



THE FUTURE OF WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW

The Growing Threat to Trust in Local Government

It's been strong for decades, but the poisonous polarization at the federal level has begun to flow downhill, threatening to undermine the service to citizens that is the foundation of that trust.

June 15, 2021 • Donald F. Kettl



A local government firefighter battles the massive 2020 Bond fire in California. The ongoing partisan battles could undermine the ability of local officials to provide the service to citizens that they expect and that has been the foundation of trust in local government for as long as we have been measuring trust. (Kent Nishimura/Los Angeles Times/TNS)

One of the hidden casualties of the pandemic is that trust in local government, long the strong foundation of governance in the United States, is showing cracks. There's time to patch the problem before the fractures spread further, but it will take some doing to prevent the hyperpartisanship

of American government from eroding it away.

The long history of distrust of American government has always had a silver lining. Trust in the federal government has [fallen precipitously](#) since 1964, when 77 percent of those surveyed said they trusted Washington to do what is right, to 24 percent this April. Trust in local government, however, [has remained constant](#) at about 70 percent. In fact, this is one of the true bright spots in American governance over the last half-century.

That held true during the pandemic. In April 2020, only 38 percent of Americans [thought the federal government was doing a good job](#) in battling the virus. But 55 percent applauded the job of their state and local governments.

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Local governments were the front lines in the fight against COVID-19. In this country, the virus first appeared in a Washington state traveler who had just returned from Wuhan, China. From there it spread quickly through a Seattle nursing home and then across the rest of the country. In New York, a New Rochelle man who worked in midtown Manhattan fell ill and then the virus roared through Queens. It even spread to Malayan tigers in the Bronx Zoo.

The local pressure of the pandemic put enormous stress on local public health officials, hospitals and medical professionals. In California, Riverside County's chief medical officer, Dr. Cameron Kaiser, was stunned at the backlash he received from imposing lockdown orders. "We never really dealt with a situation where people simply told us to go jump in a lake when we had to make those necessary orders to protect society," [he told CNN](#).

His orders were tougher than the state standards at the time. Angry citizens confronted him at a county board meeting where they accused him of infringing on their rights and "trampling on the Constitution." Others attacked him in [a fake Twitter account](#) featuring his picture with a Hitler-style mustache and a caption of "Führer Cameron Kaiser."

So, after nine years on the job, the county board fired him, in just one of many firestorms that erupted in the no man's land between angry citizens, distant feds, uncertain state officials and local public health experts. This wasn't just a Riverside problem. Kansas lost 30 local public health officials who simply decided they couldn't take it anymore. Across the country, 250 public health officials left their jobs.



Fake Führer Cameron Kaiser

@FuhrerCameron

The Public Health Fuhrer for Riverside county since 1945. Quarantine rules and power grabs in 140 characters or less. Parody, just like the official account!

📍 Riverside, CA 📅 Joined April 2020

109 Following 40 Followers

The "Fuhrer Cameron Kaiser" Twitter account created to criticize Riverside County Public Health Officer Cameron Kaiser for his pandemic response orders. (Twitter)

The Trump administration's strategy of pushing responsibility off to state and local governments generated some of the pressure local officials felt. But even more fundamentally, local officials found themselves at war with their state governments, especially in red states where, *The Atlantic's* [Ronald Brownstein contended](#), "Republican legislators and governors have operated as if they were programming a prime-time lineup at Fox News." Across the country, red-blue gridlock in D.C. became state-local — and often rural-urban — frictions.

Mayors arguing for urban lockdowns often found themselves at war with their governors pushing to reopen the economy. Texas has been ground zero for this battle, with no fight more fierce than on the mile between the Austin City Hall, where Mayor Steve Adler fought to keep the city locked down, and the state Capitol, where Gov. Greg Abbott countered the city at every turn.

All of this, of course, has been high drama that captivated the pundits. However, there's a much bigger problem here for the enormous challenge of building trust in government. We know that distrust in American government is bad. But we also know that there are some things that help earn trust, especially at the retail level, where the individual interactions between local government and officials help reverse the tide. Research by McKinsey, in fact, shows that [two-thirds of trust in government](#) can be explained by the experience people have in interacting with government officials, and at the local level — from putting out fires to picking up the trash to running parks — that interaction is often very good.

But the growing frictions between American governments, and especially between states and localities, threaten to drain local governments' historic reservoir of trust. The spillover of the poisonous polarization at the federal level is flowing downhill to the states, where it then slops over into fresh conflicts with their local governments. Americans might not much like the partisan brawling that increasingly defines government's behavior at the wholesale level. The battles, however, could prove even more pernicious for the long-run operation of American democracy: They could undermine the ability of local officials to provide the service to citizens that they expect and that has been the foundation of trust in local government for as long as we have been measuring trust.

There's a fundamentally important kernel here. It's possible to attack the big problems of trust by doing the little things that people actually care about. So many of the important steps toward damming the flood of the virus have happened in just this way. High-quality, evidence-driven customer service can help the country rebuild trust. That's both positive and possible.

But the more that local governments become the new battleground for polarizing battles, the more we'll lose ground in the fight to regain civic trust. That would be an epic loss that American government can ill afford.

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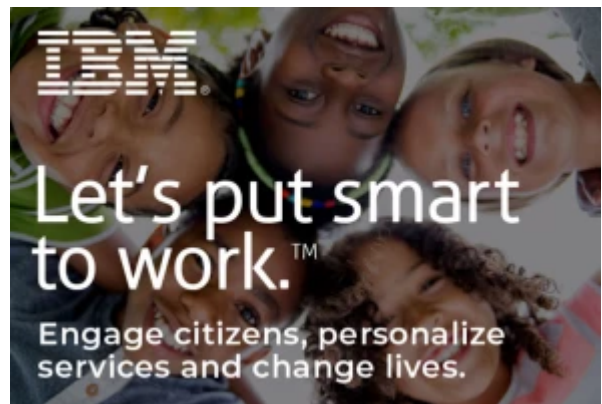


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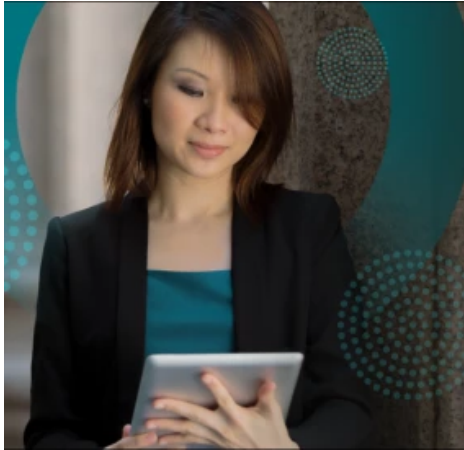
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