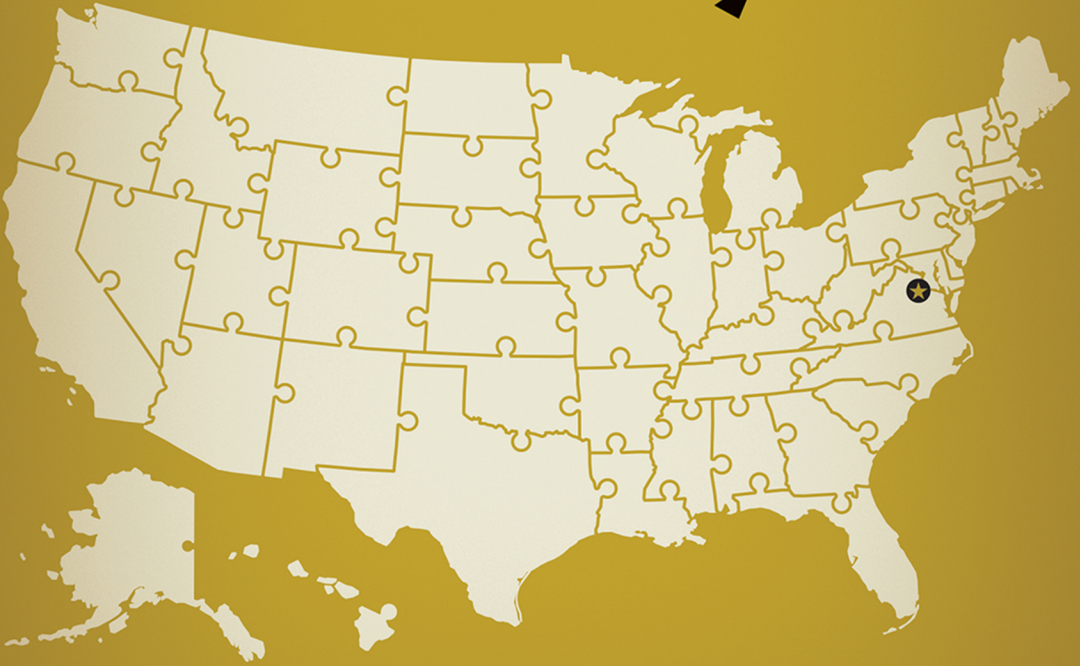


Perspectives on Political and Economic Governance

# American Federalism Today



EDITED BY

MICHAEL J. BOSKIN

## 2

# Public Attitudes toward Federalism and the Scope of National Power

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### *Introduction*

The proper distribution of state versus federal authority affects nearly every policy domain—from environmental regulation to immigration policy—in American politics today. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the subject of federalism received renewed attention as policymakers across different levels of government jockeyed over the “appropriate” policy response and their inherent authority to carry out that response (Fiorina 2023). These recent developments make it even more important to understand how the public views the proper allocation and scope of state versus national power. Is the public’s attitude toward federal authority driven by their normative preferences over centralized or decentralized governance? Or is the public just as “unprincipled” as political elites when it comes to their support for federal power? Moreover, has the public’s experience of the recent COVID-19 pandemic shaped their federalism preferences? And if so, are such attitudinal changes likely to become more permanent fixtures of the American political landscape?

To provide preliminary answers to these questions, we begin by describing public attitudes toward federalism and federal power. In particular, we focus on the extent to which attitudes toward state and local governments are either reflections of or conceptually distinct from public attitudes toward the federal government. We then examine how the public’s attitudes toward federalism—as measured by their preferences over the scope of federal power—have changed from the early 2000s onward. By examining time trends data across these past two decades, we find evidence to suggest that attitudes toward federalism are responsive to respondents’ partisan orientations as well as to their perceptions of actual changes in the scope of federal power.

Next, we turn toward perceptions of trust in local, state, and federal governments. While we find that trust in local and state governments has remained relatively stable over time, trust in the federal government has varied substantially across the past two decades. One important structuring factor appears to be the ideological orientations of respondents: those whose partisanship matched those of the incumbent administration reported higher levels of trust in the federal government than those whose partisanship did not. This correspondence paints a potentially pessimistic picture in which political expediency overrides any principled concerns over federal overreach. The effects of partisanship alignment on public attitudes are less pronounced for state and local governments, however.

Following our discussion of partisanship match/mismatch and the possibility of an unprincipled public, we turn toward how this relationship plays out across different states. To analyze this, we compare public attitudes toward *state* governments when there is a partisan match (the party affiliations of the respondent and their state governor are the same) and when there is a partisan mismatch (the affiliations of the respondent and their state governor are different). Using 2022 Cooperative Election Study (CES) data, we find that respondents are systematically less confident and trusting of their state governments when their personal party affiliation differs from that of their state governor. Building on our discussion of how public attitudes appear to be strongly structured by partisanship as well as by actual changes in federal policy, we focus specifically on the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has altered prior attitudinal trends. Leveraging high-frequency Google Trends data from 2017 to 2022, we find some preliminary evidence that the public's experiences with the pandemic might be correlated with greater interest in circumscribing the scope of national power. However, that increase in interest is not particularly large.

In the final section, we speculate about the permanence of the attitudinal changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Drivers of Public Attitudes toward Federalism*

Theoretical explanations for the drivers of public trust in local and state institutions typically fall into two general categories. On the one hand, the determinants of public confidence in state and local governments may be distinct from the determinants of public confidence in the national government (Jennings 1998). Because subnational governments hold different roles and

responsibilities than their national counterpart, the manner in which they are evaluated by the public may diverge as well. This view taps into the public's core political beliefs—including attitudes toward the distribution of federal authority—that are more ingrained and less prone to change than attitudes toward, say, short-term economic conditions (Green and Guth 1989; Arceneaux 2006; Wolak 2016).

On the other hand, given the ongoing nationalization of American politics (Hopkins 2018), and the decline in regional and local news outlets (Hayes and Lawless 2021), confidence in state and local governance may be largely a reflection of attitudes toward national government. Public attitudes are less attributable to individual evaluations of subnational governments as such, but are more structured by their evaluations of other levels of government (Hetherington and Nugent 2001). In this case, the determinants of public confidence in subnational governments remain similar to those for the national government. Likely factors would include approval of legislative and executive performance as well as broader changes in economic prosperity. Public approval (or disapproval) of the national government will then “spill over” into the public's evaluations of subnational governments (Uslaner 2001).

Public opinion toward the federal and state governments' recent pandemic responses is illustrative. Reflecting broader trends in the early stages of the pandemic with respect to bipartisan agreement over federal relief aid, 89 percent of Republicans and 89 percent of Democrats expressed support for the 2020 economic aid package (Pew Research Center 2020). As the pandemic wore on, more Republicans than Democrats expressed confidence in the ability of the Trump administration and the federal government to combat COVID-19. With the transition to the Biden administration in early 2021, this dynamic was reversed, as more Democrats expressed confidence in the federal government's capacity to efficiently tackle the pandemic.

Indeed, when communities become dissatisfied with the federal government's pandemic response, they may begin to express greater support for their state's response, especially when the restrictiveness (or the lack of restrictiveness) of the latter's response comports with their personal preferences. Take, for instance, state-level responses in California and Florida. Relative to the Trump administration's federal-level response, California's state-level response was arguably more robust during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Following Governor Gavin Newsom's

declaration of a State of Emergency on March 4, 2020, his office would issue a statewide stay-at-home order on March 19, 2020. Not only was California slow to “reopen” in 2021, but the governor did not end the state’s COVID-19 State of Emergency until several years later, on February 28, 2023.

In contrast, Florida governor Ron DeSantis charted an altogether different path. Although Governor DeSantis issued a statewide stay-at-home order on April 1, 2020, in which he limited activities within the state to essential services, he would lift business capacity restrictions by September of that year. Also, in September 2020, Governor DeSantis issued additional executive orders (see, for example, Executive Order 20-244) that limited the extent to which local governments and private businesses were permitted to adopt their own COVID-19 mitigation policies. In short, if residents in California and Florida were more supportive of their state’s pandemic response relative to the federal government’s, we might expect those attitudes to translate into general satisfaction with their state government or greater support for devolved authority.

