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The Dynamics of Public Confidence in U.S. State and Local Government

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ABSTRACT

While the dynamics of trust in the national government have been shown to be responsive to political events and governmental performance, less is known about why the public's trust in U.S. state and local government rises and falls over time. We examine the trends in confidence in subnational government using an aggregate level approach. First, we consider whether levels of trust are defined by reactions to the national government. Second, we consider how factors specific to subnational politics such as governmental performance and the quality of community life influence trust. Using measures of confidence in state and local government from 1968 to 2004 and a set of error correction models, we find evidence for both accounts. Confidence in subnational governments reflects national trends such as economic tides and public preferences for more or less government, but also exhibits unique dynamics explained by factors specific to subnational politics.

IN A REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY, we are naturally concerned with the degree to which elected representatives follow the wishes of their constituents. Outside elections, one way that the public can constrain representatives is through the trust placed in government. When levels of public confidence are high, governments may be able to engage in greater policy innovation and risk-taking. When public confidence is low, the authority and stability of government can be threatened (Bianco 1994; Tyler 1998). Trust can explain the desire to change government, including support for challenger candidates, third-party contenders, and governmental reform (Hetherington 1999; Orren 1997).

Given the importance of changes in public confidence, what explains why trust in government rises and falls? Others have investigated the dynamics of trust in national government (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Keele 2007), but little is known about why confidence in state and local government

changes over time. In a federal system, it is important to know why confidence in subnational government ebbs and flows. Subnational governments are responsible for an extensive range of policies—from education to crime and corrections to public services—and the size of policy mandates for both state and local governments have increased in recent decades (Hanson 1999; Sharp 1999). Relative levels of public trust in government can influence the balance of power between national and subnational governments, as those with greater confidence in subnational governments are more likely to support increased state and local responsibility in policy-making (Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Roeder 1994).

What, then, drives changes in trust in state and local government over time? Given the lower levels of citizen engagement in politics below the national level, it is possible that confidence in subnational government is largely static, or that the degree to which it varies over time is simply a reflection of sentiments about the national government. If this is so, it raises normative worries about the accountability of government. At the national level, the dynamics of trust can be explained by substantive factors like the health of the economy and levels of crime (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Keele 2007). However, if confidence in subnational government is simply a reflection of appraisals of the national government, then state and local governments might have limited ability to promote public confidence through policy change.

We explore how levels of confidence in local and state government in the United States change over time to see whether the dynamics of confidence in subnational government simply reflect national trends in confidence, or if these movements reflect substantive concerns such as the quality of life in communities and the balance of power in our federal system. Using surveys from 1968 to 2004, we create yearly measures of confidence in state and local government. We employ a set of error correction models to explore whether the dynamics of confidence in subnational government follow national trends or instead reflect elements specific to state and local government.

DIFFERENCES IN PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN NATIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

It is commonly believed that people hold subnational governments in higher esteem than the government in Washington. Indeed, according to recent surveys, citizens tend to view local governments most favorably in the federal system, while the national government inspires the least confidence (Conlan 1993). Yet while this tendency holds true in recent decades, it is not an absolute. Prior to declines in national government trust in the early

1970s, people often reported a preference for national government over subnational governmental units. For instance, in surveys from the late 1930s, a majority preferred a system of government with power concentrated in the federal government, rather than with the states.¹ Even as late as 1968, survey respondents were most likely to choose the national government as the level of government that inspired the greatest confidence.²

Why does trust in subnational government change over time? While the explanations for distrust in the national government have been frequently investigated (see Levi and Stoker 2000 for an overview), much less is known about what drives confidence in state and local government. Those who have investigated trust in state and local government have considered the individual level roots of confidence rather than the sources of dynamic changes in trust. These studies often compare the roots of trust in subnational government to the reasons why people trust the national government. In some accounts, confidence in subnational governments has less to do with state factors like fiscal capacity and more to do with trust in other levels of government (Hetherington and Nugent 2001). Uslander (2001) argues that trust in state government is influenced by the same kinds of factors that drive confidence in the national government—such as confidence in Congress and presidential approval.

Others suggest that confidence in state and local government has distinctive roots. Examining the open-ended responses people offer to explain their evaluations of levels of government, Jennings (1998) argues that while confidence in the national government reflects assessments of government power and performance, confidence in state and local government builds on perceptions that these governments are more accountable, more accessible, and more responsive. Roeder (1994) finds that local governments are seen as most honest, while the national government is seen as providing the most leadership. Rahn and Rudolph (2002) find that evaluations of the national government are connected to trust in local government, but so are distinct local factors such as the quality of community life and the heterogeneity of communities.

One commonality between these studies is their cross-sectional focus. Only Jennings (1998) considers temporal movements in confidence in state and local government, though he is limited by a small set of surveys to draw comparisons. Cole, Kincaid, and Rodriguez (2004) have recently commissioned a set of surveys to consider the evolution of public attitudes across federal levels of government, but their primary focus is on description and cross-sectional explanations for governmental opinions. While this angle of analysis is quite valuable, explaining how confidence in government

changes over time is also very useful for a number of reasons, which we discuss next.

