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Let's Talk About Trust: Exploring the Importance of Communication in Building and Maintaining Public Trust in Local Government

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Let's Talk About Trust: Exploring the Importance of Communication in Building and Maintaining Public Trust in Local Government

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Dedication

To my husband, Jeff, and my son, Trevor, for your patience and tolerance throughout this journey.

To my parents, Bob and Martha, for supporting my academic pursuits. I now appreciate the many sacrifices you made in my favor. And, special thanks to Bob for instilling in me (albeit subconsciously) the passion for public service.

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Abstract

In the decades leading up to the 1960s, the majority of citizens trusted the government to do what was right. But as the country advanced toward 1970, this idyllic state transformed suddenly and unexpectedly. The decline of trust that has characterized decades ever since is of concern because there are some troubling consequences of public distrust. These impacts include disobedience, obstinance, disrespect, and selfishness. Some fear that incessant distrust threatens to erode the democratic principles on which this nation is founded. This study considers whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of public trust citizens have in their local government. This research question is based on three compelling ideas that emerge from prior literature. The first is that good communication is key to building trust. The second is that face-to-face dialog is the most effective method of communication. And third, that local government is a good place to start a trust-building effort. Sixteen specific recommendations emerge from this study, most of which pertain to public administration skills and traits. For example, the results suggest that communication characteristics like responsiveness and promptness are important factors to citizens. The results also imply that a public officials' mannerisms – namely whether they are kind, helpful, and consistent – are important trust factors, as well. The author also considers the future of public leadership and the public administration profession through the lens of the recommendations.

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Chapter I: Introduction

I Love Lucy and *Leave it to Beaver*; poodle skirts and drive-in theaters; Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley – these are all icons of the 1950s, a decade remembered for post-war economic growth and cohesive social norms. Contrast these images with current headlines: mass shootings, protests against mask mandates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, nation wide riots in response to the death of George Floyd, and the January 6, 2021 storming of the United States Capitol Building when angry citizens protested the results of the 2020 presidential election. What happened in the last 70 years that resulted in this drastic societal change? Certainly, many factors are at play and society has changed in countless ways. This writing focuses on just one factor that has changed considerably during this era: public trust in government.

From about 1930 into the 1960s, the majority of citizens trusted the government to do what is right (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). But, as the country advanced through the middle of the 1960s, this idyllic state transformed suddenly and unexpectedly. Today, only about 20 percent of adults say that they trust the government to do what is right (Pew Research Center, 2020). This statistic is of concern because scholars have identified some troubling consequences of public distrust. These impacts include disobedience, obstinance, disrespect, and selfishness. Further, some fear that incessant distrust threatens to erode the democratic principles on which this nation is founded (Houston & Harding, 2013).

Trust is fragile. It can take a long time to build, and it is easy to destroy. And once destroyed, it is very difficult to restore (Hurley, 2012). In light of trust’s fragility and the detrimental ramifications of low public trust, the decline of trust in government is a topic worthy of consideration and study. The research question at the heart of this study contemplates whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of public trust citizens have in their local government. The paper is broken into five chapters. Following this Introduction, the next chapter outlines relevant literature and explains why *communication* and *local government* are at the center of the study. Chapter III describes the research framework and mixed methods approach used to examine the research question. Chapter IV details the data collection process and summarizes the results of the data analysis. Finally, the paper closes with a synopsis of key findings and suggestions. Sixteen recommendations emerge from this study, most of which pertain to public administration skills and traits. The author also considers the future of public leadership and the public administration profession through the lens of these recommendations. It is the author's hope that the results of this study will provide actionable insights as to how public officials can regain and maintain a trusting relationship with their citizens.

Chapter II: Review of Literature

As the country recovered from the Great Depression, it entered a golden era of public trust that has remained elusive ever since (Newland, 2015). From about 1930 into the 1960s, the public mood was generally positive and civic-minded (Bennett, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Election turnout was on the rise and Americans were supportive of their children going into public service (Putnam, 2000). In 1958, seventy-eight percent of citizens trusted the government to do what is right (Bannister & Connolly, 2011) and over half (59 percent) believed that politicians could be trusted to do what was best for the country (Bennett, 2001). The majority (85 percent) also reported that they were aware of the government's impact on their lives and most (76 percent) saw this impact as positive (Bennett, 2001).

But as the country advanced through the 1960s, this idyllic state transformed suddenly and unexpectedly. Throughout the last three decades of the 20th century, and into the 21st century, the public has become increasingly dissatisfied with the government (Houston & Harding, 2013; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). For example, about 10 years ago, the nation crossed a critical threshold. Prior to that time, Americans' views of those holding or seeking public office were predominantly positive. However, in 2009 the public's views officially transitioned from being more positive to more negative (Saad, 2011a). In the years that have followed, the public's trust in government has hovered at record lows. Today, only 20 percent of adults say that they trust the government to do what is right (Pew Research Center, 2020; Saad, 2011a).

But what is the root cause of this abrupt and persistent decline? Can it be attributed to a few key events, or is the stimulus more elusive? And more importantly, does the decline in trust really matter? Or said differently, what are the impacts of the decline in trust? The chapter that follows begins by attempting to shed light on these fundamental questions. From there, the discussion considers two broad themes surrounding the topic of public trust in government. The first involves the relationship between communication and trust, and the importance of face-to-face dialog is emphasized. The second theme concerns the role that local governments can play in building and maintaining a trusting relationship with the public.

Cause of the Decline

There is substantial debate among scholars as to the cause of the decline in trust. However, it is interesting to note that public trust is not the only element to follow this declining trend during the same period of time. In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putman analyzes the decline of social capital, which he describes as the "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (2000, p. 19). Like public trust, indicators of social capital (e.g., political participation, civic engagement, religious affiliations, volunteerism, and more) grew during the first half of the 20th century before commencing a steady decline during the decades that followed (Putnam, 2000).

In his detailed analysis, Putnam (2000) concludes that much of the decline in social capital (of which trust is a critical component) can be attributed to four general forces. Pressures of time and money, as well as suburbanization and sprawl, are both minor contributing factors. However, the rise of electronic communication and entertainment (namely television) and generational changes are more compelling explanations (Putnam, 2000). He concludes that generational change – "the slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved children and grandchildren"

(Putnam, 2000, p. 283) – has been a powerful factor in the decline of social capital. The civic generation – those citizens who were adults during the great world wars – had a heightened sense of unified civic responsibility (Putnam, 2000). By contrast, the generation that came to age in the 1960s experienced a variety of controversial and divisive events. The civil rights movement, the King and Kennedy assassinations, Vietnam, and Watergate (Putnam, 2000) were some of the most notable occurrences. Other factors included inflation, unemployment, and the energy crisis (Birkland, 2011). While there is no agreement in this regard, it is possible that these factors and forces moved the individual to the center of politics and deprioritized the value and importance of community (Harwood, 2019; Krastev, 2012). This analysis attempts to illustrate the complexity of public trust and the difficulty of declaring a definitive cause.

But before moving on, it is important to touch on several clarifying points. First, while the decline of social capital and public trust are correlated, the concepts are not synonymous, and their relationship is not necessarily causal. Trust is just a single thread in the complex fabric of social capital. Given the labyrinthian characteristics of social capital and the mysterious characteristics of its deterioration, it is virtually impossible to declare a definitive relationship between the two factors. However, given the affiliation between trust and social capital, it is not unreasonable to speculate that some of the factors that impacted the decline in the latter might have also influenced the former.

Second, there are a number of dissenting opinions. Some speculate that public trust naturally fluctuates over time (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Bennett, 2001), which suggests that the current low may again cycle upwards, presumably on its own accord. Another counterargument points to data collection issues. For instance, Bennett (2001) observed that there is limited survey data prior to 1965. Survey questions designed to measure public trust began in earnest in the 1960s and some argue that 50 years of data is not adequate to diagnose a trend (Bennett, 2001). A final challenge offered by Alford (2001) is that the current distrusting state may be the norm, in which case the trusting era of the mid-twentieth century was the anomaly. These dissenting views, while minority opinions, provide important restraints when considering the cause of the trust decline.

The Impact of Distrust

The inherent desire to trust others has long been central to human existence. In his book, *The Decision to Trust,* Hurley (2012) notes that "human beings have an instinctive need to cooperate and rely on each other in order to satisfy their most basic emotional, psychological, and material needs" (p. 7). That said, distrust in and of itself is not necessarily bad. In fact, a certain amount of distrust is essential and desirable in a democracy (Canel, 2020; Chanley et al., 2001; Hurley, 2012; Krastev, 2012; Whiteley et al., 2016). Certainly, there are some civil servants with self-serving agendas who are not deserving of public trust (Canel, 2020). For this reason, most democracies institutionalize a certain amount of distrust through systems of checks and balances (Canel, 2020). There are also numerous reforms that are grounded in healthy skepticism (Citrin & Luks, 2001). Examples of such reforms include anticorruption regulation, campaign finance reforms, and ethics standards. These examples of distrust are healthy and are not problematic so long as the overall level of trust remains stable (Canel, 2020).

But some fear that incessant distrust could erode the democratic principles on which this nation is founded (Houston & Harding, 2013). Scholars have identified several potentially concerning consequences of enduring distrust. For one, an untrusting public is less likely to cooperate and comply with public initiatives (Houston & Harding, 2013). Without public trust, societal interactions become less reciprocal and less efficient, forcing an increased reliance on formal institutions to maintain order and civility. Regulatory frameworks gradually take the place of informal networks and general reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). And over time, this reliance on formalized regulations puts strain on the public sector. Governments have to put more resources into compliance and inspection and invest more energy into justifying actions and decisions (Canel, 2020). The public health initiatives and mandates surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic illustrate this force in action. In their study about how the pandemic impacted public trust in science, Eichengreen, Aksoy, and Saka (2021) concluded that public distrust translated to lower compliance with health-related policies despite ample scientific evidence backing government standards. This is one example of how untrusting citizens can come to view public messages as propaganda (Canel, 2020).

A concept that is closely related to cooperation is volunteerism. Citizens who do not trust their government may be less likely to sacrifice their personal self-interest for the common good (Chanley et al., 2001; Whiteley et al., 2016). In fact, evidence indicates that volunteerism has followed the same declining trend as other indicators of social capital, with volunteering becoming more about giving money than giving time (Putnam, 2000). This type of trend threatens to undermine critical functions such as military service and the type of volunteerism that is particularly important in local level government (Van Ryzín, 2011).

Another consideration is political turnover. Representative democracy relies on voters trusting political leaders to make decisions on their behalf (Hansen & Kjaer, 2020). When trust declines, citizens may be more likely to vote against incumbents and may look to new candidates to right perceived wrongs. They may even seek out candidates with no prior public experience. By way of example, former President Donald Trump is the only United States president that had neither political nor military experience before entering the White House. Although fresh perspectives have merit, constant turnover threatens the political stability needed to tackle complex, long-term problems (Bernstein, 2001). And on a related note, potential candidates may be less likely to pursue public office when they perceive the public as impossible to please (Bernstein, 2001).

Finally, Bernstein (2001) found that distrusting people may be less likely to seek out information. Lack of information and understanding can contribute to false rumors and conspiracies that can further erode public trust (Gorman & Gorman, 2017; Sloman & Fernback, 2017). It is relevant to note that Oxford Dictionary's word of the year in 2016 was *post-truth* (Flood, 2016), which describes circumstances in which people respond more to feelings and beliefs than to facts (Flood, 2016; Canel, 2020). To complicate this consideration, government policies and public procedures have become increasingly complex over time. Therefore, really understanding public affairs requires genuine curiosity and a desire to learn.

Each of these potential impacts is concerning, but what is even more troublesome is the compounded cyclical pattern that can emerge. For instance, consider first that declining trust may reduce cooperation. If the public becomes less cooperative, the government will have to resort to stricter oversight to maintain order and protect the public good. Citizens are likely to resent this punitive progression and could protest by voting against incumbents in the name of change. However, novice officials may lack the experience and networks needed to make meaningful transformations, incensing the public even further. All the while, the public could become less engaged and less informed. Whiteley et al. (2016) refers to this detrimental pattern as the "spiral of mistrust" (p. 250) and this cycle has the potential to continue for generations (Bernstein, 2001). In the worst-case scenario, civilized society begins to separate at the seams as politics and public life become more about winning and losing (Harwood, 2019), and factions of distrusting citizens start building alternate societies (Canel, 2020), which are potential breeding grounds for guerilla activity (O'Leary, 2014). One could argue that the January 6, 2021 storming of the United States Capitol is a present-day illustration of this force in action.

What is disturbingly ironic is that governance today requires more collaboration, volunteerism, and trust than prior generations. As public management has evolved over the last 100 years, it has moved from vertical and bureaucratic to horizontal and cooperative (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Emerson and Nabatchi (2015) argue that a more collaborative approach is needed to deal with the ever-increasing number of *wicked problems* – those problems that are difficult or impossible to solve due to incomplete or contradictory information, rapidly changing environments, and complex interdependencies that span jurisdictions (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). If trust is a critical ingredient for cooperation, what does that say for the nation's collective ability to solve today's vexing problems?

Before proceeding, it is important to consider an alternative perspective. While the potential impacts outlined above appear serious, some scholars suggest that there is no need to be alarmed. Citrin and Luks (2001) observed that while Americans may distrust public officials, they remain committed to the democratic principles on which the nation is founded. They further conclude that "there is little evidence that lower levels of political trust have produced a nation of scofflaws" (Citrin & Luks, 2001, p. 26). In the end, while this counter argument, and those discussed earlier, warrant consideration, they are neither strong enough to overshadow the prevailing opinion nor cause to abandon efforts to build and rebuild public trust.

So, now what? How does a government go about building or rebuilding trust? A great number of scholars have worked to answer this question, generating a vast body of research. The section that follows endeavors to sift through this literature in an attempt to identify some of the most promising strategies to build and rebuild public trust. From this examination, three strategic themes emerge from prior research. The first is that human interaction is key to building trust. Second, within the context of this interaction, face-to-face communication promises to be the most effective strategy and therefore critical to the trust-building process. And third, the best place to begin an initiative to build public trust is at the local government level.

The Essence of the Elephant

There is an ancient Indian parable about a group of blind men who have never before encountered an elephant but strive to conceptualize the creature by touching it (see Figure 1). According to John Godfrey Saxe's (n.d.) version of the story, the first man falls against the elephant's broad side and proclaims that the elephant is nothing more than a wall. The second man happens to touch the tusk and concludes that the elephant looks like a spear. The third touches the trunk, and the fourth the leg, and they deduce that the elephant looks like a snake and tree trunk, respectively. The fifth man feels the ear and imagines that the elephant is akin to a fan, and the sixth man touches the tail and believes the elephant is nothing more than a rope. The men proceed to argue over who is right, sure that their own understanding is the only possible explanation. And yet, "each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong" (Saxe, n.d.). The allegory of the blind men and the elephant teaches that when something large and complex is broken into numerous separate parts, it can lose its meaning.

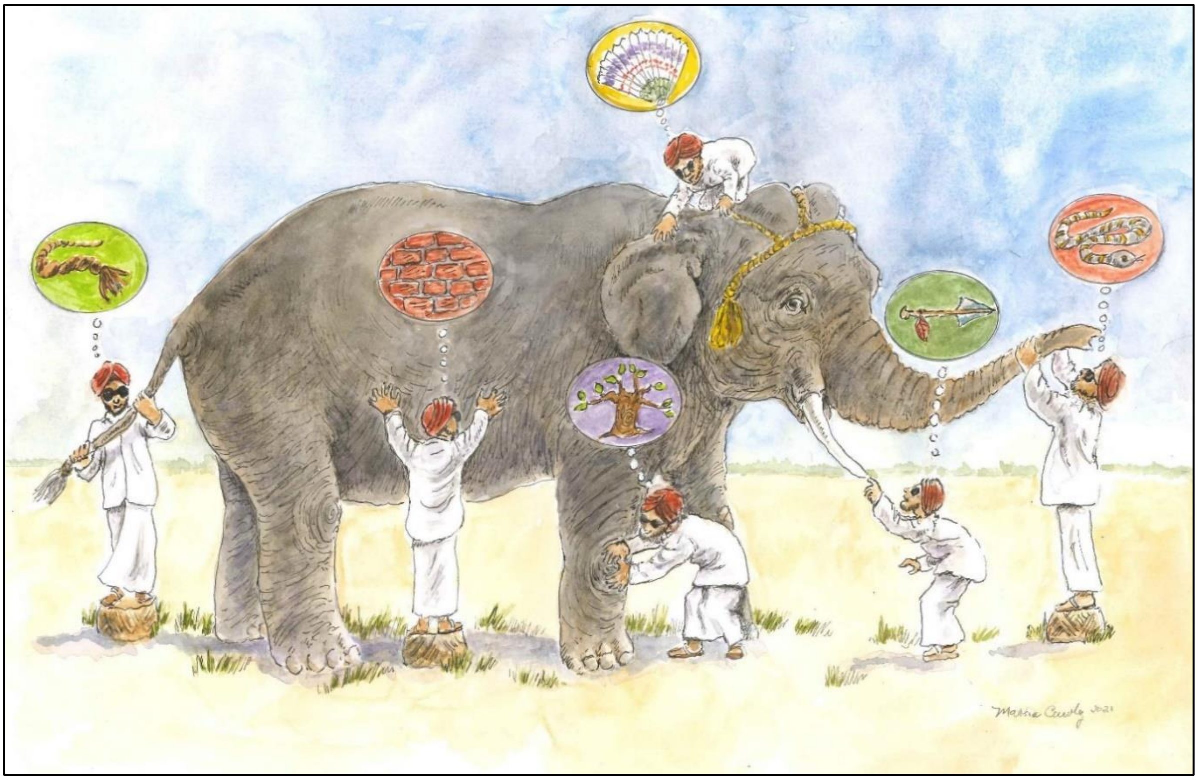

Figure 1. The blind men and the elephant (Source: Cawley, 2021)

Trust research suffers much the same fate. Trust is an expansive and complex concept and disentangling the factors that generate trust is difficult because they are so interrelated (Citrin & Luks, 2001). The body of research that examines trust is wide-ranging. Some studies focus on partisanship (e.g., Uslaner, 2001), others concentrate on the role of public administrators (e.g., Marlowe, 2004), others look at the effect of internet technology (e.g., Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006), and the list goes on. Each study asks how a particular factor relates to trust; each considers a part of the elephant, but all risk falling short of capturing the true essence of the concept. Consequently, research results can be ambiguous and even contradictory. The goal of this section is to weed out the less persuasive arguments in search of the most compelling ideas. In the spirit of the opening allegory, this section seeks to reveal the essence of the elephant, so to speak. Like a bullseye, with concentric circles moving inward toward a desired target, the remainder of this section examines trust factors from those that are peripheral to this writing to those that are most relevant.