## *Public Attitudes toward Federalism*

### *Contemporary Attitudes toward Federalism*

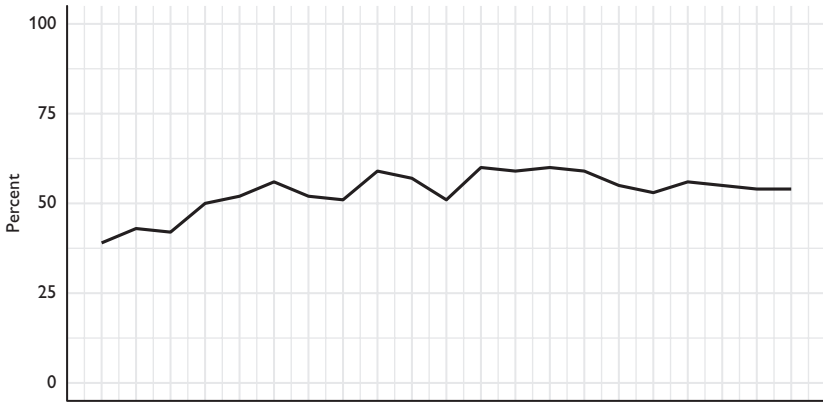
With these two general frameworks in mind, we now turn toward contemporary preferences concerning the scope of state versus federal power. Our data suggest that ebbs and flows in public preferences for the scope of federal power are structured not only by the political orientation of the respondent but also by the preexisting political context. Please note that as this paper is primarily concerned with trends across time and observed empirical associations, we do not seek to make causal claims; rather, we simply note some theoretical possibilities.

With that said, figure 2.1 shows the percentage of respondents who reported that the federal government wields “too much” power. Overall, the percentage of respondents who reported this belief has increased relatively steadily from 2002 until 2013, before decreasing from that year onward. However, since our Gallup data only begins in 2002, we cannot determine whether this trend began in 2002 or in an earlier year. In particular, it could be that this trend began earlier in 2001. Since the Bush administration and the 107th Congress passed a series of executive orders and legislative reforms, respectively, that expanded the scope of federal power after the September 11th attacks, it is plausible that this observed increase reflects the public’s response to those new policy measures.



Do you think the federal government today has too much power, has about the right amount of power, or has too little power?

Percent of survey respondents reporting the federal government has “too much” power



**Figure 2.1** Attitudes toward the scope of federal power (2002–2022)

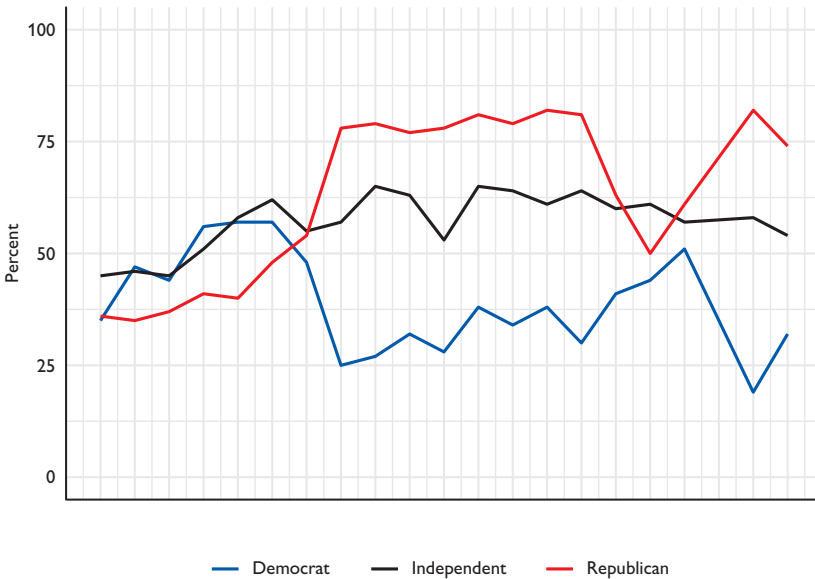
Source: Data from Gallup Poll Social Series, 2022.

Once we disaggregate public attitudes toward the scope of federal power by party, strong partisan trends emerge (figure 2.2). During the first and second Bush presidencies (from 2001 to 2009), the percentages of Democrats, Republicans, and independents who reported that the federal government holds too much power all increased. However, the percentage of Republicans who reported this view continued to increase into the Obama presidency while the percentage of Democrats decreased. Throughout Obama’s two terms, the percentage of Republicans who reported that the federal government is too powerful hovered around 80 percent and exhibited minimal variation (only shifting 2 to 3 percentage points) across eight years. Among Democrats, that same percentage increased, on average, during Obama’s first term in office, then decreased steadily during his second term.

In 2016, we observed another strong partisan effect after the November elections. The percentage of Democrats who reported that the federal government wields too much power increased steadily—from 30 to 50 percentage points—during the Trump presidency. However, two trends suggest that it is not just partisan preferences driving attitudes toward the federal government; rather, substantive changes in the powers of the federal government seem to factor into respondents’ assessments as well.

Do you think the federal government today has too much power, about the right amount of power, or has too little power?

Percent of survey respondents reporting the federal government has “too much” power



**Figure 2.2** Attitudes toward the scope of federal power (by party)

Source: Data from Gallup Poll Social Series, 2022.

First, we observe that the average percentage of Democrats who believed the federal government holds too much power during the Trump period is roughly equal to the percentage of Democrats who reported similar sentiments during the Bush administration. Given that Democratic attitudes toward the Trump administration were more negative than Democratic attitudes toward both Bush administrations, we might expect the percentage of Democrats who reported the federal government to have too much power to be higher during the Trump administration than during either Bush administration if it was solely partisan preferences that drove respondents' attitudes. The fact that this did not obtain suggests Democrats also considered other factors, such as the extent to which federal power actually expanded during the two Bush administrations.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation is also supported by the fact that the percentages of both independents and Republicans who stated that the federal government holds too much power also increased throughout this period.

Second, the percentage of Republicans who reported that the federal government holds too much power increased drastically in 2019, during a Republican administration. Again, this suggests that Republicans' attitudes toward the federal government are structured partly by policy changes at the national level and not just by their personal political orientation. While we cannot identify what policy changes in 2019 motivated attitudinal changes among Republican respondents, this trend in attitudes toward federal power continues into 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. Interestingly, however, we do not see any significant increases among independents on this same metric.

One possible explanation might be that Republicans react more strongly to expansions of governmental power under Republican administrations. Because Republican Party platforms tend to emphasize smaller government, Republican voters may react more negatively when Republican administrations seemingly "go back" on their campaign promises once in power. In contrast, the proportion of Democrats who reported that the federal government holds "too much" power decreased steadily from 2019 to 2021 before increasing sharply in 2021. Here, the prevailing trend speaks against mere partisan sentiments. Despite their general opposition to the Trump administration, Democrats were less inclined to report that the scope of the federal government was too vast during the second half of the Trump administration than during the first. One possible explanation for this unexpected shift downward is the COVID-19 pandemic. As Democrats might have desired a more robust public health response at the federal level, it is plausible that some of those sentiments spilled over into their evaluations of the federal government's proper authority.

As noted earlier, the percentage of independents who reported that the federal government wields too much power increased during both the first and the second Bush presidencies. However, unlike attitudes among their Republican and Democrat counterparts (which continued to increase and decrease, respectively), attitudes toward the federal government among independent-identifying respondents remained relatively unchanged after peaking in 2007. From 2007 onward, approximately 60 percent of independents on average would report that the federal government wields too much power.

### Historical Attitudes toward Federalism

How do contemporary trends in federalism preferences compare to their historical counterparts? From the 1960s onward, the proportion of respondents who expressed concerns that the federal government is "too powerful" has generally increased.



In the first half of the 1970s, we observed a steady increase in the proportion of respondents who reported that the federal government is too strong; this increase may be, plausibly, in response to the significant civil rights legislation that was adopted at the federal level. Starting in 1980, the percentage of respondents who reported that the federal government is too powerful decreased and would hover in the mid- to high 30s throughout the next two decades.

