

# Why Do People Trust Their State Government?

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## Abstract

Are the origins of trust in state government different from the reasons why people trust the national government? I argue that trust in state government has distinctive origins, tied to differences in how states operate within a federal system of government. Leveraging variations in the character of the states, I consider whether trust in state government is a function of its proximity to citizens, people's relative preferences for smaller government, and the homogeneity of state electorates. Using responses to the 2017 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, I show feelings of trust in state government follow not only from state political conditions and economic performance but also from the distinctive character of the states. These findings challenge prior accounts that argue that diffuse trust in state government reflects only how people feel about the national government, and highlight how large states and small states face different challenges in cultivating trust in state government.

## Keywords

public opinion, trust in state government, diffuse trust, state government performance, state size

For elected officials, the trust of the public serves as a valuable resource. When trust is high, politicians are able to take risks and embrace new commitments (Gamson 1968). Trusting electorates are more willing to support new spending initiatives and are more tolerant of policy changes that do not conform to their preferences (Hetherington 2005; Hetherington and Husser 2012; Rudolph and Evans 2005). When trust is low, citizens are more likely to demand changes, voting out incumbents and calling for reforms to the design of government (Hetherington 1999; Karp 1995; Orren 1997).

Because of this, elected officials have incentives to cultivate the trust of the electorate. Yet, the same may not be true for officeholders in the states. At the national level,

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public trust responds to the outcomes of government, where people are more likely to feel trusting when the economy is strong, scandals are rare, and crime is low (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Keele 2007; Weatherford 1984). Yet, at the state level, feelings of trust appear unconnected to the performance of state government. Instead, trust in state government is thought to follow from people's feelings toward national government (Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Uslander 2001). To the extent to which this is true, it means that elected officials in the states are limited in their ability to try to cultivate greater trust and confidence within their constituencies.

I challenge this account and argue that scholars have underestimated the degree to which people's generalized trust in state government finds its origins within the character of the 50 states. Using data from the 2017 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, I explore the origins of people's trust in their state government. I consider two types of explanations. First, I update prior studies by exploring the degree to which trust in state government is connected to political and economic conditions in the states. Second, I consider whether trust in state government draws on criteria that differ from those used to evaluate the national government, rooted instead in the distinctive ways that people relate to their state government.

State governments differ from the national government in important ways. State governments are closer to the people, given their relative geographical proximity. Because of their smaller size and smaller reach, they may better resemble people's ideals of small government than the national government. State governments arguably do not face the same challenges of representation as the national government, as they are responsible for the needs of a smaller and more homogeneous constituency than that of national government. I expect that these differences within a federal system influence how people view their state governments. By leveraging variations in the size and scope of state government across the 50 states, I explore how these differences influence people's trust in state government.

Contrary to prior work that has suggested that trust in state government is driven mostly by how people feel about the national government (Farnsworth 1999; Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Uslander 2001), I find that feelings of trust are associated with the character and performance of state governments. Because trust in state government has origins that are distinctive from the sources of trust in national government, this means that trust in state government can be cultivated in how politicians approach the job of governing in their state. Although accounts of trust in national government have emphasized the importance of government performance for feelings of trust, I also show that trust in state government draws on different foundations beyond just performance. Trust in state government depends in part on how constituents connect to their state government, where large states face different challenges in cultivating public trust compared with small states.

## **Why Do People Trust Their State Governments?**

When considering how people think about their state governments, there are reasons to be pessimistic about voter accountability. We know that voters are often not well

informed about the business of national government, and that they face potentially even greater informational hurdles when it comes to knowing the business of state politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lyons, Jaeger, and Wolak 2013). As the number of reporters in the state capital declines (Wilson 2014), the challenges of learning about state politics grow. As citizens may not find state government as interesting or salient as government at other levels (Jennings and Zeigler 1970), people may simply use their general views of government to inform their trust in state government.