The Outer Limits

First, consider briefly some of the trust factors that are tangential to this study. These concepts are considered peripheral here primarily because they are not easily influenced by a person or entity looking to build trust. And, since developing strategies to build trust is an objective of this writing, the factors discussed here are not particularly relevant. In this way, these factors establish the outer scope of the project. That said, those looking to build trust should at least be aware of these considerations so that they can anticipate how they might impact the trust-building process. There are two general categories of factors that comprise the outer limits of this writing: external factors and inherent factors.

External Factors

External factors are those that are completely external to the trust-building process. They are described as external because they are not directly related to the trustor (the person who is deciding whether to trust another person or entity) or the trustee (the person or entity seeking trust) (Hurley, 2012). There are a number of external factors. However, given that these are not the focus of this writing, only two examples are discussed here: national security and the national economy (Chanley et al., 2001).

With regard to the former, periods of international crises generally seem to produce more trusting attitudes at the national level (Chanley et al., 2001) as people pull together during times of shared adversity (Putnam, 2000). Alford (2001) notes that this phenomenon is commonly referred to as a "rally round the flag effect" (p. 45). This type of trusting rebound occurred after both major world wars and, more recently, after the September 11, 2001 attacks (Birkland, 2011; Putnam, 2000). However, as Gozgor (2021) notes, this effect tends to dissipate quickly.

There is also evidence that economic factors drive confidence in government (Chanley et al., 2001). The United States experienced this type of adjustment during the 2007 recession when perceptions of governmental honesty and integrity declined along with the economy (Whiteley et al., 2016). Similarly, nations with the greatest income disparities experience lower levels of trust (Hurley, 2012). That said, some scholars caution that the association between the economy and trust has weaknesses. For example, Hetherington and Nugent (2001) saw this association weaken as the focus shifted from the federal government to local level jurisdictions. This is logical because it is federal level policies that have the most impact on the national economy. Another example of a challenge to this theory comes from Uslaner (2001) and Citrin and Luks (2001) who both concluded that personal finances were more impactful than the national economy.

Inherent Factors

Moving inward from the outer ring of the target, inherent factors are a step closer to the bullseye. As the name suggests, these factors are inherent to the trustor, making them a bit closer to the purpose of this writing, because they are directly related to the trustor-trustee relationship. However, as with external factors, inherent factors are difficult – impossible in some cases – for the trustee to influence. The following inherent factors are discussed briefly below: demographics, partisanship, and psychological disposition. Again, while these factors are not central to the focus of this paper, they establish limits for a trustee's efforts.

Demographics. When it comes to establishing trust, demographics have questionable significance. Some scholars have concluded that demographic characteristics such as race, sex, and education emerge as significant indicators of trust in government (e.g., Brewer & Sigelman, 2002) while others contend the opposite (e.g., Alford, 2001; Citrin & Luks, 2001; Job, 2005). The paragraphs that follow consider these factors in a bit more detail, beginning with age, sex, and race.

When it comes to age, some have concluded that younger individuals tend to be more trusting than their elders (Alford, 2001; Hurley, 2012; Uslaner, 2001), but this conclusion is not unanimous. For instance, Gozgor (2021) reached the opposite determination, stating that public trust increases along with age. Houston and Harding (2013) reached yet a third conclusion, finding instead that age has a nonlinear effect on trust. They found that individuals became increasingly more negative about government administrators until age 56, at which point they become increasingly more positive. But maybe it is not age, per se, that makes a difference; maybe generational differences are more important. As noted earlier, generations develop different characteristics as a result of their collective experiences. Members of the civic generation, who were adults during the great world wars, tend to be more civically engaged than their children and grandchildren (Putnam, 2000). Therefore, it is possible that the age factor may be more complex than at first it would appear.

Examinations of sex and race have also resulted in mixed findings. Sex results exhibit similar contradictions with some researchers finding that sex is not a significant indicator of trust (Hetherington & Nugent, 2001) and others concluding the opposite. Where a significant relationship is identified, men are typically found to be more trusting than women (Houston & Harding, 2013; Richardson et al., 2001).

Race is similarly ambiguous. Where race is found to be significant, whites typically are more trusting of the political system than blacks (Rahn & Rudolf, 2005; Richardson et al., 2001). But again, others conclude that race is not significant (Hetherington & Nugent, 2001). What is somewhat concerning, given that the country is becoming increasingly diverse, is that levels of trust tend to be lower in locations that are racially varied (Rahn & Rudolph, 2005). However, Rahn and Rudolph (2005) observe that this effect can be moderated by political representation that is reflective of the diversity of its citizenry.

Education and income present different interpretation challenges. The irony about education is that even where it is found to be significant, the findings are mixed. In their examination of trust in the federal court system, Richardson et al., (2001) found that more educated citizens expressed greater confidence in the courts. But they found the opposite when looking at Congress. When it comes to trust in Congress, the researchers found that more educated citizens were less likely to express confidence. Meanwhile, Gozgor (2021) concluded that education is negatively correlated with trust in government.

Income is also somewhat nuanced. Income and trust are generally thought to have a positive relationship (Houston & Harding, 2013; Richardson et al., 2001). On the other hand, Alford (2001) found a more complex association when examined over time. He discovered a curvilinear relationship in which the wealthy were more trusting of the federal government, but only to a point. This trend reverses in 1990 at which time the poor became more trusting. Rahn and Rudolf (2005) reached yet a third conclusion. They focused on the differences between race, ideology, and income and found that trust is lower in areas with wider gaps between the rich and the poor.

One factor that could explain some of these demographic inconsistencies is Alford's (2001) theory about time referenced above. He observed that a relationship that appears significant at one point in time may become insignificant when examined over years. For instance, the gap in the level of trust between groups (e.g., men and women, white and non-white) remains consistent and moves in parallel lines, rising and falling in unison over a period of time. So, while men may appear to be more trusting than women *at one point* in time, trust levels tend to rise and fall together *over many years*. This finding calls into question the relevance of demographics when it comes to understanding trust.

Partisanship. Like demographic characteristics, the relationship between partisanship and trust is complex. Again, some studies suggest there is a significant relationship between the variables (Houston & Harding, 2013; Rahn & Rudolf, 2005; Uslaner, 2001), while others conclude the reverse (Alford, 2001; Marlowe, 2004). But even where results are in agreement over significance, findings are mixed. For instance, Houston and Harding (2013) found that Democrats are more critical than Republicans, while Uslaner (2001) concluded the opposite. However, there may be a rational explanation for this apparent inconsistency. It turns out that the trust a person exhibits in government is influenced by the party that holds the presidency. The party in power tends to be the most trusting party, which could explain the fluctuation (Alford, 2001; Citrin & Luks, 2001; Richardson et al., 2001; Whiteley et al., 2016). So, Democrats tend to be less trusting of government when Republicans are in power, and vice versa (Houston & Harding, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2020).

But partisanship considerations extend beyond the party in power. With partisanship comes political rhetoric and several concerning trends. Media coverage during any election season is full of ads showing politicians not only bashing each other, but also attacking the very government of which they are a part (Hurley, 2012). Brady and Theriault (2001) observed, with irony, that political candidates often run for government by running against it. It has not always been this way. In the 1950s and early 1960s, political candidates championed the legitimacy of government during their campaigns (Fried & Harris, 2001). But, beginning in the mid-1960s, both parties began to attack the political system itself. Today, this self-destruction has become the norm. Political candidates often describe Washington as *broken*, and then explain how they would *fix* it. Fried and Harris (2020) suggest that Donald Trump pushed this strategy to a new extreme by challenging the legitimacy of elections and questioning the credibility of intelligence and law enforcement agencies that participated in investigations against him. When citizens hear candidates criticizing organizations that they already view skeptically, their trust is likely to erode even further (Brady & Theriault, 2001; Fried & Harris, 2020).

Much of the political rhetoric that dominates the media involves exaggeration and oversimplification. Combative politicians tend to oversimplify complex issues and propose quick fixes to solve complicated problems. They cater to emotional and value-based arguments over technical discussions about the complexity of issues (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). After all, thinking through complexity is hard; playing to emotions based on values is easier. However, when the easy solutions fail, the American public is left disappointed. Politicians also tend to exaggerate policy implications “in hopes of not only defeating the policy but also humiliating the policy's proponents in the process” (Brady & Theriault, 2001,

p. 181). A politician might claim his policy will solve society's ills while claiming an opponent's proposal will have draconian effects as a scare tactic. This approach can have similarly detrimental results. Candidates often lose credibility in the eyes of citizens when policy results do not live up to the hype and the public is left disappointed and frustrated when their expectations are not realized (Brady & Theriault, 2001; Harwood, 2019).

There is another interesting pattern that emerges with partisanship. Some observe that neither independents (who exist in the middle of the ideological spectrum) nor extremists (who reside at either end of the continuum) ever emerge as the most trusting group (Alford, 2001; Richardson et al., 2001; Uslaner, 2001). Independents may see both parties as too extreme and may therefore be less likely to trust either one. On the other hand, people with extreme ideologies tend to be frustrated by elected officials, perceiving that they have either gone too far or not far enough (Richardson et al., 2001). What is concerning is that those with extreme viewpoints are the ones who are participating more. Putnam (2000) observed that public participation among moderates has declined more than among those with more extreme views. And, on a somewhat related note, Rahn and Rudolf (2005) find that trust levels tend to be lower in areas characterized by polarized ideologies.

Psychological Disposition. The final factors that make up the outer limits are psychological. Like demographics and partisanship, these characteristics are both inherent to the trustor and difficult for a trustee to influence. One aspect of the trustor's disposition is psychological adjustment. Well-adjusted people tend to have a positive outlook on the world and typically are more willing to trust. Conversely, people who are poorly adjusted tend to see the world as a threatening place and may need additional proof and assurance (Hurley, 2012).

A person's tolerance to risk is also an important psychological factor. Someone who is averse to risk will need to feel like they are in control before they trust (Hurley, 2012). Interestingly, a common cause of perceived risk is ignorance. Sometimes a situation appears risky simply because it is unfamiliar or misunderstood (Hurley, 2012). This is relatively good news for the trustee. Although a trustee cannot easily influence a person's inherent tolerance to risk, they can inform and educate them in an effort to reduce uncertainty (Hurley, 2012).

Finally, consider relative power. Generally speaking, those with little authority and control are more likely to feel vulnerable and consequently less trusting (Hurley, 2012). This presents a challenge for governments looking to build trust because the power distribution between the government and citizens is never symmetrical (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). Government can always fall back on its sovereign power. Therefore, governments would be well served to empower citizens by informing them about how they can influence the decision-making process, thereby taking steps to balance this asymmetry (Schmidthuber et al., 2020). There is evidence that the feeling of having a say about important issues, being informed, and knowing how to get involved are all factors that lead to greater trust in government (Local Government Association, 2013; Schmidthuber et al., 2020).

Putting some of these inherent factors together, consider the difference between trying to build a trusting relationship with someone who is psychologically well-adjusted, risk tolerant, and empowered versus someone who is poorly adjusted, risk averse, and vulnerable. From this perspective, it becomes apparent that some people are inherently more likely to trust than others.

The preceding discussion is intended to draw parameters around the topic at hand. Together, these external factors (e.g., national security, economic conditions, demographics, partisanship, and psychological disposition) represent external forces that influence the trust-building process. Being aware of these forces will help trustees identify trust-building obstacles and opportunities. However, they are not easily influenced and are therefore not the primary focus of this writing. The remainder of this section focuses on factors that are more central to the primary interest of this project – factors at the heart of the bullseye.

The Inner Circle

The final portion of this section focuses on factors that a trustee can influence in an effort to build trust. These factors include similarities, alignment of interests, service mentality, personal integrity, and responsiveness. But first, consider a factor that has been heralded as another trust-building solution: efficiency.

Efficiency

There is a vast body of research that deals with the efficiency of government and the measurement of performance outcomes. And with good reason – the majority of Americans agree that government could (and should) become more efficient (Marlowe, 2004). Surveys designed to assess trust in government often cite waste and inefficiency as predominant reasons that citizens lack trust (Hurley, 2012) and there are some studies that suggest that improved efficiency enhances trust in government administrators (Houston & Harding, 2013).

In fact, the notion that improved efficiency and performance might enhance trust was a fundamental principle behind the New Public Management (NPM) reforms that emerged in the 1980s (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Houston & Harding, 2013; Ostrom, 2008). In response to the dysfunctional bureaucracy that characterized the Old Public Administration era, New Public Management reformers championed a more flexible and efficient government that was more responsive and accountable to citizens (Denhardt, Denhardt & Blanc, 2014; Kaufman, 1969/2012; Rivlin, 1971/2012). In short, NPM reformers aimed to develop a streamlined government that was able to do more with less (Kettl, 2015; Gore, 1993), and pointed to the private sector as a model.

However, a growing body of research suggests that gains in efficiency could come at a significant price. Efforts designed to streamline and automate processes may actually reduce trust by distancing the citizen from the governing body (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Harwood, 2019; Houston & Harding, 2013). One example of this phenomenon is the automated phone system. These systems can reduce the need for paid personnel and efficiently channel calls to their appropriate receiver. But who has not found themselves feeling frustrated and alienated when their reason for calling does not fall into one of the menu categories? It is sometimes simply impossible to talk to a human being. While this strategy may promote efficiency, this experience far from engenders trust. In fact, Van Ryzín (2011) reached this very conclusion when he examined how the way people are treated influences trust. He actually discovered a negative relationship between efficiency and trust where the more efficient processes resulted in lower levels of trust. Ostrom (2008) agreed, commenting that "efficiency in the absence of consumer utility is without economic meaning" (p. 54). In the same vein, Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) advise that instead of trying to run like a business, governments should strive to run more like a democracy. Focusing too much on efficiency threatens to undermine democratic principles like fairness, accountability, representation, and participation (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). Therefore, public administrators should focus on serving and empowering citizens, and should treat them as respected partners in the policy building process (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Harwood, 2019).

So, while efficiency and outcomes are important, and efforts to improve them worthwhile, more and more studies are suggesting that these efforts should be subordinate to compassion and benevolence. The way people are treated appears to be far more important to building trust than perception of service quality (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Taylor-Gooby, 2006; Van Ryzín, 2011).   Further, individuals are more likely to trust the government if they feel they are treated fairly, even if the government takes an action that they do not support (Canel, 2020; Petrzelka et al., 2013; Whiteley et al., 2016). However, if “policy delivery appears to fail and at the same time the process appears unfair then they are likely to view the government as both dishonest and untrustworthy” (Whiteley et al., 2016, p. 249). This makes sense because, as Bannister and Connolly (2011) note, there is no reason why a more efficient government should be more trusted than an inefficient one. “After all, some of the most tyrannical and least trusted regimes in human history have been paragons of administrative efficiency” (Bannister & Connolly, 2011, p. 145). Observing that efficiency is not a silver bullet when it comes to building trust, the paragraphs that follow outline some more promising approaches.

Similarities and Alignment of Interests

In deciding how much to trust someone, trustors often begin by taking stock of how similar they are to the trustee. Similarities can include “common values (such as a strong work ethic), membership in a defined group (such as … a local church, or gender), and shared personality traits (extroversion, for instance, or ambition)” (Hurley, 2012, p. 30). The latter type of similarity is also referred to as homophily, which is a concept in sociology that describes people's tendency to connect with others who are similar to themselves (Khanam, et al., 2022). When two people are similar or share analogous interests, it is easier for both parties to trust because one's efforts to promote his own interest is more likely to promote the other's interest (Canel, 2020; Hurley, 2012). In these situations, it is easy for both parties to be honest and authentic (Frei, 2018).

Unfortunately, there are some challenges related to similarities. For one, while trust based on similarities can be a quick mechanism to build rapport, it can be somewhat shallow in the long run (Canel, 2020). In the extreme, focus on similarities can also have an exclusionary effect (Canel, 2020). By definition, if trust is based largely on similarities, it may be difficult to build a trusting rapport with someone that is dissimilar in one or more ways. Further, in difficult and confrontational situations, which are not uncommon in the public sector, it is much easier to focus on differences (Patterson et al., 2012). Finally, added to these challenges is the fact that our nation is much more diverse than it was half a century ago (Rahn & Rudolph, 2005). Looking back in time to the golden era of the 1950s, when the nation was more trusting, it is worth observing that the country was more homogenous than it is today. Putnam (2000) observes that America was "white, straight, Christian, comfortable, and (in the public square, at least) male" (p. 17). In contrast, today's society is "becoming more racially diverse, more ideologically polarized, and faces rising income inequality" (Rahn & Rudolf, 2005, p. 551). So, while similarities may be one trust-building tool, this approach has limitations.

Service Mentality

Van Wart (2015) defines service mentality as "an ethic of considering others' interests, perspectives, and concerns" (p. 277). He further identifies two elements of service mentality: concern for others and preference for including others in decision-making. Hurley (2012) takes a slightly narrower approach to this trust-building factor. He uses the term *benevolent concern* to describe what occurs when a trustee appears to put the trustor's interests before his own. People tend to have positive feelings about those who are willing to subordinate their concerns for the benefit of others. In contrast, people who appear self-serving are less likely to invoke trust from others (Hurley, 2012). Unfortunately, Americans' interactions with government agencies and officials sometimes leave them feeling that government does not care about them (Frei, 2018; King & Stivers, 1998), which can lead to feelings of alienation and distrust (Uslaner, 2001). In order for there to be a trusting relationship, the trustor has to believe that the trustee is empathetic to their interests (Frei, 2018; Patterson et al., 2012). For this reason, Richard Harwood (2019) advises that public officials should be driven by the importance of human dignity, should strive to see and hear citizens, and should help citizens to be participants in their community as opposed to mere bystanders or recipients of services.

Personal Integrity

Another component of a citizen's interpretation of how they are treated involves personal integrity. Van Wart (2015) defines personal integrity this way:

> Personal integrity is the state of being whole and/or connected with oneself, one's profession, and the society of which one is a member, as well as being incorruptible.

> The term "ethical" is often used as a rough synonym; so are "honest" and "fair," but they are essentially subelements of integrity (p. 280).

For the purpose of this writing, personal integrity also encompasses virtues like admitting mistakes, being forthright, and performing consistently (Canel, 2020; Van Wart, 2015). Consistency and coherence in action are particularly important because they promote predictability and reliability (Hurley, 2012; Van Wart, 2015). There is evidence that this type of authenticity and perceived accountability engenders trust (Beshi & Kaur, 2020; Harwood, 2019). Conversely, if citizens perceive public officials as corrupt, dishonest, irresponsible, and unethical, they may be less likely to trust (Beshi & Kaur, 2020; Houston & Harding, 2013; Job, 2005; Van Ryzín, 2011).

