

Translating Trust

What research reveals about public confidence—
and what local finance leaders can do to earn it

BY COLT JENSEN AND JACLYN PIATAK

What do declining levels of public trust mean for local government? What factors influence public trust? And how can local government budget and finance professionals foster public confidence? To address these questions, we review recent trends in public trust and recent research offering practical guidance for local leaders.

Recent trends in local government trust

Local government continues to have higher levels of public trust than state and federal government—but it is starting to slide. This decline accompanies a general decline in trust in institutions (e.g., media, science, corporations). (See Exhibit 1.)

Public opinion on the government across levels—federal, state, and local—has become less favorable and more negative since 2019. (See Exhibit 2.)

As Exhibit 3 shows, the decline is not solely politically driven, and declining trust can be found across political ideology. As gridlock at the state and federal levels continues to increase, we have seen the nationalization of local politics. A lack of understanding about the way local governments operate and service misattribution can lead to citizen frustration and a misalignment of local government service and tax expectations as compared to reality.

Lessons from research

Recent research on trust in government offers several lessons to help us understand factors that may influence public trust and how to enhance it.

LESSON #1:
Trust is filtered through public values.

At the local level, trust is more responsive to values and the quality of citizen-government interactions than to ideology.^{1,2}

Citizens do not evaluate local government through a single lens. Rather, the values they prioritize shape the level of trust they extend to local institutions. As shown in Exhibit 4, trust in local government varies meaningfully by residents’ top-ranked public values. Residents who prioritize efficiency and avoiding waste in government report mean trust scores of 2.16 on a 4-point scale—notably below the overall mean of 2.37. In contrast, residents who prioritize professionalism and expertise report mean trust scores of 2.57.

The practical implication is important: Building trust may require different signals for different community members. A resident who prioritizes efficiency wants to see fiscal discipline and evidence of value for tax dollars; a resident who prioritizes equity wants to see fair treatment and responsive service delivery across neighborhoods. Finance professionals who communicate results through a single “we did good work” narrative may be missing large segments of their audience entirely.

LESSON #2:
Trust varies across demographic subgroups.

Trust is largely stable across age groups, but younger residents trust less, and roughly 15 to 17 percent of residents express no trust at all.^{3,4}

Not all residents experience local government the same way, and those differences register in trust levels. Older residents tend to report modestly higher trust—51 percent of those 60 and older express “some” or “a great deal” of trust. That’s compared to 43 percent

EXHIBIT 1 | Current Trust Ratings in the U.S. Compared to Historical Averages

How much trust and confidence do you have in ... ?			
Figures are the percentage who have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the institution or actor.			
	Average %	2023 %	Difference (pct. pts.)
Your local government	70	67	-3
Your state government	63	59	-4
The executive branch	52	41	-11
The American people	67	55	-12
Men and women in political life	54	40	-14
Federal government: International problems	52	37	-15
Federal government: Domestic problems	52	37	-15
The legislative branch	48	32	-16
The judicial branch	66	49	-17

Averages date back to 1972 for all institutions except the American people (1974). Not all items have been asked every time the trust series has been asked.