As such, we may need to be skeptical about citizens' capacities to distinguish the performance of their state government from their general views of federal government. Indeed, when considering the origins of trust in state government, most have concluded that people's feelings of trust have little to do with what is happening within the states. Farnsworth (1999) finds little evidence that people's relative trust in state government responds to state conditions like unemployment rates or citizen access to ballot initiatives. Uslander (2001) also concludes that feelings of trust in government are generalized rather than specific, predicted by the same considerations that inform trust in national government. Hetherington and Nugent (2001) fail to find evidence that people are any more likely to trust their state governments under conditions of strong state performance, such as when state debts are low or state fiscal capacity is high. They conclude that people's trust in state government does not seem to have an objective foundation, where "the popularity of subnational governments may stem from something other than their performance and capability" (Hetherington and Nugent 2001, 151). Instead of reflecting a state's ability to respond to citizens, trust in state government seems to have more to do with people's comparative cynicism about national government (Hetherington and Nugent 2001).

Yet, if we shift away from considering generalized trust in state government to consider people's confidence in the specific institutions of state government, we find greater evidence of responsiveness to political conditions, where confidence in state legislatures follows from factors such as the party polarization of elected officials, state economic performance, and levels of legislative professionalism (Banda and Kirkland 2018; Kelleher and Wolak 2007; Richardson, Konisky, and Milyo 2012). In considering people's confidence in elected officials in their state, Flavin (2013) also highlights the importance of both economic performance and policy outputs for how people view state politicians. As such, it is useful to take another look at the origins of diffuse trust in state government. It may be that state performance matters only for people's specific evaluations of the institutions of state government, but not general feelings of diffuse trust. After all, diffuse feelings of trust in government have been argued to have distinctive origins relative feelings of specific confidence (Cluverius and Banda 2018; Easton 1965).

## The Origins of Trust in State Government

I start by considering whether political and economic conditions contribute to feelings of diffuse trust in state government, given the importance of these factors to explaining levels of trust in federal government. At the national level, people feel more trusting of

the national government when power rests in the hands of co-partisans (Citrin 1974; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Keele 2005). They report greater trust in the national government when the economy is strong rather than struggling (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Keele 2007; Weatherford 1984). At the state level, evidence is mixed about the importance of these factors for people's trust and approval of state institutions. People typically give warmer evaluations of state government when controlled by co-partisans, but this is not always true (Banda and Kirkland 2018; Farnsworth 1999; Flavin 2013; Uslander 2001). Likewise, scholars report mixed findings about the relative importance of economic performance for satisfaction with state institutions (Banda and Kirkland 2018; Farnsworth 1999; Flavin 2013; Kelleher and Wolak 2007; Weinschenk and Helpap 2015; Wolak and Palus 2010).

To consider whether generalized feelings of trust in state government are connected to state political and economic conditions, I consider partisan control of state government as well as state economic performance. I expect that people are more likely to trust their state government when it is controlled by members of their own party, and less likely to trust state government when they reside in states with unified out-party control of government. I test this by including two dichotomous indicators: one denoting when the respondent's party controls both the statehouse and the governor's office, and one indicating opposing party control of government. I also consider the contributions of economic performance for levels of trust in state government. If trust is in part a reaction to people's satisfaction with the performance of state government, then a strong economy signals to people that things are going well in their state. I expect that people will be more likely to trust their state government when the state economy is strong. I test this with an indicator of the state unemployment rate at the time the survey was fielded.

Beyond the effects of government performance, I also consider the degree to which trust in state government draws on foundations distinctive from those that have been shown to guide people's views of their national government. If Hetherington and Nugent (2001) are right, then the basis of trust in state government may find its origins in considerations other than government performance. Although political and economic factors have been central to explaining trust in the national government, it may be that people do not use identical criteria to evaluate their state government as they do their national government. When asked to explain why they trust one level of government more than others, people mention the power and performance of government as a source of trust in national government, but are less likely to do the same when asked why they trust their state government (Jennings 1998).

One place to start in thinking about the distinctive origins of trust in state government is to consider the ways in which state governments are different from the national government. With a federal design of government, subnational governments fulfill different roles than the national government. State governments are smaller in size and closer to their constituents, differences that can affect the ways in which states are governed. I argue that they also influence how state governments are viewed by their constituents. States are geographically smaller in size, which means that state governments tend to be closer and more accessible to citizens than the national government.

States also have a less extensive reach, charged with tackling the needs of a much smaller constituency than the one governed by the national government. State governments tailor policy to the demands of more homogenous constituencies, where it is comparatively easier to respond to the demands of the electorate.

