

Interdisciplinary Term Paper

IDS 300W: Interdisciplinary Theories and Concepts

Troy Bannister

Old Dominion University

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Dr. Peter Baker

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Understanding the Resilience of Public Trust in Local Institutions

Introduction

Public trust in institutions has sharply declined in the United States over the past decade, especially at the national level. Bell and Bell (2025) from Pew Research report that trust in the federal government remains near historic lows, a trend intensified by polarization, inconsistent policy outcomes, and widespread misinformation. However, this erosion is not uniform. Local institutions, like city councils, school boards, and public health offices, have shown resilience in maintaining their local public trust.

This paper asks the question: **“What factors contribute to the resilience of public trust in local institutions compared to national institutions since 2015?”** To answer this question, it is necessary to integrate insights from **political science, media studies, and sociology**. Each discipline offers partial explanations—performance metrics, narrative framing, and interpersonal proximity—but none of the disciplines can account for the persistent trust gap between local and national institutions.

Empirical Contrasts

Recent polling further shows the scale of the national-local trust disparities. Jones (2024) reports that while 67 percent of Americans express trust in their local government, only 32 percent trust Congress. This gap reflects the long-term split in institutional credibility between levels of governing.

Survey data during the COVID-19 pandemic also supports this performance-based framing. SteelFisher et al. (2023) found that while national public health institutions saw trust levels decline over time, trust in local and state health agencies remained resilient, primarily due to direct exposure, the perception of competence, and visibility of action. Specifically, local agencies that tailored messaging to community-specific conditions and kept up frequent, transparent updates retained significantly higher trust across political and geographic groups. This supports the idea that proximity may lift the perceptions that the institution is legitimate and how it performs.

The state (commonwealth) of Kentucky shows an excellent example of this specific dynamic. In the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump won the state decisively with 62 percent of the vote. (NBC News, 2024; Politico, nd.) Yet, in both 2019 and 2023 Democratic Governor Andy Beshear was elected and re-elected with significant bipartisan support. Despite Kentucky's strong Republican leaning, Beshear's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, economic initiatives, and his local disaster management were widely praised across party lines, contributing to his high approval ratings (Skebba, 2025). This contrast, being the federal-level Republican preference and state-level Democratic trust, shows the resilience of performance and proximity-based trust at a local level.

The data shows how complex trust formation is, revealing that it cannot be explained solely through service performance, media coverage, or community familiarity, demonstrating a need for an interdisciplinary approach.

Literature Review

Political Science

From a political science viewpoint, trust in institutions is often a function of performance. When the government delivers effective services, has responsive policies, and shows accountability, trust tends to rise. Bell and Bell (2025) note that trust in national government erodes during times of policy inaction and partisan gridlock. Meanwhile, O’Leary et al. (2025) show that state and local governments gain more trust when they provide visible, community-based solutions. Performance here is measurable by having efficient service, transparent decision-making, and responsiveness during crises, which in turn influences how the public views and evaluates their trust in the institutions. At the local level, the effects of performance are often magnified because the public sees the results firsthand. When a policy succeeds, trust may rise more quickly; when it fails, trust can erode almost overnight. SteelFisher et al. (2023) expand the crisis contexts, such as COVID-19, competence, and visible action at the local level, directly correlated with sustained trust, even as federal trust declined.

While political science frames trust as a rational response to performance, media studies suggest that public perception may operate separately from an institution’s effectiveness.

Media Studies

Media studies introduce a different tool, which is perception shaping. Rather than focusing on how well institutions perform, media scholars point to how narratives are constructed and circulated. Justwan (et al 2018) identify how algorithmically reinforced echo chambers on social media skew public perception, creating environments where misinformation thrives and the trust in institutions can suffer. Even when those institutions are functioning properly, the effects can still be felt. Additionally, Sucher and Gupta (2019) discuss how narrative oversaturation and sensationalism can dilute institutional credibility, turning trust into a casualty of the 24-hour

news cycle. National institutions, which are more likely to be the subject of media scrutiny, suffer disproportionately.

Gallup (Brenan, 2024) reports that only 31% of Americans express a “great deal” or “fair amount” of trust in the mass media—making it one of the least trusted institutions—while 67% still express at least fair trust in their local government. This suggests that negative perceptions of media credibility may undermine public confidence in national institutions even when outcomes improve.

Yet, both insights—performance and perception — may be challenged by sociology’s emphasis on interpersonal relationships and social proximity.

Sociology

Sociological research shows that social proximity and community identities are key drivers of trust. At the local level, trust is not built on the policy performance alone, like in political science or how they are portrayed in the media, but on interpersonal relationships and in-group familiarity. Bernitz (2024) emphasizes that people are more likely to trust institutions when they see and interact with local representatives, while also finding that civic engagement and personal exposure to community institutions strengthen public trust, regardless of the national political climate. The closeness of local institutions (physical, cultural, and experienced) makes them more relatable and trustworthy. Jones (2023) data show that that, even in states experiencing strong partisan divisions at the national level, trust in local government remains significantly higher than trust in federal institutions. But sociological research also shows that this closeness is not a guaranteed advantage due to the personal, visible, and day-to-day impact the institution's performance has on the community.

