



Trust in Government:

A CLOSE LOOK AT PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND ITS EMPLOYEES

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PARTNERSHIP
FOR PUBLIC SERVICE



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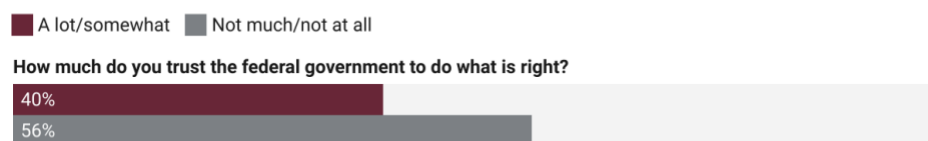
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Executive Summary

America is experiencing a lack of trust in major institutions—particularly the federal government. Only 4 in 10 Americans say they trust the federal government to do what is right at least some of the time, according to a national survey conducted by the Partnership for Public Service and [Freedman Consulting](#).

This lack of trust has serious implications for how the public interacts with our government and how well federal agencies can respond to the major challenges facing the country. Today, the nation is experiencing serious repercussions because of this trust deficit. The COVID-19 pandemic has placed demands on federal agencies to provide services, public health information, vaccines or economic relief to nearly every household in America. In recent weeks, global events have also driven our government to embark on consequential foreign policy actions in service to our safety and security as well the health of democracies abroad. The highly polarized reaction to these efforts has brought trust to the forefront of the political debate.

Views of the Federal Government



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Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18-24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper

The national survey seeks to understand how people in the United States feel about their federal government beyond the politics of the day and the leaders in Washington, D.C. It instead focuses on the parts of government that are often out of the political limelight: federal agencies and the 2 million civil servants who work across the country. It also investigates why people do or do not trust the government. This effort is the first in a series of publications the Partnership will publish in the coming months on trust in the federal government.

While several surveys have measured levels of trust over time, they rarely provide insight into the drivers of trust and the specific sources for changing expectations of government. The current challenges facing the country require more than simply knowing that trust is on the decline. This report helps to answer how people feel about the government at this moment in time and why they feel that way.

A majority of the public is distrustful of the federal government as a whole. More people feel the federal government has a negative impact (53%) on the United States than a positive one (38%). More than half do not believe the government helps people like them, and two-thirds believe the government is not transparent or does not listen to the public. For many members of the public, key associations with the federal government are politics and politicians—which are perceived very negatively. Members of Congress, for example, are seen favorably by only 30% of the public compared with 61% who see them unfavorably.

However, when asked about specific parts of the federal government, the public supports a number of key components. For example, people have mostly positive feelings when discussing certain federal agencies, missions or services that have direct contact with people. Many well-known government agencies are seen favorably. Majorities of the public see government employees favorably. And more people say their personal experiences with the government have been positive rather than negative.

Among the major findings of the survey:

1. Only 40% of respondents said they trust the federal government a lot or somewhat, and 56% did not trust the government much or at all.
2. Just 38% said the federal government has a positive impact on the United States, while 53% said the impact was negative.
3. A third of respondents (33%) believe that the federal government treats people fairly regardless of race, class, gender, level of ability or any other demographic characteristic.
4. Many variations in views are explained by partisan differences. Democrats are far more likely to trust the government (60%) than Republicans (27%) and independents (26%).
5. Blacks (at 51%) and Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders (50%) are more likely to trust the government than Hispanics (39%) and Whites (38%).
6. More people said their personal experiences with the federal government had been positive (48%) than not (38%).
7. Views of federal employees are complex but mostly positive. A majority of respondents (57%) said federal employees are doing public service, and 56% said they are hard workers. Half thought that federal workers are committed to helping “people like me” compared with 33% who say they are not.

8. A majority (57%) said that “serving their communities” is very important to why federal workers take their jobs, and 47% said public service is a leading motivating factor. Still, more people said that federal employees work for benefits, job security and salary than for other reasons.
9. The public values the role an effective federal government plays in strengthening democracy and protecting our country. Two messages supporting these missions tested slightly better than others regarding what makes the public think more favorably about government.

The public’s distrust of Washington and political institutions is a well-documented and longstanding problem. By diving deeper and seeing its potential causes, we can develop a better understanding of trust to strengthen the public’s relationship with the federal government, particularly those elements not subject to electoral politics. This research presents several bright spots and opportunities to improve perceptions of government by better telling its story and impact. Finally, the findings suggest several potential options for reform to increase the trustworthiness of federal institutions.



Photo Credit: Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, National Disaster Medical System

Introduction

While the word “trust” can have many definitions and meanings, for this report, trust in government is defined as the public’s perception of government based on expectations of how it should operate. Trust is the public’s belief that the federal system and the politicians who lead or oversee it are “responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of scrutiny.”¹

How much do you trust the federal government to do what is right?