Source: Gallup

EXHIBIT 2 | Favorability Across Levels of Government

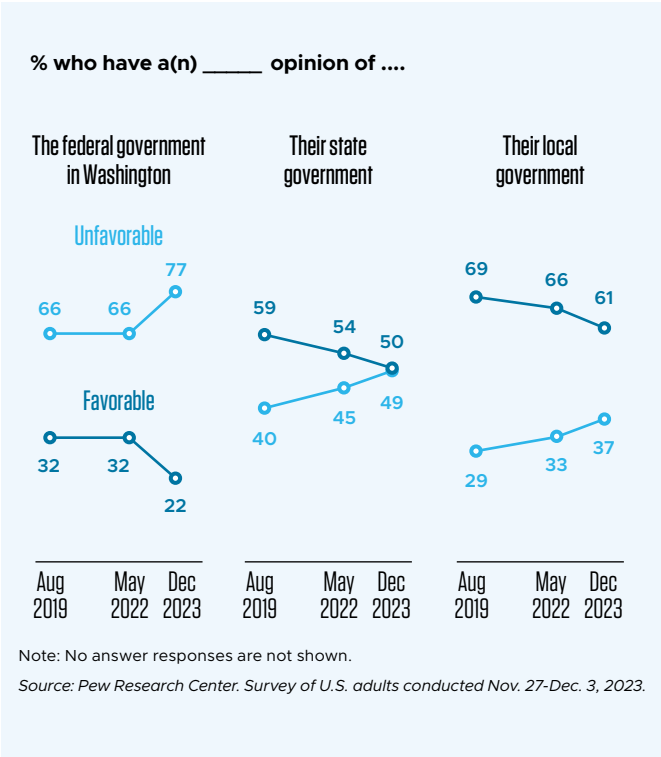


EXHIBIT 3 | Confidence in Local Government by Political Party

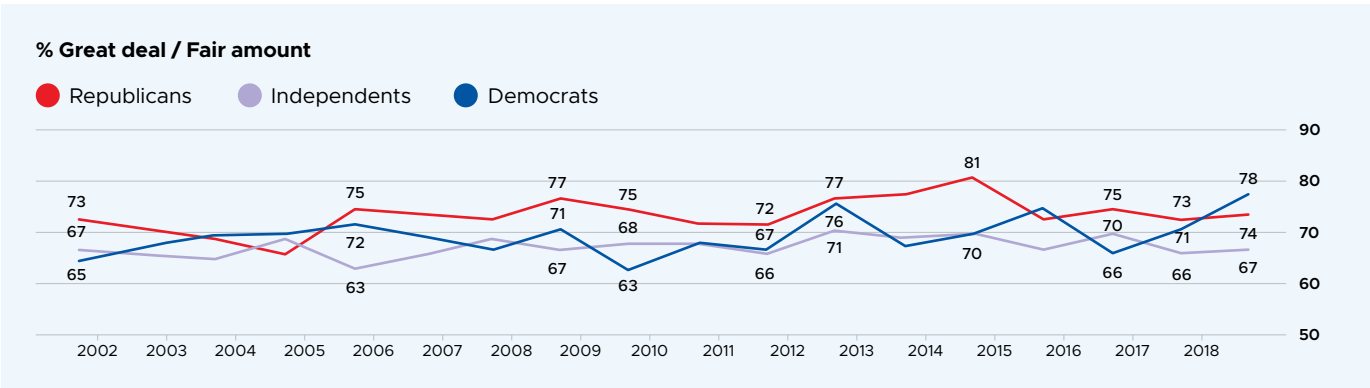
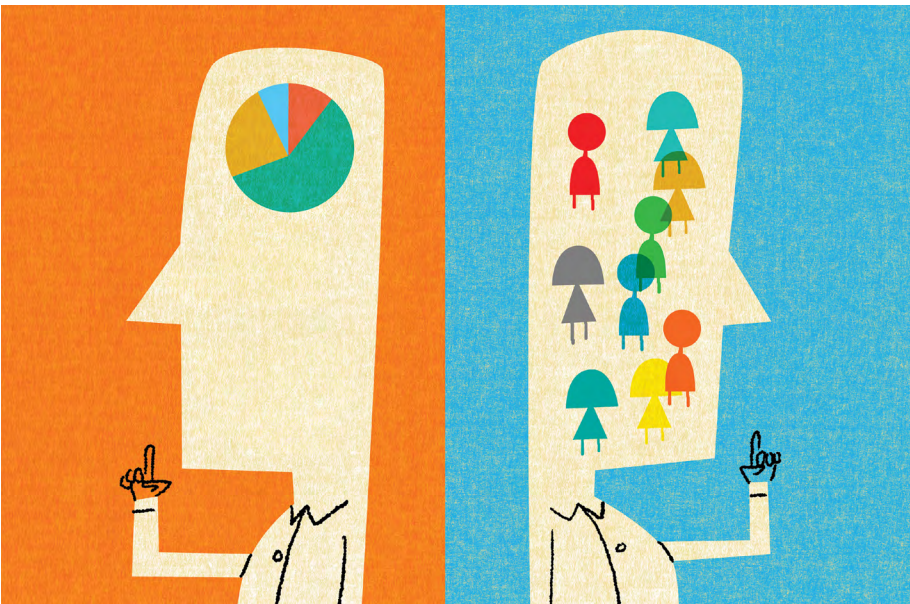
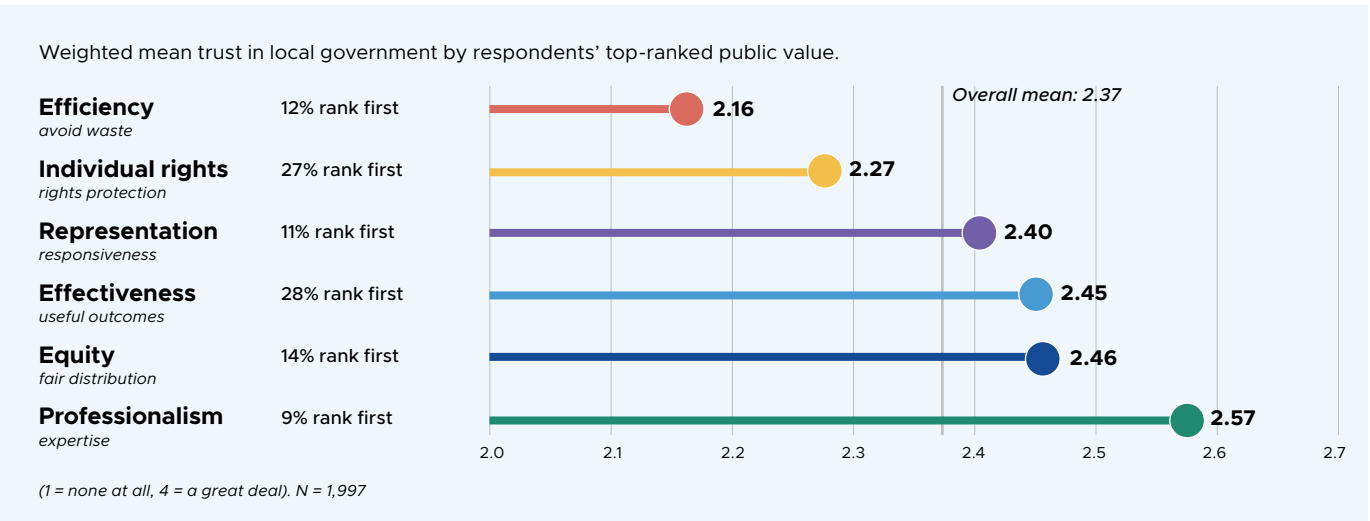