APPROVAL OF GOVERNMENT OVER TIME

First, considering changes in confidence over time allows us to test explanations that are not easily examined in a cross-sectional approach. For example, we can examine how changes in the division of power in the federal system affect confidence in each level of government, a factor that is constant when measured at a single point.³ Second, many prior models of trust and confidence in government focus on individual level determinants, such as ideology and demographic factors. But as Stokes (1962) notes, unlike other political preferences, trust in government tends to be only weakly explained by individual differences. Instead, variations in trust are more likely to reflect structural aspects of government and society. We also gain leverage in exploring when confidence in subnational governments follows or diverges from trust in the national government. Because of this, modeling the temporal dynamics of trust in government has particular appeal and importance.

Using an aggregate approach shifts our focus away from the prior explanations of trust in state and local government, such as individual demographic differences or variations in the political environments of states. We leave these for investigation in other work.⁴ Instead, we focus on public attitudes about state and local governments collectively, to see what commonalities exist in people's trust in government below the national level. Our approach echoes that of Anderson and Newmark (2002) and Stimson (2004), who consider national trends in public approval of individual senators and governors. We argue that many potential commonalities exist that unify state and local governments over time. There are times when states as a group tend to have a larger share of budget shortfalls and fiscal worries. There are periods when local governments enjoy greater shares of intergovernmental revenues. In addition, there have been periods when the national government shifts policymaking authority to subnational governments. These larger national trends are interesting and important to investigate relative levels of public confidence across levels of government.⁵

While many studies of the dynamics of trust in national government are solely concerned with the decline in trust in national government in the 1970s, two recent studies highlight that trust in government also reveals significant variability from quarter to quarter, apart from this decline (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Keele 2007). While Watergate and the Vietnam War drove trust downward in the 1970s, a healthy economy can promote public

confidence in the national government, as can social capital. Additionally, scandals, crime rates, and disapproval of Congress also explain declines in trust in national government over this period.

EXPLAINING THE DYNAMICS OF CONFIDENCE IN SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENT

What explains changes in confidence in state and local government? In thinking about the dynamics of confidence in state and local government, one argument is that we should expect limited movements, and to the extent to which changes occur, they will reflect larger national trends rather than anything substantively related to state and local matters. Such an account is rooted in individual-level accounts of the public's low information levels about subnational matters, and the low levels of citizen participation in local elections (Alford and Lee 1968; Karnig and Walter 1983; Morlan 1984). Under such an account, evaluations of government across federal levels would be intertwined. People who trust the national government when it performs well might place confidence in all levels of government, national, state, or local. Confidence in state and local government could also be driven by general value preferences for strong national government versus political control by states and localities, rather than features unique to subnational politics.

Recent research provides support for such an account. In comparing the dynamics of approval of presidents, Congress, senators, governors, and trust in the government in Washington, Stimson (2004, 155–6) argues that they all share a common movement, where “approval and trust are generic, a syndrome of attitudes toward public affairs that only appears to be affected by and directed toward particular people and institutions.” In this account, different evaluations reflect an underlying generic approval of government, based on factors like economic health and government performance. This idea of generic approval is echoed in research by Rahn (2000), who explicitly assesses the role of such global assessments in her measure of public mood. She finds that sentiments of public mood, related to general affect about the state of the nation, serve as affective shortcuts in individual decision-making. When specific information is not available to weigh in a choice, this generic barometer measure informs evaluations.

Yet while general affect or generic approval may predict how people evaluate different levels of government, we also have reasons to expect that people form distinct evaluations of state and local government, such that levels of confidence have unique dynamics. In this second account, the dynamics of confidence in state and local government are expected to reflect specific ele-

ments tied to the roles and responsibilities of states and localities, and their place within the federal system. Subnational governments have different responsibilities, make different sorts of policies, and are more proximate to voters than the national government. As such, the reasons why citizens like or dislike subnational government may be based on a set of criteria quite distinct from those used in evaluating the national government. And if voters see state and federal governments in different ways, then confidence in each may follow very different trajectories.

While Stimson (2004) notes similarities in the explanations for different kinds of approval in government, certainly differences remain. Conflict within the institution drives down public confidence in Congress (Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997), ideological distance from the public influences approval of the Supreme Court (Durr, Martin, and Wolbrecht 2000), and international conflicts have particular weight in presidential evaluations (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002). Thus, even if confidence in subnational government follows similar economic trends as evaluations of national institutions, subnational factors may still have distinct influence.

Research at the individual level also supports the argument that confidence in subnational governments should react to unique factors. Even though it is commonly acknowledged that people are not well versed in the nuances of state and local government, people have greater capacities to form meaningful evaluations of subnational government than is often believed. Both Arceneaux (2006) and Schneider and Jacoby (2003) find that people are able to draw meaningful distinctions between the responsibilities of national, state, and local governments. Because of this, aggregate dynamics of confidence could be responsive to the federal balance of governmental power.

Therefore, we have two possible kinds of explanations for the dynamics of confidence in state and local government. If confidence in state and local government is driven by national trends, then we expect that explanations of opinions will reflect general criteria, including confidence in the national government, national economic tides, general ratings of the state of the nation, and the public policy preferences of the public. Economic evaluations clearly influence public ratings of government—from presidential approval to congressional approval to trust in the national government. In part, economic prosperity speaks to government performance. When the economy is strong, people have great confidence in government; when the economy stumbles, people blame government. In line with this, we also consider the role of global assessments of how well the country is performing and levels of public satisfaction. We expect that when people

are satisfied about the state of affairs, they will express more confidence in their government across all levels.