	A lot /somewhat	Not much/not at all
Overall	40	56
Democrats	60	38
Republicans	27	71
Independents/DK	26	66

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper

Trust is crucial for reasons both conceptual (the legitimacy of well-functioning democracies relies on trust) and practical (government needs to be trusted so it can effectively serve the public). Yet most people in the United States do not trust the federal government.²

A lack of trust has serious consequences for the country. When people don’t trust their government, they are more likely to opt out of voting and other types of civic participation. People who distrust the government are less likely to follow public health guidelines. For example, almost half (46%) of the people who said they were vaccinated against the COVID-19

¹ Arthur H. Miller and Ola Listhaug, “Political Parties and Confidence in Government: A Comparison of Norway, Sweden and the United States,” *British Journal of Political Science*, 20(3) 1990, 358.
[dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400005883](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400005883)

² The survey participants were asked, “How much do you trust the federal government to do what is right?” Ten percent answered, “a lot,” while 30% said “somewhat,” 30% said “not too much,” 26% said “not at all,” and 3% answered they did not know.

virus trusted the government compared with 29% of those who had not been vaccinated. In fact, [a recent study published in The Lancet](#) found that countries with higher levels of government trust had lower infection and fatality rates during the COVID-19 pandemic.³

In order to be strong and sustainable, a democracy needs diverse groups to engage and voice their preferences. This is possible only when people representing various communities trust the government to listen and respond.

With less engagement, the public feels less empowered to influence government. This creates a mistrust loop: Diminished trust in government leads to a disengaged public, which leads to inefficient and unaccountable institutions, which leads to further deterioration of trust. When that loop is activated, progress slows down.

Our government is uniquely positioned to perform functions that are critical to national security as well as public safety and the well-being of the public. Low trust is a barrier to our government's ability to meet today's urgent needs and provide modernized, equitable and accessible services.

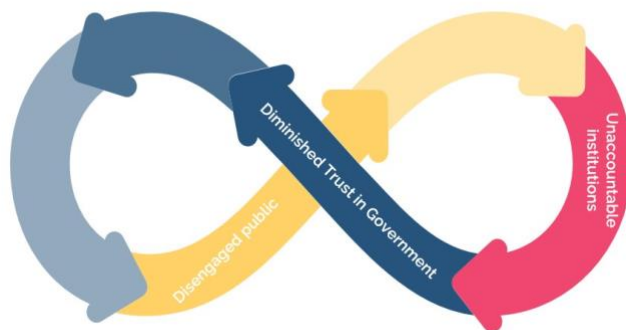


Image design by [Slidesgo](#) and [Freepik](#).

HOW DID WE ASK ABOUT GOVERNMENT?

A major goal of this research was to learn how the public thinks about various components of the federal government along with its views of the federal government as a whole.

In both the focus groups and the survey, participants were asked to concentrate on parts of the government using specific language. Some questions were asked about the “federal government in general,” while others were asked about parts such as “Congress,” “federal agencies” and “non-elected federal employees.”

Distrust also can dissuade young talent from entering the federal service—an issue that will become increasingly important in light of a rapidly aging workforce. It may likewise impact the willingness of potential political appointees to serve.

Low levels of trust in major institutions—particularly the federal government—is a persistent problem in the United States. According to many organizations tracking this trend, trust in government has been in decline since

³ COVID-19 National Preparedness Collaborators, “Pandemic preparedness and COVID-19: an exploratory analysis of infection and fatality rates and contextual factors associated with preparedness in 177 countries, from Jan 1, 2020, to Sept 30, 2021,” *The Lancet*, Feb. 2022. DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736(22)00172-6. Retrieved from bit.ly/3oplull

the 1960s.⁴ But the past few years have added new layers of complexity to this issue. A public health crisis, widespread misinformation, protests and social unrest around racial inequity and the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol reflected the brittleness of the public's faith in democratic institutions. Particularly at this time, it is critical to examine the issue of trust, to fully understand how Americans feel about their entire federal government—not just elected leaders, Congress or even the government in Washington, D.C.—and to find ways to reverse the decades-long trend.



How this research is unique

Most surveys on trust in government measure its level, but many lack additional insight on drivers of trust, the specific sources of positive or negative sentiments, changing expectations of government, or potential means of restoring trust. Simply tracking the decline of trust in government as a single institution—dozens of agencies, over 2 million employees with differing mandates and a \$6 trillion budget—and comparing it to years past is insufficient for the current state of affairs. What is needed is an investigation reflecting the current cultural moment and a deeper understanding of how government should be present in people's lives.

