic: the public expresses deep distrust in the federal government as an institution, yet simultaneously expects it to actively address a wide array of critical societal functions. For instance, majorities of Americans consistently support a major federal role in areas such as managing the immigration system, ensuring safe food and medicine, responding to natural disasters, and maintaining infrastructure. This support often transcends partisan lines, as exemplified by the 2022 survey where 85% of Democrats and 74% of Republicans agreed on the federal government's major role in disaster response.⁷ This pattern suggests that the low trust is not necessarily a rejection of government's fundamental purpose or necessity, but rather a profound dissatisfaction with its perceived performance, efficiency, and responsiveness. People recognize the essential functions of government but perceive the current federal apparatus as flawed or ineffective in delivering on those functions. The low trust appears to be more about

how government operates and *who* is in power than a fundamental ideological

opposition to its existence or core responsibilities.

Further contributing to this complexity is the observation that confidence in career federal government employees, while held by a slim majority (55%), also exhibits a widening partisan gap. In 2025, 72% of Democrats expressed confidence compared to only 38% of Republicans.⁷ This pronounced partisan influence on trust extends beyond specific policies or performance metrics, permeating perceptions of the very institutions and their personnel. The significant shifts in confidence observed across various institutions when presidential administrations change, with confidence levels rising for the party in power and declining for the opposition, suggest that public confidence is often less about an institution's objective performance and more about partisan alignment and who is perceived to be in control.⁵ This indicates a pervasive political polarization that filters down into how citizens perceive the fundamental trustworthiness of governmental bodies. Trust, in this context, is not purely a function of competence or integrity but is heavily mediated by partisan identity and political tribalism. This creates a "team sport" mentality where loyalty to one's party can dictate views on government effectiveness. This deep-seated partisan division makes rebuilding trust exceptionally challenging, as it requires overcoming ingrained biases in addition to improving services or transparency.

3. Comparative Trust: Federal, State, and Local Governments

Citizen sentiment in the United States exhibits a clear hierarchical pattern across different levels of government, with trust generally increasing as one moves from the federal to the state, and then to the local level. This section explores these distinct patterns and the underlying factors that contribute to the comparatively higher levels of confidence observed in sub-national authorities.

General Patterns of Trust Across Different Tiers of Government

Americans consistently report higher levels of trust in their local governments than in their state governments, and significantly higher trust in both compared to the federal government.⁶ According to Gallup's 2023 data, 67% of respondents expressed trust in

their local government to handle local problems, and 59% trusted their state government to handle state problems. In contrast, only 37% of respondents in the same poll reported trusting the federal government to solve domestic problems.⁶ This pattern is not unique to the U.S.; higher trust in local governments compared to national governments is a global trend observed across Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.⁶

The following table provides a comparative overview of trust levels across these governmental tiers:

Table 2: Comparative Trust Levels Across Federal, State, and Local Governments (National Averages) (2023/2024 Data)

Level of Government	% Trust/Confidence (Latest Available Data)	Source
Local Government	67% (Trust to handle local problems, 2023)	6
State Government	59% (Trust to handle state problems, 2023)	6
Federal Government	22% (Trust to do what is right, May 2024)	2
	37% (Trust to solve domestic problems, 2023)	6
	32% (Trust in legislative branch, 2023)	10
Specific Federal Agencies		
National Park Service	76% (Favorable, 2024)	6
U.S. Postal Service	72% (Favorable, 2024)	6
NASA	67% (Favorable, 2024)	6

CIA	Positive ratings (Gallup, unspecified year)	8
U.S. Military	Positive ratings (Gallup, unspecified year)	8

Factors Contributing to Higher Trust in State and Local Authorities

The consistent gradient of trust, with local governments enjoying the highest confidence, points to a fundamental dynamic: the more direct, tangible, and positive a citizen's interaction with a government entity, particularly through service delivery, the higher their trust in that entity. Conversely, the more distant and abstract the government, the lower the trust. Local government represents the tier with which most citizens have direct and frequent contact through essential services such as water and sewerage, public safety, maintenance of recreational facilities, and emergency medical and fire protection services.¹¹ These direct interactions profoundly shape citizens' perceptions of government and influence their behavior towards it.¹¹