Finally, the policy leanings of the public will potentially influence how people see subnational governments. The decision to move power from the national government to the states is often motivated by ideology. Those favoring activist government are willing to cede power to the national government, while those endorsing limited government aim to devolve power to state and local levels. We also see a rise in rhetoric about federalism and devolving power to the states during the Republican administrations of Presidents Nixon and Reagan and during periods of Republican control of Congress such as 1994's Republican Revolution. This suggests that those concerned about the concentration of influence with the national government will prefer to see additional responsibility dispersed to the states. We explore whether confidence in subnational government in the aggregate climbs when the policy preferences of the public move in a conservative direction.

If people form distinct confidence ratings of state and local government, then factors specific to subnational politics should have particular explanatory power for the dynamics of these series. Following from general trust in government models that show performance evaluations to be important in explaining confidence in the government in Washington (Citrin 1974), we begin by considering factors related to the performance of subnational governments. We expect that when subnational governments deviate from people's preferences of what government should be doing, levels of trust will fall. One such explanation we consider reflects the balance of power and government resources across federal levels. The national government's disbursement of resources to the states varies over time. At times, the federal government reserves greater power, while in other periods the national government devolves responsibilities to subnational government. Our expectation is that when more power and resources are held by the states and localities, these governments will be able to accomplish more in terms of their policy objectives. These increases in performance will translate into greater public confidence. As Jennings (1998) notes, concerns about governmental performance are particularly important in explaining why people lack confidence in state and local governments. Because of both the proximity of subnational government and its slate of policy responsibilities like social services and education, the policy outputs of state and local governments are more easily observed by citizens than the policies of the national government. In this kind of environment, the performance of government may have a particularly strong influence on public confidence.

Increasing the resources and responsibilities of subnational governments also has a potential downside. At the national level, it has been argued that the sprawling size of government has contributed to a loss of the public's esteem. Even though public support for specific government programs is generally high (Bennett and Bennett 1990), and the power of the national government contributes to its public esteem (Jennings 1998), people also dislike the idea of a large government for what it implies about representativeness and efficiency. As government becomes larger, it feels less accessible, less effective, and less responsive to citizens, deviating from people's idealized visions of citizen government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). In the case of the federal bureaucracy, Yackee and Lowery (2005) find that growth in the size of government contributes to declines in aggregate levels of support. As a result, growth in the size of state and local government may cause declines in levels of public confidence.

We also consider the effects of a third measure of performance—the fiscal health of state and local governments. The expectation is that when states and localities are in better financial positions, citizens will have greater confidence in governments to achieve their policy goals. However, when subnational governments struggle financially, worries about government performance will rise and confidence will fall. Balanced budgets also suggest efficient government, while deficit spending can suggest wasteful government to voters and weaken public confidence.

Beyond these explanations linked to government performance, we also consider the effects of perceptions about the quality of life in communities. State and local governments are closer to the people, and generally perceived as more representative and responsive (Jennings 1998). How people interact with their community may be an important determinant of how people react to local and state government. If people feel their community is moving in the right direction, and they are satisfied with their lives there, then we expect confidence to increase. In addition, the degree to which people are engaged and networked in their communities could also influence levels of confidence in government. At the national level, Keele (2007) finds that levels of interpersonal trust and civic engagement affect the dynamics of trust in government. When people feel less connected to others in their community, they could also be less trusting in the governments most proximate to them. We expect that the more people participate in their communities, and the more trust they put in the people around them, the greater confidence they will place in subnational government.

MEASURING LEVELS OF PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN SUBNATIONAL GOVERNMENT

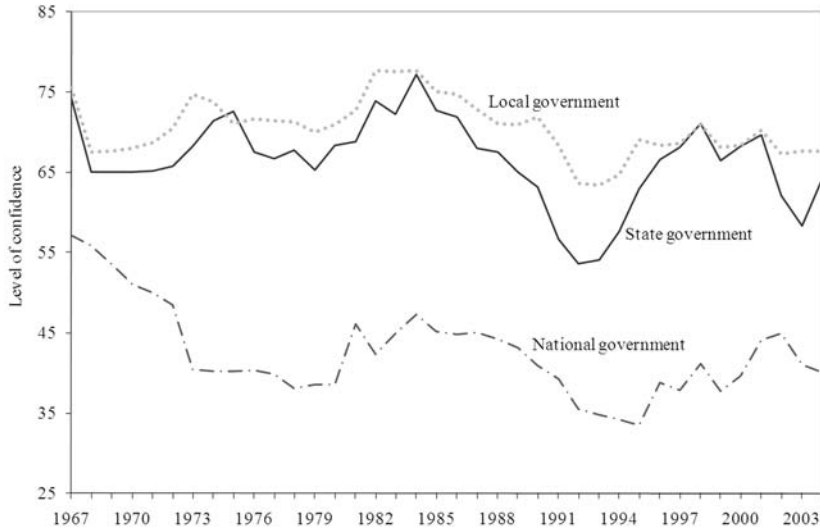
One of the limitations of exploring confidence in state and local government over time is the sparseness of available survey data. Unlike opinions like presidential approval that are commonly asked in surveys, questions about subnational government are much less frequently administered. As such, we instead rely on a number of different surveys. Using Stimson's (1999) recursive dyadic dominance algorithm, we aggregate multiple survey questions asked over time into a single time series.⁶ For the measure of confidence in state government, we aggregate seven different question wordings administered in 59 surveys from 1967–2004 to create a yearly series. For local government, we use eight different question wordings used in 68 different surveys from the same period. The question wordings, the number of times each question was asked, and the contribution of each question wording to the overall series are listed in the Appendix.⁷