Moreover, these factors represent important sources of heterogeneity across state governments as well. State governments vary significantly in the size of their constituencies and in the scope of their reach. At the national level, it is hard to gauge the effects of factors like size of government and the diversity of constituency interests on trust, as these considerations are essentially fixed in the cross-sectional approaches common to studies of trust in government. To the extent to which we have relied on the same model of trust at the national level and the state level, we have potentially overlooked the importance of features that are static at the national level but variable across the states. I propose that these differences in the size and scope of government are consequential for feelings of political trust. To explore this, I leverage the differences across the 50 states in how state governments operate. I examine how trust varies across individuals and the states as a function of three factors: the relative accessibility of state government to its constituents, the scope of state government spending, and the homogeneity of constituent demands within the states.

I first explore the effects of accessibility and physical proximity to see whether the closeness of state government influences the trust people place in their state government. When asked about what they expect of state-elected officials, citizens often say that those elected to state office have a greater responsibility to be present in the district, accessible to constituents and ready to listen to their concerns (Grill 2007). While people look to the national government for leadership, they see state governments as more accountable and more accessible than the national government (Jennings 1998; Roeder 1994). People are more likely to report a personal connection to a state-elected official than a national official (McAtee and Wolak 2011). Unlike members of Congress who leave to pursue policy goals in Washington, state legislators remain in the state to pursue policy change. Because subnational governments are closer to the people and represent smaller constituencies than members of Congress, they can be better positioned to respond to the demands of their constituents (Jennings 1998).

To explore the importance of political accountability for trust in state government, I consider whether trust is higher among those for whom state governments are comparatively more accessible. I leverage variations across both individuals and states in the accessibility of state government. I first consider individual-level variations in geographical proximity to state government, to see whether people feel greater trust when they reside in communities that are geographically close to state-elected officials. While the business of national government takes place as a distance from most people, state capitals are closer to their constituents on average. In pragmatic terms, this makes it easier to reach out to state officeholders and visit the state capital—as most live within a couple of hours' drive to the governor's office. Closeness to the capital may also have psychic value, where people who reside close to their state capital perceive state government as accessible. If the closeness and accessibility of state-elected officials is important to cultivating feelings of trust in state government, we

should see higher trust among those who live within a short drive to their state capital than those who live in distant corners of their state. I test this using an indicator of whether the respondent lives in a zip code within 50 miles of the state capital.<sup>1</sup>

As a second indicator of the accessibility of state government, I leverage state-level variations in the constituency size of state legislative districts. State legislators in large states like California, Florida, and Texas represent far greater numbers of constituents than their counterparts in small states like Vermont and New Hampshire. State senators in California average nearly a million constituents in their districts, and state representatives average nearly a half million constituents. In contrast, the constituent to legislator ratio in Vermont is far more favorable, where state senators in Vermont average under 25,000 constituents in their districts, and state representatives have districts with fewer than 5,000 constituents on average. If people trust their state government when they feel that lawmakers are responsive to their concerns, then we should see greater trust in those states where legislators represent fewer constituents. To test this, I include a ratio of the number of voting-eligible state residents over the total number of seats in the upper and lower chambers of the state legislature.

As a second source of trust in state government, I consider the effects of government size. State governments can symbolize small government, which many see as virtuous and desirable (Markus 2001). Indeed, the framers of the Constitution designed a federal system in part out of a desire to try to limit the scope of national authority and empower state and local governments that are closer to the people. While many see the government in Washington as too big and too sprawling (Saad 2017), subnational governments come closer to matching an idealized vision of small government for those who prefer a government with a limited reach. The size of state governments may well be a source of public trust, where state governments better resemble a symbolic ideal of how government should operate. I consider whether people trust their state government in part because it better matches their personal preferences for small government.

To do so, I again leverage variations across both individuals and states. At the state level, I take advantage of differences in the magnitude of state government spending across the 50 states. Some states have an expansive reach, where they invest substantially in state services from education to social welfare to state infrastructure. Other states remain comparatively frugal in their expenditures, taking a more limited role. I expect that the effects of government size on people's trust in state government will vary across individuals, conditional on their relative preferences for small government. We know that conservatives value limited government more than liberals do, preferring to constrain national authorities and devolve government power to subnational authorities. Smaller state governments should hold particular appeal to conservatives.