In Houston and Harding's (2013) study about public trust in government administrators, the authors found that about 40 percent of the people surveyed believe that a modest number of people involved in public service are corrupt. Similarly, Citrin and Luks (2001) evaluated the 1998 Pew Survey data and concluded that the perceptions of dishonesty of political leaders was one of the main causes of distrust. This trend is evident at the local level, too. Trust tends to be lower in municipalities where officials retract prior promises, shift parties, and exhibit disloyalties, even years after these events occur. In contrast, trust tends to be higher when public business is conducted in a calm and orderly manner (Hansen & Kjaer, 2020). Therefore, to maintain and rebuild trust, ethical behavior must be a priority (O'Leary, 2014) and public officials must commit to actions that are feasible to implement and resist making promises they cannot keep (Local Government Association, 2013).

Responsiveness

The final factor considered here is responsiveness. There is evidence that one of the reasons that citizens have low trust in government is a perceived lack of responsiveness to citizens' needs (Beshi & Kaur, 2020; Chanley et al., 2001; Houston & Harding, 2013). In their study about the effects of online service delivery on trust, Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) reached the same conclusion – that improved perceptions of responsiveness (at the local level) were statistically related to increased trust in local government. In another example, Rahn and Rudolph (2005) found that mayor-council systems experienced lower trust levels than places with council-manager or commission forms of government. They argue that one interpretation for this difference is that the latter forms tend to be more responsive. Therefore, when public officials become aware of a public need or concern, it is critical that they promptly respond (Bruning et al., 2008).

To summarize this first section, the factors discussed here – similarities, service mentality, personal integrity, and responsiveness – can all be influenced by the trustee. Further, there is relatively strong evidence that most of these factors have a positive relationship with trust. What is interesting, and particularly compelling, is that there is something very important that all these factors have in common: communication. In order to align interests and convey attitudes of benevolence, integrity, and responsiveness, there must be some type of communication between the trustor and the trustee. It is only through communication that citizens can gauge public officials' credibility (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). And this is the central idea of this section: of all the factors that may contribute to a person's decision to trust, there are only a few that a trustor is able to manipulate. And of this subset, the most promising factors rely on interactions between public officials and citizens. A core premise of this writing is that communication is at the heart of the trust-building process. Communication is the essence of the elephant, so to speak.

But there are a number of ways that a government can communicate with its citizens. There are letters, emails, media coverage, and of course dialog. Is one method of communication better than another? The next section considers this question.

Communication is Power

The early chapters of the Book of Genesis establish the relationship between God and humankind. God creates a world, the first humans, and all the animals. But the world becomes corrupt with sin and God decides to eliminate humanity for its wickedness with a great flood. As the waters recede, mankind returns, and the people unite to rebuild their civilization. Speaking one language, and working together, they start to build a city and a tower tall enough to reach the heavens. Worried that this human empowerment might lead mankind away from Him, God confounds their speech so that they can no longer understand one another (see Figure 2). No longer able to communicate, the people are forced to abandon the tower and God scatters them around the world, destined to speak different languages.

The underlying message of the Tower of Babel story is that communication is power. In the words of Lee Iacocca, “The ability to communicate is everything” (as cited in Van Wart, 2015, p. 293). Communication is also a crucial factor when it comes to building and maintaining trust. In fact, frequent and open communication is so important that it can be effective in building trusting relationships even when other important trust-building factors are lacking (Hurley, 2012; Putnam, 2000; Schmidthuber et al., 2020). Conversely, while good communication is critical to a trusting relationship, poor communication almost always results in distrust (Hurley, 2012).

Figure 2. Abandoning the Tower of Babel (Source: Cawley, 2021)

Citizens learn about government affairs through various means. Some read papers or magazines while others get information from their social networks. On occasion, citizens have a reason to directly interface with public officials, either by visiting an administrative office, participating in a public meeting, or attending a court proceeding. The paragraphs that follow identify several types of communication methods and discuss their strengths and weaknesses when it comes to building trust.

Communication can be categorized in a variety of ways. For the purpose of this writing, communication is divided into two general groups – one-way and two-way. The term one-way is used to describe communication that flows only from the sender (i.e., government) to the receiver (i.e., citizen). By comparison, two-way communication includes simultaneous feedback from the receiver. Within these broad categories, communication can also be classified as oral, written, listening, and nonverbal (Van Wart, 2015). A final, more contemporary consideration is whether communication occurs via traditional or electronic method.

One-Way Communication

One-way communication can include letters, postcards, pamphlets, newsletters, and the like. It can also be accomplished via traditional or electronic methods, like websites and emails. One-way communication methods can be effective tools to inform, persuade, and command. But, they pose notable challenges and are not likely to engender trust because they can be viewed as propaganda by a skeptical recipient (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000) and because they do not provide opportunities for citizens to influence the policy making process (Schmidthuber et al., 2020). For these reasons, officials would benefit from looking beyond one-way methods if building trust is a primary objective.

Arguably, the most prolific method of one-way communication is traditional media. Hurley (2012) estimates that about 72 percent of Americans get their impression of government from media, as opposed to personal experience, friends, or family. This is most true at the national level because coverage of state and local governments is more limited (Hetherington & Nugent, 2001). Nonetheless, this data is troubling given that media coverage of government affairs is characterized by some concerning trends.

For one, media coverage has become increasingly negative over time (Hetherington & Nugent, 2001; Hurley, 2012). Beginning in the 1960s, media coverage began to evolve from being "a simple carrier of the politician's message to active critic of the politician" (Hurley, 2012, p. 21). During the 1970s and 1980s, negative accounts on television and in newspapers and magazines increased from about 25 percent of stories to 60 percent (Hurley, 2012). And, as negativity in the media has increased, citizen's confidence in the media has declined (Hurley, 2012).

The media also plays an active role in accentuating and amplifying the political rhetoric discussed earlier. Politicians on opposite sides of the ideological spectrum strategically use the media to broadcast their attacks and claims. Meanwhile, Brady and Theriault (2001) observe that it is the moderates that are "left to negotiate and legislate" (p. 177). Ironically, those who are most influential in passing legislation are least likely to show up in newspapers and television talk shows (Brady & Theriault, 2001). Consequently, the public witnesses a higher proportion of fighting and combative rhetoric than really exists. They hear the right and left, but not the middle (Brady & Theriault, 2001).

The important thing to recognize is that both types of bickering and bashing only work to exacerbate citizens' distrust in government (Brady & Theriault, 2001). Sloman and Fernbach (2017) note that the public would be better served by thoughtful debate and analysis. Policy proposals are often much more complex and nuanced than is conveyed in the media. "If we encountered more detail analysis, it might influence our decision-making" (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017, p. 188). After all, discussion, debate, conflict, and resolution are essential elements of the democratic system (Brady & Theriault, 2001).

In addition to exaggerating rhetoric, the media can also be polarizing. Today, there are countless media outlets, each with different perspectives and spins. This means that people can limit their exposure to media sources that are consistent with their own views and avoid those that challenge their perspectives. Richard Harwood (2019), president and founder of The Harwood Institute, observes that political discourse has become more like rooting for sports teams than finding common ground. Polarization of this type can hinder the development of consensus, which is essential to solving problems (Citrin & Luks, 2001). Sadly, public distrust is sometimes used as a political weapon by the media and the result is detrimental to governmental legitimacy, capacity, and stability (Fried & Harris, 2001; Fried & Harris, 2020).

Two-Way Communication

In comparison to one-way communication, two-way interaction has proven more promising when it comes to building trust (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). While two-way communication can feasibly occur via phone or electronic chat, face-to-face dialog is the most authentic and most powerful (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Local Government Association, 2013). Dialog consists of two simultaneous events – the conveyance of a message by one party (e.g., speaking) and the simultaneous assimilation of the message by the other party (e.g., listening). And then the roles reverse. In this way, meaning is able to freely flow between the sender and the receiver (Patterson et al., 2012).

According to Putnam (2000) and others, face-to-face dialog is critical to democracy. "Without such face-to-face interaction, without immediate feedback, without being forced to examine our opinions under the light of other citizens' scrutiny, we find it easier to hawk quick fixes and to demonize anyone who disagrees" (Putnam, 2000, pp. 341-342). While public officials may have numerous opportunities to have face-to-face interaction with citizens, some of the most traditional methods (e.g., public hearings, public meetings) tend to discourage genuine dialog (Stivers, 1994). The tenure of these sessions tends to be stinted and formal and public attendance is often sparse (unless the agenda is controversial). Therefore, if public officials want to encourage dialog, they will likely have to solicit feedback at times when the public is not particularly engaged.

Good communication is hard work, and some public officials may resist proactively seeking this type of public engagement. Doing so would likely be time consuming (Box, 1998) and could elongate public meetings (Stivers, 1994). But scholars urge officials to appreciate that every citizen engagement is an opportunity to build a constructive, trusting relationship (Houston & Harding, 2013). Putnam (2000) observes that frequent interactions among people lead to generalized reciprocity. This type of interaction also helps officials hear neglected voices and gain a deeper understanding of complex situations (Stivers, 1994). It aids in embracing difference and diversity and helps officials to define concepts more effectively (Stivers, 1994). Not only can public officials learn the art of good communication, but they can help encourage these practices among citizens, teaching them to listen to each other and engage in constructive dialog (Stivers, 1994). Open communication can be infectious. The openness and receptiveness exhibited by one person tends to induce openness and receptivity in others (Hurley, 2012).

Electronic Communication

Before concluding this discussion on types of communication, it is important to address electronic methods. The speed at which internet technology has penetrated the everyday lives of citizens has been greater than almost any other type of consumer technology (Poe, 2011) – rivaled only by the television (Putnam, 2000). While it is possible for electronic communication to be either one- or two-way, one-way methods are more prevalent. Given the rapid rise of internet use in the last few decades, electronic communication tools have been proposed as a solution for increasing citizen engagement with the ultimate hope being that increased interaction could result in higher levels of trust (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006).

The studies that have examined electronic communication within the public sector point to three main benefits. The first are transparency and accessibility (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Websites have made it possible for citizens to access a wealth of information – agendas, minutes, laws, studies, statistics, and much more. It is far easier to access governmental information now than it was a few decades ago. There is a popular notion that the democratic process requires a commitment to transparency (Houston & Harding, 2013) and some (e.g., Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Beshi & Kaur, 2020) contend that transparency is related to trust precisely because transparency leaves less to trust. However, as honorable as this notion is, there are conflicting findings. For example, Bannister and Connolly (2011) challenged the notion that transparency is beneficial, noting that there is no evidence to support this popular opinion. Further, Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) actually concluded that improved perceptions of accessibility (via electronic methods in particular) resulted in *reduced* trust. So, while transparency may be an important characteristic of a functioning democracy, transparency alone is likely not enough when it comes to building trust. Schmidthuber et al. (2020) suggest that the opportunity to interact and participate in the decision-making process must be present along with transparency to engender trust.

A second possible benefit of electronic communication is increased responsiveness (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Electronic forms of communication occur much faster than traditional mail, and most residents would prefer to send an email over attending a public meeting. The electronic method of communication enables public officials to respond to complaints and inquiries much faster than in years past. As noted earlier, there is relatively strong evidence to suggest a significant positive relationship between responsiveness and trust (Chanley et al., 2001; Houston & Harding, 2013; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006), which suggests that electronic communication may be an effective trust-building tool in this regard.

A final potential benefit is efficiency (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). Electronic tools can channel large numbers of messages to appropriate recipients. They can even generate automated responses back to the senders, thereby streamlining procedures and reducing personnel needs. As discussed earlier, while there are studies that suggest efficient performance can engender trust (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006), there is a fine balance between efficiency and benevolence, and focusing too much on efficiency could actually result in lower trust (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Ostrom, 2008; Van Ryzín, 2011).

So, when it comes to building trust, electronic methods have limitations. While technology can be an effective tool to exhibit responsiveness, it can do little to enhance other important characteristics, such as benevolence and integrity. Indeed, perceptions of the latter are more likely to emerge from personal interaction (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). Therefore, the electronic medium is best used to reinforce and strengthen face-to-face communication as opposed to supplanting it (Putnam, 2000).

In summary, communication is power, and the ability to communicate well is key to building trusting relationships. Of all the ways government-citizen communication can occur, it is face-to-face dialog that appears to be most critical. But *the government* is huge, embodying countless agencies, officials, and employees at federal, state, and local levels. And the American population is growing each minute. Is it remotely feasible to rebuild the public's trust in government using this intimate process? It might be. The literature discussed next suggests that it may be possible if we start small – if we start with local government.

The Importance of Local Government

In 1339, Ambrogio Lorenzetti finished a monumental commission in the governing council chamber of Siena's town hall, the Palazzo Pubblico (Romero, 2017). During Lorenzetti's time, the political legitimacy of Italian city-states was often on very shaky ground. Siena was a republic, but there had been enormous unrest in the two decades leading up to the commission. Siena's political leaders were Lorenzetti's intended audience, and his objective was to catalog the obligations of the governing to the governed (Romero, 2017). The result of Lorenzetti’s commission is an awe-inspiring fresco painting that is one of the most famous of its time (Starn, 1994). It is full of symbolism and details (Starn, 1994), and even though it was painted nearly 700 years ago, the images and messages are significant today (Romero, 2017).

Visitors to the Palazzo Pubblico would have originally entered at the south end of the hall and would have found themselves surrounded by an enormous three-sided fresco. To the left (west) is *The city-state under tyranny*, straight ahead (north) is *The virtues of good government*, and to the right (east) is *The good-city republic* (Starn, 1994). Lorenzetti intended for the viewer to experience the work from left to right – from the dark oppression of tyranny to the glorious utopia of enlightened governance (Starn, 1994).

In *The city-state under tyranny* (Figure 3), the tyrant rules over the republic. Justice, the tyrant’s primary antagonist, lies helpless at his feet. Surrounding the tyrant, Lorenzetti depicts the evils that enable bad government: Avarice, Vainglory, Cruelty, Treason, Fraud, Division, Fury, and Fear. Next to this chilling court, Lorenzetti depicts the inevitable effects of bad government. The city is destroyed, the countryside barren, and in the sky, Fear’s banner warns: "None shall pass along this road without fear of death" (Romero, 2017).

Figure 3. The city-state under tyranny

Meanwhile, the images on the north and east walls provide a welcome contrast. *The virtues of good government* (Figure 4) to the north depicts the Commune surrounded by his advisors: Justice, Wisdom, Concord, Peace, Charity, Faith, Hope, Fortitude, Prudence, Magnanimity, and Temperance (Romero, 2017; Starn, 1994). The wall to the east illustrates the effects good government has on the people who live in the city and country. The city depicts thriving workers and celebrations, and the lush countryside provides food for livestock and food for families. And watching over the republic is Security, whose banner reads, "Everyone shall go forth freely without fear." (Romero, 2017) (Figure 5).

Figure 4. The virtues of good government

The images in the Palazzo Pubblico are a vivid reminder that democracy is not a spectator sport (Romero, 2017). The images in *The virtues of good government* disperse authority among the people of the republic (Starn, 1994), with Harmony holding a string that comes off the scales of justice, binding her to the citizens (Romero, 2017). And the Commune, who is neither king nor tyrant, advises the people that they must rule themselves.

Figure 5. The good-city republic (countryside)

Lorenzetti's work illustrates the powerful connection between citizens and their local government, a connection that remains relatively strong today, at least in relation to higher-level governments. There is evidence that local government today enjoys more public support than higher levels (Hansen & Kjaer, 2020; Hetherington & Nugent, 2001; Ivacko et al., 2013; Saad, 2011b). The difference is not large, but it is statistically significant (Hansen & Kjaer, 2020). In her review of nationwide Pew Survey data from 2010, Saad (2011b) concluded that attitudes about local governments have fared comparatively well over time. In fact, as of 2011, it was the only level of government that had not lost trust since 1997 (Saad, 2011b). These national level trends were recently supported at the state level, too. A poll by Susquehanna Polling and Research found that 71 percent of Pennsylvania citizens believe that local government governs best (Ercolino, 2018). These findings punctuate one reason that local level government is particularly important in understanding public trust –

because trust has fared relatively well at this level. That said, even though Americans have retained more trust in local government, trust is still declining. For example, in 1974, sixty-four percent of respondents viewed local government as having a positive impact, but by 2010 that figure had dropped by 13 points to 51 percent (Houston & Harding, 2013). So, while not as acute as other levels, the trend at the local level still remains troubling, particularly because local governments are being asked to shoulder a greater share of policymaking authority and responsibility (Rahn & Rudolph, 2005).

Another reason to focus on local government, and a reason that trust at the local level may be higher, is because the people who make up local governments are often visible members of the community they serve. And, as Job (2005) observes, people are more likely to trust those they know. Local governments also oversee services that have a direct impact on citizens' daily lives (Behi & Kaur, 2020) – services like trash removal, snow plowing, and park maintenance. In addition, because of the tangible nature of local government, public officials often intentionally work to develop ongoing, dynamic relationships with residents (Bruning et al., 2008).

Further, as counterintuitive as it might seem, another reason to focus on local government is its small size. Declining trust is a big issue. It is a phenomenon that is present in every state in the country and in all levels of government. Intuition might suggest that large problems are best resolved with expansive solutions. However, sweeping remedies deployed on a widespread scale may not be the best approach. British anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar studied the connection between neocortex capacity and social networks. He suggested that ideal social cohesion and function occurs at group sizes of around 150 people – this goes for communities, military units, business units, and the like (Dunbar, 2011). Although some scholars caution that the *Dunbar number* should not be taken as gospel (e.g., Ruiter et al., 2011), Dunbar's work does suggest that efforts such as those intended to increase trust might be best deployed at the local level. Also consider the classic work of Mancur Olson (1965). He found that smaller groups tend to be more successful when it comes to affecting collective action. Olson (1965) observed that "the larger the group, the farther it will fall short of providing an optimal amount of a collective good" (p. 35).

Finally, local government is an ideal venue to restore civic engagement. Interestingly, the era that predated the decline in trust – the years between 1910 and 1940 – was characterized by strong civic engagement (Hurley, 2012; Putnam, 2000). Sadly, the decades that followed witnessed a decline in civic-mindedness, a waning in participation in public affairs, and a reduction in the public's willingness to sacrifice for the common good (Hurley, 2012; Putnam, 2000). The prevailing opinion among scholars is that civic engagement is critical for a functioning democracy and an important ingredient of social capital (Putnam, 2000; Tolber & Mossberger, 2006). Local government units may be the ideal arena for this type of public participation (Beshi & Kaur, 2020). This is not a new concept. Early French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville professed that the "art of associating together" is a critical ingredient of a civilized society and instructed that the "science of association is a necessary ingredient for advancing civilization in democratic societies" (as cited in Ostrom, 2008, p. 94).