Through interviews, focus groups and a nationally representative survey, we uncovered unique insights into how people feel about the government and the causes of those feelings. The results show that trust in government is problematic. However, when opinions are considered in their entirety, it is not all bad news for the federal government. When asked about specific agencies, services, missions or federal employees, the public's views are more positive. People also feel that their personal experiences with the government are more favorable than not.

These findings suggest there are opportunities for the federal government to improve its brand by focusing attention on the executive branch institutions which, despite making up the vast majority of government, do not often come to mind when people think of government.

Trust in government should not be a partisan issue. It is an essential part of maintaining a democracy that works for all people. Trust is also essential for the government to be able to reform itself and improve its own functioning. It is not about building a bigger or smaller government but an effective one, well-equipped to solve major problems facing the country.

⁴ Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021." Retrieved from [pewrsr.ch/3GwpBZS](https://www.pewresearch.org/3GwpBZS)

HOW DO THE PARTNERSHIP'S SURVEY RESULTS COMPARE WITH OTHER SURVEYS?

Many institutions have conducted surveys on how much the public trusts the federal government. The Partnership's survey shows that 40% of the public trusts the federal government "a lot" or "somewhat."

The wording of a survey question has an impact on results. For example, there is preliminary evidence that including the word "Washington" in a question rather than "federal government" might decrease people's reported levels of trust.

For more than 40 years, [Gallup](#) has been asking: "How much trust and confidence do you have in our federal government in Washington when it comes to handling [International/Domestic] problems?" In September 2021, 39% of the public said it trusted the government "a great deal" or "a fair amount" to handle international problems, along with the same number for domestic problems.

The [Pew Research Center](#) asks: "How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?" In April 2021, 24% of people said "about always" or "most of the time."

The options respondents can choose from can also have an impact on results. While various surveys might come up with slightly different numbers, all point to strong levels of distrust in the federal government.

This report offers details about the level of trust in government among specific populations, as well as insights into why people feel the way they do. The topics discussed below include:

- **Differences by demographics.** How levels of trust differ by groups of population such as race, gender and age.
- **Reasons why people distrust the federal government.** Insights into potential causes behind varying levels of trust.
- **People and institutions viewed positively.** The public supports certain parts of the federal government.
- **Improving the brand and trustworthiness of the federal government.** What the public wants from its government and potential ways for the government to better itself.

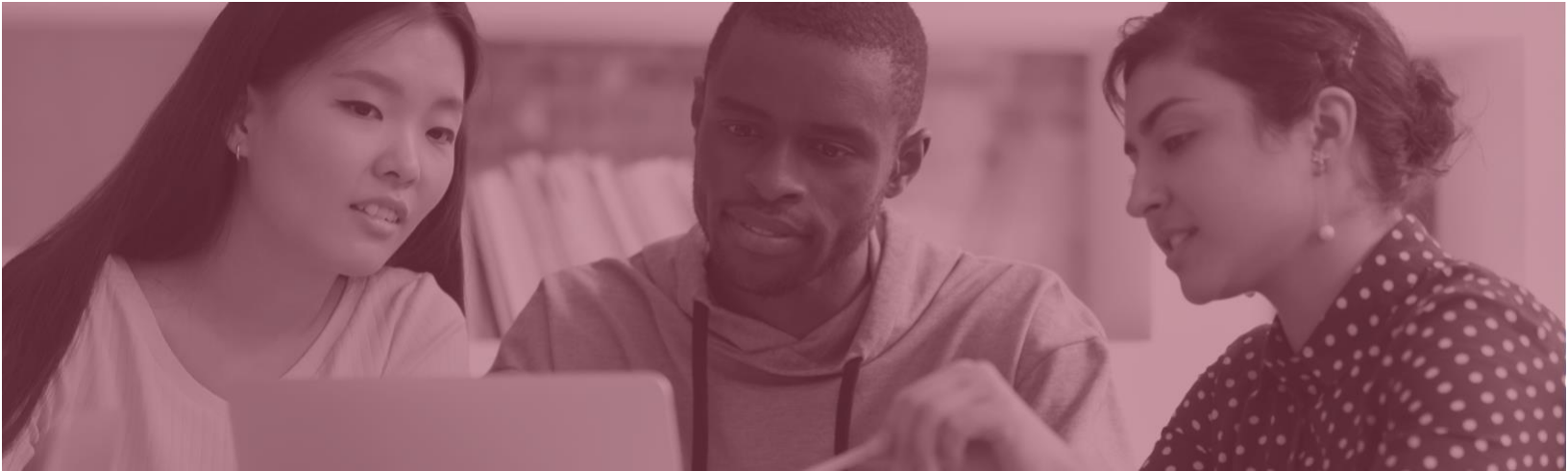


Photo Credit: Shutterstock

Differences by Demographics

By examining and better understanding how levels of trust differ by demographics such as race, gender, education and age, federal agencies can tailor how they interact and communicate with these populations.