These three perspectives, while complementary in some ways, also lead to multiple interpretations of the same empirical reality. Simply put, political science treats trust as an objective response to measurable performance; media studies examine how public emotion can be shaped, regardless of actual performance; and sociology shows how those same outcomes can feel amplified when experienced directly. Together, these views explain why the same event can produce very different trust trajectories depending on how it performs, how its portrayed, and how personally it is experienced.

Analysis of Conflicting Insights

Political science views that improved performance should raise trust. Media studies find that even with good performance, negative media coverage can still erode trust. Sociology suggests that trust may remain high regardless of performance or media coverage if community ties are strong. These disciplinary insights can produce forecasts that contradict each other. For example, political science would expect public trust to recover after seeing service improvements, but media studies might predict continued decline if a negative narrative continues. Sociology could see resilience continue even without measurable improvements, as long as local engagement and familiarity remain intact.

While O'Leary (2025) and Bell and Bell (2025) show that trust increases with service delivery, Justwan et al. (2018) point out that echo chambers persist even when users are exposed to quality journalism. Bernitz's (2024) findings further complicate the idea that improved performance or more transparent communication alone can rebuild trust nationally. The Flint Water Crisis provides a clear example of disciplinary conflict between sociology and political science perspectives on institutional trust. Morckel and Terzano (2018) found that, at the height of the crisis, Flint residents reported exceptionally low trust in both local and state government, with

proximity to the failure intensifying feelings of betrayal and loss of confidence in local officials.

From a sociological standpoint, proximity is conditional: when institutions are perceived as competent and responsive, closeness fosters trust, but when they fail, that same closeness magnifies distrust because the harm is direct and personal.

In contrast, the political science perspective, which is outlined in the Flint Water Advisory Task Force (2016), frames the crisis as primarily a governance breakdown: weak oversight, flawed decision-making structures, and subpar safeguards. The way the report frames it, trust could have been preserved if stronger institutional policies and mechanisms had been in place, regardless of proximity. The conflict comes up because sociology interprets the downfall as a relational consequence shaped by the conditions of proximity, while political science attributes it to systemic governance deficiencies.

Creating Common Ground

Following Step 8 of the IDS process, the concept of “closeness” reconciled the conflicting perspectives regarding “trust”. “Closeness” has physical (geographical), cultural (shared norms), and digital (exposure) meanings. Each discipline contributes to this integration from its own perspective: political science emphasizes the actual proximity of the institution and its performance; media studies show the effects that narrative distance or saturation can have on perception, and sociology focuses on community-level engagement and interpersonal relationships.

Local institutions benefit from all three meanings as well: geographically nearby, culturally embedded, and less entangled in the national media’s talking points. Town Halls, neighborhood outreach programs, and school board meetings allow for direct engagement and feedback that

reinforce trust in ways national institutions cannot replicate. The SteelFisher et al. (2023) findings illustrate this integration: local public health agencies that combined transparent communication, culturally relevant messaging, and visible on-the-ground action that could be witnessed firsthand maintained significantly higher trust than the federal institutions, embodying all three dimensions of closeness. Bridging these perspectives requires acknowledging that proximity's effect on trust is conditional, and that the performance of government can shape those conditions. The Flint, MI case shows that when local institutions fail, proximity transforms from a trust asset into a trust liability, amplifying public anger and eroding credibility. However, political science's lens offers a pathway to reverse that: building strong oversight, accountability, and crisis response policies can ensure that future local interactions between the public and officials are perceived as competent and trustworthy. From an interdisciplinary view, common ground comes up in designing systems where government reforms create the conditions for proximity to have a positive effect so that the community and the governing body can reinforce one another. Eggers et al. (2025) TrustID framework points to this integrative approach by identifying four key trust signals—capability, reliability, transparency, and humanity—that institutions must activate to sustain public trust. When these signals are effectively demonstrated through consistent, empathetic, and transparent engagement, proximity becomes an amplifier of trust, not its downfall. In practice, this means pairing safeguards with transparent, locally mediated communication so that the social benefits of closeness are preserved, even during times of institutional stress.

By shifting the focus from “how institutions perform” to “how people relate to institutions,” this framing resolves a lot of the tension within the integration of each discipline. With each

discipline accommodated it allows for a proper integration into the research without needing to dismiss any portions of each individual insight.

Conclusion

Trust in national institutions has eroded significantly, but this trend has not affected local institutions equally. An interdisciplinary analysis shows that while performance failures and negative media portrayals undermine national trust, local trust persists—or collapses—depending on the conditions surrounding social proximity and direct experiences. By reframing trust as a conditional relationship shaped by both structural governance and relational proximity, this study integrates the strengths of each discipline. The interdisciplinary process made it possible to move beyond sole-discipline explanations, show that neither government reform nor just community engagement alone is sufficient, and that both must operate together to maintain resilience in public trust. Policymakers seeking to rebuild national trust can adapt localized engagement strategies, such as transparent crisis communication, culturally relevant messaging, and visible service delivery, while maintaining strong institutional safeguards. In this way, the conditions that make proximity a trust builder, rather than a trust breaker, can be designed with intention. In an era where institutional credibility is fragile, getting government structures to align with the social realities of community connection may prove to be one of the most valuable tools for sustaining public trust.

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