Richardson et al. (2001) concluded that attending meetings and participating in public affairs make people more tolerant of diversity and more comfortable with the consensus-building process. "Nowhere is the need to restore connectedness, trust, and civic engagement clearer," Putnam (2000) writes, "than in the now often empty public forums of our democracy" (p. 412). However, all too often, public meetings are either devoid of any citizen attendees or only attended by people who either passionately support or oppose an item on the agenda. In the case of the latter, discourse is more often characterized by angry attacks than by thoughtful discussion (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). By comparison, the democratic problem solving that is *supposed* to occur during local public meetings is characterized by face-to-face dialog where citizens and officials are forced to examine and challenge opinions (Putnam, 2000). Without this intimate interface, it is easy to fall back on rhetoric characterized by simplistic solutions and personal attacks (Putnam, 2000). For this reason, genuine public dialog is needed to restore a sense of legitimacy in government (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

In addition to being critical to a functioning democracy, and central to this writing, authentic civic engagement is also seen as a way to enhance public trust (Van Ryzín, 2011). Citizens who are engaged in the policy making process and more knowledgeable about public happenings tend to have a better understanding of the workings of government. They are therefore more likely to see public administrators and elected officials as trustworthy partners (Schmidthuber et al., 2020; Uslaner, 2001; Whiteley et al., 2016) and more likely to be satisfied with the governmental organization and the decisions of public leaders (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Local Government Association, 2013). Conversely, those who have the least knowledge are more likely to be driven by their overall cynicism (Bernstein, 2001).

Public officials and political leaders play an important role in creating an atmosphere that invites this type of civic engagement. Public officials can create opportunities to foster and facilitate connections with citizens (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). But superficial engagement is not adequate. Citizens must feel that they have meaningful opportunities to participate, and they must perceive that they have a say in public decisions (Schmidthuber et al., 2020). Richard Harwood (2019) and others (e.g., Local Government Association, 2013) maintain that these efforts should begin at the local level.

Before closing, it should be noted that civic engagement is interestingly entwined with two other factors discussed earlier: communication and age. First, recall that one-way communication includes traditional media. One of the most popular – and most powerful – vehicles of media coverage is, of course, the television. Television viewing increased by about six hours per week between 1965 and 1995 (Putnam, 2000). One consequence of increased television viewing is that it has kept people at home (Putnam, 2000). It is the one leisure activity that seems to inhibit other leisure activities, including civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). In fact, Putnam (2000) found that reliance on television for entertainment is the most significant predictor of civic disengagement. For an interesting contrast, briefly compare the television medium with another method of one-way communication: the newspaper. Unlike television, newspaper readership is *positively* correlated with citizen engagement (Putnam, 2000). But unfortunately, newspaper readership declined along with trust and other measures of social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Now consider how television and civic engagement trends intertwine with age. Putnam (2000) maintains that the overall decline in civic engagement has roots in generational differences. In fact, he contends that generational differences are the *single most important explanation* for collapse in civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). Interestingly, the long civic generation – the most civically engaged age group – was the last generation to grow up without television (Putnam, 2000). This interconnection between age, civic engagement, television, and trust illustrates the intricate complexity of the topic at hand.

It is also important to recognize dissenting opinions regarding local government and civic engagement. First, while some scholars agree that local government has fared better than other levels when it comes to trust, others conclude that the level of government is irrelevant and that trust in one level or one institution will spill over to others (Bannister & Connolly, 2011; Chanley et al., 2001; Marlowe, 2004; Petrzelka et al., 2013; Uslaner, 2001). By way of example, Uslaner (2001) said (channeling his inner Dr. Seuss), "If you do not like green eggs and ham, you will not care if they are served in a house or with a mouse. Shifting the locus of power will not solve the problem of trust in government" (p. 133). There is also a question as to whether trust at the local level could vary depending on the structure of the government. For example, while the size of the municipality does not appear to be relevant (Hansen & Kjaer, 2020), Rahn and Rudolph (2005) concluded that mayor-council systems engender less trust than council-manager systems. Finally, on the topic of civic engagement, there are some who conclude that trust and civic engagement do not have a significant relationship (e.g., Houston & Harding, 2013; Job, 2005). However, these dissenting opinions are in the minority. Further, this author found no literature to indicate that efforts to build trust at the local level would be in some way detrimental. There are also some promising civic engagement indicators that should be recognized. Between the late 1990s and into the 2000s, community service among youth started to increase (Putnam, 2000). In addition, Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) maintain that citizens are becoming more involved in government processes than they have been in the past. It is too early to tell whether this uptick is a lasting trend, but the news is positive, nonetheless.

In closing this chapter, three compelling ideas emerge from the vast body of trust-related literature. The first is that good communication is key to building trust. The second is that face-to-face dialog is the most effective method of communication. And the third is that local government is a good place to start a trust-building effort. The study that follows draws from these ideas by asking *whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of public trust citizens have in their local government*. The next chapter outlines the methods used to answer this important question.

Chapter III: Research Framework and Approach

The purpose of Chapter III is to outline the precise steps the researcher took to examine the research question, which considers whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of trust citizens have in their local government. While the question itself is relatively simple, the empirical process required to attempt to answer it is more complex. As discussed in the preceding chapters, there are a myriad of complicated factors that influence trust, many of which are inextricably intertwined. For this reason, the first part of the chapter discusses key terms and variables. With a concept as nuanced as trust, it is critical to establish clear parameters around these ideas. The same is true for population and participants. As noted in Chapter II, declining trust is a widespread issue that is present in every state in the country and at all levels of government. Yet, this study intentionally focuses on a small population. The rationale behind that choice is also outlined in this chapter. Finally, the last part of the chapter explains the ontological and epistemological frameworks at the nucleus of the project and details the two-phase mixed methods approach deployed to evaluate the research question.

Concepts

Given the complexity of the topic, the first step in developing the research design for this project involves articulating conceptual definitions of key terms in the research question (Johnson, 2014). The research question incorporates five key concepts: public trust, communication, local government, local public officials, and citizens. But who are *citizens* and who are *local public officials*? What does *communicate* mean in the context of this project? In order for this study to be replicable by another researcher, precision is critical. For this reason, the paragraphs that follow discuss each of these terms in more detail.

Public Trust

The cardinal concept in this study is trust, which is a complex notion. It is difficult to define and even more challenging to operationalize. One of the factors that makes trust-related research difficult is that there is no agreed-upon definition for the concept (Thomas, 1998). Rather, trust has been subjected to numerous definitions and conceptualizations (Boateng & Cox, 2016). By way of example, Taylor-Gooby (2008) refers to work by Das and Teng (2004), in which the authors identify 28 unique definitions of the term. This plethora of meanings has led to confusion and imprecision, which hinders the study of the topic.

Houston and Harding (2013) sum up the concept as a "willingness to rely on others to act on our behalf based on the belief that they possess the capacity to make effective decisions and take our interests into account" (p. 55). Bannister and Connolly (2011) suggest a very similar definition. They define trust as "the willingness of a party to expose itself to the possibility of being exploited by another party" (p. 139). Meanwhile, Hurley (2012) suggests that trusting is simply feeling "comfortable with how a party will act in a situation in which you could be hurt" (p. 25). Other scholars provide similar definitions (e.g., Citrin & Luks, 2001; Garcia & Casaló Ariño, 2015; Hurley, 2012). At the heart of all these meanings is the concept of risk – the risk of relying on others to do what is in our best interest.

A number of scholars take this general concept of risk one step further by conceptualizing trust in two separate dimensions. For example, several researchers (e.g. Houston & Harding, 2013; Taylor-Gooby, 2006) refer to earlier work by Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953), which suggests that trust can be broken down into two dimensions – competence and care. Trust based on competence involves "judgments of the trustee's ability to accomplish stated goals and to act consistently” (Houston & Harding, 2013, p. 55). On the other hand, trust based on care reflects the belief that the trustee will act in a manner that considers the interests of others (Houston & Harding, 2013).

Taylor-Gooby (2008) uses different terms to describe the multidimensionality of trust. He distinguishes between trust that is based on reason and trust that is based on non-rational factors. Rational approaches assume that trust is, at least in part, based on “deliberative consideration of evidence” (Taylor-Gooby, 2008, p. 291). In contrast, non-rational approaches are less intentional, including notions like faith, intuition, and instinct (Taylor-Gooby, 2008).

Taylor-Gooby (2008) points out the similarities between these multidimensional approaches – that decision-making based on track record may inform the competence (or rational) dimension of trust, but care (or non-rational) requires an “extrarational leap of faith” (p. 292). He further adds that it is this “leap of faith” that “is necessary to address uncertainty, where past record may not be a helpful guide” (Taylor-Gooby 2008, p. 292). As discussed in Chapter II, there is a growing body of literature that suggests that the care dimension is more important than the competence dimension when building trust (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Houston & Harding, 2013; Ostrom, 2008; Taylor-Gooby, 2006 & 2008; Van Ryzín, 2011).

Before concluding this discussion about the meaning of trust, it is important to recognize that *public* trust is unique. The concept of public trust requires a conceptualization of trust in *something* as opposed to *someone* (Job, 2005). Public trust in government is a confidence in “future actions of government, government organisations, and the people who administer those abstract systems” (Job, 2005, p. 2). While it is generally accepted that it is possible to trust individuals, there is some dispute about the concept of trusting an abstract system, such as government (Job, 2005). During an interview about trust in public administration, Professor Steven Van de Walle observed that there is really no reason to apply the concept of trust to public administration:

> Public administrations are bureaucracies, and they are based on full predictability and the elimination of risk. They have clear rules, clear procedures, and clear standards. You just go to a governmental office and you get what you are supposed to get. There is no necessity then for a citizen to trust the Public Administration. (Canel, 2020, p. 485)

But in reality, regulations and procedures are not always black and white. In practice, there is often ample room for discretion and interpretation, making public trust in government a relevant topic of discussion.

This dispute aside, several scholars have attempted to define public trust in government. Some suggest that trust in government is an evaluation of whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public (Miller & Listhaung, 1999 as cited in Hansen & Kjaer, 2020; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Similarly, in their study on trust amid public management reforms, Boateng and Cox (2016) define public trust as the willingness of a citizen to "accept vulnerability and to take risk with the view that their counterpart political appointees would demonstrate trustworthiness, guarantee positive outcomes, and offer protection" (Boateng & Cox, 2016, p. 241). Finally, and most simplistically, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines trust in government as "the confidence of citizens and businesses in the actions of government to do what is right and perceived as fair" (as cited in

Schmidthuber et al., 2020, p. 92). This study will employ this final definition because of its straightforward and broad application.

Other Concepts

In addition to public trust, there are four additional concepts that are central to this research question: communication, local government, local public officials, and citizens. First, consider communication. In the broadest sense, the Latin root *communicatio* means *to share or impart*. Because communication can take a variety of forms, the Merriam-Webster definition suffices for this study: "A process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior" (Communication, n.d.).

Local government is another key concept. The Census Bureau identifies two categories of local government: general purpose and special purpose (National League of Cities, n.d.). General purpose governments include counties and municipalities (e.g., townships, boroughs, cities) while special purpose entities consist of special districts and school districts (National League of Cities, n.d.). For the purpose of this project, the term local government is specific to municipalities. And, as the Population section discusses later, the study is specifically interested in the seven municipalities that comprise the West Chester Area School District in Chester County, Pennsylvania.

Consistent with the definition of local government used here, the phrase local public officials is used to describe two general categories of individuals. One group consists of elected officials who are charged with general governance of the local government unit. For this particular study area, this includes members of boards of supervisors and borough council members. The term also incorporates civil servants – those individuals who are employed by the elected officials to carry out projects and programs they authorize.

Finally, the term citizens is used to describe the individuals and entities that both own property and live within the local government unit. Traditionally, the term citizen is used to describe individuals or entities that own property in a particular jurisdiction (even if they do not live there), that live within a jurisdiction (even if they are not property owners), or both. However, the definition used in this study is narrower. Here, the term citizen is used to describe individuals and entities that *both* own property *and* live within the local government unit. The definition is narrow for a reason – because citizens who meet both criteria are easily documented in tax assessment records and are more likely to be involved in community affairs (Putnam, 2000). However, it is important to note that this limitation, while intentional, excludes voices of more transitory and less engaged residents.

Variables

With key concepts defined, the next step in developing the research design involves outlining the study variables. There is one dependent variable of interest here and that is public trust. Most public trust data that is available has been collected at the national level. This includes the General Social Survey and the National Election Studies. While this extensive data is effective for comprehensive studies, it is too broad to apply to this local level analysis. Therefore, new data had to be collected.

In addition to public trust, the study considered several independent variables. One such variable was municipal residency. Collecting residency information made it possible for the researcher to explore differences between individual local government units with respect to public trust. Another category of independent variables had to do with engagements between citizens and local public officials. Participants were asked to consider two types of engagements with public officials. They were asked about engagements that left them feeling that they *trusted* the other person, and (conversely) about engagements that left them feeling that they *did not trust* the other person. The responses contained a variety of variables (e.g., responsiveness, listening, ethics). Another category of variables had to do with information sources. Specifically, participants were asked to report how they learned about things that were going on within their local governments. Again, the responses encompassed an array of variables (e.g., newsletters, websites, social media).

Before closing, it is important to address several variables that were not included in this study. While it is common to consider demographic variables (e.g., age, sex, race, education, income), the researcher decided not to collect this type of data for two main reasons. As discussed in Chapter II, demographics have questionable significance when it comes to public trust. In addition, these questions can be off-putting to some people and could therefore diminish the response rate.

Population

As established at the close of Chapter II, declining trust is a big issue. It impacts the entire country and all levels of government. While intuition might suggest that large problems are best resolved with expansive solutions, research implies that a narrower approach could be more effective (e.g., Dunbar, 2011; Olson, 1965). For this reason, the researcher opted to focus on local government. More specifically, the population of this study was limited to citizens within the seven municipalities that make up the West Chester Area School District in Chester County, Pennsylvania (i.e., East Bradford Township, East Goshen Township, Thornbury Township, West Chester Borough, West Goshen Township, West Whiteland Township, and Westtown Township). These municipalities were selected for two reasons. First, they are members of a Council of Government, which means that they meet regularly and collaborate on projects and efforts. Second, the researcher benefited from firsthand knowledge of this region as a result of professional public administration experience in Chester County.

Participants were limited to adult individuals and entities that both own property and live within the local government units. As noted earlier, these limitations were utilized because citizens who meet both criteria are more likely to be longtime residents and more likely to be involved in community affairs (Putnam, 2000). According to the 2010 Census, there are roughly 113,000 citizens within the study area (as of this writing, the 2020 Census results had not yet been published). Obviously, some of these property owners live outside the study area, while others own multiple properties within the area. Therefore, the actual population number is likely somewhat less than 113,000, but the exact difference is unknown.

Research Design and Theoretical Framework

Given the descriptive nature of the research question, a two-phase, non-experimental, mixed methods design was utilized (Johnson, 2014). The design was intended to capture a snapshot of public trust in a particular area at a particular point in time. There were no before measures and no comparisons. The first phase employed a quantitative approach (survey) to collect fundamental information about trust in local government. The second phase used qualitative methods (focus groups) to explore trust. This ordering – quantitative then qualitative – is consistent with what David Morgan (1998) referred to as Design 2 Typology (as cited in Hesse-Biber, 2017). This approach is inductive in that the researcher intended to accumulate and analyze data in phases in the hopes of generating a broader understanding of public trust at the local level.

This mixed methods approach presents advantages and challenges. On one hand, qualitative and quantitative methodologies are grounded in very different ontological and epistemological frameworks, which is why some purists argue that the mixed methods approach is undesirable, if not impossible. The quantitative method is grounded in the positivist approach, which assumes at a very fundamental level that knowledge is something that is to be discovered rather than produced. It also presumes that the social world, like the natural world, is governed by rules (Hesse-Biber, 2017) and that these rules create a patterned and predictable world. The positivist perspective recommends a distinct separation between the researcher and participants for the purpose of preserving the researcher's objectivity and advocates for structured and standardized methods to increase the generalizability of findings (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

By comparison, qualitative methods are grounded in the interpretivist approach, which concludes that the best way to gain understanding about a complex concept like trust is to view it from the participant's perspective (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The qualitative paradigm is the preferred method when it comes to exploring subjective meaning and obtaining in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of people (Hesse-Biber, 2017). As the literature suggests, the decision to trust is highly personal and based on a variety of situational and socially constructed factors. Trust is a value laden concept. For this reason, the *truth* about one's decision to trust is not "independent of the human interpretive process" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 23). For this particular study, it was citizens who possessed the necessary information and experience. In this way, the researcher and participants were "cocreators in the knowledge-building process" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 7). So, while a quantitative approach is appropriate for gathering a general description of public trust, qualitative methods are needed to gain a deeper understanding of the types of interactions that cause a citizen to trust (or distrust).

Despite the stark differences between these methods, there are strong arguments in favor of a mixed approach. The combined approach creates more comprehensive, insightful, and valid results than either can obtain alone (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Riccucci, 2010). Mixed methods can be particularly effective in bridging the gap between these two approaches by drawing on the strengths of each and compensating for each other's weaknesses (Riccucci, 2010). Mixed methods can also have a synergistic result in which "one method enables the other to be more effective" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 275). For these reasons, a growing number of scholars (e.g., Hesse-Biber, 2017; Riccucci, 2010; Yang, 2015) are urging scientific purists to accept a diversity of research methods, questions, approaches, and styles, arguing that diversity and collaboration are more likely to enhance our ability to solve complex public problems that involve layers of understanding.

Another important element of the mixed design is flexibility. While flexibility would not be a desirable characteristic in all projects, it is suitable here because of the descriptive nature of the question and because the researcher is the sole investigator (Bazeley, 2013). It is also important to note that *flexible* is not tantamount to disordered. Flexible designs can still be systematic, verifiable, sequential, and consequential (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Ultimately, the researcher aspired to strike the appropriate balance between a tightly specified approach, which could exclude relevant information, and an overly broad approach, which could prove ineffective. This flexibility allowed for a more fluid research process and enabled the researcher to adjust specific questions and analysis as data was collected to best meet the needs of the project (Bazeley, 2013). Finally, the mixed design allows for triangulation, whereby validity and credibility are enhanced by examining the same issues from different perspectives (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

Sampling and Data Collection

Considering the two-phase structure of the study, the following paragraphs discuss each phase of the study separately – the quantitative phase followed by the qualitative, just as the project progressed. Within each phase, the author describes the data collection approaches used and outlines the sampling strategies that were employed to select the study participants.