Partisan differences account for much of the variation. While 60% of Democrats say they trust the government, only 27% of Republicans and 26% of independents do.

Gender is not a significant factor in how much people trust the government. Males are slightly more likely to have trust than females (43% to 38%), but such a difference is barely outside the margin of error of 2.2 points.

Republican males, however, are more likely to trust the government than Republican females (33% to 22%). Male and female Democrats, by contrast, trust the government at almost the same rate (59% to 61%).

How much do you trust the federal government to do what is right?

	A lot/somewhat	Not much/not at all
Overall	40	56
Democrats	60	38
Republicans	27	71
Independents/DK	26	66
Female	38	58
Democrats	59	38
Republicans	22	75
Male	43	55
Democrats	61	37
Republicans	33	67
18-34	42	54
35-49	43	54
50-64	38	58
65+	37	60
Less than 50	42	54
Democrats	58	40
Republicans	33	66
50+	38	59
Democrats	63	34
Republicans	22	76
Black or African American	51	46
AAPI	50	46
Hispanic or Latino	39	59
White	38	58

[Show less](#)

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. Note: The survey consisted of an oversampling of respondents who self-classified as Black or African American, Asian American or Pacific Islander, or Hispanic or Latino. • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Age also seems to make little difference. People 65 and older trust the government slightly less than people ages 18 to 34 (37% to 42%), but those differences are minor.

Older Republicans are less likely to trust the government than younger Republicans, however. Twenty-two percent of Republicans 50 and older say they trust the federal government compared with 33% of Republicans under 50. A smaller split exists among Democrats: 58% under the age of 50 say they trust the government while 63% of those 50 and over agree.

Other demographics have a greater differentiation. Some racial groups trust the government more than others. About half of Blacks as well as Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders trust the government compared with 39% of Hispanics and 38% of Whites.

Racial groups are far from uniform in their opinions, however. Partisan differences within racial groups are strong. For Hispanics who identify as Democrats, 60% say they trust the government, while only 17% of Republican Hispanics say the same thing. Sixty-one percent of White Democrats expressed some level of trust compared with 26% of White Republicans.

Education correlates with trust in government. Almost half of college graduates (51%) said they trust the government compared with 36% of those who did not graduate college. An even higher number of people with post-graduate degrees reported trust in the government (59%). People who said they voted in 2020 were more likely to say they trust the government (43%) than those who did not vote (25%). And people living in cities were also more likely to say they trust the federal government than people living in other types of areas such as suburbs, small towns or rural areas.

How much do you trust the federal government to do what is right?

	A lot/somewhat	Not much/not at all
Overall	40	56
Non-college grad	36	61
College grad	51	47
Post-grad degree	59	40
Vaccinated	46	51
Unvaccinated	29	67
Voted in 2020	43	55
Did not vote in 2020	25	67
City	52	45
Suburb/big city	38	59
Suburb/small town	36	60
Small town	31	66
Rural area	32	62

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper

These results are reflective of how people felt at a specific time in October 2021. Historical trends reveal additional insights into how trust is impacted by events. Over time, the party sitting in the White House has impacted levels of trust in the government overall. According to an analysis of surveys since the 1970s by the Pew Research Center, “Trust in government has been consistently higher among members of the party that controls the White House than among the

opposition party.”⁵ However, Pew Research adds that Republicans have been more reactive to changes in political leadership than Democrats.

No attempt to understand how the public perceives the federal government is complete without viewing how results differ by groups. Experiences with the federal government vary greatly, and efforts to better serve and communicate with the public will not be a one-size-fits-all solution.

