

Research & Policy Brief Series

Should Popular or 'Expert' Opinion Guide Local Government Decisions?

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What is the Issue?

The opening words of the Constitution's Preamble: "We the people of the United States..." is an assertion of democratic self-governance which figures prominently in America's collective sense of identity. It tracks across the long arc of our nation's inspirational rhetoric, notably Lincoln's "of the people, by the people, and for the people", or Roosevelt's "This nation has placed its destiny in the hands and heads and hearts of its millions of free men and women", or Reagan's "we the people tell the government what to do".

And yet, when we shift from transcendent speeches to the actual American practice of democracy, it is impossible to ignore the debate and struggle over how, exactly, we bring "we the people" to life. The debate rests on an old set of tensions over the role of qualifications, knowledge, and expertise in government, essentially asking whether democracy can survive without a well-informed citizenry. The tensions are reflected in the different authorities vested in the aptly named House of Representatives versus those in our institutions such as the Senate, the Electoral College, and the Supreme Court, each of which was deliberately designed to be less representative than the House. And they weave through the conflicting impulses that pitted Plato's "philosopher kings" against his "earth giants", "elitists and royalists" against "the unwashed masses", populists against technocrats, Federalists against anti-federalists, Jacksonians against Whigs, dispensers of patronage against "good government" reformers, and even advocates of direct democracy against those of representative democracy.

A flurry of recent commentaries and books note that we live in an era in which populist, anti-elite impulses are once again strongly asserting themselves across the political spectrum: "Populism is back. And it is back with a vengeance¹." In the U.S., this has been layered on top of a half century decline in "the people's" trust in many American institutions, perhaps foremost among them the federal government.

This same period has seen sustained challenges to the role of experts and expertise. Some researchers have called attention to a general erosion of public trust in science, and advocacy for "civic science" is partly justified by the need to "restore trust²." Research has particularly highlighted conservative resistance to climate science, but broader evidence suggests the tendency to repel information varies by topic and that rejection of inconvenient truths that challenge core beliefs or group identities seems more human than partisan.³ We believe, then, that it is timely to report on our recent research into American attitudes about government, and in particular with respect to the role of experts in governing.

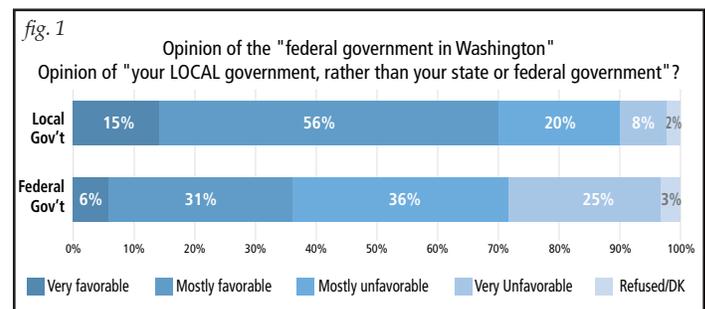
Revisiting Trust in Government

"Trust in government" has been a focus of social surveys for more than half a century, most notably of the National Election Study commissioned by the Pew Research Center in 1958. At that time, about three-quarters of Americans trusted their federal government "all or most of the time"⁴. Since then, levels of trust have declined

dramatically; currently only about one in five indicate they trust the government in Washington all or most of the time⁵. The extent to which people trust government varies on a number of factors such as age, party affiliation of respondent and party in power, race and ethnicity, etc⁶. Levels of trust have historically and persistently been much higher for local government⁷, perhaps due to proximity and the increased opportunities for interaction with local leaders and institutions. Our focus here is to delve further into how levels of trust correspond to the way *local* leaders make decisions, and the extent to which residents feel local leaders should pay attention to expertise when they make decisions.