Improving the performance of government in delivering services is directly correlated with an increase in trust among the recipients of those services.⁶ For example, satisfaction scores for interactions like applying for a passport (88%), filing federal taxes (74%), and voting in a federal election (77%) are notably high, indicating that the quality of service delivery is a key driver of positive sentiment.⁶ A citizen's positive digital experience with a government agency is also a strong predictor of overall trust, with ease of use, effectiveness in accomplishing tasks, and perceived data safeguarding contributing to higher confidence.¹²

Furthermore, the mission of various government agencies can significantly influence perceptions of trust. Agencies primarily providing benefits, such as child care, housing assistance, and food assistance, tend to garner higher trust levels compared to those focused on regulation or enforcement.⁹ This suggests that the nature of the interaction—whether it is perceived as helpful or restrictive—plays a role in shaping public confidence. While state and local governments are not entirely immune to the negative sentiment directed at the federal level, they are often perceived as less abstract and less politicized. The federal government is frequently associated with "politics and politicians," specifically Congress, the President, or the Supreme Court, rather than the specific agencies that provide services.⁶ This distinction allows local

and state entities to build trust through demonstrable competence and reliability in meeting immediate needs and delivering practical benefits, even as broader political frustrations persist.

Despite the generally higher trust in state and local governments, they are not entirely insulated from the negative sentiment directed at the federal level. An examination of public opinion indicates that displeasure with the federal government can have a "trickle-down effect" on state and local partners.⁹ For instance, data from California reveals a strong link between distrust in the state government and distrust in the federal government: among Californians who trust Sacramento only "some of the time," nearly all (85%) express the same level of distrust for Washington.¹³ This suggests a complex interplay where positive local experiences can build trust, but national political polarization and negative media narratives, often focused on federal politics, can undermine confidence even in more directly accountable local institutions. Citizens may generalize their frustrations with the federal government to other levels, even if their direct experiences with state or local services are positive. This highlights that state and local governments must actively counter this "trickle-down" effect by emphasizing their distinct roles, transparency, and direct responsiveness to local needs, recognizing that their higher trust levels are not entirely stable or immune to national political dynamics.

4. State-Level Sentiment: Variations and Case Studies

While national averages provide a broad understanding, citizen sentiment toward governing authorities exhibits significant variations at the state level. These differences often reflect unique regional dynamics, demographic compositions, and localized policy impacts. This section delves into detailed examples from specific states to illustrate these nuances.

Detailed Insights from Specific States

California (Public Policy Institute of California - PPIC):

Californians consistently demonstrate a higher level of trust in their state government in Sacramento compared to the federal government in Washington D.C. This trend has been

observed since 2021.¹³ As of September 2024, 42% of Californians reported trusting the state government to do what is right, while 31% expressed similar trust in the federal government.¹³ An examination of sentiment within California reveals notable regional differences. Trust in both Sacramento and Washington is highest among San Francisco residents (50% for state, 36% for federal) and lowest in the Central Valley (36% for state, 25% for federal).¹³ Demographic variations also play a significant role: trust in California's government is higher among African American, Asian American, and Latino residents (48% each) compared to White residents (34%). For the federal government, trust is higher among African American residents (47%) than other racial or ethnic groups. Furthermore, trust in the state government increases with higher education levels (48% for college graduates), whereas trust in the federal government is higher among residents with a high school diploma or less (36%).¹³

The interconnected nature of distrust is also evident in California. Less than a quarter of Californians (23%) express trust in both levels of government, while half trust both only "some of the time" or "never." Distrust in one level of government is strongly linked to distrust in the other; for instance, 85% of those who trust Sacramento only "some of the time" also express the same sentiment toward Washington.¹³ The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) conducts its Statewide Surveys, with the latest findings (September 2024) based on a poll fielded from August 29 to September 9, 2024, involving 1,605 adults, including 1,071 likely voters.¹³

Ohio (BGSU Poll):