Among conservatives, I expect that living in a state where the reach of state government is limited will be associated with greater feelings of trust, whereas living in a state with a larger, more activist state government will be associated with lower feelings of trust. Among liberals, I expect that feelings of trust in state government will instead climb as relative levels of state spending increase. To capture the relative reach of state government, I use per capita state expenditures in the prior year. To assess



people's preferences for limited government, I rely on a measure of self-reported ideology (Markus 2001). By interacting ideology with relative spending, I test whether people are more likely to trust their state government when the size of government is better aligned with their preferences for activist or limited government.

As a third explanation, I consider the connections between trust in state government and levels of social and political homogeneity in the states. At the national level, lawmakers must balance the diverse interests of numerous constituency interests across geographical lines, partisan divides, and group differences. Given the tremendous diversity of interests across the United States, policymakers will find it difficult to satisfy citizen demands and find policy consensus. These challenges should be lower within the states, as smaller geographic units traditionally feature less heterogeneity (Dahl and Tufte 1973). When state electorates have similar preferences and priorities, subnational governments may find it easier to meet the demands of their constituents. This has been suggested to be one of the reasons why state and local governments enjoy higher trust than national governments (Dahl and Tufte 1973). People who live in homogenous areas may also feel like they share more in common with others in the community, which is thought to be associated with heightened political participation (Oliver 2000). At the local level, scholars confirm that greater social diversity is associated with lower levels of trust and confidence in local government (Baldassare 1985; Rahn and Rudolph 2005). At the state level, greater social diversity has been linked to lower levels of participation in state politics (McAtee and Wolak 2011). I consider whether trust in state government is higher among homogenous electorates that share more common interests.

I expect that trust in state government will decrease as the social and political heterogeneity of a state increases. To test this, I rely on two measures—an index of state partisan diversity and a measure of racial and ethnic diversity. I create a measure of state partisan diversity using responses to the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. In the common content, nearly 60,000 respondents identify as Democrats, Republicans, or Independents. I use state-aggregated measures of the percent of each partisan group within each state to create a Herfindahl index of state partisan diversity. Lower values on this measure indicate states dominated by one partisan group, whereas higher values indicate those states where Democrats, Republicans, and Independents are found in nearly equal numbers. To assess state racial and ethnic heterogeneity, I use a modified Herfindahl index based on the percentages in each state who identify as white, black, Asian American, Pacific Islander, Native American, some other race, or multiracial as well as the percentage that identifies as Latino or not within each category. Very homogenous states have scores near 0 on the measure, whereas the most diverse states approach a score of 1.<sup>2</sup>

## Levels of Trust in State Government

To explore the origins of trust in state government, I rely on an item included in a module of the 2017 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Respondents were asked, “How often can you trust your state government to do what is right?” The

response options fall on a nine-point scale, with alternating points labeled, “always,” “most of the time,” “about half the time,” “some of the time,” and “never.” I rescale the measure to cover a range from 0 to 1. In the survey, I find an average level of trust in state government of 0.36, which falls somewhere between trusting state government some of the time and trusting government about half of the time. Only about 41% of the sample trust government at least half of the time, indicating that mistrust of state government is more common than feelings of trust. However, people remain significantly more trusting of their state government than the national government. The average level of trust in national government is 0.28, or trusting government only some of the time. Only 28% of the sample reports that they trust the national government at least half of the time.

This measure of trust arguably offers a significant improvement over the measures used in past studies of trust in state government. Most prior studies have relied on the question wording included in the American National Election Studies, which asks people to rank their relative levels of trust in government across federal levels, and identify which level of government they trust most and which level of government that they trust least (Farnsworth 1999; Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Jennings 1998).<sup>3</sup> The nature of these question wordings likely invite people to focus in particular on their feelings about national government, rather than considering how they think about their state government. This could explain why scholars have failed to find strong evidence that trust in state government is tied to the performance and character of the states.