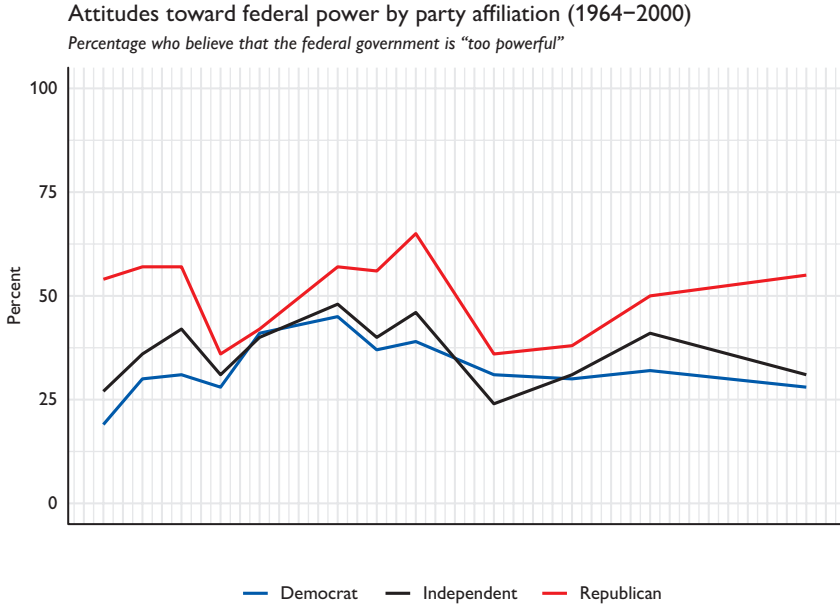
Once we disaggregate the above data by respondents' political affiliations, we observe an interesting divergence between *historical* partisan attitudes and *contemporary* partisan attitudes toward the federal government. Principally, we observe that the historical attitudinal gap between Democratic and Republican respondents who believe the federal government is “too strong” (or alternatively, not too strong) is *smaller* than the contemporary attitudinal gap. Take, for instance, the proportion of respondents who reported that the federal government is too strong. From 1964 to 2000, the gap between Democratic and Republican attitudes hovered around 18 percent. In other words, approximately 18 percent more Republicans on average reported that the federal government was too powerful. However, during the first Obama presidency, this attitudinal gap between Democrats and Republicans would increase to a little more than 50 percent.

Figure 2.3 reflects the percentage of respondents who reported that the federal government is indeed “too powerful.” Similar to the trends we observed previously, variations in partisan attitudes tend to track one another rather closely. Although the magnitude of the change might differ across political affiliations, increases (or decreases) in the proportion of Democrats, Republicans, and independents who reported that the federal government is “too powerful” tended to proceed along very similar lines from 1964 to 2000.

## *Public Attitudes toward Local, State, and Federal Governments*

### *Trust and Confidence in Local Governments*

We now turn toward public confidence in local, state, and federal governments. Trust in local governments (i.e., the percentage of respondents who reported that they hold a “great deal” or a “fair amount” of confidence in their local governments to handle local problems) has remained relatively stable—though trending upward—across the past two decades, with aggregate support hovering around the 65 to 75 percentage point range. In 2021, however, there is a 6-point decline in overall trust in local governments, a fairly significant decrease. Indeed, the 6 percent drop in 2021 is the largest change in



**Figure 2.3** Federal government is “too powerful” (by party)

Source: Data from American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series, 2000.

local government trust from 2001 to the present, matched only by a 6-point increase in public confidence in local governments from 2011 to 2012.

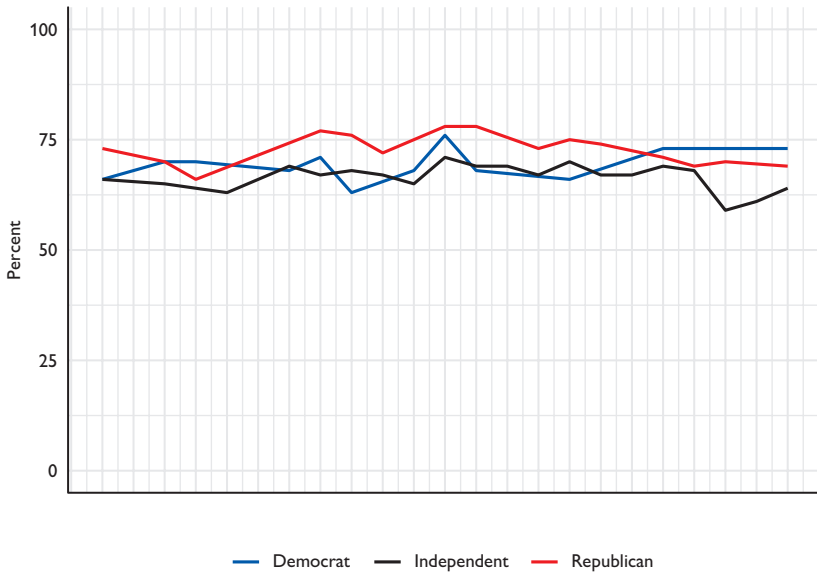
Despite the occasional volatility in public opinion, confidence and trust in local governments remained relatively stable across time as a general matter. In the period from 2002 to 2022, confidence trended upward by approximately 3 percent on average.

Once we disaggregate respondents’ confidence in their local governments by party affiliation, we observe noticeable partisan trends. As we see in figure 2.4, Republican respondents tend to report higher levels of trust and confidence in their local governments than either independent or Democratic respondents across nearly all years (with the exception of 2004). One possible explanation is that Republican ideology tends to favor policymaking at lower levels of governance rather than at higher levels, a core belief that then carries over into their evaluations of their local governments.

We might expect partisan attitudes toward local governments to reflect the partisanship of the national executive and legislative branches. If the partisanship of respondents is opposite to that of the national executive, we might expect those individuals to place more confidence in the ability of

How much trust and confidence do you have in the local governments in the area where you live when it comes to handling local problems?

Percent of survey respondents reporting a "great deal" or a "fair amount"



**Figure 2.4** Attitudes toward local governments (by party)

Source: Data from Gallup Poll Social Series, 2023.

their local governments to do what they believe the national government will not (or cannot) do. This favoring of their local government over the federal one might be especially pronounced when the partisanship of the former is more closely aligned with the respondent's personal political preferences.

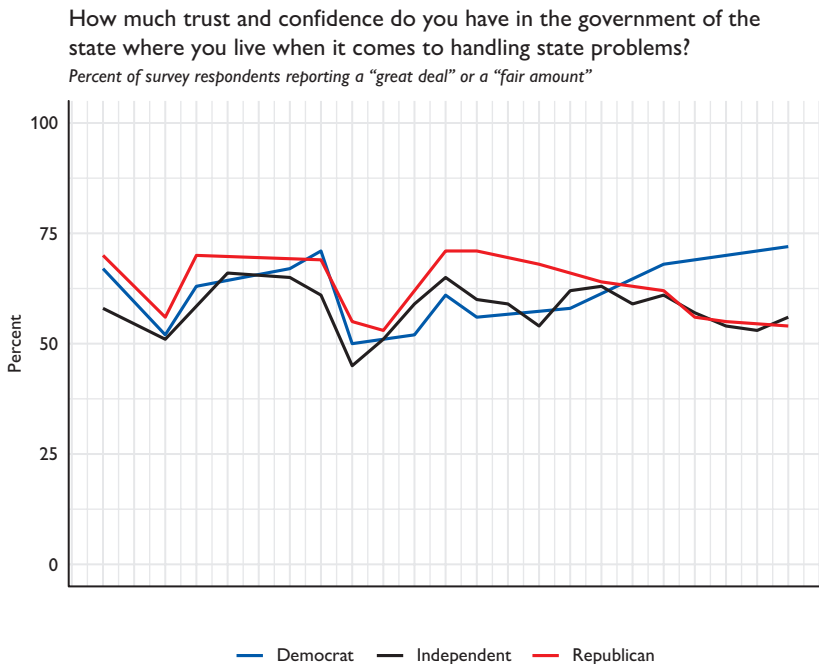
Despite such expectations, however, partisan differences in trust and confidence in local governments do not appear to follow any discernible pattern. Take, for example, President Bush's and President Obama's terms in office. We might expect Democrats' confidence in their local governments to increase or at least remain constant throughout the Bush administrations.

However, while we observe a 4-point increase during the first Bush administration, we observe a 2-point *decrease* followed by a 3-point increase during the second Bush term. Contrary again to expectations, we observe an 8-percentage-point *decrease* in Democrats' confidence in their local governments at the beginning of the first Obama presidency, but then a 15-point jump from 2009 to 2012.

## Trust and Confidence in State Governments

Public trust and confidence in state governments exhibit more variation than confidence in local governments, though they remain less variable overall when compared to attitudes toward the federal government. On the whole, public trust decreased by 12 percentage points during the first half of the Bush presidency before rebounding during the second half. During Bush's second term in office, trust in state governments remained stable at 67 percent.

With the transition to the Obama administration in 2008, we see a similar dynamic play out. Trust in state governments decreased by 16 percentage points from 2008 to 2009, then increased by 13 points from 2009 to 2012. During Obama's second term, public trust hovered around 62 percent on average. Although trust decreased by 7 percentage points during the first half of his second term, it increased by 5 percentage points from 2015 to 2016. Following 2016, the percentage of respondents who stated that they had a "great deal" or a "fair amount" of trust in their state governments held steady at 63 percent. Only in 2019 did the percentage of respondents in this



**Figure 2.5** Attitudes toward state governments (by party)

Source: Data from Gallup Poll Social Series, 2023.

category begin to decline, further decreasing from 63 percent in 2019 down to 52 percent in 2021.