The dynamics of confidence in each level of government are shown in Figure 1. First, we see that levels of confidence in subnational governments are not constant, but dynamic over time. Given lower levels of citizen engagement in subnational politics, we might have expected these series to be static, unresponsive to political changes over the years. However, the trends we observe show that levels of confidence in local and state government vary quite significantly over time. While confidence in state government tends to be more variable than confidence in local governments, both levels of government enjoy periods of greater and lesser public confidence. Comparing the temporal movements in these series, the gap between public confidence in the levels of government is smallest in the late 1960s, with ratings of national versus subnational government diverging in the 1970s. As Watergate and other factors drove confidence in the national government downward, evaluations of state and local government became more positive. Through the 1980s and 1990s, however, the dynamics of confidence in government converged again. For instance, confidence in national government as well as in state and local government all declined in the early 1990s, and then climbed toward the latter part of that decade.

RESULTS

Next, we investigate possible explanations for these dynamics, relying on a set of single-equation error correction models. While error correction mod-

Figure 1. Dynamics of Confidence in National, State, and Local Government



els are often used in political science to model cointegrated time series, the model specification can be generalized to a number of specifications beyond the cointegrated case, including stationary time series (Bannerjee et al. 1993; DeBoef and Keele 2008). Results from augmented Dickey-Fuller tests on both confidence in local government and confidence in state government suggest that the series are long memoried. Yet given the small sample sizes of the series, we cannot conclusively identify the series as integrated (or fractionally integrated). The adaptability of error correction models to both stationary and non-stationary time series makes this modeling strategy a particularly desirable approach.

Error correction models allow for estimation of long-term and short-term parameters. We expect that national factors such as economic evaluations and satisfaction with the state of affairs in the nation are readily integrated into public evaluations of confidence in government. On the other hand, factors related to the balance of influence across federal levels will likely not have an immediate impact, taking more time to be recognized and then reflected in evaluations. For other measures, including the consequences of the increasing size of state governments, it is not clear whether effects are immediate or delayed, so the general specification of the error correction model allows us to test both possibilities.

In an error correction model, we assess both a short-term and long-term effect of X on Y . The short-term coefficient indicates the contemporaneous

change in Y for a change in X, while the long-term coefficient represents an effect over time, dispersed over several periods at a rate determined by the error correction rate (the coefficient of the lagged Y). In addition to these short and long-term effects, we are also interested in the total dynamic effect of X on Y. This total effect summarizes the combined influence of both the short and long-term effect and informs the level of influence of an explanation on public confidence. This is important to assess because we might have a significant short-term effect that does not have a significant total effect when considering its cumulative influence.⁸

First, in Table 1, we test whether confidence in state and local government is explained solely by evaluations of other levels of government. To measure confidence in national government, we rely on an aggregated measure of trust in the government in Washington (Keele 2007). In the first and third columns, a simple bivariate specification is used to consider the effects of ratings of the national government, but the measure is not a significant predictor in either model. In the second and fourth columns, measures of confidence in the other subnational government are included in addition to the measure of trust in the national government. Here, we find that confidence

Table 1. Examining the Linkages Between Confidence in National, State, and Local Government

		Δ State Confidence	Δ State Confidence	Δ Local Confidence	Δ Local Confidence
Y _{t-1}		-0.238 [#] (0.125)	-0.468* (0.155)	-0.237 [#] (0.121)	-0.469* (0.145)
Δ National Confidence	Short-term	0.218 (0.248)	0.296 [#] (0.174)	0.008 (0.163)	-0.177 (0.121)
National Confidence	Long-term	-0.094 (0.131)	-0.004 (0.092)	-0.040 (0.084)	-0.033 (0.063)
Δ Local Confidence	Short-term	—	1.082* (0.175)	—	—
Local Confidence	Long-term	—	0.551* (0.223)	—	—
Δ State Confidence	Short-term	—	—	—	0.510* (0.083)
State Confidence	Long-term	—	—	—	0.311* (0.107)
Constant		19.656* (7.231)	-7.494 (9.454)	18.260* (7.893)	13.734* (6.074)
N		37	37	37	37
Adjusted R ²		0.139	0.590	0.146	0.570
Box-Ljung Q Test		14.302	7.749	6.734	12.331
p-value		0.576	0.956	0.978	0.721

*p<0.05, #p<0.10, two tailed tests; standard errors in parentheses

in state government positively predicts confidence in local government, and increasing trust in local government similarly is positively associated to confidence in state government.⁹

Considering the total effects of evaluations of national government, we see a similar pattern of results. We find that the significant short-term effect of confidence in the national government in the error correction model is short-lived, as the cumulative effect of the measure is not significant.¹⁰ Overall, these results suggest two things. First, it indicates that levels of confidence in state and local government are not singularly determined by how people see the national government. Second, it suggests that confidence in state and local government may share some similar dynamics.¹¹

These results however cannot settle our central question about what drives confidence in subnational governments. While assessments of the national government do not predict levels of confidence in state and local government, they may all share similarities in what explains their movements. For instance, confidence in national, state, and local government may all reflect economic trends, where each gains public esteem in eras of economic good fortune and loses public confidence as the economy ebbs. The connections between ratings of national and subnational government may be obscured by the fact that while some national factors like the economy may affect all levels of government similarly; the effects of national tides such as public policy mood may differ across federal levels. As such, subnational ratings may track general national trends even if they do not parallel the dynamics of confidence in the national government.

