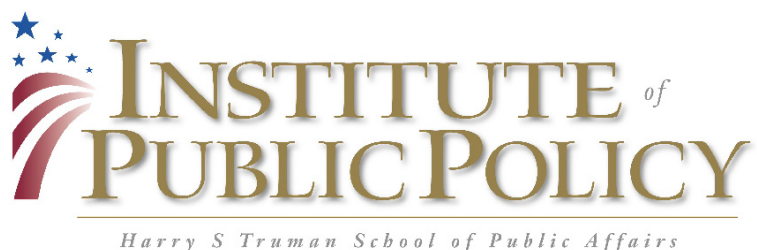


Public Confidence in Government: Trust and Responsiveness

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Conclusions are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Institute of Public Policy or the Truman School of Public Affairs

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Introduction

Americans' trust in government has been declining since the 1960s. A large body of social science literature now supports this conclusion, generally focusing on one of two areas. The first group of studies suggests that public trust in government is a function of economic factors,¹ social conditions such as crime and poverty,² and political factors including scandals and job performance evaluations of elected officials and government institutions.³ A second line of research has found that trust in government helps to explain other political attitudes and behaviors. For example, declining levels of trust affect public evaluations of government, vote intentions,⁴ and preferences on a wide variety of issues such as race policy and healthcare.⁵

Much of the existing research has focused on the public's trust in federal government institutions. Less is known about trust in state and local governments, and how it compares to attitudes about the federal government. These comparisons are important due to persistent questions about which level of government is best suited to deal with various public policy issues such as education and the environment.

To examine public confidence in government, researchers at the Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs at the

University of Missouri have recently completed a national survey of 1,000 adults on these issues. The survey asked respondents about their general trust in government, their trust in local, state, and federal governments specifically, and their feelings on different levels of government's responsiveness to public opinion. The survey was administered as part of the 2007 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), a 10,000 person survey conducted through the collaborative efforts of a consortium of universities.⁶ The 2007 CCES was administered in November 2007 by Polimetrix, an internet survey firm located in Palo Alto, California.⁷

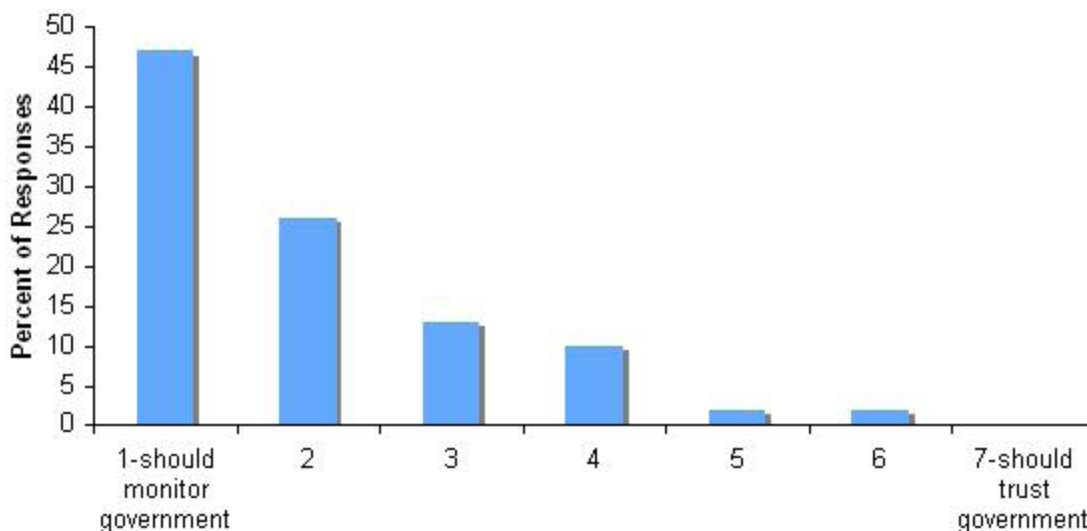
General Trust in Government

The survey first asked participants to characterize their level of trust in government on a scale ranging from "should monitor government (1) to "should trust government" (7). Specifically, the survey asked:

Do you think people should trust government officials to do what is right, or is it important for citizens to monitor government officials all the time?

Figure 1 displays the distribution of responses. An overwhelming majority of respondents (approximately

Figure 1: General Trust in Government



86 percent) believe that government should be monitored to some degree, with 47 percent placing themselves on the extreme end of the monitoring government scale. Ten percent gave neutral responses, and only four percent place themselves toward the “should trust government” side of the scale. Less than one percent of the American public thinks government should be trusted in absolute terms.