EXHIBIT 4 | Trust Is Filtered Through Public Values



Citizens do not evaluate local government through a single lens. Rather, the values they prioritize shape the level of trust they extend to local institutions.

of 18-to 29-year-olds. The youth gap is real and worth monitoring (see Exhibit 5). Across the full sample, roughly 15 to 17 percent of respondents express no trust at all, a figure that is consistent across age groups and suggests a floor of civic alienation that general outreach campaigns are unlikely to penetrate.

LESSON #3

Social identities shape public trust.

Public service motivation—the drive to help others grounded in service in public organizations—is positively associated with local government trust, while political ideology is a stronger predictor of trust at the federal level than at the local level.^{5,6}

This finding suggests that local governments are operating in a somewhat different trust environment than federal agencies. Ideological predispositions matter less, and the quality of citizen-government interactions matters more.

The practical implication is encouraging: Trust in federal agencies rises and falls with national politics, something no agency can control. Trust in local government works differently: it depends more on what local governments actually do. Every budget hearing, service request, and public meeting is a chance to build trust or lose it, regardless of residents' politics. The public service motivation finding offers another opening. Residents who

are driven to help others through public service already lean toward trusting government, and they are often the same people who show up for budget workshops, citizen academies, and volunteer boards. Giving these residents meaningful roles can pay off twice: It strengthens their trust, and it shows others what a good working relationship with local government looks like.

LESSON #4

Relative trust matters.

