

## When planning new policies, local governments should take into account how much they are trusted by citizens

*While trust in the federal government may be at an all-time low, citizens still trust state and local governments. In new research using Lincoln, Nebraska, as a case study, [Mitchel Herian](#) looks at how people's levels of trust in their local government influences their support for government activities. He finds that citizens with high levels of trust in local governments are more likely to support government involvement in human services such as health, libraries and public transport, and in infrastructure development, including policies aimed at increasing economic growth.*



Much commentary has focused on trust—or the lack of trust—in the American governmental system. Typically, this commentary has lamented the historically low levels of trust that Americans currently have in the various institutions that comprise the federal government. For example, a recent Gallup [poll](#) showed that only 7 percent of Americans say they have “a great” or “quite a lot” of confidence in Congress, down from 30 percent just 10 years ago. As of late 2013, a Pew Research [survey](#) showed that only 19 percent of Americans said they trust the government in Washington “just about always” or “most of the time.” These remarkably low numbers may hint at foundational problems in the U.S. political system. Accordingly, commentators, researchers and policy makers are taking great care to understand the sources of the low numbers, as well as anticipate the implications of such low confidence in government.

Commonly overlooked in much of the popular media, however, are the relatively high rates of trust that U.S. citizens have in their local governments. In general, residents have confidence that local and state governments will successfully carry out the functions of government. It is thought that residents who live among their elected officials and policy makers—and who may personally know the public officials in their locality—may be more likely to have trust in them because of proximity and familiarity. As we know from a long line of research, trust in government is generally associated with support for government and what it does. Because local governments do enjoy high levels of trust, they are therefore also more likely to enjoy higher levels of support for their involvement in various governmental activities.



The importance of trust Credit: [Terry Johnston](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-2.0](#))

State and local governments in the U.S. carry out a wide range of functions. These activities range from very important salient activities such as policing and emergency services, to less important activities such as management of sewage and storm water. It is worth asking whether trust in government is related to support for these various services that are provided by local governments. Knowing the answer to this question is important for two reasons. First, understanding how trust relates to support for various types of governmental services will allow governments to know where “built in” support may exist for specific policies. For example, if a government knows that high levels of trust exist in their community, and that trust positively relates to support for building roads, then the government will know that they will likely have support for road building projects. Second, this knowledge may allow government to develop interventions designed to build trust in government as it seeks to build support for specific policy efforts. Again, suppose that a government knows that trust in government is positively related to support for building roads. In attempting to generate public support for building roads, a local government may seek to enhance trust through various means such as public outreach or promotion of activities that signal trust to citizens.

To begin to answer the question of how trust differentially relates to support for public policies, I examined data from a 2008 survey of residents in the City of Lincoln, Nebraska. The survey consisted of a representative telephone survey of 605 residents and was part of a broader effort on the part of the Mayor of Lincoln, Chris Beutler, to engage residents on issues related to the city’s budget. The specific purpose of the survey was to gauge citizens’ priorities for a variety of services. Citizens were asked to rate 12 city services on a 10-point scale where 1=very unimportant and 10=very important. The results showed that fire and ambulance services were deemed most important (9.09) while public bus and transportation services were considered least important (6.88). In addition to questions about priorities, the survey asked residents a series of questions about trust in government and demographics.

To examine the relationship between trust and support for government services, I combined the 12 services into 3 broader categories. Using statistical techniques to identify and combine clusters of related data, I collapsed the service priorities into: Human Services (e.g. health department services, libraries, parks), Infrastructure and Development (e.g. management of sewer and storm water, street maintenance, building permits) and Emergency Services (e.g. fire and ambulance, police). Statistical techniques were then used to estimate the extent to which trust in government predicted support for each of the three broad service areas.

The analyses demonstrated that higher levels of trust in government predicted individuals’ support for governmental activity in the area of Human Services and in the area of Infrastructure and Development. The results mean that those who have a high level of trust in the government are more likely to support government involvement in such activities as providing health-related services, maintaining libraries and parks, and providing public transportation. Similarly, those high in governmental trust are more likely to support government involvement in maintaining sewers and roads, using zoning laws to plan growth, administer building permits, and generally promote economic growth in the community. Notably, there was no relationship between trust in government and support for emergency services (fire, ambulance, police). Support for these services was likely so high, that support for them exists regardless of one’s level of trust in government.

From an academic perspective, the results of this study suggest that more research is needed to further understand how trust in government relates to support for government involvement in the wide range of activities for which it is responsible. From a practical perspective, this study can offer clues to policy makers about the ways in which trust and policy support are related. This knowledge can provide policy makers with a more detailed view of the ways in which governmental trust leads to support for policies, and may allow policy makers to think about strategies to enhance trust among citizens.

In the end, it is clear that a much more nuanced understanding of trust in government is needed in the American context. The American federal system of government allows local and state governments to provide many of the most important services to citizens. Yet, much of the discourse in the popular media and academia focuses on Americans’ trust in the federal government that is located in Washington, D.C., thousands of miles away from many Americans. By more fully examining how trust in government develops and changes with regard to state and local governments, we might begin to obtain a more accurate understanding of how citizens’ trust in government truly relates to the services it provides. This, in turn, may allow us to avoid some of the alarmist

language that is commonly used with regard to trust in government and may promote a more level-headed discussion regarding the role of trust in government in the American political system.

*This article is based on the paper, '[Trust in Government and Support for Municipal Services](#)' in *State and Local Government Review*.*

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## About the author

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Since 2008, Mitchel Herian has been a research specialist at the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center. At the center, he conducts policy-relevant research for federal, state, and local governmental entities. His work consists of a range of activities such as surveys, field experiments, laboratory studies and the facilitation of public participation into governmental decision-making.



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