Phase I (Quantitative)

The first phase of the study used a survey to collect quantitative data pertaining to residency and level of trust. Surveys are effective tools when it comes to obtaining basic information, which was the objective of this initial phase. They can also be particularly meaningful when attempting to capture community data (Putnam, 2000). Given the narrow focus of this portion of the project (described in more detail on the following pages), a survey was an appropriate tool.

In developing the survey (Appendix A), the researcher took care to keep the format short and easy to complete so that respondents were not overburdened by the task of completing the survey. The survey began by disclosing information about the project so that participants could make informed decisions about participation. The disclosure statement included information about data transmission, storage, and protection so participants were informed about any potential risks. The survey format was submitted to the West Chester

University Institutional Review Board (IRB) on April 20, 2021, and the IRB issued its approval on June 16, 2021 (Appendix B).

The survey, which was administered electronically, asked participants to indicate consent by clicking a button to accept (Martinez, 2017). Once in the survey, participants were asked to:

- Report whether they live within the West Chester Area School District. Respondents who did not live in the district were not able to continue the survey.
- Identify the municipality in which they live. Respondents who did not know where they lived or reported living in a municipality outside the study area were not able to continue the survey.
- Identify whether they own (or are in the process of buying) their property. Respondents who were not property owners (or in the process of buying) were not able to continue the survey.
- Rate how much of the time they feel they can trust their local government to do what is right. To help ensure reliability and validity, the researcher used a question that was similar to one used by the General Social Survey to measure public trust in the federal government (i.e., *How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right -- just about always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never?*).
- Indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a focus group on the topic of public trust in local government.

Participants who answered the last question in the affirmative were asked two additional screening questions, which were later used to prioritize focus group participants (discussed more later). (Refer to Appendix A for more detail.)

With the survey form complete, the researcher turned to recruiting participants for the survey. To recruit survey participants, the researcher planned to mail postcards (Appendix C) to approximately 1,600 citizens within the study area. Given that the population size is approximately 113,000 citizens (over 100,000), a sample size of 384 participants was needed to meet the social science standard of five percent precision and 95 percent confidence (Johnson, 2014). The intended size of the mailing assumed a 30 percent response rate (Johnson, 2014). The number of postcards the researcher planned to send to citizens within each jurisdiction was proportional to the population of the municipality with respect to the overall study area (Table 1). This way, recruitment efforts would be appropriately distributed across the population of the area.

Table 1.
Sampling Method

Municipality	Number of Properties	Percent of Total Properties	Number of Postcards
West Chester Borough	6156	14	226
West Whiteland Township	9845	23	361
East Bradford Township	3994	9	146
West Goshen Township	9838	23	361
East Goshen Township	8129	19	298
Thornbury Township	1341	3	49
Westtown Township	4352	10	160
Total	43655	100	1600

The specific postcard recipients were determined using several steps. First, the researcher obtained property owner data from Chester County for all properties within the population area. This initial database contained 43,655 records. Next, the researcher created a separate database for each municipality in the study area. Working through one municipality at a time, the researcher further reduced each sample using a consistent process:

1. In an effort to focus on the property owners who resided locally, the researcher reduced the database to those with mailing addresses in the study area, which encompassed 11 zip codes: 19319 Cheyney, 19335 Downingtown, 19341 Exton, 19342 Glen Mills, 19355 Malvern, 19373 Thornton, 19380 West Chester, 19381 West Chester, 19382 West Chester, 19383 West Chester, and 19395 Westtown.
2. Each database was sorted by property owner so that the researcher could scan for, and eliminate, institutional owners (e.g., public utilities, large corporations). Again, the researcher's objective was to identify individual citizens because they were more likely to be engaged in community affairs (Putnam, 2000). Once this part of the process was complete, the original population was reduced by 13,544 to a sample of 30,111.
3. Finally, a random sort was applied, and the researcher selected the number of rows needed to obtain a representative sample (see Table 1, Number of Postcards column) (rows were selected in consecutive order, starting with the first row).
4. This list was sent to the printer for a final address check (which further reduced the list by 13) and 1,587 postcards were mailed to the selected participants.

In addition to the postcard, the researcher provided promotional materials (Appendix D) to the seven municipalities within the study area. The municipal representatives were generally supportive of this research effort and indicated they would be willing to assist in promoting the survey. Municipalities used a variety of promotional approaches, including social media posts, email blasts, newsletters, and websites. In this way, the municipalities neither formally cooperated nor participated in the study; their involvement was purely optional. Finally, the researcher provided a press release about the study to the Daily Local News (newspaper of local circulation), which was published on May 23, 2021 (Appendix E).

Phase II (Qualitative)

The second phase of the study used focus groups to collect qualitative data about trust in local government. Krueger and Casey (2015) describe a focus group as a small group of people who possess certain characteristics and provide qualitative data about a topic of interest through guided discussion. The focus group format puts the spotlight on the contributor as a key participant in the knowledge-creating process (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Krueger & Casey, 2015). In this way, focus groups are effective tools when it comes to gaining insight into complicated topics, obtaining a range of perspectives, and trying to understand differences between groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus groups can be an effective tool to lay the groundwork for future research and can be used in combination with other methods to help interpret results (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

As noted above, at the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group on the topic of public trust. Surveys containing positive responses to this question were segregated into two groups. One group contained potential focus group participants who were trusting (those who responded that they trusted local governments *Just about always* or *Most of the time)* while the other contained potential participants who were untrusting (those who responded that they trusted their local government *Only some of the time* or *Almost never*). The objective behind creating homogeneous focus groups was that participants would be more likely to feel free to speak openly about their opinions and experiences (Bazeley, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Krueger &

Casey, 2015). At the same time, the segmentation of groups by cynicism allowed for comparison between groups (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Participants who responded that they would be willing to participate in a focus group were asked two additional screening questions (see Appendix A):

- How long have you been living in your municipality – less than one year, one to three years, four to ten years, more than ten years (but not entire life), entire life, don't know?
- In the last few years, how often would you say you have communicated with municipal public officials – frequently, sometimes, seldom, never, don't know?

These screening questions were important because focus group participants need to have relevant experience to be successful in this setting (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The answers to these questions became relevant when the researcher formed the focus groups, as outlined next.

With the pool of potential participants divided, the researcher sent a follow-up email asking respondents to identify dates that they would be available to participate in a focus group. Separate emails containing different dates were sent to trusting and untrusting groups. From this point, the researcher used several strategies to form the focus groups:

- The researcher eliminated respondents who were not available to participate in any of the dates provided.
- The researcher removed respondents who reported that they *Never* communicated with municipal public officials because communication is a key factor of the study.

- The researcher prioritized respondents who reported having tenures of four or more years on the basis that they were likely to have more experience with their government.
- The researcher attempted to form groups that contained participants from a variety of municipalities.
- Depending on the number of participants that remained at the conclusion of this sorting process, random selection could be used to reduce the participant pool while minimizing bias (Krueger & Casey, 2015).)

The goal was to have enough respondents to create at least two focus groups consisting of five to eight participants for each category (a total of four groups – two trusting and two untrusting) (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Groups of this size are small enough for everyone to share and yet large enough to generate diverse opinions and perceptions (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Meeting invitations with Zoom links were sent to the final groups of participants. Zoom teleconferencing was used primarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the platform also enabled participants to remain in their familiar and comfortable surroundings, which contributed to achieving a relaxed atmosphere (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This is relevant because people who are comfortable are more likely to self-disclose (Krueger & Casey, 2015). A facilitation guide (Appendix F) was used to steer discussion and Zoom recording tools were used to capture audio (but not video) recordings. Each focus group began with a disclosure statement that outlined the purpose of the study, the anticipated duration, a review of the potential risks, and an explanation of how records would be stored and used. Participants were informed that they were in groups with like-minded individuals so that they would feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings (Krueger & Casey, 2015). After several opening and introductory questions, focus group participants were asked four key questions:

1. Think back to a time when you had an engagement with a public official that left you with the feeling that you *trusted* that person. Tell me about that interaction.
2. Think back to a time when you had an engagement with a public official that left you with the feeling that you *did not trust* that person. Tell me about that interaction.
3. All things considered, what would you say is the most important thing for local public officials to know if they want to build a more trusting relationship with their citizens?
4. How do you learn about things that are going on within your local government?

The facilitation guide was submitted to the West Chester University IRB on April 20, 2021, and the IRB issued its approval on June 16, 2021 (Appendix B).

Including opening, closing, and key questions, the question route consisted of a total of eight questions, which is appropriate for a 90-minute session (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Each focus group lasted between 60 and 90 minutes given that two hours represents a physical and psychological limit (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The open-endedness of the questions allowed participants to respond without boundaries (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Throughout the discussion, the researcher kept the conversation on track and made sure everyone had a chance to speak (Krueger & Casey, 2015). No compensation or incentives were provided for two reasons. For one, the virtual environment made incentives like food and refreshments irrelevant. But beyond that, monetary incentives are often not that impactful in public sector research (Krueger & Casey, 2015). It is sometimes more meaningful for participants to be part of an effort that has the potential to improve public service delivery in their local municipality (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Immediately after each focus group, while the exchange was still fresh, the researcher used memo writing to summarize key points and capture initial thoughts. Later, each recording was reviewed in its entirety to get a fresh sense of the overall breadth and depth of the content of each focus group (Bazeley, 2013). Finally, the rough transcription prepared through Zoom was reviewed against the recording and refined as a Word document. This multi-step process helped the researcher to establish an intimate understanding of the data, while providing time for reflection and contemplation (Bazeley, 2013; Hesse-Biber, 2017; Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Once the focus groups were transcribed, the researcher deployed a systematic coding process to ensure consistency (Krueger & Casey, 2015). First, each key question was written out on a large sheet of paper – one sheet of paper for each question (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Next, each transcript was printed out on a different color paper to make it easy to distinguish between the groups (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Starting with the first key question, the researcher followed the process outlined by Krueger and Casey (2015) by reading each response and responding to this set of questions as described:

1. Did the participant answer the question that was asked? If yes, skip to question 3. If unsure, set the question aside and review it later. If not, go to question 2.
2. Does the response answer a different question in the focus group? If yes, cut the response out and place it with that question. If not, cut the question out and put it in a pending discard pile.

3. Does the response say something important about the topic? If yes, place it on the paper with the appropriate question and consider question 4. If not, cut the question out and put it in a pending discard pile.
4. Is the response similar to something that has been said already? If yes, start grouping like quotes together. If not, start a separate pile.

Once done with the first focus group question, the same process was used for each remaining question. Throughout this process, the researcher continuously considered whether ideas were similar to or different from others (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This process was applied to all key questions from both trusting focus groups before moving to the untrusting participants in an effort to expose any differences between the group types (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Next, using grounded theory as the guiding methodology, the researcher identified similar themes (codes) among the quotes and noted codes in the margins of the paper. Through this coding process, the researcher strived to understand participants' deeper perspectives beyond mere surface statements (Bazeley, 2013). As the list of initial codes grew, the researcher began to transition to focused coding. Codes that revolved around a similar concept were grouped and renamed to reflect the common theme.

Then, starting with the first sheet of paper, the researcher prepared a descriptive summary of responses to the first question. The summary compared and contrasted the similarities and differences between trusting and untrusting groups, taking note of how frequently something was said, the specificity of responses, respondents' emotions, and the extensiveness of an idea (i.e., how many different people said the same thing) (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Once summaries were prepared for each question, the researcher looked across all questions in search of consistent themes (Krueger & Casey, 2015), focusing more on how ideas related to each other. The researcher continually compared, connected, and organized in search of patterns and themes (Bazeley, 2013). Memos were used throughout the process to provide an audit trail so that others could retrace the researcher’s decision-making process in the future.

One inherent challenge with this type of grounded theory approach is reliability. For this reason, the researcher considered having a second person code a sample of the material to see if they applied similar codes. However, Dey (1993) observed that there is more than one set of categories to be discovered in qualitative research (as cited in Bazeley, 2013). In other words, each researcher, viewing the data from their unique perspective, may see and interpret the data differently (Bazeley, 2013). Consequently, Bazeley (2013) concludes that it is not reasonable to expect that two people will code data in the same way. On the other hand, it is realistic to expect some consistency in coding performed by one person throughout an entire project and reasonable to expect that coding decisions will make sense to a second observer if provided the rationale behind the coding (Bazeley, 2013). For this reason, the researcher alone performed the coding by documenting thorough descriptions of each code to increase reliability (and validity) (Bazeley, 2013).

Privacy and Data Security

Before closing this discussion, it is important to touch on one final detail – privacy and data security. Steps were taken to protect participant identification during both phases of the study. The only survey question that collected and recorded identifiable information (i.e., email address) is the one that asked whether participants would be willing to participate in a focus group, and that question was optional. Identifiable information was needed because this was the only mechanism for contacting participants for the focus group. However, this information was stored apart from the remainder of the survey data.

During the focus group sessions, identity was safeguarded before each session began. As participants entered the Zoom waiting room, any name associated with their account was changed to a generic format (e.g., participant 1, participant 2) and the camera function was disabled (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Once renamed, participants were admitted to the session. During the introduction portion of the focus group session, the researcher instructed all participants to keep the content of the discussion and any description of the participants private. It was emphasized that this information should not be shared with others. After the session, the audio recording and transcript were saved to Dropbox (encrypted). The names associated with the transcription were the generic names assigned at the start of the session, which protected confidentiality through the data analysis process.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to outline the precise steps that the researcher took to examine the research question. Just like a recipe can be used by numerous cooks to create a meal with consistency, the methods chapter provides the technical detail needed for other researchers to replicate this study. This comprehensive summary included definitions of key terms and descriptions of population parameters and sampling methods. The chapter also explained the ontological and epistemological frameworks that shaped the study and detailed the steps the researcher followed to select participants and collect data in both quantitative and qualitative phases of the study. The next chapter picks up where this chapter leaves off, describing the analysis of the data.

Chapter IV. Analysis of Data

The purpose of the preceeding chapter was to outline the precise steps the researcher took to examine whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of public trust citizens have in their local government. With methodology clearly delineated, the chapter that follows focuses on the analysis of data. Considering the two-phase structure of the study, the following chapter discusses each phase of the study separately – the quantitative phase followed by the qualitative. Within each phase, the author discusses the data analysis methodology and summarizes the results of that analysis.

Phase I (Quantitative)

After being live for approximately four months, the survey received 446 responses. Of these, 74 were incomplete or invalid, leaving a sample size of 372 valid responses (n = 372). This was just short of the desired sample size of 384 participants needed to meet the social science standard of five percent precision and 95 percent confidence (Johnson, 2014). The researcher anticipated that obtaining the desired response rate would be challenging because non-response tends to be high in public administration trust research (Canal, 2020). Moreover, distrusting citizens are even less likely to participate in surveys of this nature (Canal, 2020).

The first key question of the survey asked respondents this question: "*In which municipality do you live: East Bradford Township, East Goshen Township, Thornbury Township (Chester County), Thornbury Township (Delaware County), West Chester Borough, West Goshen Township, West Whiteland Township, Westtown Township, Don't know, Other?*" Responses of *Thornbury Township (Delaware County)*, *Don't know*, and *Other*, were eliminated as invalid. Table 2 reports the frequency distribution, the percentage of total population within each municipality, and the difference between these two values. The responses were moderately dispersed. The majority of responses came from East Goshen Township (37.90 percent, mode) while Thornbury Township had the least responses (1.08 percent). When examined alongside the municipal percent of total population, East Goshen and East Bradford responses were higher than their percentage of population while the other municipalities were lower.

Table 2.
Response to: "In Which Municipality do you Live?"

Municipality	*n*	%	Percent of Total Population [a]	Difference [b]
East Goshen Township	141	37.90	18.62	19.28
West Goshen Township	76	20.43	22.54	-2.11
East Bradford Township	53	14.25	9.15	5.1
West Whiteland Township	56	15.05	22.55	-7.5
West Chester Borough	24	6.45	14.10	-7.65
Westtown Township	18	4.84	9.97	-5.13
Thornbury Township	4	1.08	3.07	-1.99
Total	372	100.00	100.00	

[a] Reflects the percentage of the total population that is contained within the municipality.
[b] Reflects the difference between the percentage of responses received and the percentage of the total population within the municipality.

The second key question asked respondents: "*How much of the time do you think you can trust your local government to do what is right: Just about always, Most of the time, Only some of the time, Almost never, Don't know?*" Table 3 reports the results. This question was answered by 370 respondents, 167 of which (44.9 percent) reported that they trusted local government to do what is right *Most of the time*.   Nearly the same number (165 respondents) reported that they trusted the government only *Some of the time* (111 respondents, 29.8 percent) or *Almost never* (54 respondents, 14.5 percent). The median occurs in the *Most of the time* category (89.2 cumulative percent).

Table 3.
Response to: "How Much of the Time do You Trust Your Local Government to do What is Right?"

Trust	*n*	%
Almost never	54	14.5
Only some of the time	111	29.8
Most of the time	167	44.9
Just about always	34	9.1
Don't know	4	1.1
Missing	2	0.5
Total	372	100.0

Finally, the researcher considered whether there were differences between municipalities with regard to level of trust. To examine this question, responses to the trust question were first recoded into a dichotomous variable to distinguish between individuals with a good deal of trust and those with less trust. The first two levels of responses (those who reported to trust public officials *Just about always* and *Most of the time*) were coded "1" and the remaining two levels (those who reported to trust *Only some of the time* and *Almost never*) were coded "0." Richardson et al. (2001) used a similar recoding strategy in their study of trust in governmental institutions.

First, a crosstab analysis was used to examine general differences between municipalities (Table 4). The results show that residents in East Bradford, East Goshen, and West Goshen Townships reported to have more trust in local government than those in Thornbury, West Chester, West Whiteland, and Westtown. Interestingly, East Goshen and East Bradford – the municipalities with residents reporting the most trust (66.2 percent and 62.3 percent, respectively) – also were the municipalities with the most frequent responses. This could be an indication that Canal (2020) might be right – that distrusting citizens may be less likely to participate in surveys of this kind (Canal, 2020). But are the differences between the levels of trust significant?

Table 4.
Trusting Crosstabulation

		EGT	EBT	WGT	WCB	WT	WWT	TT	Total
Trusting	*n*	92	33	45	8	6	17	0	201
	%	66.2	62.3	59.2	33.3	33.3	30.4	0.0	54.3
Untrusting	*n*	46	19	29	16	12	39	4	165
	%	33.1	35.8	38.2	66.7	66.7	69.6	100.0	44.6
Don't know	*n*	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	4
	%	0.7	1.9	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.1
Total	*n*	139	53	76	24	18	56	4	370
	%	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note. EGT = East Goshen Township, EBT = East Bradford Township, WGT = West Goshen Township, WCB = West Chester Borough, WT = Westtown Township, WWT = West Whiteland Township, TT = Thornbury Township.