As figure 2.5 shows, changes in trust for state governments by party affiliation initially track one another but then begin to diverge in 2013. For both Democrat and Republican respondents, trust in state governments decreased during the first Bush presidency before steadily increasing in the second. Surprisingly, trust among Democrats and Republicans both decreased in the first half of the Obama presidency, increased after the 2010 midterm elections, then decreased again after Obama's reelection in 2012. Starting in 2013, Democrats' trust in their state governments continued to rise throughout the last half of Obama's second term as well as throughout the Trump administration. In contrast, after 2013, Republicans' trust in their state governments declined throughout both subsequent Democratic and Republican administrations.

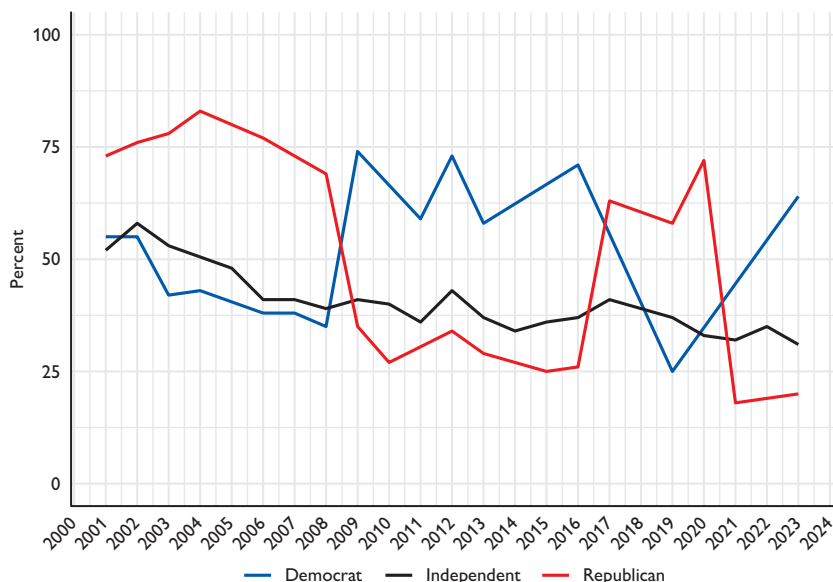
### Trust and Confidence in the Federal Government

Across the past two decades, trust in the federal government has decreased from an artificial high of 66 percent in 2002 to a low of 37 percent in 2021.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the aforementioned dynamics observed with respect to local and state governments, partisan attitudes toward the federal government are more strongly structured by the ideological orientation of the incumbent executive. Put differently, matches (or mismatches) between the political orientation of the respondent and that of the executive tend to induce increases (decreases) in trust of greater magnitude than those we had observed with respect to subnational forms of government.

We next turn to a discussion of contemporary public attitudes, which are captured in figure 2.6. Among Republicans, trust in the federal government reached a high of 83 percent in 2004 and remained in the mid- to high 70s throughout Bush's second term in office. Following Obama's historic victory in 2008, Republicans' trust in the federal government would decrease substantially before reaching a low of 27 percent during the 2010 midterm year. Throughout the period from 2008 to 2016, trust in the federal government among this group remained less than 35 percent. After Trump's election in 2016, trust in the federal government among Republicans increased to the mid-60s. Contrary to past trends, Republican respondents' trust in the federal government decreased sharply in 2020 despite an incumbent Republican president. It is unclear whether this decrease was in response to the Trump administration's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, suspicions of federal health agencies, or other factors.

How much trust and confidence do you have in our federal government in Washington when it comes to handling domestic problems?

Percent of survey respondents reporting a “great deal” or a “fair amount”



**Figure 2.6** Contemporary attitudes toward the federal government (by party)

Source: Data from Gallup Poll Social Series, 2023.

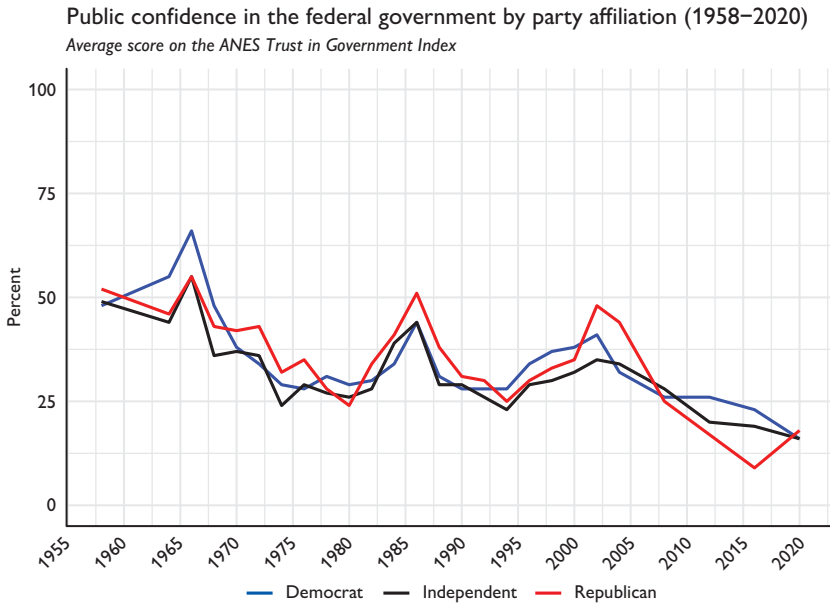
Democratic respondents show the opposite movements. Trust in the federal government remained low throughout the first and second Bush administration, then increased during the Obama period before decreasing again after Trump’s election in 2016. For both Republicans and Democrats, trust in the federal government increased once an executive of the same political orientation took office; in instances where the partisanship of the respondent and of the executive aligned, the public’s level of trust tended to increase at the beginning of that president’s term, decrease during his (first) term in office, then increase slightly before and after the next midterm elections. Following the same pattern, trust decreases again after the midterms before increasing again in the period preceding the next presidential election. Overall, voters’ attitudes toward the federal government are substantially less stable than their attitudes toward their local and state governments. While changes in trust in local and state governments tend to remain within a 10-percentage-point range of each other, trust in the federal government exhibits much higher volatility of 40 percentage points or more.



Once again, we see that independent respondents' attitudes toward the federal government remained unaffected by electoral cycles—they remained generally stable regardless of whether there was an upcoming midterm or presidential election. However, independents' trust in the federal government appears to trend downward throughout the entire period under study—decreasing from the mid-50s in the early 2000s to the low 30s in 2021.

While the Gallup survey discussed above is not directly comparable to the American National Election Studies (ANES) Trust in Government Index, the latter may still prove helpful in contextualizing the former. Measured on a 100-point scale from “least trusting” to “most trusting,” the ANES Trust in Government Index is an aggregate measure of governmental trust built from four standard ANES questions.<sup>3</sup> Overall, with the exception of three temporary peaks in 1966, 1986, and 2002, public confidence in the federal government has declined at a steady pace since the postwar period (figure 2.7).

Although today's decrease in public confidence appears to be a continuation of historical trends, these similarities end once we disaggregate respondents by their political affiliation. From the postwar period until the early 2000s, the ebbs and flows in partisan attitudes toward the federal government tend



**Figure 2.7** Historical attitudes toward the federal government (by party)

Source: Data from American National Election Studies (ANES) Time Series, 2020.

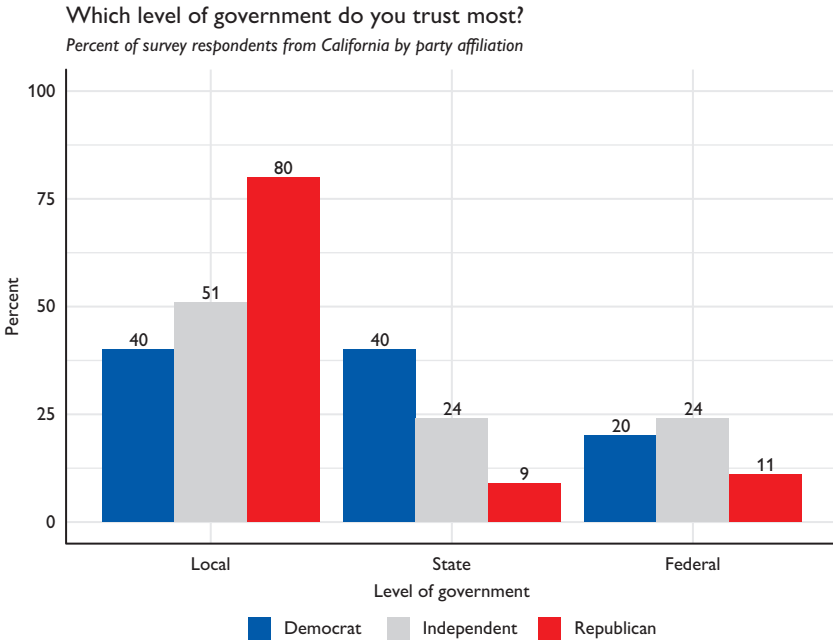
to track one another closely. When Democrats lose confidence in the federal government, so do Republicans and independents. And when Republicans regain their confidence in the federal government, so do their Democratic and independent counterparts. This represents a substantial difference relative to partisan attitudes in the contemporary period, where an increase in confidence among members of one party is marked by a concurrent decrease in confidence among members of the other.