To resolve this question, we next consider the consequences of specific national tides to see if the trends in public confidence in subnational government reflect the same factors driving trust in the national government. We rely on three measures. The first reflects economic health, as captured in the Index of Consumer Sentiment. We expect that when economic assessments are positive, state and local government will enjoy greater public confidence. The second relates to general assessments of satisfaction with one's life. This measure was created using the same process as the dependent variables, using six different survey questions administered over eighty times concerning individuals' general level of happiness and satisfaction.¹² Our expectation is that when the public's level of general positive affect falls, so will confidence in subnational governments. The third explanation we consider relates to the public's preferences about the direction of public policy, assessed with Stimson's (1999) public policy mood measure. We expect that when public preferences move in a conservative direction, confidence in state and local government will increase.¹³

Results of the error correction model are shown in Table 2. In the case of the confidence people hold in their state governments, we find all three explanations to be significant predictors. First, we see that citizens' general level of satisfaction has both a significant short-term impact and long-term effect, where greater satisfaction boosts confidence in government. An increase of one point in general satisfaction (representing an increase of 7 percent based on the measure's variance) has a significant total dynamic effect of 1.4 points on confidence in state government. Part of the effect of general satisfaction is immediate—a one-point increase in satisfaction increases confidence by almost a half a point (0.47) in that period as people contemporaneously translate an increase in public satisfaction into a boost in government confidence. Yet the effects of satisfaction are not ephemeral or limited to that single year. People might take more time to fully update their views in light of this new information, or perhaps the dividends of satisfaction persist over a greater period. We see from the coefficient of the long-term effect (0.91) that confidence will climb nearly another point over the next five years as the long-term effect of satisfaction plays out. The effect is greatest in the first year, decreasing according to the error correction rate of the model. In this case, 63 percent of the long-term effect is felt in that first year, increasing confidence 0.57 points, with a 0.21 point increase the

Table 2. The Effect of National Factors on Confidence in State and Local Governments

		Δ State Confidence	Δ Local Confidence
Y _{t-1}		-0.632* (0.128)	-0.400* (0.120)
Δ General Satisfaction	Short-term	0.470 [#] (0.260)	0.295 (0.201)
General Satisfaction _{t-1}	Long-term	0.907* (0.249)	0.279 (0.177)
Δ Policy Mood	Short-term	-0.185 (0.258)	0.015 (0.201)
Policy Mood _{t-1}	Long-term	-0.448* (0.207)	-0.265 [#] (0.151)
Δ Index of Consumer Sentiment	Short-term	0.088 (0.062)	0.008 (0.048)
Index of Consumer Sentiment _{t-1}	Long-term	0.113 [#] (0.059)	0.023 (0.042)
Constant		18.154 (17.563)	29.352 [#] (14.801)
N		37	37
Adjusted R ²		0.440	0.248
Box-Ljung Q Test		7.606	7.941
p-value		0.960	0.91

*p<0.05, #p<0.10, two tailed tests; standard errors in parentheses

following year, decreasing from there such that nearly the total impact of the long-term effect is felt after five years.

While general satisfaction readily informs confidence in state government, public policy preferences influence levels of confidence not immediately, but at the next time period, with a long-term coefficient of -0.45 . (The short-term coefficient is not significant.) While others find few connections between ideology and views of subnational government at the individual level (Roeder 1994; Uslaner 2001), in the aggregate we find that as the public's policy preferences move in a conservative direction, confidence in state government climbs. A decrease of one point in public policy mood in a conservative direction would have no immediate effect, but in the next period would increase trust in state government 0.28 points, with a significant total effect of increasing confidence by 0.71 points over time.¹⁴

Citizen evaluations of economic health are also connected to the dynamics of confidence in state government, but surprisingly, only the long-term effect is statistically significant, indicating that economic evaluations are not contemporaneously incorporated into assessments of confidence. The cumulative dynamic effect of economic evaluations is 0.18, so that as economic optimism grows, confidence in state governments also builds. A five-point increase in the Index of Consumer Sentiment has a total dynamic effect of confidence in state government of nearly a one-point increase. When the economy is strong, people report more confidence in not only national government (Keele 2007), but also state government. Together, the effects of these general national factors indicates that how people see their state governments is driven at least in part by the state of the nation and general preferences about government.

Turning to the local government model, we see a similar pattern of results: economic health and general satisfaction are both positively associated with confidence in local government, but here only the policy mood measure is significant. Again, when public preferences move in a conservative direction, confidence in local government grows. A one-point movement in public policy mood in a conservative direction would have no significant immediate effect, but in the next time period would increase trust in local government 0.11 points, with a significant total effect of increasing confidence by 0.66 points over time.