Table 5.
Results of Bonferroni Test

Municipality 1	Municipality 2	*p*
East Bradford Township	West Whiteland Township	< .001
East Goshen Township	West Chester Borough	< .001
East Goshen Township	West Whiteland Township	< .001
West Goshen Township	West Whiteland Township	< .001
East Goshen Township	Westtown Township	.003
East Bradford Township	West Chester Borough	.006
East Goshen Township	Thornbury Township	.006
East Bradford Township	Thornbury Township	.007
East Bradford Township	Westtown Township	.01
West Goshen Township	West Chester Borough	.01
West Goshen Township	Thornbury Township	.02
West Goshen Township	Westtown Township	.02
Thornbury Township	West Chester Borough	.16
Thornbury Township	Westtown Township	.20
Thornbury Township	West Whiteland Township	.29
East Goshen Township	West Goshen Township	.44
West Chester Borough	West Whiteland Township	.52
East Bradford Township	**East Goshen Township**	.53
West Whiteland Township	Westtown Township	.60
East Bradford Township	West Goshen Township	.91
West Chester Borough	Westtown Township	.96

Note. Bolded items indicate more trusting municipalities.

The Kruskal-Wallis H (KWH) Test was used in an attempt to answer this question. The KWH Test was used because the dependent variable (Trust) is ordinal as opposed to interval, but there are several considerations. First, as discussed above, the sample (n = 372) is just short of the desired number of participants (384). In addition, responses were particularly low in Thornbury Township (four responses). These shortcomings must be taken into account when considering the analysis results.

The results of the KWH test show an overall significant difference in level of trust by municipality (H (6) = 44.567, p < .001). However, given the number of municipalities, 21 pairwise comparisons were needed to identify where significant relationships existed. A Bonferroni test was used to identify the significant relationships; Table 5 reports the results. Not surprisingly, the most significant differences exist between the most and least trusting municipalities. For example, the most significant relationships are between East Bradford, East Goshen, and West Goshen on the trusting side and West Chester, West Whiteland, Westtown, and Thornbury on the untrusting side. The level of significance decreases when jurisdictions with similar trust levels are paired with each other.

Phase II (Qualitative)

Out of the 372 survey respondents, 140 reported that they would be open to participation in a focus group. With the pool of potential participants divided into trusting and untrusting respondents (as described above), the researcher sent a follow-up email asking respondents to identify dates that they would be available to participate in a focus group. Separate emails containing different dates were sent to trusting and untrusting groups. Response to this second correspondence was lower, with 16 trusting and 15 untrusting people submitting their consent and availability. From this point, the researcher used the strategies outlined in the previous chapter to form the focus groups.

Initially, the goal was to have enough respondents to create at least two focus groups consisting of five to eight participants for each category (a total of four groups – two trusting and two untrusting) (Krueger & Casey, 2015). However, after going through the steps outlined earlier, the researcher was able to create just three focus groups – two trusting and one untrusting, each containing five or six participants.   Meeting invitations with Zoom links were sent to the final groups of participants. Trusting focus groups took place on August 17, 2021 and August 25, 2021 between 6:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m.; the untrusting focus group took place on August 18, 2021 at the same times.

Several themes emerged throughout the analysis process described earlier. These themes can be separated into two broad categories: trust factors and communication factors. Trust themes pertain to factors that seem to influence whether the participants decided to trust public officials. For the most part, these themes originated from the first two key questions, which asked participants to consider engagements that left them feeling like they trusted – and did not trust – the public official. By comparison, the fourth key question, which asked how participants learned about happenings within their municipality, generated responses about communication. Finally, responses to the third key question, which asked participants to contemplate the most important thing for local public officials to know if they want to build a more trusting relationship with their citizens, contributed to both trust and communication themes. Each theme genre is discussed below, beginning with trust factors.

Trust Factors

There were six prevalent trust-building themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. These factors consisted of service mentality, responsiveness, listening, civic engagement, and personal integrity. Other factors that were mentioned with less frequency included knowledgeability, fiscal responsibility, and accountability. The paragraphs that follow detail the nature of the discussion surrounding these ideas.

Service Mentality

The most prevalent trust factor theme throughout the focus groups was the notion of service mentality, which is defined as "an ethic of considering others' interests, perspectives, and concerns" (Van Wart, 2015, p. 277). Both trusting and untrusting participants cited benevolent and service-oriented traits as important trust-building characteristics. For instance, participants commented that public officials should be "friendly" and "helpful." One participant recalled the saying, "You get more flies with honey than with vinegar" and another advised public officials to, "Treat others as I treat my grandmother. Not just the way you want to be treated, but how I treat my grandmother." Other participants spoke about the importance of protecting the public's interest. One participant commented that they wished public officials "would stop and think about [the] resources they have been charged with protecting" and another added that public officials should have "the people who live in the township as their number one priority."

One thing that was strikingly different between trusting and untrusting groups was the hostile emotion expressed by several untrusting participants who registered personal attacks against the public officials for their failure to put others' interests before their own. Some insisted that public employees were inherently "lazy." For example, one person commented, "Government employees are lazy. Government staff are not paid well at all, [so] I can understand why they're lazy." Another person added, "You know, these guys are not lighting the world on fire, right? That's why God invented local governments and government workers, right? If it wasn't for those jobs, they wouldn't have a job."

Other speakers attacked public officials for being mean and malicious. For instance, one speaker recalled an interaction with a state official: "She's a very nasty person. She is not professional in any way at all. She can't take slight criticism, even if it's presented to her with respect. She doesn't even have thin skin; she has no skin." Another recounted their perception of a public meeting:

> There was an old gentleman with a big gray beard, looked like he was Rip Van Winkle. You could tell he was there because he doesn't have a social life. He's bored and his involvement in local government is how he entertains himself. I imagine he has lots of cats, too. No offense to cat people. The guy's not there to serve a purpose, he's not there for representing people, he's there to be a jerk or to entertain himself at a minimum.

During these exchanges, it was occasionally difficult for the researcher, a public administration professional, to hear the criticisms and attacks voiced by untrusting participants. However, composure was important, and the researcher knew that all participants contribute to the knowledge-building process (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Finally, one participant drew an interesting parallel between transactional and transformational leadership:

> I think local municipal employees and managers [are] good with *transactional* stuff you know, like when we talk to police, or we have a tree down that needs to be cut

> up. They're on it right away because they're trained for that, and they do that stuff all the time. But when you talk to somebody about something *transformational*, you know where they have to think outside the box and really consider things, nine times out of 10 they'll be dismissive or come up with a good excuse to say no. [emphasis added]

This comparison between transactional and transformational leadership is explored more in Chapter V.

Responsiveness

Another prominent theme throughout the discussion was responsiveness. Both trusting and untrusting participants cited responsiveness as an important trust-building factor, and conversely referred to lack of responsiveness as a factor that can damage trust. Commentary about responsiveness included statements concerning promptness of action and the importance of follow through. Concerning the latter, one participant offered the following observation:

> Lack of a follow up is almost critical as far as any trust associated with your local community people. If [public officials] leave you out in the blue as far as what the response is going to be, and they leave the responsibility on [the citizen] to constantly be the prodder, it does not leave a very helpful attitude as far as interaction between the community and the government.

Other participants spoke about the importance of public officials taking action once a concern or issue has been raised. For example, one person positively recalled the following experience:

> My street was a cut through for a lot of other neighborhoods. Many were speeding when there were at least two bus stops with kids. I remember meeting with the township staff, and they immediately organized and ordered like a traffic study to figure out what to do.

Finally, one participant summed up the importance of responsiveness, saying, “It's very frustrating when you reach out to either an employee or an elected official and you do not hear back from them.”

Listening

Another recurring theme throughout the focus groups was the importance of listening. Both trusting and untrusting participants cited active listening as an important trust-building factor. When public officials interrupt a citizen with whom they are speaking or dismiss their concerns as irrelevant, citizens leave feeling disrespected and unheard. In reaction to this type of experience, one participant advised public officials to “allow people to speak without being interrupted and without snarky little comments.” Conversely, a public official who actively listens and shows genuine interest and concern is more likely to leave the citizen with a positive feeling. For example, one participant shared an account of how a public official responded to her concerns about the Sunoco Mariner 2 East pipeline:

> [The public official] listened to my concern and came out and looked at it. He talked to the pipeline people [and] he walked me through … how this is not a problem. And he was right. He's absolutely right. But, he gave me the time of day … and I felt both heard, and I also felt that my safety was not mocked you know, like my concern for the safety of my family was not mocked in any way, which you know I think I could have been a pretty easy target [and] was not.

Another participant spoke about the importance of listening when the citizen and politician align with different political parties. This person recalled a positive experience engaging with a state senator who had a different political alliance:

> Even though we have the completely opposite politics, she's very respectful. She's easy to communicate with. I actually text with her back and forth on certain issues. With someone who doesn't agree with me at all on pretty much everything, she has taken the time to hear my opinion on some things.

The sentiment among all participants was unanimous – listening is important.

Civic Engagement

The importance of civic engagement was another popular theme, but only among trusting participants, several of whom served as volunteers on local government boards and committees. Those who had some level of involvement with their local municipality felt it reaped a variety of benefits, including personal knowledge of public officials and a deeper understanding of the decision-making process. When speaking about the experience of volunteering, one participant commented:

> I've gained a greater appreciation for the types of inquiries that appear before the committee, and the level of engagement of the township employees, and the … amount of work that needs to get done to ensure that we serve the mission of that committee. So, I increased my respect for the work that our local township officials are doing.

Another participant added that “there is little that can replace interactions on a personal basis.” Seeing the value of civic engagement, several participants commented about the need for more people to be involved in local government. One person observed:

> A lot of people just don't care. They don't want to get involved. They don't care until that one hot topic comes along and then, all of a sudden, you know. Somehow local government, all levels of government … need to get the public more involved. A lot of … citizens take for granted the ability that they have to influence things, to get things done, and the privilege they have of voting. And somehow, we as a nation, we have to reenergize the citizenry.

Another reflected:

> I was one of those people that somebody mentioned earlier. [I] never had any issues, so there wasn't any reason for me to be involved. But as a volunteer, I just found all of our township supervisors [were] trying to do the right thing.

While this sentiment was unique to trusting participants, it is worth noting that a few untrusting people spoke about their *lack* of involvement in local government. One reported that they had never had an interaction with public officials, while another reported only one engagement in 16 years.

Personal Integrity

The final prevalent topic pertains to ethical behavior, which both trusting and untrusting participants described as being "honest," "open," "transparent," "straightforward," and "unbiased." One speaker described this type of behavior simply as, "say what you mean [and] mean what you say; walk the walk and talk the talk." Other people spoke about the importance of staff and officials not having a "hidden agenda" and not abusing the power inherent to their positions.

The concept of reliability and consistency are two important components of personal integrity (Van Wart, 2015). One participant described reliability simply as doing what you say you are going to do when you say you are going to do it. But most participants that mentioned consistency and reliability spoke about it in terms of applying rules and regulations in a consistent manner. In contrast, they also discussed the negative impact of applying standards in an arbitrary manner. One participant recalled an experience during a public meeting:

> Everything was under the microscope and some of the requirements didn't seem to be codified, but yet they were being brought up by supervisors in a meeting as things that we had to do, and it was very, very frustrating. It was roadblock after roadblock after roadblock after roadblock.

Another shared a similar account involving municipal approval of a development. “There was a developer, who jumped through all the right hoops and got all of the permits that he needed, and just as he's finishing up a project, the borough decides they're going to change the zoning on him.”

Several trusting participants noted the important role that consistency and listening have on trusting the process even when – in fact, particularly when – the outcome is not favorable. Participants were more likely to trust the outcome of a process if they felt heard and believed that the public official was applying rules and regulations in a consistent fashion. For example, one person recalled how their municipality handled a traffic-related complaint:

> Ultimately, we had hoped to get to have a traffic light installed and that did not happen, but I felt that we were heard, that the issue was addressed, and the door was left open if we felt that the solution that was implemented was not going to be effective.

In this way, reliability, consistency, and listening may be particularly powerful influences when it comes to building and maintaining public trust.

Other Factors

In addition to the topics discussed above, there were several other factors that were discussed with less frequency. Some people (both trusting and untrusting) said it was important for public officials to be knowledgeable on municipal policies, programs, and functions. Several trusting participants spoke about impact (mainly negative) that politics and political rhetoric can have when it comes to trust. One person commented:

> One of the things that's changed since I've been here, and since I've been involved, is the interplay between the parties. … When I first started working with the township, I didn't even know they had … parties. But all of a sudden … now democrats are getting elected, republicans are getting elected, and [it] seems like there's a lot more … political noise involved in a lot of stuff that used to be just kind of common sense. And it seems like it's gotten a lot messier.

One topic that was raised by only untrusting speakers was fiscal responsibility, and the importance of being conservative with the public's money. Untrusting participants also commented on the importance of accountability.

Communication Factors

In addition to trust factors, there were also a number of communication themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. There were four main factors that pertained to methods of communication. These included social media, e-news, paper newsletters, and websites. Other factors that were mentioned with less frequency included municipal liaisons, agendas and minutes, and newspapers. Beyond methods of communication, participants also discussed characteristics of communication, like frequency, content, and timeliness. The paragraphs that follow detail the nature of discussion surrounding these ideas.

Social Media

The vast majority of participants identified social media as a key communication channel, although some noted that local government has been "slow to catch on." Facebook and Nextdoor were the main platforms identified by participants. Interestingly, while people identified social media as a frequently used resource, they were quick to identify the inherent flaws of the platforms. One participant identified social media as the best and worst invention of modern times because it can simultaneously connect and divide its users. Participants used adjectives such as "toxic," "polarizing," "angry," and "bad" to describe social media platforms. One person spoke positively about being able to get information about government from "like-minded people," but a fellow participant pointed out that this feature of social media can contribute to polarization and misinformation. Another person pointed out that social media tends to lead people to believe that they know more than they do and embolden citizens by providing a sense of security and anonymity. So, while social media seemed to be a key source of information, it is not without flaws.

E-News

Another popular information conduit was electronic news (e.g., Constant Contact). Both trusting and untrusting participants claimed to get information from e-news resources and several commented on the convenience of having the news delivered right to their email inbox without any effort on their part. On the other hand, some recognized that e-news is not as equitable as a paper newsletter that is mailed to all property owners (whether they want it or not). Recipients must opt in for e-news by subscribing. And, while not an issue raised during focus group discussions, equity could also be an issue if citizens do not have equal access to technology.

Newsletter

Similar to e-news, paper newsletters were cited by both trusting and untrusting participants as information sources. Unlike electronic resources, residents recognized that everyone receives the newsletter with no effort on their part. It shows up in their mailbox without the need to subscribe. Whether or not they read it is up to them. One participant, who volunteered on a local government committee, talked about the municipality’s decision to go from paper newsletters to electronic:

> Right around the start of COVID, two years ago, [the township] stopped the paper newsletter, which went out quarterly, which … every resident got, and [it] was a pretty good news source. But, they went to this digital thing and I don't think it's getting the same … coverage.

This person’s comment reinforces concerns others raised about the equity of e-news sources.

Website

Not surprisingly, the final leading source of information cited by participants was the municipal website. Websites were cited more by untrusting participants who voiced criticisms about navigability and the fact that using a website requires initiative on the part of the citizen. Others cited websites as beneficial for static information, like meeting dates and times, contact information, and online forms.

Other Sources

In addition to the most prominent information sources discussed above, participants cited a number of other resources with less frequency. Several trusting participants identified direct liaisons as a beneficial source of information. For instance, a municipal representative could routinely visit a homeowners’ association or other civic group to provide routine updates about government happenings. Other sources included board and committee meeting agendas and minutes, digital meeting recordings, newspapers (although one person recognized that newspapers are playing a diminishing role), phone calls to public officials, and friends and family. Finally, only one participant mentioned direct face-to-face communication as an important method of communication, saying, “I’ve seen when people come and they're able to have a conversation with people about issues. … It goes a long way from just that stuff you hear on the internet, Nextdoor, and all the sniping back and forth.”

Communication Characteristics

Regardless of the conduit of the information, numerous participants – mainly trusting – spoke about the characteristics of the communication. For instance, speakers advised municipalities to keep messaging simple, yet interesting. One person suggested more “storytelling” to keep people engaged. Several stressed the importance of being proactive, with one describing proactiveness in this way: “If you know something, and it has the potential to be important, or of interest to the constituency, … share it proactively, as opposed to getting caught.” Being proactive also involves making it easy for the citizen to get the information, which likely involves using different communication vehicles to reach citizens who may get their information from a variety of sources. One person advised officials not to rely too much on websites. “You know don't just be like, ‘Oh well, it was put on the township website, you didn't see that it was there.’” Being proactive is particularly important when issues are sensitive and potentially divisive. In these situations, participants advised public officials to control the message by being the first – or near first – to convey critical information. A final recommendation was to utilize communications to seek public participation, with speakers stressing the importance of gathering a variety of perspectives. Amidst all the recommendations for providing frequent, engaging, and proactive communications, one person raised the issue of scalability, asking whether it is feasible and realistic to demand this type of communication from local governments and whether it would be scalable to higher levels.

Conclusion

To summarize Chapter IV, this study collected and analyzed data in two phases. The first phase used a survey to collect quantitative data from the participants and concluded that there were significant differences between levels of trust among some municipalities. However, given the nature of this study, the qualitative data collected during the focus groups was more enlightening. There were five prevalent trust-building themes that emerged from the focus group discussions: service mentality, responsiveness, listening, civic engagement, and personal integrity. There were also several communication themes that materialized: social media, e-news, paper newsletters, websites, and a variety of communication characteristics. The next chapter reaches beyond the surface level results and contemplates the deeper meanings and implications behind the findings.

Chapter V: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

This final chapter strives to tie a bow around this study of communication and trust in local government. But first, reflect on the empirical journey to this point. The Review of Literature (Chapter II) argues that three compelling ideas emerge from the vast body of trust-related literature. The first is that good communication is key to building trust. The second is that face-to-face dialog is the most effective method of communication. And third, local government is a good place to start a trust-building effort. The research inquiry that emerges from prior research, and is considered in this study, is whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of trust citizens have in their local government. Building from this point, Chapter III describes the research framework and mixed methods approach used to examine this question, and Chapter IV details the data collection process and summarizes the results of the data analysis. This final chapter draws this examination to a conclusion in three stages. First, the author discusses the study results as seen through the lens of empirical research. For the most part, the study results were consistent with prior research, but there are some differences and nuances. Next, the author refines this discussion further by listing some recommendations and implications that emerge from the project. The author then highlights some of the limitations of the study and suggests ways that future research can both expand on the results and address some of the limitations. Finally, some brief concluding thoughts close this chapter and the study.