### Trust and Confidence by Party: A More Granular Look

To better understand how partisan dynamics structure attitudes toward different levels of governance, we now shift toward a more fine-grained account of the public's federalism preferences. Drawing from recent YouGov survey data on public confidence and trust in local, state, and federal governments,<sup>4</sup> we compare the public's federalism preferences across three states: Arizona, California, and Texas. For our purposes, these three states are especially instructive given their general political orientations. While California and Texas are viewed as reliably Democratic and Republican strongholds, respectively, Arizona is better characterized as a "purple" state. This state-level variation in partisan orientations allows us to better illustrate the role of party (mis)match in shaping the public's trust/confidence in different levels of government.

Trust among Californian respondents adheres to clear partisan distinctions (figure 2.8). California Republicans overwhelmingly trust their local government the most (at 80.17 percent); perhaps surprisingly, they trust the California state government (9 percent) even *less* than they trust the national government (11 percent). On the surface, this pattern appears to run contrary to a supposedly core Republican belief: that policymaking is best conducted at lower levels of governance. One possible explanation is that California Republicans' concerns for political expediency outweigh their more principled concerns over federal overreach. Not only is California's governor a Democrat, but both of the state's legislative chambers are controlled by the Democratic Party in 2024. Even though the US presidency and the Senate remain under Democratic control, Californian Republicans might still find some solace—and confidence—in the Republican-controlled House.

Meanwhile, California Democrats appear to trust their local and state governments in equal proportions (at 40 percent and 40 percent, respectively). Their trust in the national government is lower, at 20 percent, however. The underlying reason for Democrats' decreased trust in the federal government

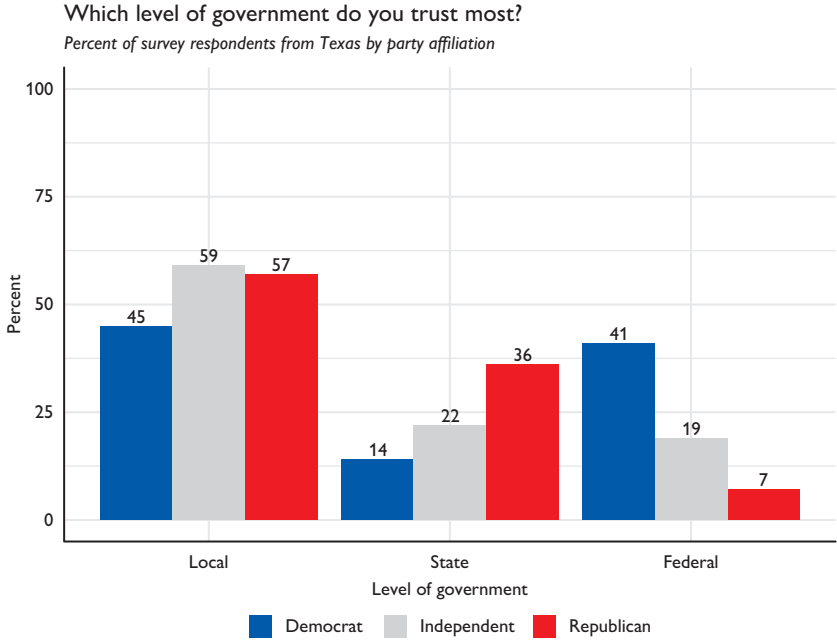


**Figure 2.8** California: Attitudes toward different levels of government

Source: Data from YouGov, 2022.

is likely the same as that for Republican’s decreased trust in the California state government. While California Democrats might find confidence in the Democratic governor and Democrat-controlled state legislature, their trust in the federal government might be moderated downward by the existence of a Republican-controlled House. Finally, independent respondents do not appear to adhere to any partisan trends. Instead, independent respondents’ confidence in the three levels of government progressively decreases across the local, state, and federal governments.

Much of the aforementioned dynamics we observed in California are further evident in Texas (figure 2.9). Among Republican respondents, 57 percent indicated that they trusted their local government the most. This was followed by the Texas state government (at 36 percent) and the federal government (at 7 percent). Like Texas Republicans, Texas Democrats also trust their local government the most, relative to the state or the federal government. While 41 percent of Texas Democrats stated that they trust the federal government the most, that number decreases to 14 percent for the Texas state government.

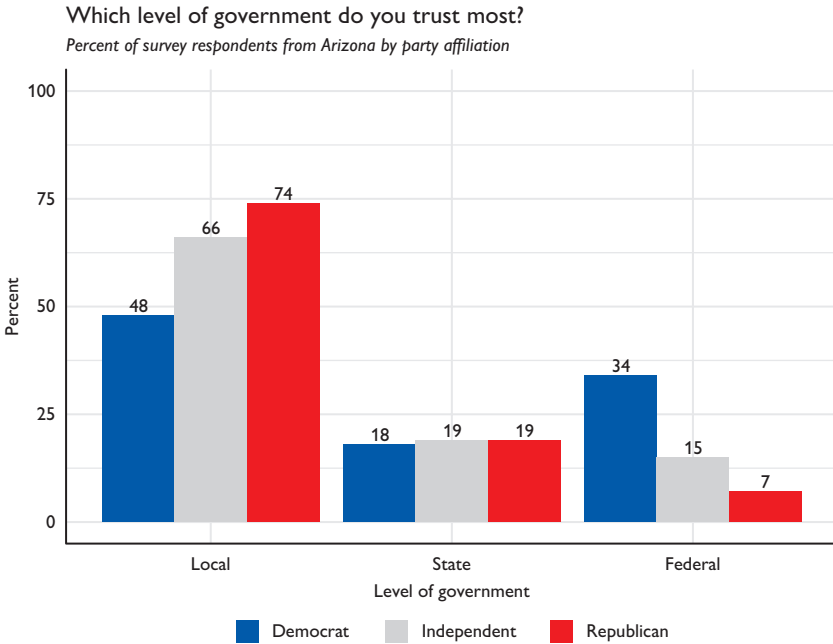


**Figure 2.9** Texas: Attitudes toward different levels of government  
 Source: Data from YouGov, 2022.

Just as in California, independents in Texas do not adhere to any party-specific trends. Rather, the proportion of independent respondents who indicated that they trust the government decreases as they move from their local government to their Texas state government, then finally to the federal government.

Concluding with Arizona (figure 2.10), a solidly “purple” state, we see that Republicans overwhelmingly trusted their local governments more (at 74 percent) than either their state or local governments (at 19 and 7 percent, respectively). This aligns with our prior observations that Republican-identifying respondents tend to have the highest levels of trust in their local governments. Meanwhile, we see that a higher percentage of Democrats indicated they trust the federal government than either Republican or independent respondents did; this, again, seems to point toward the influence of partisanship mis(match) in shaping attitudes toward the federal government.

Interestingly, we see that Democratic, Republican, and independent attitudes toward Arizona’s state government appear to be roughly equal—while



**Figure 2.10** Arizona: Attitudes toward different levels of government

Source: Data from YouGov, 2022.

18 percent of Democrats stated that they trusted their state government the most, 19 percent of independents and 19 percent of Republicans stated they did so as well. Here, we can interpret the relative congruence between Democratic, Republican, and independent attitudes toward their state government as supporting the importance of party affiliation for structuring federalism attitudes. While Arizona’s governor is from the Democratic Party, both chambers of the Arizona state legislature are under Republican control. In other words, unlike California and Texas, in which one single party dominated both the state executive and legislature, Arizona is characterized by divided government at the state level. Just as Democratic Arizonans will be able to see their political positions reflected in their state governor, their Republican counterparts will be able to see their own views reflected in their state legislature.