Relative trust in one level of government compared to another shapes public preferences for policy implementation.⁷

As shown in Exhibit 7, people who have higher levels of trust in the state government, as compared to the federal government, also prefer that policies be implemented at the state level rather than the federal government. This finding holds across different policy areas like unemployment, health, environment, and food. We find similar patterns for relative trust in local government for a preference for emergency response at the local level.⁸

LESSON #5

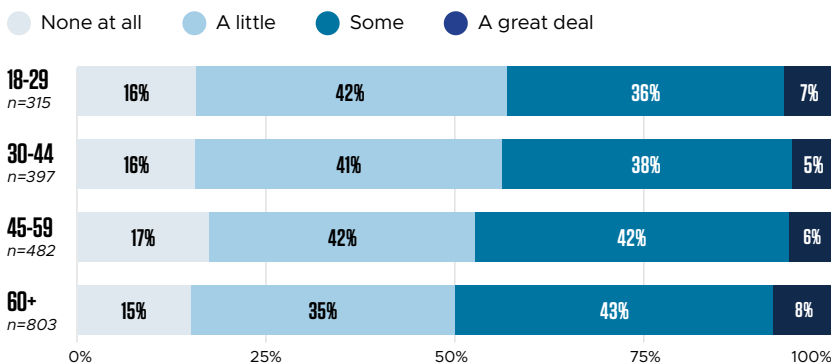
Local trust is intergovernmental.

Trust in local government is not evaluated in isolation; residents weigh it against their trust in state and federal governments. Trust is also intergovernmental: many policy areas require collaboration and coordination across levels, so residents' judgments about one level are shaped by the performance of the government ecosystem.

Take emergency response, for example, a service that local governments might assume they “own” in the public mind. When asked to rank which level of government they most rely on for emergency response, only 33 percent of respondents named county or municipal government first. State emergency agencies ranked first for 39 percent of respondents, and FEMA ranked first for 28 percent (see Exhibit 8).

The implication for local governments is significant: Local performance may be evaluated through the lens of a broader

EXHIBIT 5 | Local Government Trust by Age Cohort



Trust scale: 1 = none at all; 4 = a great deal. Full joint sample, weighted distribution across ordinal response categories. N = 1,997

EXHIBIT 6 | Trust in Local Government Across Levels of Public Service Motivation

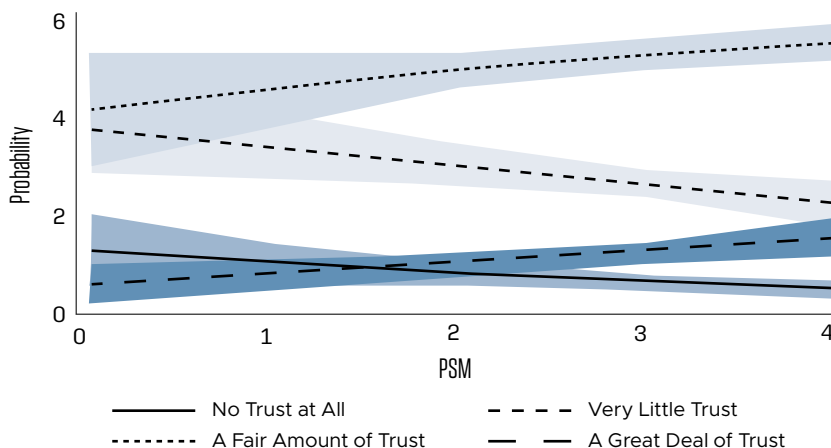
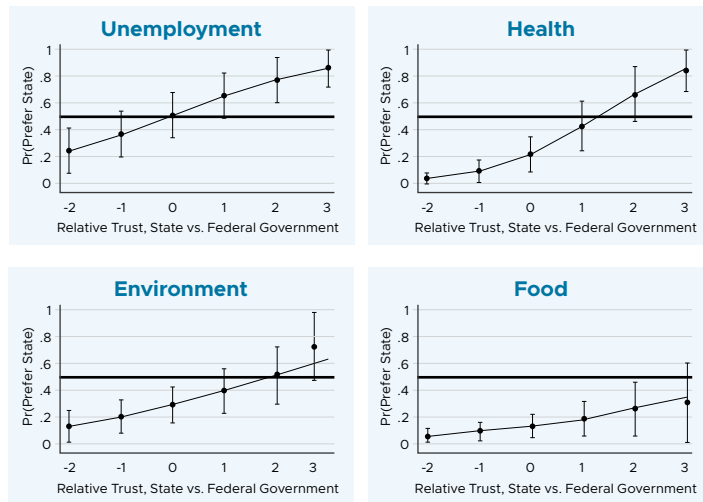
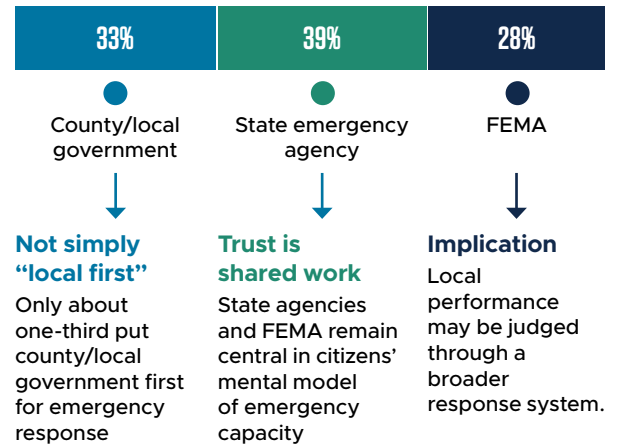