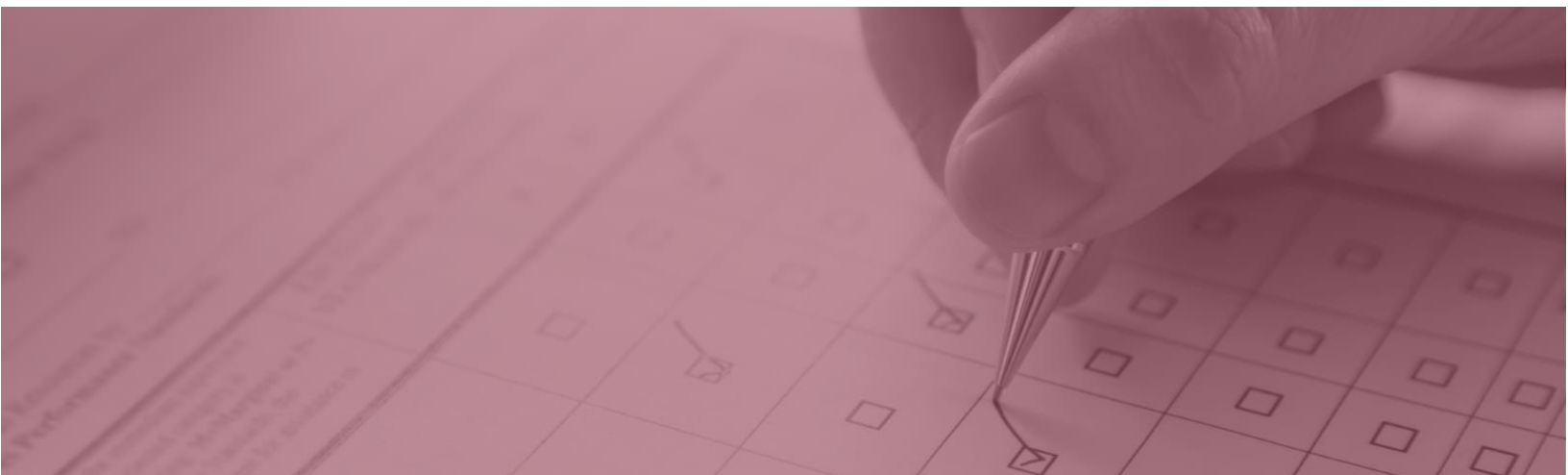


Photo Credit: Shutterstock

Reasons Why People Distrust the Federal Government

A major goal of the Partnership’s research was to explore the perceived sources of distrust for the 56% of Americans who say they do not trust the government. Research participants were asked about subjects that ranged from personal experiences interacting with the federal government to perceptions of how the government serves their communities.

The results of the survey along with the findings of the focus groups and other qualitative methods show that—broadly—the sources of distrust can be divided into three major categories:

- perceived or real examples of government serving some communities better than others;
- the belief that the government is inefficient and ineffective; and
- negative personal experiences.

⁵ Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2021.” Retrieved from [pewrsr.ch/3GwpBZS](https://www.pewresearch.org/ch/3GwpBZS)

Trust is a subjective experience. People’s perceptions, rather than what the federal government actually is and does, play a significant role. We cannot assume the public does in-depth analyses of their own feelings and the reasons behind them or assesses changes in their own response to the government. Most of these considerations happen unreflectively. Therefore, all responses to questions of trust in government are snapshots of feelings and thoughts. As such, they provide only a partial view of the complex sociopolitical issue of trust erosion.



Distrust stemming from the government serving some communities better than others

Many of the research participants expressed a belief that the federal government is not focused on helping people like them and their communities.

“I think [government employees] do a good job of protecting certain populations,” said one participant. “But a lot—the majority—fall through the cracks and are expected to figure it out yourself some way, somehow.”

Significantly less than a half of survey respondents

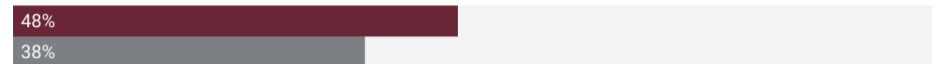
(37%) felt that the federal government helps people “like me” and a similar number (39%) said the government serves “my community.” Only about a third of respondents believed that the government treats all people fairly (33%).

When asked which group of people the government helps the most, 50% said the wealthy while only 7% said the middle class and 9% said the poor. Only 9% said the government helps all groups equally, and 15% said the government doesn’t help any group.

Personal and community experiences and trust

■ Agree ■ Disagree

My personal experiences with the federal government have been mostly positive



The federal government serves my community



The federal government helps people like me



Treats people fairly regardless of race, class, gender, level of ability or any other demographic characteristic



Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper



Distrust of government because it is seen as too bureaucratic and wasteful

Many members of the public believe that the federal government does not function efficiently and is not careful with the public's resources. Fully 75% of respondents said the government is too bureaucratic and also wasteful. Almost as many stated it is corrupt (69%), while 59% said it was incompetent.

Republicans were more likely to agree with negative views of the government in this way. Eighty-two percent of Republicans agreed the government is too bureaucratic, while 69% said it was incompetent and 79% said it was corrupt. By contrast, 70% of Democrats said it was too bureaucratic, 50% said it was incompetent and 62% said it was corrupt.

When asked about potential positive attributes, the findings were stark. Only 23% of all respondents said the government is transparent, 27% believed the government listens to the public, a little over a third (37%) think it is accountable and less than a half find the government effective (41%).

Views of the federal government

	Positive	Negative
Impact the federal government has on the U.S.	38%	53
Impact on people like you	36	55

	Agree	Disagree
Too bureaucratic	75%	11
Wasteful	75	17
Corrupt	69	19
Incompetent	59	31
Is effective	41%	52
Is accountable	37	54
Listens to the public	27	65
Is transparent	23	67

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper



Distrust coming from personal experiences

More people said their personal experiences with the federal government were positive (48%) than not (38%). However, for those who had negative personal experiences, these instances seemed to be a significant factor in their overall trust of government. Such experiences could involve working through an intrusive questionnaire or having an unreasonably long wait time for document processing, but these examples of being poorly served are likely to color an individual's entire view of the federal government.