### State-Level Partisan (Mis)match

Next, we turn toward a high-level overview of how partisanship match and mismatch plays out across all states. The 2022 CES module asks respondents

about “how much trust [they] have in the government of the state where [they] live when it comes to handling the nation’s problems.” Respondents are then asked to register their opinion by selecting “a great deal,” “a fair amount,” or “not at all.” Taking this CES data, we sum up the percentage of respondents who reported that they trust their state government “a great deal” and “a fair amount,” then aggregate them based on their party affiliation and their state of residence. Then we identify the partisanship of their state governor before noting whether there is a match or mismatch between the respondent’s partisanship and their state governor’s partisanship.

On average, 54 percent of Republican respondents reported that they held a “great deal” or a “fair amount” of trust in their Republican state governors. Yet when we turn toward states in which there was a Republican mismatch between respondents and their governors in 2022, we see an entirely different story. Here, among Republican respondents residing in a state with a Democrat governor, only 20 percent indicated that they trust their state government a “great deal” or a “fair amount.” In comparison to their Republican match counterparts, Republican respondents in “mismatched” states are substantially less confident in their state governments (by 34 percent). This non-trivial gap in state confidence suggests that the public might be less principled over their federalism preferences than previously assumed.

Figure 2.11 sums up this approval gap in states controlled by Republican governors. While this general trend (of Republicans expressing more confidence in their state governments than their Democratic counterparts) tends to hold across most states, we observe some notable outliers. In Maryland, Massachusetts, and Vermont, more Democratic respondents expressed confidence in their Republican-controlled state governments than Republican respondents within those same states. This is likely a function of the unique political environment across those three states, whereby nominally Republican governors tend to be more moderate than the typical Republican governors in other states.

We now engage in the same exercise, but with Democratic respondents. On average, 61 percent of Democratic respondents living in states held by Democratic governors expressed support in the performance of their state governments. Interestingly, the average percentage of Democratic respondents in Democratic states who expressed confidence in their state governments (61 percent) is *greater* than the average percentage of Republican respondents in Republican states who expressed those same attitudes (54 percent). While this initially seems to run contrary to expectations and



How much trust and confidence do you have in our state government when it comes to handling state problems?

Percent of survey respondents reporting a "great deal" or a "fair amount"

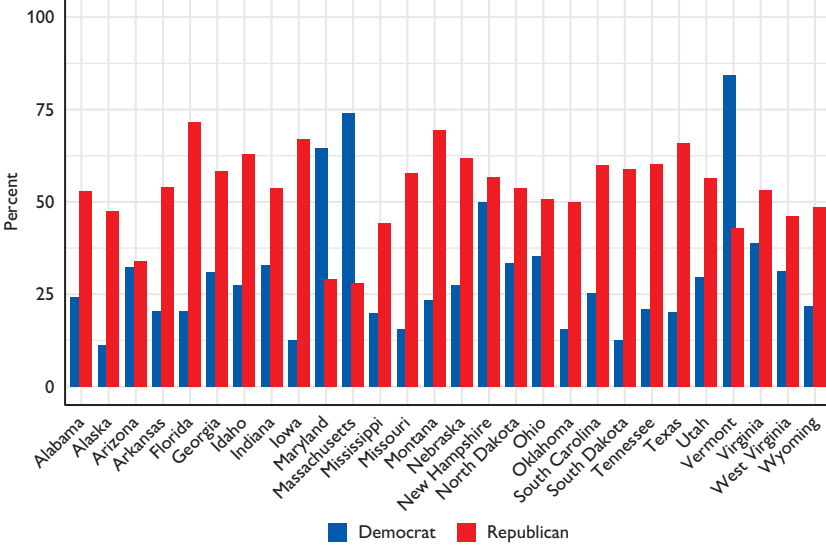


Figure 2.11 Public confidence in Republican match states

Source: Data from Cooperative Election Study, 2022.

How much trust and confidence do you have in our state government when it comes to handling state problems?

Percent of survey respondents reporting a "great deal" or a "fair amount"

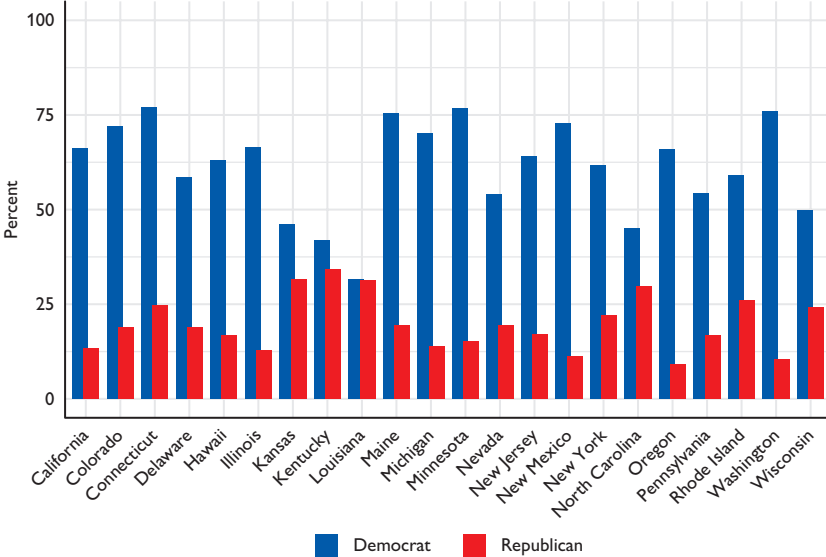


Figure 2.12 Public confidence in Democratic match states

Source: Data from Cooperative Election Study, 2022.

received wisdom that Republicans tend to value devolved governance, that might not necessarily be the case. Rather, Republicans might simultaneously prefer devolved governance while maintaining a healthy skepticism of government in general.

Here, the 54 percent of Republican respondents in Republican states who expressed confidence in their state governments might reflect their general skepticism (relative to Democrats) of government in general. Moreover, that 54 percent of Republicans is likely higher than the percentage of Republicans who express confidence in the *federal* government.

Among states in which there was a Democratic mismatch between respondents and their governors in 2022, the percentage of respondents who expressed confidence in their state governments drops down sharply to 31 percent. Moreover, as figure 2.12 illustrates, unlike with states controlled by Republican governors, we do not observe any instances in which Republicans expressed *more* approval of their Democrat-controlled state governments than Democrats did within those same states. With that said, respondents in Louisiana came close. While 32 percent of Democrats expressed confidence/trust in the Louisiana state government, 31 percent of Republicans did so as well.

### *COVID-19 and Federalism*

Has the COVID-19 pandemic altered patterns of party affiliation and federalism preferences? There is some evidence to suggest that this is the case. For instance, communities that have, historically, taken a more negative stance on governmental prerogatives have shifted their position toward a more agreeable one. As Mueller et al. (2020) note, rural communities that historically expressed stronger opposition to government spending have tempered some of those attitudes in response to the pandemic. They report that 79 percent of respondents approved of increasing spending for small businesses, while another 64 percent approved of increasing spending on healthcare. However, the findings by Mueller et al. do not disaggregate across local, state, and federal levels of government spending, so they are of limited value for our paper. Even though rural respondents might be more amenable to governmental spending as a whole, their specific preferences might remain highly conditional on the level of government at which that spending occurs. And even if the *absolute* levels of support for government spending have increased throughout the pandemic, the *relative* difference in support for local/state versus federal government spending may have remained the same.

Experimental survey evidence has also helped disentangle the relationship between the pandemic and the public's federalism preferences. Rendleman and Rogowski (2022) find that attitudes toward federalism reflect both evaluations of government performance during the COVID-19 pandemic and the public's ideological commitments. Respondents who were either (1) satisfied with their state's response to the pandemic or (2) more satisfied with their state's response relative to the federal government's response were more likely to express a preference for greater state powers. Overall, they find evidence to suggest that it is ideological orientations—not political allegiances—that determine support for devolved government. Along similar lines, Jacobs (2021) finds that the American public's preferences for governmental intervention—whether at the state or federal level—were generally independent from their particularized, lived experiences with pandemic virulency. After taking stock, Jacobs concludes that the public's attitudes toward government performance and authority during the pandemic were largely structured by their party affiliation.

### Google Trends and Public Attitudes toward Federalism

To complement existing survey research into how COVID-19 has induced shifts in federalism preferences, we leverage observational search data from Google Trends to consider how the pandemic response influences the public's perceptions of federal overreach. Collected in real time by the Google News Initiative, Google Trends data is a measure of the key terms and phrases that the public searches for during any given week. So far, existing research has demonstrated that Google Trends strongly correlates with racial animus (Stephens-Davidowitz 2014), anti-Asian attitudes during the pandemic (Huang et al. 2023), immigration attitudes (Chykina and Crabtree 2018), disease outbreaks (Carneiro and Mylonakis 2009, Ginsberg et al. 2009), and other related health outcomes (Ayers et al. 2012). To that end, we collected Google Trends data on public searches relating to federalism broadly and to the scope of federal power specifically; we then consider the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as an exogenous shock to the public's federalism preferences in 2020.