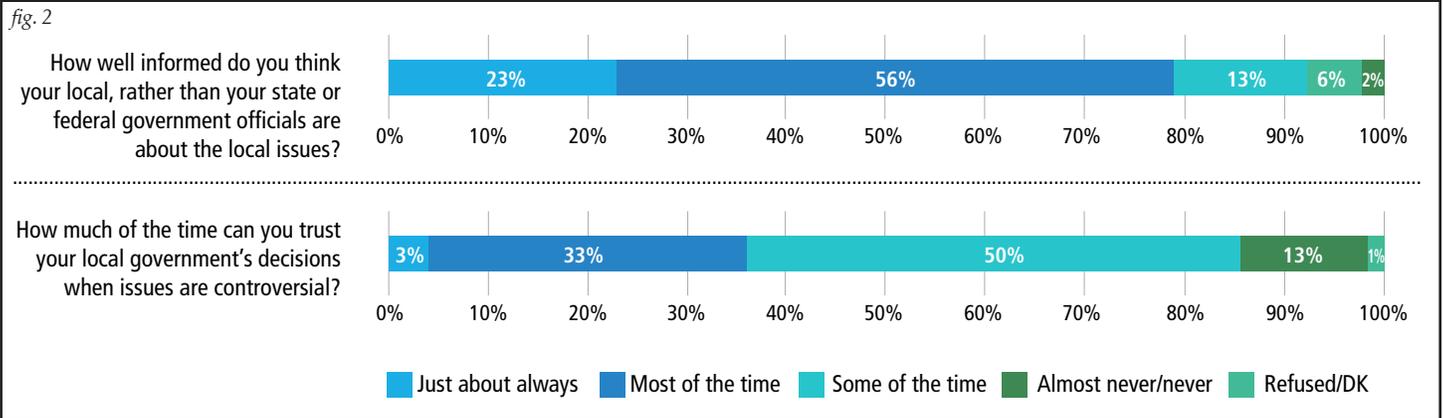
As part of a five-year, multi-state research project that examines the role of evidence, information, science, and identity politics in local government decision making, particularly in the presence of controversy, we commissioned several questions on a recent national survey, the Cornell National Social Science Survey (CNSSS 2016). We were specifically interested in how well informed Americans thought their local leaders were, how levels of trust might vary when the issues at hand are controversial and – with special attention to the question of popular versus expert opinion – what local leaders should base their decisions on when those issues are controversial.

In order to calibrate our results against national and prior NYS surveys, we asked survey respondents about their general opinion of the federal and local governments. Responses generally mirrored results found elsewhere; opinions of local government were significantly more favorable than those held for the federal government (71% vs. 37%, respectively - see fig. 1)⁸.



Are local leaders well-informed? Can you trust them when the issues are controversial?

Respondents' confidence in local leadership extended to how well-informed about local issues those leaders were perceived to be. When asked "how well informed do you think your local, rather than your state or federal, government officials are about local issues?", almost 80% of respondents felt local leaders to be "somewhat" or "extremely" well informed about local issues compared to less than 20% who felt local leaders were "not very



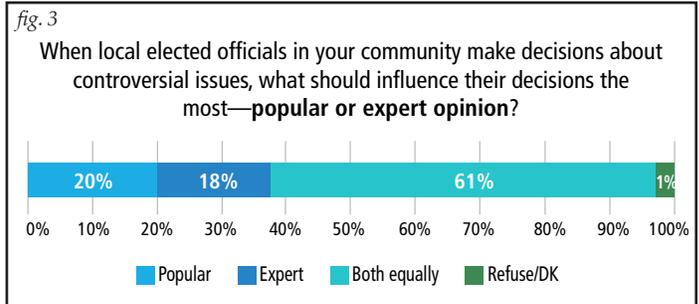
well” or “not at all” informed. (see fig. 2)

Trust in local officials, while strong, appears to waver when decision-making centers on controversial issues. Just over a third (36%) of respondents indicated trusting local government decisions about controversial topics “just about always” or “most of the time”, while a solid 50% reported such trust “some of the time”. Only 1 in 8 (13%) said they “almost never or never” trusted local officials with decisions about controversial issues.