In Ohio, trust in the state government has shown more stability compared to federal trust. Between February and April 2025, the percentage of residents who reported trusting the state government "all or most of the time" remained at 17%, while the proportion believing it "can never be trusted" increased slightly from 13% to 16%.¹⁴ When asked which federal or state government institutions could be trusted most, federal institutions generally fared better than their state counterparts. For example, the President of the United States was chosen by 30% of Ohio voters, while the Ohio Supreme Court was chosen by 14%.¹⁴ Notably, distrust in the federal government increased among Ohio voters, particularly among independents (an 8-point increase) and Democrats (a 5-point increase).¹⁴ The BGSU Poll conducts regular statewide polling in Ohio, partnering with YouGov for representative samples. The April 2025 poll was a web-based survey of 800 registered Ohio voters, with a margin of error of +/- 4.0 percentage points, weighted to account for presidential vote choice and demographics.¹⁴

Rhode Island (University of Rhode Island Survey):

A survey conducted by several departments at the University of Rhode Island found that a majority of respondents (51% combined) expressed "little or no trust" in the Rhode Island government. Only 11% reported having "a great deal" or "a lot" of trust.⁹

The following table synthesizes these state-specific trust levels:

Table 3: State-Specific Trust Levels in State vs. Federal Government (Latest Available Data)

State / Region / Group	Trust in State Government (%)	Trust in Federal Government (%)	Source
California (Overall, Sept 2024)	42%	31%	13
<i>California - San Francisco residents</i>	50%	36%	13
<i>California - Central Valley residents</i>	36%	25%	13
<i>California - African American residents</i>	48%	47%	13
<i>California - Asian American residents</i>	48%	N/A	13
<i>California - Latino residents</i>	48%	N/A	13
<i>California - White residents</i>	34%	N/A	13
<i>California - College graduates</i>	48%	N/A	13
<i>California - High school diploma or less</i>	N/A	36%	13
Ohio (Overall, April 2025)	17% (trust "all or most of time")	30% (President trusted most)	14
	16% (believe "can never be trusted")	26% (believe "can never be trusted" in federal)	14

Rhode Island (Overall, Unspecified Date)	11% (trust "a great deal/a lot")	N/A	9
	51% (trust "little or none at all")	N/A	9

Discussion of Regional Differences within States

The detailed data from California vividly illustrates that citizen sentiment is far from uniform even within a single state. The significant variations observed across regions, such as the stark difference between San Francisco and the Central Valley, and among different demographic groups, underscore the profound influence of localized factors and community experiences in shaping perceptions of government.¹³ This observation aligns with the understanding that trust is built through tangible, direct interactions, as discussed in the previous section. If sentiment varies

within a state, it indicates that the specific local context, the unique issues faced by communities, and the perceived quality of local governance are powerful shapers of opinion.

This implies that "state-level sentiment" is not a monolithic entity but rather an aggregate of diverse local experiences and perceptions. Factors such as prevailing economic conditions, the direct impact of specific state or local policies, and the demographic composition of a particular region can lead to widely different levels of trust, even under the same state government. This reinforces the idea that public confidence is a mosaic of localized sentiments rather than a uniform statewide phenomenon. Consequently, for state policymakers, a one-size-fits-all approach to building trust is unlikely to be effective. Strategies must be carefully tailored to address the unique concerns and experiences of different regions and demographic groups within the state. Understanding these intra-state variations is as crucial as understanding differences between states.

5. County and Local-Level Sentiment: The Impact of Direct Engagement

At the most granular level of governance—counties and local municipalities—citizen sentiment is profoundly shaped by direct engagement, service delivery, and community-specific factors. This tier of government often serves as the primary point of contact between citizens and their governing authorities, making its performance particularly impactful on public trust.