Our investigation takes national Google Trends queries from a five-year period from 2017 to 2022. We adopt this five-year timeframe for two reasons. First, this five-year timeframe allows us to determine whether any observed changes in federalism preferences are due to seasonality effects rather than to the pandemic itself. Second, by limiting our investigation from 2017 to

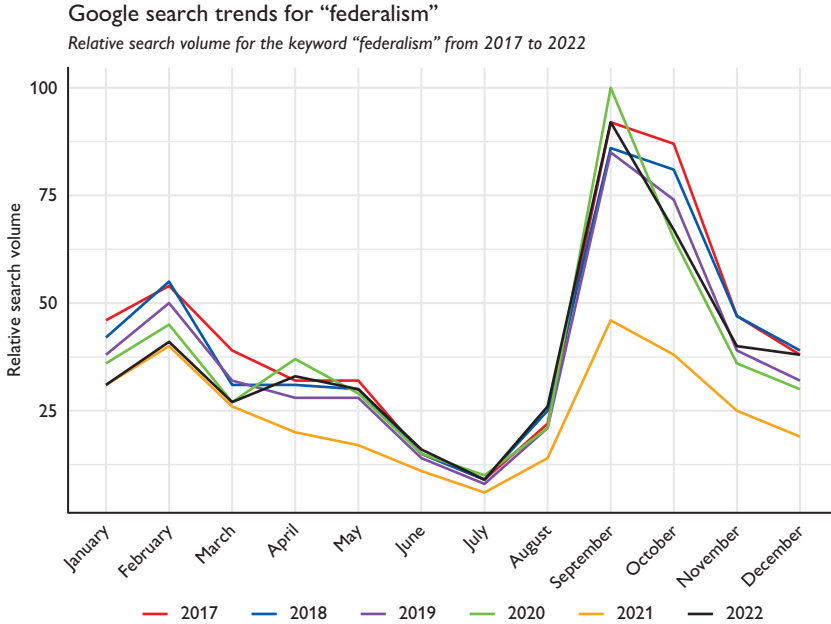
early 2022, we are able to avoid unintentionally capturing events that are unrelated to the pandemic but may have induced public concerns over the scope of federal power. In particular, by stopping our investigation in early 2022, we avoid the Supreme Court's decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* on June 24, 2022 (the draft decision was leaked on May 2, 2022). This stopping point is crucial because, by reverting the power to regulate abortion access back to the states, *Dobbs* may have similarly spurred public interest in state versus federal power.

We view the advantages of Google Trends to be twofold. First, relative to survey data, respondents are likely to be more forthcoming with their Google search results than when answering either online or face-to-face surveys. Although the public's preferences toward federalism is not an inherently sensitive topic (in contrast to, say, racial prejudice or previous engagements in illicit markets), there might still be some downward pressure for respondents to answer in a "socially acceptable" manner. For instance, one can imagine a scenario in which right-leaning respondents living in a more left-leaning area feel some social pressure to express federalism preferences that do not wholly reflect their own sincerely held preferences (though, admittedly, the magnitude of this effect will likely be small). Second, since Google Trends queries are collected on a weekly basis, they are relatively high-frequency data points that give the researcher a sense *across time* of the public's expressed interest in federalism and federal power. Relative to retrospective survey questions that may ask respondents to report their behavior or attitudes at some unspecified time in the past, Google Trends does not suffer from recall bias.

### Google Trends: Searches for "Federalism"

The following section displays Google Trends for the following search terms and phrases: "federalism," "states' rights," and "state sovereignty." We first turn toward the "federalism" Google Trend. Figure 2.13 displays the "popularity" of the search term "federalism" month by month from 2017 to 2022.

To start, we observe in figure 2.13 an interesting seasonality with respect to Google searches for "federalism." While overall interest in federalism slowly decreases from January onward, we see an annual spike in public interest in September, which then decreases to "normal" levels of interest by the end of each year. In 2020 (as denoted by the green line), Google searches for "federalism" were at a five-year high in April and September of that same year. While it is difficult to identify exactly what events or conditions prompted these interest peaks, two cases are instructive. First, the small peak in April



**Figure 2.13** Google search trends for “federalism” (by year)

Source: Data from Google Trends, 2022.

coincided with the Trump administration’s decision to extend the voluntary nationwide shutdown until April 30. Second, the peak in September coincided with when COVID-related mortality numbers in the United States surpassed 200,000. If these two explanations hold, it is interesting to note that the reasons underlying the public’s interest in federalism at either of these two times seem to run in opposite directions. In April, the public’s interest in federalism was presumably motivated by concerns over federal overreach and whether the Trump administration was exceeding its authority to extend the voluntary nationwide shutdown order. Yet in September, the public’s interest in federalism was likely motivated by their concern that the federal government was not doing enough to stem the COVID-19 crisis.

Put differently, while the above Google Trends tells us that public interest in federalism increased somewhat in 2020, it does not allow us to determine the reasons associated with that change. A user might search for “federalism” because she is dissatisfied with the federal government’s limited response and desires her state government to step in and implement more stringent pandemic restrictions, but this search behavior would be observationally

equivalent to that of another user who thought the federal government had overstepped its legal prerogatives, and who desired an even more limited response.

### Google Trends: Searches for “States’ Rights” and “State Sovereignty”

In order to more precisely determine whether the public preferred a more limited or more expansive federal pandemic response, we refine our search terms to “states’ rights” and “state sovereignty.” The Google Trends associated with each of these two phrases are as follows:

As figures 2.14 and 2.15 illustrate, public interest in states’ rights and state sovereignty was unusually high in 2022 (as denoted by the black line). However, as previously noted, this surge in interest was likely in response to discontent over reproductive rights and the Supreme Court’s *Dobbs* decision, rather than resulting from any sustained concerns over pandemic restrictions. We will return to this question of attitudinal permanence in a later section.

As expected, public interest in states’ rights and state sovereignty was particularly high in 2020 (as again denoted by the green line). Following

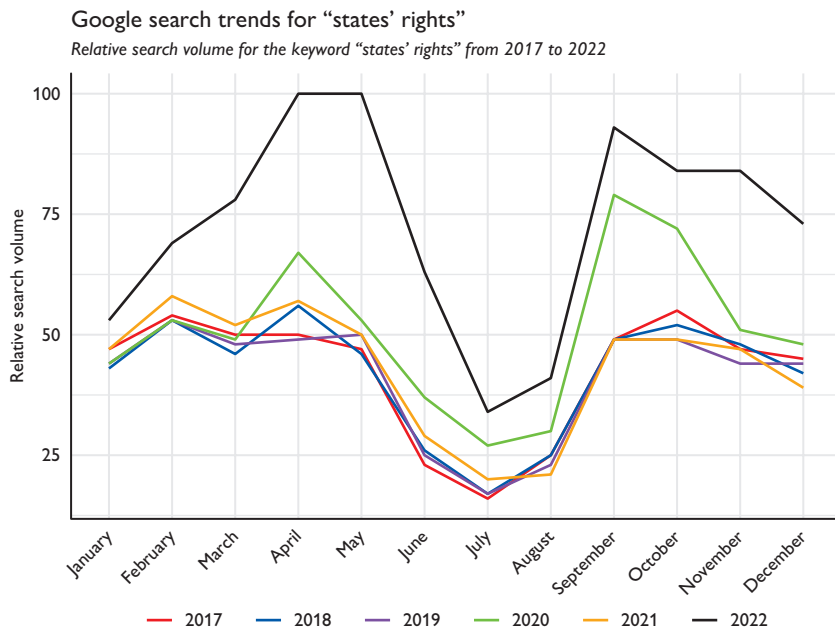
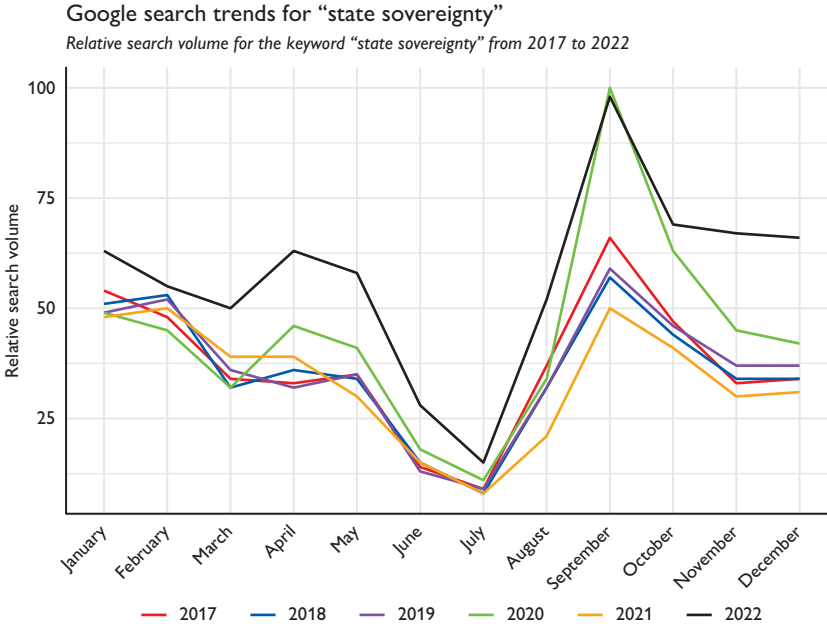


Figure 2.14 Google search trends for “states’ rights” (by year)

Source: Data from Google Trends, 2022.