Discussion

The intent of this study was to explore whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate affects the level of public trust citizens have in their local government. Generally speaking, the discussions that emerged from the qualitative portion of the study suggest that communication characteristics like responsiveness and promptness are important factors to citizens. The results also imply that public officials' mannerisms – namely whether they are kind, helpful, and consistent – are important trust factors, as well. The discussion that follows strives to move beyond these simplistic statements to unite the study results (Chapter IV) with themes from empirical research (Chapter II) in an effort to extrapolate deeper meaning. For the most part, the study results were consistent with prior research. For example, service mentality, personal integrity, responsiveness, communication, and civic engagement all surfaced as prominent considerations. On the other hand, there are some distinctions and differences worth highlighting with regard to similarities, efficiency, and external and inherent trust factors.

Service Mentality

The concept of service mentality is a prominent theme in this study and in prior literature (e.g., Harwood, 2019; Hurley, 2012; Van Wart, 2015). During focus groups, both trusting and untrusting participants cited benevolent and service-oriented traits as important trust-building characteristics. Participants commented that public officials should be friendly and helpful and advised them to subordinate their personal interests in favor of the public good. The same themes are echoed in literature. Hurley (2012) observed that people tend to have positive feelings about those who are willing to put others' interests before their own, and Harwood (2019) stresses that public officials should be driven by the importance of human dignity. In this way, the results of this study closely align with prior findings.

The recommendations that extend from these findings are relatively simple. Public officials should remember that their role includes an oath to serve the public good (Van Wart, 2015). Officials should exercise professionalism, compassion, concern for others, fairness, and optimism (Van Wart, 2015). They should also demonstrate respect for others. This includes being respectful to citizens, coworkers, and anyone else they interact with (Van Wart, 2015). Finally, service mentality requires expanding decision-making to include as many people as feasible, given the nature of the topic at hand (Van Wart, 2015).

Before moving on, recall that one participant drew an interesting parallel between transactional and transformational leadership. Academically speaking, transactional and transformational leadership models are very different with regard to theoretical emphasis, type of power, and desired leadership behavior. Transactional leadership models emphasize closed systems with a narrow range of variables (Van Wart, 2015). Leaders exhibit legitimate power based on rewards and punishments (Van Wart, 2015). Transactional leadership also emphasizes behaviors like monitoring, planning, and delegating (Van Wart, 2015). By comparison, transformational leadership models stress open systems with a broad range of variables (Van Wart, 2015). Leaders exercise expert and referent power with emphasis on behaviors like networking, informing, and empowering (Van Wart, 2015). Given the prevalence of *wicked problems* and jurisdictional interdependence, transformational leadership would seem like a more appropriate model for today's public leaders.

Personal Integrity

Ethical behavior was another important factor identified by both trusting and untrusting focus group participants. As described by study participants, ethical behavior includes being honest, open, transparent, straightforward, and unbiased. They also talked about the importance of public officials being respectful of the power that is inherent to their positions. Finally, comments about performing reliably and consistently were important integrity-related themes. Most importantly, serving the public with personal integrity may be particularly meaningful when an outcome is not favorable to a citizen. Participants were more likely to trust the outcome of a process if they felt heard and believed that the public official was applying rules and regulations in a consistent fashion. The study results mirror prior research because there is evidence that this type of authenticity and perceived accountability engenders trust (Beshi & Kaur, 2020; Harwood, 2019).

How does a public official perform and deliver public services with personal integrity? Van Wart (2015) suggests three strategies. The first is to "examine and explain principles behind actions" (Van Wart, 2015, p. 283). Government in general is fraught with a myriad of regulations and it is easy to lose sight of the purpose and intent behind these standards. In order to consistently apply rules and regulations, officials must examine policy origins with discipline (Van Wart, 2015). This examination is also key to being able to explain actions to citizens (Van Wart, 2015). Van Wart (2015) recommends that public officials make decision-making as transparent as possible. It is this transparency that helps citizens respect decisions even if they are averse to their personal interests (Van Wart, 2015). Finally, Van Wart (2015) suggests that public officials should provide opportunities for candid feedback. But in addition to providing for these opportunities, officials have to be prepared to really listen to the feedback and be responsive, which are two characteristics that are discussed next.

Responsiveness

Both trusting and untrusting participants cited responsiveness as an important trust-building factor. Commentary about responsiveness included statements concerning promptness of action and the importance of follow through. The same themes are echoed in literature. There is evidence that trust and responsiveness are positively correlated (Beshi & Kaur, 2020; Chanley et al., 2001; Houston & Harding, 2013). Specifically, Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) concluded that improved perceptions of responsiveness were statistically related to increased trust in local government. In addition, Bruning et al. (2008) found that prompt response to a public need or concern is critical to maintaining trust. Again, the results of this study closely align with prior findings. The one nuance that is worth highlighting is that the participants in the focus groups distinguished between responsiveness in terms of prompt action and responsiveness in terms of following up on unresolved issues, with participants putting particular emphasis on the importance of the latter.

Again, the recommendations that extend from these findings are relatively simple. Officials should be prompt in responding to inquiries, complaints, or other communications, even if their initial response is only to confirm that they received the message and offer a timeframe within which they will respond in more detail. Second, once an engagement has occurred, it is important for officials to follow up in accordance with their pledge.

Communication

Recall that, for the purpose of this writing, communication is divided into two general groups – one-way communication and two-way communication. While one-way methods can be effective tools to inform, persuade, and command, they pose notable challenges when it comes to building trust. In comparison, two-way interaction has proven more promising (Bannister & Connolly, 2011) because it allows for the free flow of meaning between the sender and the receiver (Patterson et al., 2012). Also recall that while it is possible for electronic communication to be either one- or two-way, one-way methods are more prevalent.

During focus group discussions, participants were asked to identify how they learn about things that are going on within their local government. In response, participants listed social media, e-news, paper newsletters, and websites as the most popular means of communication and information exchange. All these communication methods are one-way and three of the four are electronic. Taking the ideas that emerged during the focus groups together with theories from empirical research, a number of important communication themes emerge. Some of these themes concern strategies for successful communication. Other themes pertain to navigating some critical communication challenges, namely confirmation bias and knowledge illusion. The paragraphs that follow consider these themes in more detail.

Communication Strategies

Regardless of the conduit of the information (e.g., social media, website, newsletters), participants spoke about the characteristics of successful communication. The paragraphs that follow review several key strategies and related recommendations. The strategies discussed include actively listening, ensuring electronic communications are of high quality, striving for equitable distribution of information, and using community liaisons.

Listening. A prominent theme throughout the focus groups was the importance of listening. Both trusting and untrusting participants cited active listening as an important trust-building factor. Literature is in agreement (e.g., Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Frei, 2018; O'Leary, 2014; Rogers, 1961; Stivers, 1994). The average person listens to a lot on a daily basis. The irony is that most people are not very good at it. All too often, people “listen in an ego-driven way” (Stivers, 1994, p. 366), just waiting for the speaker to finish to insert their perspective. Instead of attending to what the other person is really saying, the receiver is too often focusing on how they will reply (Stivers, 1994). This tendency is accentuated during confrontational discussions, when message recipients are more likely to respond defensively (O’Leary, 2014). Government employees in particular have a tendency to respond to a challenge by citing chapter and verse of the organization’s regulations and procedures. But these habits are detrimental to building trust (O’Leary, 2014).

According to Patterson et al. (2012), one reason that people have a difficult time remaining calm in confrontational situations is that “we’re designed wrong” (p. 5):

> When conversations turn from routine to crucial, we’re often in trouble. That’s because emotions don’t exactly prepare us to converse effectively. Countless generations of genetic shaping drive humans to handle crucial conversations with flying fists and fleet feet, not intelligent persuasion and gentle attentiveness. (Patterson, et al., 2012, p. 5)

The reaction to confrontation is physical and largely involuntary. These situations cause a release of hormones (including adrenaline) and heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate all increase. While this response was important to ancient ancestors, who had to decide between fighting and fleeing, it is not helpful when it comes to higher level reasoning (Patterson et al., 2012).

Research suggests that instead of reacting defensively, public officials should just listen. More specifically, they should listen deeply and with understanding (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Frei, 2018; O’Leary, 2014), and in a way that people feel safe to share their thoughts (Patterson et al., 2012). Listening in this way means seeing “the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about" (Rogers, 1961, pp. 331-332). This type of listening requires that message recipients dedicate their full and deliberate attention to the speaker (Stivers, 1994) even if what the other person is saying is total nonsense (Canal, 2020). It is the connection that is important. And while this control may go against human instinct, it may be an important strategy in building and maintaining trust.

Electronic Communication. Given the undeniable dominance of electronic communication, literature offers a few general recommendations when it comes to its effective use. First, while technology cannot completely replace personal interface, electronic systems can be designed to mirror two-way communication (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006) and mimic human interaction (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). More often than not, electronic solutions tend to focus on pushing information out to users as opposed to engaging them in communication (Houston & Harding, 2013). However, building interactive features into electronic platforms could be advantageous. Research also suggests that the quality of the messaging matters. High quality, error free communications suggest that the rest of the government operation is high quality and trustworthy (Garcia & Casaló Ariño, 2015). Finally, if building trust is the goal, combining electronic methods with other strategies may prove most effective (Garcia & Casaló Ariño, 2015).

Equity. Traditional paper newsletters, while more costly, can be distributed to all citizens without any action on their part. It shows up in their mailbox without the need to subscribe. Whether or not they read it is up to them. E-news methods are similar in that they arrive in the recipient's email inbox quickly and easily (and cheaply); however, recipients must opt in for e-news by subscribing. An already skeptical citizen may be less likely to sign up for communications, thereby further limiting their exposure to public information. And, while not an issue raised during focus group discussions, equity could also be an issue if citizens do not have equal access to technology. The implications here suggest that local governments would be best served by not looking at newsletter communications in exclusory fashion – electronic *or* paper. Rather, while more expensive, using both methods would likely be most effective. From a marketing standpoint, the more methods the better. The *rule of seven* is an old marketing maxim that suggests a prospective buyer needs to hear or see a marketing message at least seven times before they are likely to take an action to buy it (Tutorials Point, n.d.). This same rule may have merit in public service, too. It could be that a citizen needs to see or hear a message multiple times before internalizing it.

Community Communicators. Before closing this discussion on communication strategies, it is wise to touch on one other issue that was raised during the focus groups. While not a prominent theme, several trusting participants identified direct liaisons as a beneficial source of information. For instance, a municipal liaison could routinely visit a homeowners’ association or other civic organization to provide routine updates about government happenings. Wood and Fowlie (2013) contemplate the effectiveness of using this type of connection to increase trust at the local level. They refer to these channels as community communicators:

> Community communicators (CCs) are individuals in the local area who have an influence on the ideas and opinions of other people around them. … They are “connectors” who are able to persuade other people to share their opinions and draw groups together, either through formal means or simply by being the type of person who stands and chats to other residents. (Wood & Fowlie, 2013, p. 529)

The CC concept is founded on the assumption that citizens appreciate having more information about issues and problems, even if they are not in agreement with the issue or approach. Community communicators can also be more effective than traditional communications when it comes to challenging myths and rumors and reaching disengaged individuals (Wood & Fowlie, 2013), because CCs have nothing to lose or gain from fellow citizens’ opinions and behaviors (Garcia & Casaló Ariño, 2015).

The benefits of a CC program go in two directions. Not only can CCs convey information about governmental programs and policies to citizens, but they can also share insights and opinions from residents with public officials, thereby creating a more effective communication loop (Wood & Fowlie, 2013). Community communicators are able to detect negative sentiments among the public early, which might help officials arrest dissent before it becomes endemic (Wood & Fowlie, 2013). As discussed in more detail on the following pages, myths and rumors tend to be self-reinforcing. Once entrenched, these sentiments are not easily reversed with facts and statistics. Prompt response is critical and face-to-face communication is the most effective way to challenge and explore misconceptions (Wood & Fowlie, 2013).

When selecting people to perform this critical function, it is important to choose people with the right personality and the communication skills needed to engage with residents and build trusting relationships (Wood & Fowlie, 2013). They should also be prominent members of the community. Malcom Gladwell (2002) might refer to them as “connectors” – “people whom all of us can reach in only a few steps because, for one reason or another, they manage to occupy many different worlds and subcultures and niches” (Gladwell, 2002, p. 48). These individuals are engaging, energetic, knowledgeable, and influential among their peers. They possess a rare set of social gifts that enables them to pull people together. Connectors tend to share similarities and interests with multiple groups of people and are therefore seen as more trustworthy. Finally, to combat the communication challenges discussed next, CCs need strong and strategic communication skills. But, the fact that they are not directly associated with the government gives them a leg up in this regard.

Communication Challenges

The vast majority of trusting participants identified social media as a key communication channel. Facebook and Nextdoor were the platforms most often identified by participants. Interestingly, while people identified social media as a frequently used resource, they were quick to identify several notable flaws: polarization, ideological isolation, and the illusion of knowledge. The paragraphs that follow discuss these concerns and challenges in more detail.

The Illusion of Knowledge. One focus group participant pointed out that social media tends to lead people to believe that they know more than they do. This is not an unusual phenomenon. The world is a complex place, and it goes without saying that it is impossible for one person to know all there is to know. Consequently, people do not just rely on the knowledge that is in their own minds, but also on the "collective mind" (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017, p. 5). The collective mind refers to knowledge that exists in places other than one's own mind – information in books, on the internet, and in other peoples' minds (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). The problem is that people often fail to recognize where their own knowledge ends and the collective mind begins. The result of this oversight is that people are overconfident in their knowledge. The smallest bit of information makes them feel like an expert (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). Sloman and Fernbach (2017) refer to this phenomenon as the *knowledge illusion*. This tendency can be particularly problematic when the media and social networks come into play. Recall that most people learn about government affairs from the media and that the media tends to exaggerate and oversimplify. The knowledge illusion suggests that a person may absorb a media message and presume he knows all there is to know on a subject, when in reality, he only has internalized the very simple tip of a very complex iceberg.

Social networks can result in a similar outcome. A person who thinks he is informed about a topic tends to talk to others as if an authority on the matter. However, people are rarely actually experts, so this delusion can have a detrimental snowball effect. The people who a self-proclaimed expert talks to do not know much either, so they believe what they are told. Then these people parrot what they are told to others, and in this way a community can reinforce each other's views and spread incomplete and inaccurate information (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). The internet expands our networks even further, making it even easier to spread opinions and join like-minded people (Putnam, 2000; Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). The concerning part is that word of mouth is an important factor when it comes to people's judgements of trust (Canel, 2020).

The challenge for governments is that once this ball starts rolling it can be very difficult to stop or reverse (for reasons discussed next). To that end, Sloman and Fernbach (2017) offer several strategies that public officials can try to counteract the knowledge illusion. One approach is to ask for a detailed causal explanation of the issue at hand (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). This can both reduce a person's confidence and reduce the extreme nature of their position (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). It is important to clarify that asking a person for a causal explanation is different than asking them why they believe something. Having people consider reasons for their position can actually further entrench their beliefs (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017), possibly because it gives them the opportunity to reinforce their thinking. On the other hand, asking for causal explanations is more likely to moderate opinions (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017), because it forces them to consider implications beyond their initial belief. It is also critical to mention that this strategy is not likely to be effective for opinions that are based in morals and values. This is because moral and value judgements cannot be explained and are therefore hard to moderate. Consequently, explaining does not change anything (Guess & Farnham, 2011; Sloman & Fernbach, 2017).

The challenge with this approach is that exposing people's illusions can upset them (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). Further, people may be less likely to seek out new information once their illusions have been exposed (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). These reactions are obviously detrimental to building a trusting relationship. So, navigating this minefield demands strong communication skills. To strip someone of their knowledge illusion and not risk losing a trust-building opportunity, a trustee must be able to help the person realize their ignorance without making them feel stupid, which is not easy (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017).

Polarization and Ideological Isolation. During the focus groups, participants spoke about how social media can simultaneously connect and divide its users because it enables users to limit their connections to like-minded people. The term *confirmation bias* refers to the phenomenon that occurs when individuals seek out information that supports their own beliefs and reject information that runs counter to these beliefs (Gorman & Gorman, 2017; Patterson et al., 2012). A person will often fail to reverse or revise their beliefs, even when the basis of their belief has been completely refuted, because doing so might result in embarrassment and shunning (Gorman & Gorman, 2017).

Confirmation bias can be particularly strong during times of high emotion, and it does not matter whether the emotion is positive or negative (Gorman & Gorman, 2017). During these periods, people are more prone to believe what they are told and are less likely to engage in discussion to gain factual understanding. Rather, they are more likely to seek reassurance and emotional bonding from those within their social networks (Gorman & Gorman, 2017). Recall that people with low levels of psychological adjustment are less likely to trust. Similarly, there is evidence that people who are poorly adjusted are more likely to form their opinions on the basis of emotion (Gorman & Gorman, 2017).

Like with knowledge illusion, the interconnectivity enabled by today's technology can also exacerbate confirmation bias. As recognized earlier, the internet can serve two completely opposite functions. On one hand, it has the ability to unite millions of people across the world and broaden "our horizons with vast streams of information" (Gorman & Gorman, 2017, p. 57). On the other hand, however, the internet can create isolation and polarization by allowing people to filter out opinions that run counter to their own (Gorman & Gorman, 2017), thus aggravating the confirmation bias tendency.

It is easy to appreciate how confirmation bias can be problematic for public officials. While knowledge illusion illustrates how easy it is for incomplete or inaccurate information to take hold and spread, it is confirmation bias that makes it difficult to reverse an epidemic once it starts. Thankfully, there are several strategies public officials can use to neutralize confirmation bias. Of course, the most effective approach is to control the messaging early and address any fallacies quickly and vigorously, just as it is preferable to get a vaccine as opposed to treating symptoms of an illness. A second option is to forewarn people that they may be exposed to false and persuasive messages. This early warning gives people time to think about the merits of a message before forming an opinion (Gorman & Gorman, 2017). There is also evidence that making people aware of biases may help them to think critically about a message. Another strategy is to offer weakened versions of counter arguments in the same way a vaccine introduces weakened viruses.

Public officials can also make headway by considering the psychological disposition of citizens. It can be helpful to identify those who are the proponents of conspiracy theories and those whose opinions are more malleable. Individuals who support and promulgate conspiracy theories “tend to portray themselves as lone wolves who are the victims of huge and powerful conglomerates” (Gorman & Gorman, 2017, p. 62). The people who are more likely to succumb to these messages tend to be lonely, isolated, and mistrusting of authority (Gorman & Gorman, 2017). Since it may be difficult to sway these individuals, public officials may do better to spend their time reaching those who are still forming their opinions in an effort to keep them from buying into false theories (Gorman & Gorman, 2017). Another approach is to engage open-minded people in exercises in which they are asked to “imagine different sides of a controversy, different outcomes, and different interpretations” (Gorman & Gorman, 2017, p. 139).