To put these results into perspective, the 2007 CCES included a question that asked respondents to rank their level of trust in other people on a 7-point scale, ranging from “you can’t be too careful when dealing with others” (1) to “people can be trusted” (7). The question was worded as follows:

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?

The responses to this question indicate that the public trusts their fellow citizens significantly more than government (see Table 1). On the 7-point scale, the mean response to the “trust in others” question was 3.5 compared to about 2 for the “trust in government” question.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Mean Response
Trust in Government	47%	26	13	10	2	2	<1	1.99
Trust in Others	11%	15	23	24	19	8	1	3.55

Trust in Different Levels of Government

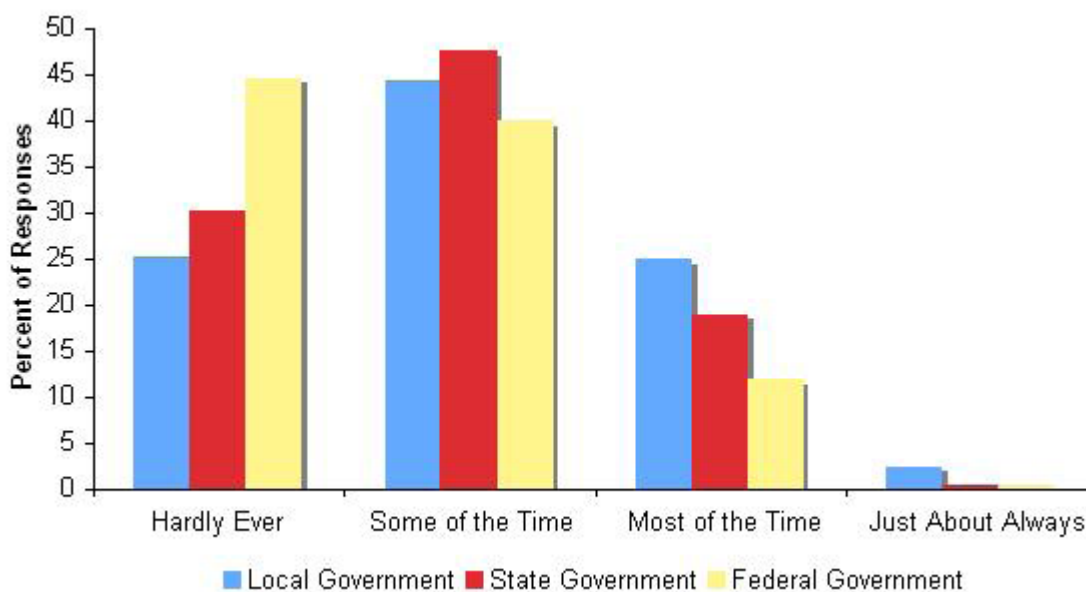
The survey responses indicate that the public generally has a low level of trust in government. But perceptions may vary across local, state, and federal government for reasons ranging from differential interaction and exposure to feelings about which levels of government are responsible for the economic, social, and political factors that affect confidence in public institutions. To investigate these potential variations, the survey asked:

How much of the time do you think you can trust each level of government? Just about always, most of the time, some of the time, hardly ever, or don’t know?

The responses displayed in Figure 2 illustrate significant differences in trust across levels of government. For example, 45 percent of the public thinks that the federal government can “hardly ever be trusted,” compared to 30 percent at the state level and 25 percent at the local level.

Considering the responses on a 4-point scale, where “hardly ever” is coded 1 and “just about always” is coded 4, the mean responses presented in Table 2 further highlight the differences in public trust across the three levels of government. The public perceives local government as the most trustworthy, followed by state government and the federal government, which most Americans trust either hardly ever or only some of the time.

Figure 2: Trust in Different Levels of Government



* “Don’t know” responses are omitted: Federal = 3.28%; State = 3.11%; and Local = 3.24%

Table 2. Trust in Different Levels of Government

	Local Government	State Government	Federal Government
Mean Response	2.05	1.89	1.67

Perceptions of Responsiveness of Different Levels of Government

To provide another gauge of public confidence in different levels of government, the 2007 CCES asked participants about their perceptions of government responsiveness to public opinion. The survey item was worded as follows:

Next, we'd like to ask you about the responsiveness of different levels of government. Please respond whether you agree or disagree, strongly agree or strongly disagree, or neither agree nor disagree about whether each level of government is responsive to public opinion.