What should influence local leaders’ decisions about controversial issues?

A central focus of our research project is to learn more about how local leaders make decisions in practice, what information and sources they rely on, and the contexts in which “expert” (University-based research, scientific findings, Extension educator consultation, etc.) versus “popular” (political views, popular opinion, stakeholder pressure, etc.) opinion influences local officials. In order to gauge which of the two types of opinions local constituents want their leaders to be influenced by the most, we added a question in the 2016 CNSSS which asked “When local elected officials in your community make decisions about controversial issues, what should influence their decisions the most – popular or expert opinion?”

While public opinion and its varied modes of expression are certainly important for democratic decision making, polling has rarely tried to directly assess public preferences for the use of expertise in government decision making, much less for controversial decisions made specifically at the local level. Thus, our results have little opportunity for direct comparison. However, while the current context of populist sentiment might seem to indicate a strong popular preference for public opinion over that of experts in local controversies, our survey results tell a different story⁹. Just one in five (20%) preferred popular opinion to have greater influence; a nearly equal proportion (18%) indicated that expert opinion should have the most influence. In contrast, a clear majority (61%) felt



that popular and expert opinion should “equally” influence local leaders’ decisions on controversial issues. (see fig. 3)

Discussion

Few local officials would contest the assertion that their jobs have become increasingly difficult and complex over time. Public officials are expected to make decisions while weighing ever more specialized scientific and technical expertise and evidence. We have presented information about public expectations and perceptions of local government decision makers. Our results reaffirm the persisting observation that trust in the local government remains much greater than for the federal government. We add the supporting finding that a very solid majority believe their local officials to be well informed, and that only 13% feel their local representatives cannot be trusted to make decisions in the face of controversy. Finally, we show that the public is broadly receptive to the role of expertise in local decision making, even (especially?) when controversy is involved. Additional analysis of our data will help us better understand how this support varies. Other aspects of our multi-state research project are designed to help academic experts better inform local officials in the face of controversy, a result the public appears to strongly favor.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES: <https://www.siena.edu/news-events/article/new-yorkers-trust-rate-job-done-by-local-governments-as-better-than-that-do>

¹Benjamin Moffit, *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style and Representation*, Stanford University Press, 2016: p. 2

²Karin Backstrand, *Civic Science for Sustainability: Reframing the Role of Experts, Policy-Makers and Citizens in Environmental Governance*, *Global Environmental Politics*, Volume 3, Number 4, November 2003, pp.24-41

³Dan M. Kahan, *Ideology, Motivated Reasoning, and Cognitive Reflection: An Experimental Study Judgment and Decision Making*, 8, 407-24 (2013), Aaron M. McCright et al 2013 *The influence of political ideology on trust in science* *Environmental Research Letters* 8: 1-9

⁴See http://electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab5a_1.htm

⁵See <http://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-1958-2017/>

⁶See http://electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab5a_1.htm

⁷See <http://news.gallup.com/poll/195656/americans-trusting-local-state-government.aspx> A February 2015 Siena College poll confirms this differential in terms of New Yorkers’ trust that government will “do what is right” either “just about always” or “most of the time”: 28% federal, 28% state, 43% local government. See <https://www.scribd.com/doc/257032117/Siena-Local-Government-Poll#>

⁸Pew Research’s use of the same question wording in a national March 2013 poll yielded 63% favorable ratings for local, and 28% for the federal, government (57% for state government). See <http://www.people-press.org/2013/04/15/state-governments-viewed-favorably-as-federal-rating-hits-new-low/>

⁹See other evidence of preference for expert opinion in: Timothy L. O’Brien, *Gender and support for expert advisers and elected officials in the US public sphere*, *Public Understanding of Science* 2018, Vol. 27(2) 243–259