## State- and Individual-Level Differences in Trust in State Government

Because I am interested in both individual-level and state-level heterogeneity in people’s trust in state government, I rely on multilevel regression and a random intercept random coefficient specification. Multilevel modeling serves to minimize the risk of false positives associated with state-level predictors compared with regression with clustered standard errors (Steenbergen and Jones 2002). The random effect associated with the intercept is included to address concerns tied to state-level clustering in levels of trust in state government. Because I expect that the coefficient associated with ideology will vary across the states conditional on state differences in government spending, I also include a random effect associated with ideology.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the state-level covariates, I also include several individual-level controls. I control for trust in national government to help isolate the portion of trust that is unique to the states. I control for respondents’ personal economic fortunes, using an indicator of whether the respondent reports that their personal economic situation has gotten better or worse over the past year. I also include demographic controls for gender, race, and education.<sup>5</sup>

Multilevel regression results are shown in Table 1. In Figure 1, I report predicted levels of trust in state government at minimum and maximum levels of predictor variables, holding other variables at their means. I first consider the degree to which trust

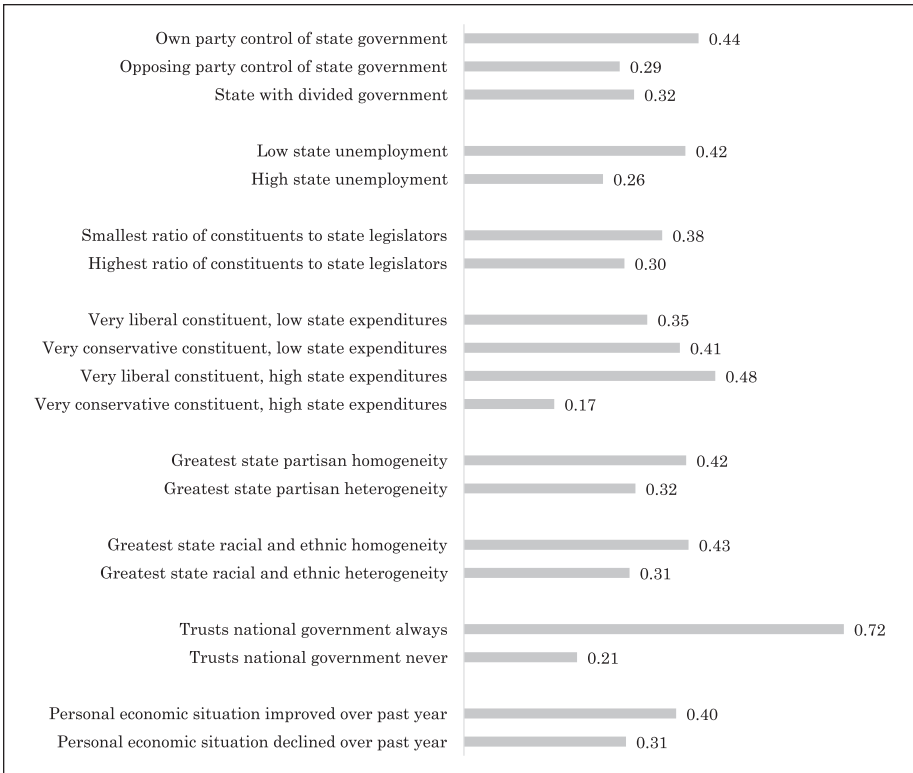


**Table 1.** Explaining Levels of Trust in State Government.

	Trust in state government
Own party control of state government	0.122* (0.016)
Opposing party control of state government	-0.027 (0.025)
State unemployment rate	-0.031* (0.012)
Lives near the state capital	0.001 (0.018)
Constituency size of state legislative districts	-0.003* (0.002)
Respondent ideology	0.048* (0.017)
State expenditures, per capita	0.019* (0.008)
Ideology $\times$ State Expenditures	-0.009* (0.002)
State partisan diversity	-1.391* (0.464)
State racial and ethnic diversity	-0.161* (0.056)
Trust in national government	0.505* (0.045)
Personal economic situation	0.095* (0.032)
Education	-0.018 (0.035)
Female	0.019 (0.016)
Nonwhite	0.029 (0.018)
Constant	1.181* (0.297)
Variance components	
Variance, intercept	0.003 (0.003)
Variance, ideology	0.0002 (0.0002)
Covariance, ideology and intercept	-0.001 (0.001)
<i>N</i> (no. of states)	1,085 (49)

Note. Multilevel regression estimates, standard errors in parentheses.

\* $p < .05$ .



**Figure 1.** Predicted levels of trust in state government.

Note. Predicted values based on estimates reported in Table 1. Other variables held at their means.