Thus, we cannot reject the argument that public confidence in subnational governments is independent of national trends; factors like the economy that are so important in explaining evaluations of national institutions also are reflected in confidence assessments of state government. Yet even if confidence in subnational government is partially explained by national factors,

it does not exclude the possibility that specific localized factors also help explain the variance in public confidence over time. As such, we next consider whether factors specific to subnational government drive the movements in public confidence, utilizing measures related to the quality of life in communities and the balance of power across levels of government.

In the first model reported in Table 3, we focus on structural explanations. The first is the balance of power across federal levels, measured as the total federal outlays to states and localities, standardized by the gross domestic product. The second is the fiscal health of the state or locality, measured as the total revenues of state or local governments divided by total expenditures. High values indicate greater fiscal health of the states, and they are expected

Table 3. Intergovernmental Factors and Trends in Confidence in Subnational Government

		Δ State Confidence	Δ State Confidence	Δ Local Confidence	Δ Local Confidence
Y	t_{-1}	-0.346* (0.106)	-0.317* (0.109)	-0.402* (0.132)	-0.352* (0.146)
Δ Aid to States and Localities	Short-term	-1.985 (4.334)	—	0.675 (3.147)	—
Aid to State and Localities t_{-1}	Long-term	4.322* (1.586)	—	1.401 (1.013)	—
Δ Fiscal Health	Short-term	0.149 (0.106)	—	0.505* (0.251)	—
Fiscal Health t_{-1}	Long-term	0.290* (0.120)	—	0.525# (0.308)	—
Δ State and Local Employees	Short-term	-0.737 (1.052)	—	-1.250 (0.817)	—
State and Local Employees t_{-1}	Long-term	-0.331* (0.149)	—	-0.224# (0.122)	—
Δ Community Satisfaction	Short-term	—	0.235 (0.320)	—	0.142 (0.253)
Community Satisfaction t_{-1}	Long-term	—	-0.447* (0.157)	—	-0.157 (0.127)
Δ Social Capital	Short-term	—	1.540* (0.637)	—	0.943# (0.470)
Social Capital t_{-1}	Long-term	—	0.528* (0.241)	—	0.462* (0.177)
Constant		-1.225 (14.948)	30.958* (11.492)	-14.516 (24.191)	18.488# (9.449)
N		37	28	37	28
Adjusted R ²		0.371	0.430	0.257	0.310
Box-Ljung Q Test		16.846	11.115	10.750	10.111
p-value		0.396	0.519	0.825	0.606

*p<0.05, #p<0.10, two tailed tests; standard errors in parentheses

to promote greater citizen confidence in subnational government. Finally, we consider the size of subnational government, measured as the share of the population employed by state and local governments. The expectation is that as state and local governments grow in size, public confidence in these institutions will decline.

Again, we find that these factors have stronger explanatory power for the dynamics of confidence in state government than the movements in local government confidence. Considering first the deployment of federal funds to subnational government, we find that the more federal monies dispersed to the states, the greater confidence people place in state governments. Jennings (1998) indicates that support for the national government is based in part in the power it holds. When states have greater resources to accomplish policy goals, the public gains confidence in government.

This is counterbalanced, however, by the consequences of growth. When the size of state and local governments grows, measured by the number of those employed by the subnational government, confidence in state government drops (the total dynamic effect is significant, with a coefficient of -0.95 and a standard error of 0.45). The fiscal health of the states also positively predicts confidence in state government. When state governments are managing their monies well, citizens tend to have greater levels of confidence in their policymaking abilities. Clearly, trends in confidence in state government reflect changes in the performance of government.¹⁵ The pattern of insignificant short-term effects and significant long-term effects suggests that the responsiveness of public confidence to changes in governmental performance is not contemporaneous, but occurs after a delay. This may be a function of the incremental nature of changes that occur in budgets and personnel, or may simply represent the time it takes for the public to recognize and then respond to changes in the size of government and balance of federal power.

In the case of confidence in local government, however, these performance measures explain less of the series' dynamics. While the fiscal health of local governments has a significant positive effect in the short term and the size of subnational government has a significant and negative long-term effect, neither is significant when we consider the total dynamic effects of these factors.¹⁶ Our inability to explain changes in confidence in local government could be a sign that these evaluations are less responsive to changes in government performance and driven by other unmodeled factors, or perhaps a reflection of the fact that confidence in local government is simply less variable over time.

Next, we consider the relationship between community life and confi-

dence in subnational government. First, we consider the effects of citizen ratings of community life. This measure was created using the same process as the dependent variables, using seven different survey questions administered over fifty times, relating to assessments of satisfaction with community life and support for the direction the community is heading. We also consider the effects of social capital, using a measure created by Keele (2005).

Results of the error correction model are shown in the second and fourth columns of Table 3. The quality of life in local communities has little effect on confidence in state and local government. Confidence in local government is not related to how people rate the quality of life in their communities, while positive reports of community life are negatively related to confidence in state government. Social capital, on the other hand, influences the dynamics of confidence in both levels of government. The total dynamic effect of social capital on confidence in state governments is 1.67 (standard error of 0.68), while the total effect in the local government model is 1.31 (standard error of 0.53). These effects are felt both contemporaneously and over the long term. A one-point increase in social capital increases confidence in state government contemporaneously by one and a half points, and increases confidence in local governments by nearly one point. The long-term effects are more modest, with a one-point increase in social capital increasing confidence in state government by 0.2 points the next period, with an effect duration of about seven periods. The long-term effects of confidence in local government are slightly smaller, but follow a similar dynamic over time. When people are more engaged in their communities and have more trust in the people around them, they express greater confidence in the governments that are most proximate.