**Figure 2.15** Google search trends for “state sovereignty” (by year)

Source: Data from Google Trends, 2022.

March 2020, “states’ rights” was a more popular Google search term across all remaining months of that year than it was during comparable months in 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2021. In 2020, Google searches for “states’ rights” peaked slightly in April of that year before decreasing steadily until September. In September 2020, Google searches for the term peaked again. We observe a similar trend—with similar peaks in April and September 2020—with respect to Google searches for “state sovereignty,” though this trend is not as pronounced. Notably, these April and September 2020 peaks for “states’ rights” and “state sovereignty” mirror those previously observed for “federalism.”

### Google Trends: Searches for “Lockdown,” “Mask Mandate,” and “Vaccine Mandate”

By comparing when the public tends to concentrate their searches on keywords such as “federalism” and “state sovereignty” with when the public searches for phrases such as “lockdown” or “mask mandate,” we are able to gain a preliminary sense of whether the former might be operating as an underlying worry for the public with regard to the latter.

With that question in mind, we first turn to Google search trends for “lockdown” and “stay at home” before moving forward to search trends in “mask mandate” and “vaccine mandate.” Unsurprisingly, Google searches for the key terms “lockdown” and “stay at home” spiked in March and April 2020, before tapering off with a brief peak in late 2020. Likewise, searches for “mask mandate” were marked by three distinct spikes in May 2021, August 2021, and February 2022. And finally, “vaccine mandate” searches remained relatively stable at the start of the pandemic, which is unsurprising given (1) the lack of a suitable vaccine at the time as well as (2) the absence of public discourse over recommended or mandatory vaccinations. Overall, Google searches for “vaccine mandate” began in earnest in late 2021 before spiking rapidly from September 2021 to January 2022.

As these Google Trends demonstrate, there is not much outward correlation between (1) searches for federalism and its associated key terms, and (2) searches for pandemic-related restrictions and regulations. As the above-mentioned Google Trends do not necessarily map onto one another, one plausible interpretation is that the public did not make core distinctions between the levels at which pandemic restrictions were implemented. If so, this seems to mirror existing experimental evidence that “Republicans prove to be just as outcome-oriented as Democrats in their support or opposition to a face mask and vaccination requirement, regardless of which level of government proposes the policy” (Jacobs 2021).

Of course, our Google Trends data has several obvious limitations. First, we cannot make any substantive claims concerning whether it was individuals’ experiences of the pandemic that induced changes in their attitudes toward national power. Second, we cannot be certain that Google Trends queries are representative of the national population. It might very well be the case that those who feel most strongly about states’ rights and circumscribed national power are those who engaged in the most internet searches for those key terms.

## Conclusion

We conclude with three brief observations. Though we have seen shifts in public attitudes toward federalism as a function of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unclear if the pandemic induced more permanent changes in popular preferences toward federal versus state authority. Now three years since the onset of the pandemic, we have some evidence to suggest the *impermanence* of these changes to the public’s federalism preferences. While Google searches

for “states’ rights” and “state sovereignty” were at a five-year high in 2020, the public’s interest in both concepts would decrease to “normal” levels by the next year. And indeed, the public’s interest in “state sovereignty” in particular was occasionally at its lowest monthly levels during 2021.

Although this paper thus far has not extensively discussed Google Trends data in 2022, it is worthwhile noting that Google searches for “states’ rights” peaked during the week of May 1 to May 7, then increased once again during the week of June 19 to June 25. As expected, these two peaks coincided with the leak of the *Dobbs* decision (on May 2) and the release of Court’s finalized *Dobbs* decision (on June 24). In both *Dobbs*-related peaks, the increase in public interest over time was *higher* than during previous COVID-19 related peaks. While we cannot draw strong conclusions from these observed trends, this difference appears to suggest that federalism and states’ rights were more in the forefront of the public’s consciousness with respect to reproductive rights than with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, we note the unfortunate scarcity of disaggregated data on federalism attitudes. While there exist comprehensive time series data on trust/confidence in the federal government, the presidency, Congress, and the Supreme Court, there is very little longitudinal data that is disaggregated by different levels of government. Given this lack of disaggregated time series data, we are left with “snapshot” survey experiments that do not allow us to draw conclusions about the evolution of attitudes toward federal power across time. To advance our understanding of the public’s federalism preferences, a more robust data collection effort would be essential.

## Notes

1. This would include, among others, an executive order establishing military commissions and mass surveillance programs, as well as the creation of the US Department of Homeland Security.

2. An artificial high because according to longer time series such as the American National Election Studies, trust spiked in the aftermath of 9/11 before falling back to more normal levels. <https://electionstudies.org/data-tools/anes-guide/anes-guide.html?chart=trust fed govt>.

3. The four ANES questions comprising the Trust in Government Index are as follows: (1) How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?; (2) Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?; (3) Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes,

waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?; (4) Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are (1958–72: a little) crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked (1958–72: at all)?

4. Our many thanks and deepest appreciation to David Brady and Doug Rivers for sharing their survey data.

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## DISCUSSION

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**MICHAEL J. BOSKIN:** It does look like, for everybody, confidence at lower levels is higher than at the federal level. I think that's important as well as the partisan differences.

**MICHAEL W. MCCONNELL:** You don't have that by copartisans, though?

**ALICE YIQIAN WANG:** No, we don't. No.

**MCCONNELL:** Any way to tell the difference between large, urban cities versus small towns?

**WANG:** Not in the Gallup or the ANES [American National Election Studies] data I was able to find. I think they were, at least for the Gallup data, it was more just what it was at the national level. Wasn't able to find the specific metropolitan region or specific city that these respondents were at.

**MORRIS P. FIORINA:** As Alice mentioned, there are long time series on confidence in the federal government, in the presidency, in the Supreme Court, the Congress, but surprisingly little asked about levels of government. That was a surprise to us.

**MICHAEL T. HARTNEY:** How important do you think the political sophistication of the people answering the question matters here? Because I'd imagine there are a lot of people out there who think the president is the reason it takes a long time to get through the line at the DMV. So I wonder if maybe you've broken this out, controlling for—they're imperfect—but some of the questions on political knowledge, that sort of thing.

**WANG:** That's a great idea in terms of, if you go ask the average person, "Hey, can you define federalism for me?" Maybe that isn't necessarily a point of reference for them, that's always at the forefront of their minds. Or thinking about if there is a political problem, yes, that's something that they're going to attribute to the executive, the federal government, rather than the local one. I think your question is probably something that we're going to look to further in the future, but not something we considered here.

**BOSKIN:** That's a great idea, Michael [Hartney]. I would just make a quick comment that this project is related, but there's a separate umbrella project at Hoover called the Tennenbaum Program for Fact-Based Policy. Doug Rivers and I are trying to figure out what people know about a subject, which I think, Doug informed me, is depressing when you look at the data. What they think they know, but also what they think other people would benefit from knowing more factual knowledge about. And that's been pretty fascinating. So we'll look forward to engaging with some of you. This may be an area that makes some sense for you to dig deeper and we can do some additional polling.

**BRUCE E. CAIN:** There's an interesting point here about whether the confidence that you see in local government is structural or whether it's political, and here's how I'll define it. Okay? Structural might be that local government is closer to the people, smaller in units, delivers services that are more visible. Political would be that maybe you have more people—particularly in the West and the Midwest—that are elected on nonpartisan tickets. And so you don't have partisan signals and you don't have the national media exposure, etc. So the nice thing about this time series is you could control at the state level, whether you have split government, united government, copartisans, that kind of stuff over time. But I think you could also have some of the structural stuff in terms of the size of the government, test and see whether [with] smaller governments there's more confidence, etc.