



VOICES OF TOMORROW

Young Adult Perspectives on Trust in Government

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Engaging young adults and encouraging them to pursue careers in federal government agencies is a strategic imperative for fostering trust and inclusivity in our government.

By understanding the perspectives of millennials and Generation Z individuals, government agencies have an opportunity to respond to the unique factors that shape this demographic group's relationship with government.

In February 2024, the Partnership for Public Service conducted an online survey of 1,000 Americans aged 18 to 34 on their opinions of the federal government.

The survey's findings underscore a prevailing sentiment of skepticism among young adults, with only 34% expressing confidence in the federal government's ability to do what is right. A majority of respondents, 69%, indicated that the government does not communicate effectively with individuals in their age group, signaling a crucial area for improvement in engaging youth. At the same time, 67% of young adults acknowledged a positive community impact of careers in federal government agencies—and yet only a fraction of them have considered pursuing such a career path. This data shows there is a pressing need for agencies to reevaluate their approaches to bridge the gap between the aspirations of young people and their participation in the federal workforce.

In line with our [previous research](#) on the general public of all ages, our latest survey data shows trust to be scarce among young people. Only 44% of respondents see the overall impact of the federal government as positive, with the number dropping to 36% when considering its positive influence on people in their age range.

| How much do you trust the federal government to do what is right? | |
|--|-----|
| Trust | 34% |
| Do not trust | 64% |
| Impact the federal government has on the U.S. | |
| Positive | 44% |
| Negative | 51% |
| Impact the federal government has on people around your age | |
| Positive | 36% |
| Negative | 58% |

Opinions on the future level of the federal government’s trustworthiness were also almost equally divided.

While 40% anticipated an increase in trustworthiness over the next decade, 44% held an opposing view, expressing skepticism about any positive change.

| In 10 years, the federal government will be more trustworthy than it is today. | |
|--|-----|
| Agree | 40% |
| Disagree | 44% |

Personal experiences also present a mixed picture, as 44% reported mostly positive interactions with the federal government, while 45% disagreed.

When contemplating the experiences of their peers, only 38% agreed that most young adults have had positive encounters with the federal government. While our questions did not specify the types of experiences our respondents should have considered when answering these questions, these could have ranged from navigating federal student aid programs to accessing health care and social services such as housing assistance or unemployment benefits.

| Personal experiences | |
|--|-----|
| Positive | 44% |
| Negative | 45% |
| Experiences of most people around my age | |
| Positive | 38% |
| Negative | 50% |

The above findings paint a troubling picture of a lack of confidence in the federal government among young people and underscore the need to understand what contributes to this phenomenon. As the data indicates, one potential avenue to explore here lies in the realm of communication.

A feeling of disconnect emerged as a prominent thread in our survey data.

Notably, 69% of the respondents answered that the federal government lacks effective communication with individuals of their age group. This level of dissatisfaction with government communications makes it clear there is room for improvement in bridging that gap.

| The federal government communicates effectively with people around my age. | |
|--|-----|
| Agree | 27% |
| Disagree | 69% |

The effectiveness of government communication also emerged as a strong theme in the open-ended responses to our question on what influences young people’s trust in government. Transparency and honesty (or lack thereof) and related concepts were among the most mentioned in the answers we received.

What factors influence how much you trust the federal government to do what is right?

“Communication more than anything.”

“Knowing what is really going on and what’s happening behind closed doors would make them [the federal government] more trustworthy. Whether it would create panic or not, being aware of what is happening would better guide my trust.”

“Primarily my trust is determined by the ability of the federal government to communicate properly enough with its citizens to create a comforting environment for the people if there is fear of worsening times.”

“I put my trust that they will be transparent with me about the details and not withhold information from me. Because they are the voice for me.”

“Keeping myself informed and making sure that we are told and up-to-date about everything in the news I feel like as long as we know everything that’s going on we weren’t blindsided, so as long as they keep doing that, I think they’re gonna be leading us in the right direction.”

“Not hearing how and when the government does something right.”

To add context to the communication issue, we asked about the perceived trustworthiness of different sources of information about the federal government, and our respondents highlighted their own family and friends, along with official government websites and academic institutions as the most reliable. This suggests a preference for personal communication on the one hand and understanding of the significance of credible and established sources of information on the other.

Please, rank these sources of information about the federal government in order from most to least trustworthy based on your personal opinion.

| Ranking | Source of information |
|----------------|--------------------------------|
| 1 | Family |
| 2 | Official government websites |
| 3 | Academic institutions |
| 4 | Friends |
| 5 | Non-governmental organizations |
| 6 | News media |
| 7 | Social media |
| 8 | Personal blogs |

Another notable opportunity for reshaping the relationship between the federal government and young people could be in taking a closer look at career aspirations among young adults.

One positive insight evident from our data is a strong belief in the potential for positive community impact through a career in federal government agencies - 67% of our respondents agree with that. Yet, most of them have never considered a job with the federal government.

| I believe that a career in federal government agencies is an opportunity to have a positive impact on my community. | |
|--|-----|
| Agree | 67% |
| Disagree | 25% |
| Have you ever considered or applied for a job in the federal government OTHER than the military? | |
| Yes, I have applied for a job | 7% |
| Yes, I have considered but have never applied for a job | 21% |
| No, I have never considered it | 68% |

This presents a valuable opportunity that federal agencies could and should use. By recognizing the positive sentiment about how meaningful a federal career could be and finding ways to nurture that among young adults, agencies might be able to enhance the government's recruitment efforts, ultimately strengthening young people's representation in federal organizations.

The Partnership for Public Service has a strong focus on attracting young, diverse talent into the federal government and helping these individuals navigate the process of searching and applying for suitable federal positions. Some of our approaches include training higher education professionals through the [Federal Advisor Certificate Program](#), and sending students into federal agencies for paid internships through our [Future Leaders in Public Service Internship Program](#). But with the number of civil servants under age 30 composing [just 7%](#) of the federal workforce compared to 20% of the overall U.S. workforce, increased efforts from various organizations, as well as the federal government itself, are necessary in this area of work.

Acknowledging and addressing the unique perspectives of young adults is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and trusting relationship between our government and this emerging generation.

According to [the latest data](#) from the U.S. Census Bureau, the 18-34 age group comprises 76.8 million individuals in the United States, accounting for 23.1% of the total population. Listening to the voices of these young adults is strategically important for building a more responsive and effective government for all, as their opinions on policies will impact generations to come.

Over the coming months, the Partnership for Public Service will delve deeper into the diverse perspectives of youth on various aspects of federal governance. By engaging in ongoing research and analysis, we seek to capture the sentiments of this demographic, offering insights into their relationship with the federal government in its various aspects.



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