CONCLUSIONS

At the national level, people often lack familiarity with the business of the Supreme Court, and instead use diffuse governmental support to inform their evaluations of the institution (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). We might expect the same phenomenon in regards to governments below the national level, where confidence in state and local government has little to do with the specifics of subnational politics. Nevertheless, even if public confidence in state and local government builds on this kind of diffuse support, we find that in the aggregate, citizens have evolving assessments about subnational governments, responsive to national trends as well as the specific business of state and local authorities.

In part, evaluations of state and local government reflect national trends.

The economic tides that are central to explaining support for government leadership at the national level also affect confidence in state government, while local governments remain more immune from economic trends. General preferences for more or less government also influence confidence in both state and local government, with the conservatism of the public associated with greater levels of confidence in subnational governments. We also find that evaluations of state and local government are influenced by a unique set of factors. For state governments, these include the relative role of states versus localities in the federal system and the size of government. For both state and local government, the connections between people and their communities in the form of social capital are significantly related to levels of confidence. When levels of interpersonal trust and civic engagement increase, confidence in subnational government climbs. While the public's engagement in state and local politics is often limited, the dynamics of public confidence in subnational government respond to meaningful trends in federalism and bureaucratic management. This evidence of citizen responsiveness strengthens the case for representation and accountability at the subnational level.

These results also speak to debates about the distinct politics of state and local governments. Studies of subnational politics are sometimes met by criticism that the subnational level is merely a microcosm of national-level trends and patterns, where state and local governments mirror what happens in Washington and on the national political scene.¹⁷ While we find an imprint for national politics on the dynamics of confidence in state and local government, we also find that changes in confidence are substantive, driven by public evaluations of the performance and capabilities of state and local government.

Adding to this evidence of distinctness is the fact that the explanations for confidence in state government also differ from those that explain support for local governments. For instance, evaluations of economic health hold greater weight in assessments of state government than local government. If confidence in each level of government were closely intertwined, declines in trust in the national government would be particularly worrisome for the threats posed to the legitimacy of government. Our findings suggest that declines in confidence in national government will not necessarily affect confidence in other levels of government. Instead, public confidence in subnational government can not only erode, but also increase in response to the performance of state and local governments.

In all, these connections between state and local environments and the dynamics of confidence in subnational government are consequential for

several reasons. First, state and local governments are responsible for many of the policies that have the greatest impact on people's day-to-day lives, including education, public utilities, many social services, welfare, and crime and corrections. Because of this, attention only to how people feel about the government at the national level neglects one of the most common route by which government comes into people's everyday lives—through policies, programs, and laws crafted at the state and local level.

We show here that changes in government performance cause public confidence in subnational government to rise and fall. These changes in trust in turn can have consequences for the operation of state and local government, particularly given the increased opportunities to translate mistrust into governmental change. At the national level, mistrust in government can influence electoral preferences, translating into greater support for challenger candidates (Hetherington 1999). At the state level, the avenues for citizens to influence policy and change government are even greater. In a number of states, voters are able to use ballot initiatives, legislative referenda, and gubernatorial recall powers to have a more direct influence on government. Indeed, Karp (1995) finds that trust in government is one of the best predictors of public support for legislative term limits. In addition, political influence is often more accessible at the state and local level. Participating in town meetings and school board sessions offers opportunities to engage in politics that can be appealing due to their proximity, their relatively smaller size, and their accessibility. Thus, declines in governmental confidence at the state and local level can be more easily translated from opinion into action.

The dynamics of confidence in government across federal levels are also consequential for the allocation of government resources and the institution of federalism. Debates concerning the federal system have driven discussions of American politics since the founding. At times, the national government holds greater influence, while in other eras, state and local governments take on greater policy responsibility. Previous research connects increasing confidence in state governments to public support of the transfer of greater policy authority to the states (Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Roeder 1994). In addition, public sentiments about different levels of government are connected to people's feelings about which level of government should be responsible for specific programs and areas (Schneider and Jacoby 2003). Thus, understanding the tides of citizen confidence in government informs the balance of power in a federal system.

Trust is key in representative government; if people are reluctant to entrust power to government, it will be harder for politicians to accomplish policy goals. The ability of government to commit resources to collective policy goals

and to take risks in policymaking depends on the level of trust citizens hold in their government (Bianco 1994; Gamson 1968). While the legitimacy of state and local government is not likely threatened by changes in public confidence, the dynamics of trust could be especially consequential for subnational governments. The states are laboratories of policy innovation, where governments create novel programs and policies that can spread to other regions and the national government. The ability of states to innovate can depend on the public's trust in activist state governments, and this confidence in subnational government reflects both the performance of state and local governments and the quality of life in communities.