About two-thirds of the respondents who said most of their personal experiences with the federal government were positive also said they trusted the government (64%).

By contrast, for those who said that their experiences with the federal government had not been positive, only 14% said they trusted the government while 85% reported they did not.

Personal experiences and trust

	Trust	Do not trust
Of people who say they have had mostly positive experiences	64	34
Of those who say they have NOT had mostly positive experiences	14	85

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper

Still, some research participants acknowledged that personal experiences with the government could be positive even as they were skeptical about the government in its entirety. Expressing a common sentiment, one focus group participant said: “I don't fully trust [the government] ... But there have been interactions I've had, and people that I know have had, [where problems were] solved. They've gotten taken care of.”



Photo Credit: National Park Service

People and Institutions Viewed Positively

While the research shows the federal government as a whole is unpopular, the public does not view all parts of the government in the same way. As a rule, “government” without qualifiers suggests politics and politicians to research participants. When specific elements of government are defined and segmented, however, views vary. For example, both members of Congress and political appointees are viewed negatively—only 30% of the public has favorable opinions of each group.

However, when people focus on agencies and their missions and services, or non-elected government officials and their work in public service, more positive attitudes surface.

These findings suggest that the public does not distrust or dislike all of the government. Only certain parts are unpopular, but these elements drive the conception of the government as a whole. By emphasizing how our government is supporting people’s everyday lives—keeping us safe, healthy and secure—the federal government can begin to increase the understanding of its foundational role and improve how it is perceived.



The public has favorable views of many agencies

When participants were asked about their views of several well-known government agencies, the results were mostly positive. Participants were asked about their feelings on 13 agencies, and 12 of those were viewed more favorably than unfavorably. In some cases, the public’s views were overwhelmingly positive. Only one agency, the Internal Revenue Service, had a majority with an unfavorable opinion (51%).

Some of the most popular agencies were ones that members of the public interact with on a regular basis. The National Park Service, which is responsible for maintaining parks that generally receive more than 300 million visitors a year,⁶ was the most popular with 84% of respondents holding a positive view. The next most popular ones include the Social Security Administration (69%), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (65%), the Department of Veterans Affairs (64%) and the Census Bureau (62%).

The Transportation Security Administration—which operates security at the nation’s airports—was favored by a rate of about 2-to-1.

When asked about the military as a whole, an overwhelming number of respondents (82%) said they had a favorable opinion.

Opinions of most federal agencies are positive

	Very/somewhat favorable	Very/somewhat unfavorable
Federal government overall	40	55
National Park Service	84	5
Social Security Admin.	69	23
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	65	29
Department of Veterans Affairs	64	24
Census Bureau	62	21
Environmental Protection Agency	60	26
Health and Human Services	60	26
Department of Homeland Security	56	30
Transportation Security Administration	55	27
Department of Justice	52	39
Department of State	46	34
Immigration and Customs Enforcement	46	41
Internal Revenue Service	42	51

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper

⁶ National Park Service, “Visitation Numbers,” February 2022. Retrieved from bit.ly/3v2pxyy



The public's views of federal employees are complex, but generally more positive than of government overall

Unlike most surveys that focus primarily on politicians and elected officials, our survey asked specific questions about non-elected federal government employees to understand how they are perceived.⁷ The federal government is made up of about 2 million civil servants, 85% of whom live outside the Washington, D.C. area.⁸

Views of federal employees

Most non-elected federal government employees...	Agree	Disagree
Are as competent as an average private sector employee	58	26
Are doing public service	57	24
Are hard workers	56	26
Are competent	55	27
Work as hard as an average private sector employee	53	33
Are committed to helping people like me	50	33
Are corrupt	30	49

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper

The majority of the public sees some positive qualities of government employees. More than half the public recognizes that civil servants are “hard workers” and “competent.” A similar number (57%) agreed that federal employees are engaging in “public service.”

“I think that the people who are hired that are civil servants are just doing their job. And I do trust them to do their job,” shared one focus group participant.

⁷ There are many ways to describe or label those who work for the federal government in non-political positions. For most of the survey, respondents were asked their views on “non-elected federal government employees” because it was an accurate and neutral term. For comparisons, the survey asked the approval rating for other related terms and found that different labels resulted in slightly different responses. About half (48%) of respondents had a favorable view of “non-elected federal government employees.” By comparison, the terms “civil servants” (66%) and “public servants” (62%) had higher approval ratings, while the rating was about the same for “federal government employees” at 53%.