The responsiveness measure also suggests that the public has significantly lower levels of confidence in higher levels of government (see Figure 3). Considering first the federal government, a strong majority of the public (60 percent) disagrees or strongly disagrees with the statement that the federal government is responsive to public opinion. Twenty-seven percent neither agree nor disagree with the statement, and only a small percentage agree (12 percent) or strongly agree (1 percent).

State government is perceived to be more responsive

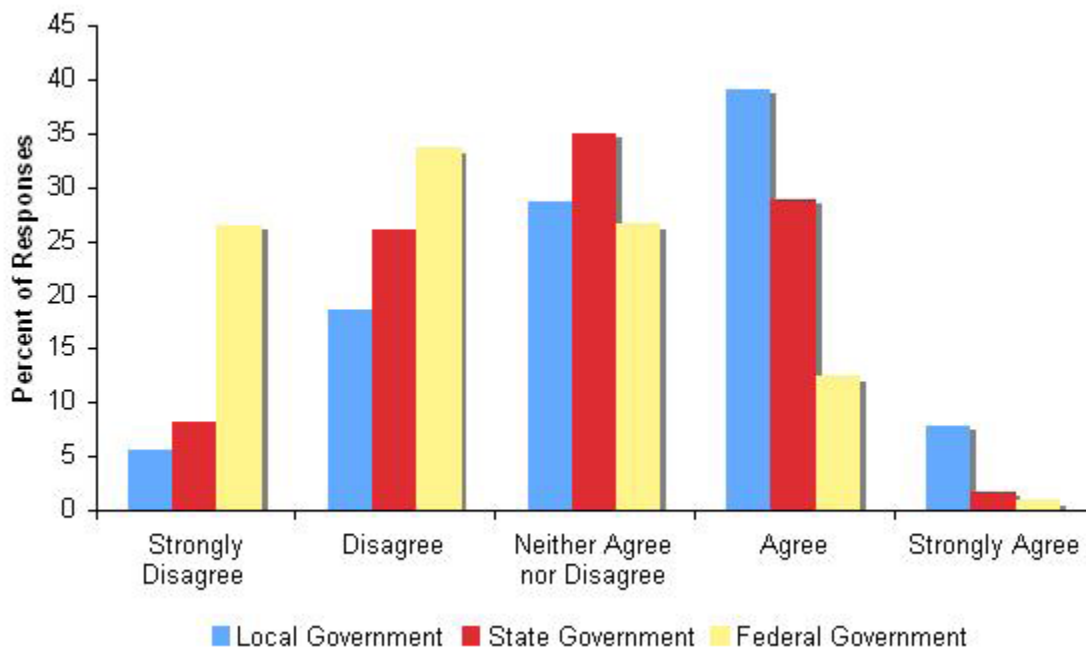
to public opinion than federal government, with 29 percent agreeing and 2 percent strongly agreeing that state government is responsive to public opinion. The most common response (35 percent) was “neither agree nor disagree”; about 34 percent of the public disagree, 8 percent strongly agree. Finally, local government is viewed most favorably. A much smaller percentage of the public either disagrees (19 percent) or strongly disagrees (6 percent) with the statement that local government is responsive to public opinion and almost half agree (40 percent) or strongly agree (8 percent). Twenty-nine percent neither agree nor disagree.

Table 3 presents the mean responses from the responsiveness measure, where “strongly agree” is coded 2, “agree” is coded 1, “neither agree nor disagree” is coded 0, “disagree” is coded -1, and “strongly disagree” is coded -2. Positive values thus indicate confidence in a given level of government. These data further illustrate that public confidence in government declines from local to state to federal government.

Table 3. Perceptions of Responsiveness of Different Levels of Government

	Local Government	State Government	Federal Government
Mean Response	.25	-.10	-.72

Figure 3: Perceptions of Responsiveness of Different Levels of Government



Conclusion

Results from the 2007 CCES provide a couple of significant conclusions. First, the public has low levels of general trust in government. Americans are much less trusting of government institutions than they are of their fellow citizens. Second, the public has lower levels of confidence in higher levels of government. In regard to both trust and responsiveness, the public has some confidence in local government, but negative views of state and, especially, federal government.

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⁶ More information about the CCES project can be found at <http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/index.html>.

⁷ Polimetrix uses a national matched-random sampling method in which participants are selected to reflect the national adult population. Although this method reduces potential sampling error, we use weights to guard against potential biases and to assure that the sample is nationally-representative.

Author Biography

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