The Significance of Local Government in Citizen Experience and Trust

Local government is the level where most citizens experience direct interaction with governing authorities on a regular basis.¹¹ These interactions revolve around essential services that directly affect daily life, such as public safety, water and sewerage systems, maintenance of recreational facilities, and emergency medical and fire protection services.¹¹ This consistent and direct contact significantly influences the image of government that citizens develop and, consequently, affects their behavior toward governmental institutions.¹¹ Reflecting this tangible connection, Americans consistently express the highest levels of faith in their local governments, with 67% reporting trust in local authorities to handle local problems in 2023, a figure notably higher than for state (59%) or federal (32% for legislative branch, 37% for domestic problems) governments.⁶

The Role of Service Quality, Transparency, and Digital Experience in Building Local Trust

Citizen satisfaction with local government is often measured by their contentment with local services, infrastructure, and the overall built environment within their communities.¹⁵ These assessments are crucial for local governments to evaluate their performance, measure effectiveness, and demonstrate accountability to the public.¹⁵ A direct correlation exists between improving the performance of government in delivering services and an increase in trust among the recipients of those services.⁶ Academic research further indicates that factors such as the quality of services delivered, the level of income inequality, and the degree of social heterogeneity

significantly influence trust levels in U.S. communities.¹¹

Transparency and open access to public records are also vital components for fostering trust at the local level. Concerns have been raised about the "deteriorating terribly" access to public records in some areas, highlighting the importance of clear, accessible information for building confidence.⁹ Residents consistently express a desire for greater transparency from their local governments and believe that improved budgeting practices can contribute to enhanced trust.⁹ Moreover, a citizen's positive digital experience with a government agency is a strong predictor of overall trust. When state governments' digital services are perceived as easy to use, effective in helping citizens accomplish tasks, and secure in safeguarding data, trust levels tend to be higher.¹² This indicates that modern, user-friendly digital interfaces are becoming increasingly important for public confidence.

Insights from Local Community Surveys (Polco/National Research Center)

Specialized organizations like Polco, through its National Research Center (NRC), play a crucial role in capturing and analyzing localized sentiments. NRC serves as a major repository of disaggregated data on trust in state and local government, having collaborated with hundreds of jurisdictions nationwide for over 25 years.⁹

Polco's "National Community Survey" (The NCS) is recognized as a "gold standard" tool for collecting representative opinion data from residents. Designed specifically for local governments, The NCS enables communities to measure performance, track sentiment over time, and benchmark their results against national averages.¹⁶ The "Local Government Trust Index" (LGTI), developed by Polco in partnership with Arizona State University and the National League of Cities, provides a standardized method to measure public confidence at the local level, with pilot programs in diverse cities such as New Orleans, Louisiana; Broadview, Illinois; and Dublin, Ohio.²²

Data from Polco indicates regional variations in local government confidence, with residents in New England reporting higher levels of confidence than those in Western states.⁹ Furthermore, demographic variations observed at the local level often mirror national patterns. For instance, Asian and White Americans tend to have higher overall confidence in local government compared to Black and Hispanic populations. Individuals aged 45-64 generally exhibit lower confidence rates than other age groups, while higher household incomes and education levels tend to correlate with

elevated confidence in local government.⁹ A Deloitte study also highlighted that specific agencies providing direct benefits, such as child care, housing assistance, and food assistance, garnered the highest levels of trust.⁹ The methodology employed by Polco and The NCS is rigorous, ensuring statistically valid survey design, representative sampling, high-quality data collection, and mobile-friendly platforms, often utilizing mailed invitations and targeted outreach to maximize participation.¹⁶ An example of localized data collection is the 'Citizen Satisfaction' data on County Health Insights for Spokane County, which measures residents' satisfaction with local government, infrastructure, and services at both city and county levels, providing insights into quality of life.¹⁵

The consistent observation that local trust is tied to direct contact, service quality, and citizen satisfaction points to clear, actionable mechanisms through which trust can be built at this level. It is not merely about general perceptions but about tangible, measurable improvements in service delivery and accessibility. This provides a practical blueprint for local government leaders: prioritizing efficient, high-quality service delivery, enhancing transparency and public participation, and investing in user-friendly digital interfaces can directly translate into higher citizen trust and foster a more engaged citizenry. These concrete actions can potentially serve as a model for higher levels of government.