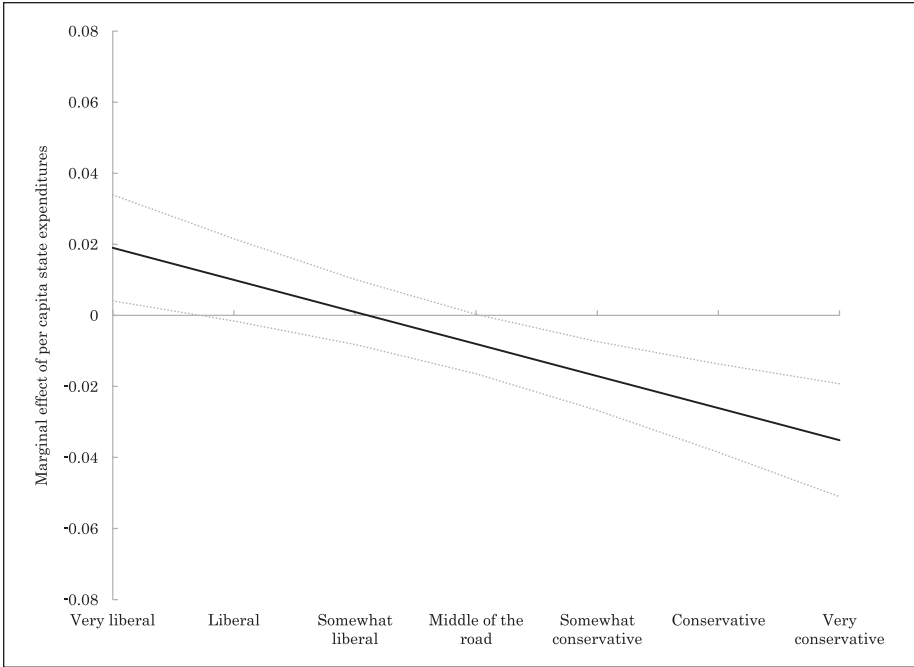
in state government is responsive to political and economic conditions in the states. I find that people are significantly more likely to report diffuse trust in their state government when it is controlled by members of their own party. Their predicted level of trust (0.44) is much higher than among partisans living in a state where the legislature and governor's office are controlled by the opposing party (0.29). Partisans living in state with divided government fall somewhere in between in their trust in state government, with a predicted level of trust of 0.32 on the 0 to 1 scale. However, I do not find a significant effect associated with opposing party control of state government. Those who live in states with divided government are as trusting as those who live in states where the rival party controls the state legislature and governor's office. While Uslander (2001) finds only limited evidence that trust in government is influenced by partisan control of state government, I find greater support that co-partisan control of government informs the trust people place in their state government.

I also confirm the importance of economic performance for trust in state government, as indicated by the significant coefficient associated with state unemployment rates. A one-point drop in unemployment rates is associated with a 0.03 increase in

feelings of trust in state government. In the state with the lowest level of unemployment, the predicted level of trust is 0.42 on the 0 to 1 scale, whereas the predicted level of trust in state government falls to 0.26 in the state with the highest unemployment rate. While others have shown that political conditions in the states can influence the specific trust that people place in state institutions and state politicians (Banda and Kirkland 2018; Flavin 2013; Kelleher and Wolak 2007), I extend these findings to show that people's generalized trust in state government also reflects the contemporary political and economic conditions within states. This challenges prior studies of general trust in state government, which have argued that state economic conditions matter little to establishing trust in state government (Farnsworth 1999; Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Uslaner 2001).

When considering how trust in state government relates to the accessibility of state government, I fail to find evidence that people trust their state government more when they live closer to their state capital. Those who live within 50 miles of their state capital are no more likely to say that they trust state government than those who live at a greater distance. To the degree to which people trust their state government for being closer to them than the national government, this seems to follow from a symbolic and subjective feeling of closeness rather than the true distance of constituents from their state representatives. I also considered whether this null result might be the product of the choice of measure of geographical closeness. However, as reported in Table A2 in the supplemental appendix, this null finding is robust to alternate specifications of geographical closeness as well, including distance to the state capital in miles, logged distance, distance in quintiles, and a threshold measure of living within 25 miles of the state capital.<sup>6</sup> I also considered the possibility that those who live closer to their state capital evaluate state governments using different criteria than those who live farther away. In Table A3 in the supplemental appendix, I test for heterogeneity in the effects of state contexts by interacting these explanations with the measure of closeness to the state capital. However, I find little evidence that those who live near the state capital evaluate their state government differently than those who live some distance away.<sup>7</sup> Geographical closeness seems unimportant to cultivating feelings of trust in state government.