EXHIBIT 7 | Policy Preferences by Relative Trust in State vs. Federal Government



Source: Suzanne Leland, Jacqueline Chattopadhyay, Cherie Maestas, and Jaclyn Piatak, "Policy venue preference and relative trust in government in federal systems," *Governance*, 34(2), 2021.

EXHIBIT 8 | Local Trust Is Also Intergovernmental



First-ranked level of government for emergency response among valid responses. N = 1,653

Findings suggest that local governments are operating in a somewhat different trust environment than federal agencies. Ideological predispositions matter less, and the quality of citizen-government interactions matters more.

intergovernmental response system. When a hurricane or wildfire unfolds over days or weeks, citizens assemble mental models of the full response system, and credit or blame is distributed across levels. Local governments that communicate clearly about their specific roles, and that work visibly in coordination with state and federal partners, are better positioned to receive appropriate credit for their contributions.

What now?

Local finance professionals are well-positioned to contribute to trust-building efforts. Accurate, timely, and accessible financial reporting builds competence-based trust. Budget processes that genuinely engage residents in priority-setting build benevolence-based trust. Clear communication about the intergovernmental

dimensions of service delivery builds the kind of informed public understanding that makes service misattribution less likely.

None of these things requires a separate trust initiative; they require treating trust as a design criterion in the work finance and management professionals are already doing. Ensuring that public values are considered and taken into account in everyday decision-making, financing, and budgeting can help maintain and strengthen public trust. 

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¹ Jaclyn Piatak and Colt Jensen, "Public values and sector service delivery preferences: Public preferences on contracting from simple to complex human services," *Public Administration Review*, 84(5), 2024.

² Nathan Favero, Colt Jensen, M. Kim, and Jaclyn Piatak, "Which Public Values are Most Important? Linking Political Ideology and Public Service Motivation to Public Values Preferences," *The American Review of Public Administration*, 55(7-8), 2025.

³ Colt Jensen and Jaclyn Piatak, "Public service motivation and trust in government: An examination across the federal, state, and local levels in the United States," *The American Review of Public Administration*, 54(2), 2024.

⁴ Colt Jensen and Jaclyn Piatak, "Authoritarian Attitudes and Public Service Motivation: Examining Trust Across Levels of Government in the United States," *The American Review of Public Administration*, 2026.

⁵ Colt Jensen and Jaclyn Piatak, "Public service motivation and trust in government: An examination across the federal, state, and local levels in the United States."

⁶ Colt Jensen and Jaclyn Piatak, "Authoritarian Attitudes and Public Service Motivation: Examining Trust Across Levels of Government in the United States."

⁷ Suzanne Leland, Jacqueline Chattopadhyay, Cherie Maestas, and Jaclyn Piatak, "Policy venue preference and relative trust in government in federal systems," *Governance*, 34(2), 2021.

⁸ R. Hines, Cole Jensen, Suzanne Leland, and Jaclyn Piatak, "Who Should Be Responsible for Emergency Response? Examining Trust, Civic Engagement, and Level of Government Preferences," presented at the Southern Political Science Association Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana, January 2026.