Moreover, the demographic patterns observed in local government confidence, such as the differences across racial/ethnic groups and income/education levels, are consistent with those seen at the federal level. This consistency suggests that underlying systemic factors, such as historical experiences with government, perceived equity of services, representation in leadership, and socio-economic disparities, may be at play. The observation that "higher educated, more wealthy, more white groups may tend to trust government more...due to the fact that their government leaders often tend to resemble them or that these residents have traditionally felt more welcome to share their voice in community decision-making"⁹ provides a crucial hypothesis for this pattern. This implies that building trust is not solely about universal service improvements but also about actively addressing historical inequities, ensuring equitable service delivery, and fostering inclusive governance that genuinely represents and engages all segments of the population. Ignoring these demographic nuances risks perpetuating distrust among marginalized groups, even at the local level where direct engagement is highest.

The following table summarizes the key factors influencing trust in state and local government:

Table 4: Key Factors Influencing Trust in State and Local Government

Factor	Nature of Impact	Supporting Data/Context
Proximity & Direct Contact	Directly correlates with higher trust; local government is primary point of citizen interaction.	Gallup: 67% trust local, 59% state vs. 37% federal. ⁶ Most citizen contact with government is local. ¹¹
Quality of Services Delivered	Directly correlates with improved trust; fundamental driver of citizen satisfaction.	Improving performance improves trust. ⁶ Satisfaction with passport (88%), taxes (74%), voting (77%). ⁶
Digital Experience	Strong predictor of overall trust.	Positive digital experience (ease of use, effectiveness, data safeguarding) leads to higher trust. ¹²
Transparency & Accountability	Crucial for building trust; doubts about these erode confidence.	Declining trust rooted in doubts about accountability/transparency. ²³ Concerns about deteriorating public records access. ⁹ Residents want more transparency. ⁹
Mission Clarity of Agencies	Agencies providing direct benefits tend to be more trusted than regulatory ones.	Child care, housing, food assistance agencies highly trusted. ⁹ Enforcement/regulatory agencies may be at a disadvantage. ¹²
Income Inequality	Significant effect on trust levels in U.S. communities.	Research indicates link between income inequality and trust. ¹¹
Social Heterogeneity	Significant effect on trust levels in U.S. communities.	Research indicates link between social heterogeneity and trust. ¹¹

Less Politicized Perception	State/local governments perceived as less abstract and political than federal.	Federal government associated with "politics and politicians". ⁶
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6. Key Drivers and Implications of Citizen Sentiment

The analysis of citizen sentiment across federal, state, and local governments reveals several overarching factors that profoundly shape public trust. These drivers have significant implications for the effectiveness of governance and the overall health of democratic systems.

The Influence of Political Polarization and Misinformation on Trust

Political polarization emerges as a dominant force in shaping citizen sentiment, particularly towards the federal government. Confidence levels are heavily influenced by partisan alignment, with trust often rising when one's preferred party controls the White House and declining when the opposing party is in power.⁴ This dynamic suggests that trust is not solely based on an objective assessment of governmental performance but is deeply intertwined with political identity and loyalty.

Compounding this challenge is the pervasive spread of disinformation and misinformation online, which actively contributes to the erosion of trust in both governmental institutions and traditional information sources.³ In an environment where political divisions are stark, information is often consumed through partisan lenses. This makes citizens more susceptible to narratives that confirm their existing biases and demonize the "other" party's governance, regardless of factual accuracy. The consistent observation of deep partisan divides in trust, coupled with the proliferation of misinformation, indicates a systemic challenge to democratic health. This environment fosters a feedback loop where distrust becomes self-reinforcing, regardless of actual government performance, contributing to an "unrelentingly negative" view of politics and elected officials, with 65% of Americans reporting feeling exhausted when contemplating political matters.²⁴ This suggests that trust is not just declining due to perceived poor performance, but also due to a fractured information environment and deep ideological divides that make objective assessment

difficult and foster pervasive cynicism.