However, I do find that trust in state government is connected to the constituency size of state legislative districts. Those who live in states with fewer constituents per legislative district are significantly more likely to trust state government than those in states with comparatively populous state legislative districts. At the state with the smallest number of state constituents per legislative seat, the predicted level of trust in state government is 0.38 on the 0 to 1 scale. As the constituency size of a state legislative district approaches that of a congressional district, people report less diffuse trust in state government. In the state with the largest number of constituents per legislative seat, the predicted level of trust in state government drops to 0.30. This suggests that people do value the accessibility of state-elected officials when thinking about why they trust their state government. However, the relative ease of getting an audience with state politicians appears to be more important to feelings of trust than the mere closeness of the state capital.



**Figure 2.** Marginal effect of state spending on trust, by ideological identification.

Turning next to the consequences of the size of state government, I find a significant interaction effect between per capita state expenditures and people's ideological leanings. The size of state government informs feelings of trust, but differently so for liberals and conservatives. Conservatives are less likely to trust government when they live in states with greater per capita spending, whereas liberals are more likely to trust their state government when they reside in states with higher rates of spending. In Figure 2, I plot the marginal effects of per capita state expenditures on trust in state government over the range of citizen ideology. Among those who identify as very liberal, I find a significant positive marginal effect, indicating that liberals are more likely to trust their state government when they live in a state with higher levels of per capita spending. For other liberals and moderates, the marginal effects of state spending are not significantly associated with feelings of trust in state government. Among conservatives, I find a significant negative marginal effect that increases in size with the strength of conservative identification. For conservatives, increases in state spending are associated with lower levels of trust in state government.

Trust in state government is partially rooted in people's ideological desires for smaller government, where liberals and conservatives think about their state government differently depending on the relative size of state government. Conservatives not only say they prefer small government but also feel more trust in their state government when it comes closer to that ideal. Liberals are more likely to prefer

expansive government and report greater feelings of trust when they reside in places where state governments spend more on state programs. As a robustness check, I also considered the degree to which this effect is robust to the effects of ideological policy responsiveness. To test this, I interact respondent ideology with the liberalism of state policy outcomes.<sup>8</sup> As reported in Table A6 in the supplemental appendix, I find that the effects of state spending on trust are robust to controlling for ideological policy similarities. Conservatives are more likely to trust their state government when it has a smaller fiscal reach than when it spends more, even after controlling for levels of partisan and ideological similarity.

Finally, I find that higher levels of social and political homogeneity in the states are associated with greater feelings of trust in state government. Both state partisan diversity and state racial and ethnic diversity are significant predictors of trust in state government. Moving from the lowest level of partisan heterogeneity to the highest level of partisan heterogeneity would lead to a predicted drop in trust in state government by 0.19 points. A move from the most racially homogenous state to the most racial diverse would lead to a 0.12 drop in trust in state government, representing around a half of a standard deviation decline given the scale of the measure. Those who live in states with greater social and political diversity are less likely to voice feelings of trust in state government, confirming a similar pattern that has been observed in people's trust in their local government (Baldassare 1985; Rahn and Rudolph 2005).<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

Although prior studies of trust in state government have suggested that its origins lie outside the state capital (Farnsworth 1999; Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Uslander 2001), I demonstrate that the attributes and performance of state governments contribute to feelings of public trust. Strong economic performance is associated with greater trust in state government, mirroring patterns found at the national level. Partisan control of state government also influences people's feelings of trust, which is important to recognize given the increasing party polarization in both state and national politics. This means that the business of state politics is a key driver of feelings of public trust. If trust in state government was merely a product of how people feel about the national government, it would afford state-elected officials little influence over cultivating feelings of trust in government.

I also show that trust in state government reflects more than just the performance of government. To the degree to which scholars have failed to find much evidence that feelings of diffuse trust in state government are connected to what is going on within the states (Farnsworth 1999; Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Uslander 2001), it might have been in part due to the decision to assume that trust in national government and trust in state governments are determined by the same kinds of factors. These results suggest that that people trust their state government for reasons beyond just its performance and respond to things like the accessibility of state representatives and the size of state government. If trust follows from government performance

alone, it suggests that people are mostly concerned with the political and economic conditions in the state. These results highlight that people have expectations of their state government that extend beyond contemporary conditions.