⁸ Brandon Lardy, “You don’t have to go to D.C. to see our government in action,” Partnership for Public Service, Oct. 21, 2020. Retrieved from bit.ly/3sreKv2

At the same time, about half of the respondents agreed with the view that federal employees are “more interested in helping themselves than the public.” About the same number said federal government employees make more money than the average private sector employee doing similar jobs—a statement that is not always accurate.⁹

EXAMPLES OF VIEWS OF GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES

- “We have many dedicated, hard-working people in this country. I believe in every job you have people who work hard and others who do not. This is not limited to the federal government.”
- “I think people start [in the federal government] with the intentions of doing good. But after a while they become drunk with the power and the money.”
- “I think the majority of people that work for the government are looking for an easy job where they don't have to do much work.”
- “People want to serve their community or country. Others like to try to get a government position because most of the time it is a stable job and career.”
- “[People work in the government for] the money they would make, the status in social circles, to further a dream or goal they want to attain.”
- “The people in government are so far away from blue collar they can't even relate.”
- “[People work in the government] to better our nation, help their fellow citizens, and to feel a sense of accomplishment as they do genuine good in the world. Heaven knows it's not for a paycheck.”

Three in 10 respondents believed that federal employees are “corrupt.” While that is less than the 49% who did not agree with that notion, the fact that about a third of the public views federal employees as corrupt could be a source of negative feelings toward the government. When thinking about why a person might choose to work for the federal government, respondents cited benefits, job security and salary as the most important factors. These reasons were cited more often than other motivations such as serving the public.

Almost 6 in 10 Americans believe the idea of serving their communities was a leading factor for government employees while almost half (47%) said public service. As one observer said: “The reason I would assume people go to work for the government is to help the greater good.”

Sizable portions of the public believe that “control” (40%) and “power” (37%) are extremely or very important for federal employees. The portion of both Democrats and Republicans who gave those answers were almost the same.

The overall view of government employees is complicated. But a majority of the public believes they are hard workers interested in serving their communities. While most federal workers rarely receive public recognition, many people view them positively, which presents a critical

⁹ Jessie Bur, “Feds face a smaller but significant pay gap with private sector,” Federal Times, Nov. 6, 2019. Retrieved from bit.ly/3HQmxci

opportunity to help shift perceptions of the institution. By focusing more on people who keep our country running and who are committed to the public good, the overall views of the government could be changed for the better.

As one focus group participant stated: “Certain people within the government I feel can be trusted. And if we can get more honest, good people in the federal government, that could be an awesome step forward in order for the collective to trust them.”

Importance of factors for working for federal government

How important do you think each factor is for someone who decides to work for the federal government?

■ Extremely/very important

Benefits

79%

Job security

77%

Salary

71%

Serving their communities

57%

Public service

47%

Control

40%

Power

37%

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper



Photo Credit: Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service

Improving the Federal Government's Brand and Trustworthiness

Finding ways for the federal government to improve how it is perceived and to increase the public's trust will be a challenge. A key element of any such effort will require a deeper understanding of what the public wants to see from the government. By examining the public's expectations, the government can find opportunities to both increase its favorability and improve the ways it serves and interacts with the public.

This research is aimed at gaining a better understanding of the public's expectations of their government and areas where they want to see improvement. Being aware of public perceptions is a fundamental element of better serving the country.



What does the public highlight as areas of concern?

Participants were offered a list of nine options for government improvement and were asked to select the three that mattered most to them. Half of all respondents stated that having the government be more accountable for its actions was among their top priorities.

Expressing a sentiment supported by other participants, one focus group member suggested: “Hold those folks [in government] accountable. There needs to be some measurable changes. And if you hold them accountable, and they don’t make their measurements, get them out.”

Ways people want to see federal government improve

Percentage is of people who included a response among their top three choices.

More accountable	50
Solve big problems facing country	44
More efficient with public resources	41
More transparent	38
More responsive to public	31
Protect individual liberties	29
More compassionate to those facing hard times	27
Lessen regulations	16
Be more modern	11

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 2,301 U.S. adults from Oct. 18–24, 2021. • Created with Datawrapper

Doing a better job solving major

problems facing the country was the second most mentioned at 44%. That was followed by a desire for the government to be more efficient with public resources and to be more transparent. About one-third of the respondents said that being more responsive to the public was a priority, and the same idea permeated many of the focus group conversations. “There’s a lot of opinions out there that aren’t getting heard or represented,” one individual stated. “Ask questions and listen to people for the policies and the laws that they’re putting into place; people who are the underprivileged, the diverse population of our country,” said another.

Some of these improvements should be critical parts of government practice. The fact that respondents highlighted them as areas of concern suggests that current efforts at accountability, transparency or delivery are not done in a way that resonates with the public. This calls for further investigation of this question.