The Importance of Government Responsiveness, Accountability, and Integrity

A fundamental aspect of declining trust is rooted in public doubts about the accountability, transparency, and responsiveness of public institutions to citizen participation.²³ For trust to be strengthened, governments must ensure that public services effectively respond to the diverse needs of the population, that policy decisions are made transparently and in the public's best interest, that robust checks and balances are in place among institutions, and that citizens can meaningfully participate in decision-making processes.²³ Public opinion polling itself serves as a crucial mechanism in this regard, helping elected leaders understand public feelings and priorities, and providing a necessary counterweight to the influence of powerful special interests and lobbyists.¹

The Link Between Service Delivery Performance and Public Trust

As consistently highlighted throughout this analysis, the quality and efficiency of direct service delivery are paramount to building and sustaining public trust. This is particularly evident at the local level, where citizens have the most direct interactions with government.⁶ Positive experiences with government services, such as applying for a passport or filing taxes, significantly contribute to higher satisfaction and, by extension, trust.⁶ While 48% of Americans report positive personal experiences with the federal government, compared to 38% reporting negative experiences, there remains considerable room for improvement in service delivery at all levels.⁶ This indicates that tangible, effective, and accessible public services are not merely administrative functions but critical components of fostering citizen confidence.

7. Conclusion and Forward-Looking Perspectives

The landscape of citizen sentiment towards governing authorities in the U.S. is

characterized by a persistent and complex interplay of factors. Trust in the federal government remains at historically low levels, heavily influenced by partisan affiliations and a pervasive sense of frustration. In contrast, state and local governments generally command higher, albeit still challenged, levels of public confidence, primarily due to their proximity to citizens and the tangible nature of the services they deliver. Significant demographic and regional disparities in trust exist across all governmental tiers, reflecting diverse experiences and perceptions. A notable paradox persists: despite widespread distrust, Americans continue to demand active governmental intervention in a broad range of societal issues.

Implications for Governance

The current state of public trust carries profound implications for effective governance. Low trust can impede the public's adherence to policy decisions, reduce compliance with laws and regulations, and make collective action, particularly during times of crisis, significantly more challenging.⁹ Furthermore, the analysis indicates that negative sentiment directed at the federal government can have a "trickle-down effect," posing challenges for state and local partners who might otherwise benefit from their direct engagement with communities. This necessitates that all levels of government adapt their communication strategies and proactively address public concerns regarding misinformation and disinformation to rebuild credibility.

Potential Avenues for Rebuilding and Strengthening Public Trust

Addressing the multifaceted challenges to public trust requires a comprehensive and sustained effort across all levels of government. Several key strategies emerge from the current analysis:

- **Prioritize Service Delivery:** Governments should emphasize competence and reliability in providing tangible services. This is particularly effective at state and local levels, where direct impact is most visible, and best practices should be sought for replication at the federal level where feasible.⁶
- **Enhance Transparency and Accountability:** To counter public doubts, institutions must ensure transparent decision-making processes, provide open

access to information, and uphold robust checks and balances.⁹ This includes addressing concerns about the accessibility of public records.

- **Foster Meaningful Citizen Participation:** Creating genuine avenues for citizens to participate in governmental decisions can increase responsiveness and foster a sense of shared ownership, thereby strengthening public confidence.¹
- **Bridge Partisan Divides:** Leaders should actively seek common ground on essential government functions and emphasize shared values over divisive political rhetoric to mitigate the corrosive impact of political polarization on trust.⁷
- **Combat Misinformation:** Developing proactive strategies to counter the spread of false information and promoting media literacy are crucial steps to enable more informed public discourse and reduce cynicism.³
- **Invest in Digital Experience:** Improving the ease of use, effectiveness, and security of government digital services is a strong predictor of trust and should be a continuous area of investment.¹²
- **Address Demographic Inequities:** Targeted strategies are needed to build trust among historically marginalized groups by ensuring equitable service delivery, fostering inclusive representation, and acknowledging historical grievances.⁹

Forward-Looking Research

Future research should build upon these findings by conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of specific trust-building initiatives. Deeper dives into county-level variations, beyond aggregated state data, are necessary to fully understand the hyper-local dynamics of citizen sentiment. Furthermore, research into the effectiveness of different communication strategies in highly polarized information environments would provide invaluable insights for governments seeking to reconnect with their constituents and foster a more trusting relationship with the citizenry.

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