To the degree to which state governments are trusted for different reasons than those that inform people's confidence in the national government, it could help explain differences in trust across federal levels of government. We know that people tend to place more trust in their state government than the national government (Cole and Kincaid 2000; Wolak and Palus 2010), but the reasons for this are not well understood. These differences may well be the consequence of people's different expectations of governments at each federal level. State governments serve different roles for citizens compared with the national government—and are evaluated differently as well.

Small governments are often valued on pragmatic grounds, for their efficiency or strengths in service delivery. Yet, small governments are argued to be important to constituents as well, potentially encouraging civic life and promoting responsive politics (Dahl and Tufte 1973; Oliver 2000). Although the smaller size of states has been thought to be key to how people think about their subnational governments, these claims have not been fully tested. I find that differences in size matter for public trust in multiple ways. Larger states find it harder to cultivate public trust given the greater diversity of demands within their constituency. But to the degree to which a state government is large and activist, it can result in greater trust among liberals in the state. Conservatives instead prefer smaller government and report less trust as the reach of state government increases. In limiting the size of the state legislature and increasing the size of state legislative districts, states again alter the connections between constituents and their state government. Smaller states face different challenges in cultivating public trust as compared with larger states.

These differences are important as trust is a valuable resource across state governments. Although states are responsible for many policy domains that affect the day-to-day lives of their constituents, a mistrustful constituency makes it harder for elected officials to enact policy change (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). Even as the states are seen as laboratories of democracy and a place for policy innovation, public skepticism of government can discourage policy innovation and risk-taking (Bianco 1994). Mistrust can contribute to electoral turnover in the states, as constituents call for term limits and vote out incumbents (Hetherington 1999; Karp 1995). Trust is a valuable resource for elected officials in the states, and one that follows from the differences in how states represent the wishes of their constituents.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. I use point-to-point distance between the respondents' zip code and the zip code of the governor's office in the state. Within the sample, the average respondent lives about 120 miles from their state capital, and about 30% live within 50 miles.
2. I use a measure created by Esri based on Census estimates from 2017. A state's score reflects the probability that two people randomly chosen from within the state will have different ethnic or racial backgrounds. The measure ranges from 0.141 (Maine) to 0.835 (Hawaii).
3. These wordings ask, "Do you have more faith and confidence in the federal government, the government of this state or the local government around here?" and "Which level of government do you have the least faith and confidence in: the federal government, the government of this state, or the local government around here?"
4. The inclusion of the random coefficient term addresses clustering due to unexplained state-to-state variations in ideology's effects on trust (Steenbergen and Jones 2002). In a model that excludes the interaction, the random effect associated with ideology is significant, which means that the effects of ideology on trust vary significantly across the states. After including the interaction term with state government spending, the random effect is no longer significant, suggesting that government spending explains most of the variation in the effects of ideology on trust across states. Excluding the random intercept term and the covariance term yields substantively similar results, but no notable gains in model fit.
5. Summary statistics of the measures are included in Table A1 in the supplemental appendix.
6. I chose the threshold measure as it is less collinear with the specific geographic size of the state and other predictors in the model.
7. The interaction between co-partisan control of state government and closeness to the capital is the only significant interaction effect. I find that those who live farther from the capital seem to report slightly higher trust in co-partisan state governments than those who live closer to the capital. Results are presented in Figure A1 in the supplemental appendix.
8. To measure state policy liberalism, I rely on a 2016 measure created by Ruger and Sorens, following the method described by Sorens, Muedini, and Ruger (2008).
9. Among the controls, I affirm that those who mistrust the national government tend to be cynical about their state government, whereas those who report that they are personally better off economically are more trusting than those experiencing more difficult economic times. Gender, race, and education are unrelated to trust, consistent with prior studies that show limited demographic variation in feelings of trust (Stokes 1962). As a robustness check, I also included controls for gubernatorial approval and state legislative approval and confirmed the same pattern of results. I also tested whether trust is lower in states with more professionalized or more polarized state legislatures, but do not find evidence of this. These models are reported in Tables A4 and A5 in the supplemental appendix.

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