Messages and the need for more research

Rebuilding trust and shifting the public’s perception of the federal government requires understanding what types of messages and messengers resonate the most. In the coming months,

the Partnership will conduct further research into messaging and its effects on different audiences.

Preliminary research shows promising results in some small yet significant ways. When research participants were asked about the government as a whole, they generally focused on politics and Congress—areas that are unpopular. But when people focused their attention on non-elected employees who are generally less visible, responses were more positive. Shifting the framing of how Americans see the federal government and emphasizing the work beyond elected officials in Washington might be one way to increase trust.

ADVICE FOR THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

- “The government [should] become more transparent and relate to its people. Become more involved and listen to the public by holding town hall meetings online to become more in tune with the people it serves.”
- “Increase government transparency; bring corrupt leaders to justice; work together in communities to solve problems; improve leadership and government performance.”
- “Better inform the public on all the everyday work the federal government does for us. I don't think most people even think about all the things the government does for the benefit of us all.”
- “The government should publicize more what they do correctly, but also when something goes wrong, they should tell the people how it can be fixed.”
- “The day-to-day government employees that work hard behind the scenes deserve accolades.”
- “Put more [positive] stories [about public servants] forward to the public—rather than the cat-dog fights of the primary parties—showing that ... real people who work for government are doing good things.”

“I'd say the most interesting part [of participating in a focus group] was once again thinking about all the things the federal government provides to run the country smoothly,” one participant said. “Beyond just getting caught up in daily political arguments, the government really does provide essential services.”

Additionally, focus groups conducted for this project responded positively to videos of high-achieving public servants—specifically, winners of the Partnership’s [Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals](#).

Many participants said that viewing a personal story of a government employee made them realize that more people working for the government see themselves as public servants working hard for the good of the people.

For example, after viewing the story about a doctor at the Centers for Disease Control and Protection, one respondent said: “Honestly, I was a bit shocked that there are people like him working for the government. I guess this really makes me question my own biases.”

“I’m sure there are others in the federal government who view their work as a calling,” added another participant.

The Partnership’s research also suggests the public values the role the federal government plays in strengthening democracy and national security. The survey tested reactions to a range of messages regarding what makes the public think more favorably about government. While many of the messages were attractive, two tested slightly more favorably than others. The top message involved the need for a well-functioning government to protect and strengthen democracy. That was followed closely by a message about the need for government and the military in keeping the country safe.

Other preliminary testing suggested that people reading positive statements about the role of the government and its achievements increased their trust in the government by small margins in the short term. More work needs to be done in this area to better understand what messages work best and whether such an increase in trust would last over time.



Photo Credit: Shutterstock

Conclusion

Trust is foundational in ensuring proper functioning of government and supporting a productive relationship between the public and the government. The longstanding issue of the public's mistrust needs to be not only observed and documented, but also examined in depth and proactively addressed.

Gaining public trust is a long-term endeavor that will take improvements on two fronts: government competence and effective communication. The efforts will need to be tailored to the needs of specific demographic groups, as for historical, cultural, political and practical reasons, different people experience government in different ways. But what will have the same positive response across the population is providing equitable services to all people, regularly listening to the public, responding to its needs and increasing transparency and accountability. A promising avenue the government should explore in its efforts to gain public trust is educating the public about the work of non-elected government employees whose dedication seemed to spark interest and support in the course of this research. Focusing attention on the important work of the various government agencies that are not commonly associated with political debates also could be a step that helps reshape the public's view of the government.

For gains in public trust to be sustainable, these improvements should occur on a consistent basis. The Partnership will pursue additional research and educational efforts in the coming months to advance knowledge on this topic. As noted in the Partnership's 2021 [“Government for the People” report](#), sporadic good government services will not amount to an overall positive opinion of government. Among widespread government criticism, a few negative impressions can taint one's relationship with the government in general and severely damage trust—something that can only be mended by a comprehensive, systematic and coordinated approach to good governance.

Authors



Paul Hitlin manages research for the Partnership's Center for Presidential Transition including the organization's [presidential appointment tracker](#), which they produce in collaboration with The Washington Post. Paul believes information should be a public good, an idea that informed his work at the Pew Research Center where he studied media, technology and data science.



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Methodology

The survey results come from a poll conducted by the Partnership for Public Service, [Freedman Consulting](#) and [Impact Research](#) from Oct. 18–24, 2021. The survey was conducted online and text-to-web survey of 2,301 adults nationwide with oversamples of people who self-classified as Black or African American, Asian American or Pacific Islander, and Hispanic or Latino. Responses were weighted to reflect the demographic makeup of the country. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish with a margin of error of +/- 2.2 percentage points.

Focus groups and online discussion panels known as QualBoards were conducted in conjunction with [Echelon Insights](#). Three focus groups were conducted from Aug. 3–5, 2021, while three QualBoard sessions were conducted during September 2021.

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