APPENDIX

Table A1. Confidence in State Government Series

Question wording	Correlation	n
(I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society, and I'd like you to tell me how much confidence you have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little confidence.) . . . Your state government.	0.918	14
How much confidence and trust do you have in the government of the state where you live when it comes to handling state problems—a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?	0.856	11
(I'd like your opinion of some organizations and institutions.) . . . Your state government . . . Do you have a very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of your state government?	0.910	4
As far as people in charge of running state government are concerned, do you feel they really know what most people they represent or serve really think and want, or do you feel they are mostly out of touch with the people they are supposed to lead or help?	1.000	2
As far as the people in charge of running state government are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?	0.954	15
How much trust and confidence do you have in your state government to do a good job in carrying out its responsibilities?	0.955	6
How much of the time do you trust your state government to do what is right: Just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?	0.746	8

Table A2. Confidence in Local Government Series

Question wording	Correlation	n
(Here is a list of things having to do with community life. Would you go down that list and for each one tell me how you would rate it here in your area—excellent, good, fair or poor?) The local government	0.912	3
And how much confidence and trust do you have in the local government in the area where you live when it comes to handling local problems—a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?	0.659	12
(I am going to read you a list of institutions in American society, and I'd like you to tell me how much confidence you have in each one—a great deal, quite a lot, some, or very little confidence.) Your local government. (I'd like your opinion of some organizations and institutions.) . . . Your local government . . . Do you have a very favorable, mostly favorable, mostly unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of your local government?	0.762	13
(Let me ask you about a number of different types of leaders.) As far as people in charge of running local government are concerned, do you feel they really know what most people they represent or serve really think and want, or do you feel they are mostly out of touch with the people they are supposed to lead or help?	1.000	2
As far as the people in charge of running local government are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?	0.791	17
How much of the time do you trust the local government to do what is right: Just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or none of the time?	0.698	12
How much trust and confidence do you have in your local government to do a good job in carrying out its responsibilities?	0.846	5

ENDNOTES

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1. This is based on Gallup Polls conducted January 20–25, 1936 and June 16–21, 1937.

2. This is based on responses to the 1968 National Election Study.

3. Arguably the use of aggregated data also allows us greater ability to explore the larger trends that affect approval across states and localities, as the noise of such idiosyncratic factors is reduced and national trends are more easily recognized if present (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002).

4. Cross-sectional studies indicate that state contexts may not heavily determine levels of public trust, as Hetherington and Nugent (2001) find only a limited effect for state context in explaining confidence in state government.

5. These patterns of aggregate subnational trends often differ from those at the nation-

al level. State and local governments can accumulate debt at very different rates than the national government due to the differing policy mandates of each. In terms of public opinion, Roeder (1994) shows that people collectively express greater optimism about state economies than the national economy. Psychologically, we also know people tend to express greater positivity about local than national phenomena (Mutz and Flemming 1999).

6. This approach has been used to create a number of different opinion time series (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997; Durr, Martin, and Wolbrecht 1993; Keele 2007; Kellstedt 2000).

7. The algorithm reports how well each set of survey questions loads to the overall construct, as well as the percent variance that the items explain. For the state confidence measure, the correlations of the component measures to the overall series range from 0.75 to 0.96, while for the local government measure, the range spans 0.66 to 0.91. In the state confidence measure, the items explain 83 percent of the variance, while the items in the local government measure explain 61 percent of the variance. In sum, the measurement models fit the data reasonably well.

8. We rely on a Bewley transformation to calculate the total dynamic effect, or long-range multiplier, of each independent variable (Bewley 1979; DeBoef and Keele 2008). The Bewley transformation is useful because it not only summarizes the total effect of X , but also provides a standard error associated with this coefficient.

9. The same pattern of results is found when we model these relationships using a lagged-dependent-variable, partial adjustment model.

10. The coefficient on the total effect is -0.01 and the standard error is 0.20 .

11. We also conducted a set of Granger tests to investigate the relationships between confidence in different levels of government. These tests on the relationships between confidence in state and local governments do not reveal Granger causality in either direction. We also find that confidence in national government does not Granger cause confidence in state or local government, though we find some support for confidence in state government as a Granger cause of trust in national government.

12. The correlations of the component measures to the overall series range from 0.60 to 0.90, with the items explaining 70 percent of the variance.

13. Granger tests do not support for the opposite order of effects, with changes in confidence in state or local government Granger causing changes in policy mood.

14. The standard error on the coefficient of the total effect is 0.30 .

15. It is possible that these intergovernmental factors are either a cause or consequence of policy mood, where changes in public conservatism are connected to the size of government or balance of federal power. We find that policy mood is independent of the number of federal dollars sent to states and localities as well as the size of subnational government; Granger tests in both directions were insignificant. Nonetheless, it seems likely that these series are interrelated in some fashion, and when we include policy mood in this state confidence model, the effects of mood are not significant and the effects of government size and outlays to subnational government are significant only at the 0.10 level. In the case of local government confidence, mood is not significant when added to the model, and with its inclusion, the effect of the size of subnational government is no longer significant. This suggests that there is some shared variance between the series.

16. The coefficient of the total effect of the fiscal health of local government is 1.08 and

the standard error is 0.78. For governmental size, the coefficient of the total effect is -0.51 and the standard error is 0.31.

17. Brace (1993), for instance, finds that patterns of state economic development are constrained by national economic trends. In other research, scholars debate the degree to which gubernatorial elections are simply referenda on public evaluations of the President and national government (Chubb 1988; Holbrook 1987; Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991).

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