In closing, communication is a critical element of accomplishing a trusting relationship. Public officials need to be skilled listeners, forward thinkers, and creative messengers. They also have to be prepared to navigate challenges posed by the knowledge illusion, confirmation basis, equity, and electronic technology. This is a tall order. When it comes to communication, Van Wart (2015) has two broad recommendations. The first is to evaluate communication skills to identify strengths and weaknesses. As noted in Chapter II, there are numerous categories of communication – one-way and two-way; oral, written, listening, and nonverbal; electronic and traditional.

> Because there are so many types and methods of communication, assessment is not a simple proposition. The skills for good e-mail communication are not necessarily those needed for writing a good analytic report. Therefore, any assessment of communication skills has to be discrete enough to identify the specific subcompetencies. (Van Wart, 2015, p. 295)

Once weaknesses are identified, a plan can be developed to strengthen these areas. Strategies to do this can run the gamut, ranging from self-study to professional coaching. Regardless of approach, Van Wart (2015) observes that communication skills are too important to have significant weaknesses.

Civic Engagement

The importance of civic engagement is the final theme discussed here. Civic engagement was mainly raised as an important element by trusting participants, particularly those with direct experience with local government operations. These participants felt that their involvement reaped a variety of benefits including personal knowledge of public officials and a deeper understanding of the decision-making process. Conversely, the few untrusting participants who spoke about direct involvement with their municipalities reported having very limited interaction with public officials.

Unfortunately, as discussed earlier, civic mindedness and participation in public affairs has waned since the 1960s, as has the public's willingness to sacrifice for the common good (Hurley, 2012; Putnam, 2000). One strategy to reverse this trend and increase public engagement is to decentralize decision-making to smaller jurisdictions (Putnam, 2020), which is of course one of the approaches explored in this writing. Beyond emphasis on local governance, public entities should think creatively about how to engage the public. This means thinking past traditional and mandated participation options. Putnam (2020) also recommends the inclusion of a "social-capital impact statement" (p. 413) for new programs so that public officials are forced to consider how an effort might impact – either positively or negatively – civic engagement.

In closing this section, the study results were largely consistent with prior research. Service mentality, personal integrity, responsiveness, communication, and civic engagement all emerged as prominent considerations. On the other hand, there are some distinctions and differences worth highlighting concerning similarities, efficiency, and external and inherent trust factors. First, consider similarities and alignment of interests. Earlier research suggests that trustors often begin by taking stock of how similar they are to the trustee when deciding whether to trust (Hurley, 2012). While none of the participants mentioned anything about alignment of interests or similarities, that might be because it is more of a subconscious factor. Looking for similarities might not be an intentional endeavor, but might still be meaningful. Other inherent and external factors discussed in Chapter II could also be more subliminal. For instance, while national security, economic conditions, demographics, and partisanship may not be conscious considerations among trustors, they could still have some influence.

A second point worth noting involves psychological disposition. Psychologically well-adjusted, risk tolerant, and empowered individuals tend to be more trusting than people who are poorly adjusted, risk averse, and vulnerable (Hurley, 2012). One unexpected occurrence during the focus groups involved the personal attacks that were voiced by untrusting participants against public officials. Some participants attacked public workers as lazy and implied they worked for local government because they were not employable elsewhere. Others suggested that people who work for government do so because they lack any kind of social life. What is the purpose and origin of these attacks? Are these spiteful feelings the result of a specific experience or more generalized sentiments that evolved from societal messages? Or is this an example of poor psychological disposition? Is it possible to reach beyond biases like this to establish trust? This would be an interesting area to explore further through interviews or focus groups.

Finally, while efficiency was not specifically identified by participants as an important trust factor, it is worth noting that several untrusting people noted the importance of fiscal responsibility, which is arguably an aspect of efficiency. So, while not prominent topics of the focus group discussions, similarities, external and inherent trust factors, and efficiency still remain relevant considerations.

Recommendations and Implications

In order to distill the broad range of topics discussed above, the recommendations outlined below are divided into three broad groupings. The first part considers skill-based recommendations, the second focuses more on trait-based strategies, and the third pertains to the topic of civic engagement. Finally, the author considers the implication of the recommendations in terms of the future of public leadership and the public administration profession.

Skills

Recommendations pertaining to responsiveness and communication are skills-oriented because they are more susceptible to refinement (Van Wart, 2015). That is, they can be altered by training, education, and practice. Regarding responsiveness, the discussion above points toward two recommendations:

1. Officials should be prompt in responding to inquiries, complaints, or other communications.
2. Once an engagement has occurred, officials should follow up in accordance with their pledge.

There are also a number of recommendations that pertain to communication:

3. Public officials should use a multitude of communication strategies to ensure information is distributed broadly and equitably.
4. Officials should also strive to create communications that are simple, yet interesting, creative, and engaging.
5. When preparing communications, it is important that messages are high quality (e.g., error free, correct grammar, clean formatting). This is particularly true when it comes to electronic communications.
6. When using electronic methods, public officials should strive to mirror two-way conversation to the greatest extent feasible. This means maintaining a conversational tone when writing and using interactive technology in a way that mimics human interaction.

7. When speaking with citizens, it is important for public officials to calmly listen with the goal of understanding the person's perspective. This is particularly important in confrontational situations.
8. Public officials should communicate promptly and proactively, particularly when the message is potentially controversial. This also involves addressing fallacies and false rumors quickly and vigorously.
9. In addition, when dealing with potentially divisive issues that are ripe for public distortion, public officials should consider forewarning people that they may be exposed to false and persuasive messages. They may also consider offering weakened versions of counter arguments.

Because skills are more malleable to training and development, Van Wart's (2015) suggestion to identify strengths and weaknesses through evaluation has merit for both communication and responsiveness. Once weaknesses are identified, a plan can be developed to strengthen these areas. As noted above, strengthening strategies can come in many forms: books, classes, and formal instruction or coaching.

Traits

Service mentality and personal integrity are more leadership traits than they are skills. Unlike skills, traits are more inherent in that they are anchored in the personality of a person and are therefore difficult to radically change (Van Wart, 2015). In crude terms, someone either has service mentality and personal integrity, or they do not. This challenge aside, the discussion above suggests three recommendations to enhance service mentality:

10. Public officials should remember that their role includes an oath to serve the public good.

11. Officials should demonstrate respect, professionalism, compassion, fairness, optimism, and concern for others.
12. Public officials should expand decision-making to include as many people as feasible.

With regard to personal integrity, there are three recommendations that emerge from the discussion:

13. Officials should be prepared to examine and explain principles behind actions.
14. Public officials should ensure that decision-making is as transparent as possible.
15. Officials should provide opportunities for candid feedback.

The fact that service mentality and personal integrity are leadership traits, and that traits are more inherent than skills, presents a problem for public administration education and professional development. If these attributes are important aspects in building trust, yet difficult to teach and develop, what does that mean for this field of profession and study? This is one of the questions taken up shortly. But first, consider one final recommendation surrounding civic engagement.

Civic Engagement

There is one last suggestion that is neither skills-based nor trait-based. Rather, this recommendation pertains to enhancing civic engagement:

16. Public officials should think creatively about how to engage the public. For example, one strategy suggested by Putnam (2020) is to include a social-capital impact statement when planning new policies or programs.

It is possible the factors covered by the recommendations outlined above are somewhat cyclically related. In other words, citizens might be more likely to get involved in their local government if their public leaders exhibit the desired skills and traits, because they may feel more positive and trusting with regard to the local government. Moreover, civic engagement in and of itself could increase trust even further as a result of increased knowledge and understanding.

Questions for Public Leadership and Administration

The 16 recommendations listed on the preceding pages represent important themes that emerged from this study in combination with existing literature. The recommendations mainly consist of skill- and trait-based strategies, with one recommendation pertaining specifically to civic engagement. But these recommendations point to four fundamental questions pertaining to public administration and leadership as a study and as a profession. These questions, which deal with public administration education, public employee recruitment and selection, professional development, and leadership priorities, are discussed in more detail below.

A good number of future public leaders – both elected and appointed – get their initial exposure to the profession from political science and public administration programs at colleges and universities. Do these higher education programs adequately and appropriately prepare these students for their roles as public leaders? First, the importance of building and maintaining a trusting relationship with citizens should be a fundamental element of any public administration education program because trust is critical to ensuring public cooperation, compliance, volunteerism, and political stability. In addition, the results of this study suggest that responsiveness and communication are critical factors when it comes to maintaining a trusting relationship with citizens. While these skills are important in public administration, they are particularly prominent in other academic disciplines. For instance, some of the recommendations listed above point toward public relations, marketing, psychology, communication, and hospitality management. Do public administration and political science programs include adequate instruction in these areas?

The trait-based questions pose an even tricker challenge. Unlike skills, which are susceptible to education and training, traits are more ingrained in the person. Nonetheless, it would seem important to cover service mentality and personal integrity as part of ethics curriculum. Given the inherent aspect of these factors, would it also be appropriate to offer personality assessments as part of this education? An assessment of this nature might be informative to someone considering public administration as a profession.

The next logical step in the career path of a public servant is the recruitment and selection process. This is another time when it would seem important to consider these factors, which should be prominent in position descriptions and job postings. In addition, these factors should be explored in detail during the interview and selection process, with questions or evaluations that are specific to the requirements of the particular position. Finally, during the onboarding processes, the importance of these skills should be tied to civic engagement and the democratic process to ensure employees appreciate their vital connection to the profession.

Again, service mentality and personal integrity traits provide a special challenge. One way to evaluate these traits during the hiring process would be to administer a personality test as part of the selection protocol. This emphasis on identifying the right person for a position is consistent with one of the conclusions author Jim Collins reaches in *Good to Great* (2001). Using an analogy of people riding a bus, Collins advises that one of the first things successful leaders do is make sure the right people are on the bus and in the right seats. This is the same idea. However, relying heavily on personality poses a challenge. If building public trust is at least partly influenced by attracting and retaining naturally talented officials and employees, what does that mean for the future of public service? Is this a feasible and realistic expectation? This same question was posed by Osborne and Gaebler in 1992 (as cited in Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

Once employees are hired and performing in a particular job, professional training and development becomes a critical enrichment activity. As such, it is important that the educational strategies discussed earlier are available to public employees in the form of professional development. These include training in customer service delivery, strategies to deal with difficult personalities, and a wide variety of communication instruction. Professional writing, confrontational situations, social media, and promotional writing are all types of communication training that could be relevant for different positions. Further, as recommended by Van Wart (2015), communication evaluation is important to identify weaknesses so that training and development can be specific and targeted. A last aspect of professional development involves civic engagement. Public employees should have the opportunity to learn about strategies to engage citizens in the workings of government.

Finally, public leaders, who are ultimately responsible for budgeting and personnel management, need to realize that the investment in responsiveness, communication, and civic engagement take time and money. In order for employees to receive important training, dollars need to be prioritized for that purpose. Further, being responsive to citizen inquiries and communicating frequently and effectively takes time. Staffing must be adequate to provide the support required to fulfill these duties.

Clearly, there are many questions left to answer and this study is limited in terms of definitive conclusions. These limitations are the topic of the next section.

Limitations

All empirical studies have limitations and constraints, and this project is no exception. Perhaps one of the most obvious limitations is its small size. While limiting size was a conscious decision, it does impact the ability to generalize the results and recommendations contained in Chapters IV and V to a larger population. This is not an uncommon limitation of qualitative research (Hesse-Biber, 2017) and generalizability was not a primary objective of this work. Rather, the goal here was to explore the concept of public trust in local government in some depth to help form a foundation for further study (the topic of the next section). It is possible that future research work in this area could produce more generalizable results.

Another limitation, albeit minor in the context of the study, was the response rate. The survey received 372 valid responses, just 12 under the 384 responses needed to meet the social science standard of five percent precision and 95 percent confidence (Johnson, 2014). Given that the delta between actual and desired participants is relatively small, and that the quantitative component of the study was not the primary focus, the implications of this shortcoming are negligible. Nonetheless, it does suggest that the presumed response rate of 30 percent was optimistic and that a lower rate should be anticipated for similar efforts in the future.

A final limitation worth recognizing concerns a point raised by Canal (2020), who observed that distrusting citizens are even less likely to participate in surveys. Canal’s (2020) finding played out in this study, with fewer untrusting citizen responding to the focus group solicitation. As a result, untrusting perspectives were underrepresented. Given the importance of hearing from this population, this is another justification for broadening participant recruitment efforts.

Future Research Opportunities

But, with each limitation comes an opportunity. The paragraphs below outline how this study opens the door for future research prospects. One opportunity lies in methodology. The focus groups were prioritized because qualitative methods are the preferred technique when it comes to exploring subjective meaning and obtaining in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of people (Hesse-Biber, 2017). However, the information gathered from focus group discussions could be used to develop a more robust survey, which could collect a broader range of quantitative data.

Another opportunity for exploration concerns demographics. While demographic data was intentionally omitted from this study (for reasons discussed in Chapters II and III), it could be worth considering in the context of the relationship between homophily and trust. When two people are similar or share analogous interests, it is easier for both parties to trust because one’s efforts to promote his own interest is more likely to promote the other’s interest (Canel, 2020; Hurley, 2012). According to Brookings, the 2020 Census results indicate that “nearly four of 10 Americans identify with a race or ethnic group other than white, and suggest that the 2010 to 2020 decade will be the first in the nation’s history in which the white population declined in numbers” (Frey, 2020, para 1). What type of impact could this growing diversity have on public trust? This would be an interesting question to consider.

In addition, the population of this study was limited to property-owning citizens within the seven municipalities that make up the West Chester Area School District in

Chester County, Pennsylvania. This is an extremely small population within the context of the United States. There are good arguments for focusing on local governments. Rahn and Rudolph (2005) observe that local level government is too often overlooked in public and administration science. But, as observed in the preceding section, small studies are limited when it comes to generalizability. Deploying research of this nature within multiple local government regions would offer more cases to examine and compare (Rahn & Rudolf, 2005).

Beyond these options, the recommendations and questions listed earlier provide a wealth of opportunities for further examination. Each item raises an empirical challenge that could be investigated using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Obviously, the most critical question is whether any of these efforts would impact the level of trust citizens have in their local government. If a municipality made efforts to train employees to be responsive, would it make a significant impact? If a public employer used personality testing to identify candidates with service mentality and personal integrity, would it matter? The only way to quantitatively test these questions would be through a series of surveys administered over multiple years so that results could be compared over time.

One last challenge: if there was evidence that some of these recommendations could have a statistically significant impact, would it be possible to apply the treatment on a larger scale (e.g., state or national level)? This is a tall order. However, doing nothing does not seem to be an appropriate action either. Given the importance of public trust in ensuring a stable democracy, any effort, regardless of how small, would seem a worthwhile endeavor.

Conclusion

From about 1930 into the 1960s, the majority of citizens trusted the government to do what is right (Bannister & Connolly, 2011). But, as the country advanced through the middle of the 1960s, this idyllic state transformed suddenly and unexpectedly. Today, only about 20 percent of adults say that they trust the government to do what is right (Pew Research Center, 2020). This statistic is of concern because scholars have identified some troubling consequences of public distrust. These impacts include disobedience, obstinance, disrespect, and selfishness. Further, some fear that incessant distrust threatens to erode the democratic principles on which this nation is founded (Houston & Harding, 2013). In light of these detrimental ramifications, the decline of trust in government is a topic worthy of consideration and study.

A great number of scholars have studied this topic, generating a vast body of research. Building on the work of many others, the preceding study is grounded in three themes that emerge from earlier findings. The first is that human interaction is key to building trust. Second, within the context of this interaction, face-to-face communication promises to be the most effective strategy and therefore critical to the trust-building process. And third, the best place to begin an initiative to build public trust is at the local government level. This study draws from these ideas by asking *whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of public trust citizens have in their local government*.

While declining trust in government is a widespread issue, this study intentionally focuses on a small population. More specifically, the participants were limited to adult individuals and entities that both own property and live within the seven municipalities that make up the West Chester Area School District in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Even though intuition might suggest that large problems are best resolved with expansive solutions, some research indicates that sweeping remedies deployed on a widespread scale may not be the best approach (e.g., Dunbar, 2011; Olson, 1965). Rather, smaller groups could be more effective when it comes to collective action (Olson, 1965).

A two-phase, non-experimental, mixed methods design was utilized to examine the research question. The first phase of the study used a survey to collect quantitative data pertaining to residency and level of trust. The survey received 372 valid responses (n = 372). The largest portion of respondents said that they trusted their local governments to do what is right *most of the time* (44.9 percent) and the results of the Kruskal-Wallis H test show an overall significant difference in level of trust by municipality (H (6) = 44.567, p < .001). Not surprisingly, the most significant differences exist between the most and least trusting jurisdictions.

The second phase of the study used focus groups to collect qualitative data about trust in local government. Out of the 372 survey respondents, 140 reported that they would be open to participating in a focus group. Initially, the goal was to have enough respondents to create at least two focus groups consisting of five to eight participants for each category (a total of four groups – two trusting and two untrusting). However, after going through several screening steps, the researcher was only able to create three focus groups – two trusting and one untrusting.

Generally speaking, the discussions that emerged from this phase of the study suggest that communication characteristics like responsiveness and promptness are important factors to citizens. The results also imply that public officials' mannerisms – namely whether they are kind, helpful, and consistent – are important trust factors, as well.

The distillation of the focus group themes resulted in 16 specific recommendations for public officials. Nine of these recommendations can be categorized as skills-oriented because they can be altered by training, education, and practice (Van Wart, 2015). Two of these suggestions related to responsiveness while the remaining seven pertain to communication. For instance, the results indicate that public officials should be prompt in responding to inquiries, complaints, or other communications and that officials should communicate proactively, particularly when the message is potentially controversial.

The next six recommendations are better categorized as leadership traits because they are anchored in the personality of a person, and therefore more difficult to radically change (Van Wart, 2015). Half of these recommendations pertain to service mentality while the other half deal with personal integrity. For instance, public officials should demonstrate respect, professionalism, compassion, fairness, optimism, and concern for others. Officials should also ensure that decision-making is as transparent as possible. Finally, there is one last suggestion that is neither skills-based nor trait-based. Rather, this recommendation pertains to enhancing civic engagement. Very simply, this final item suggests that public officials should think creatively about how to engage the public.

Before closing, the author considers the future of public leadership and the public administration profession through the lens of the recommendations, and four broad questions emerge. These questions contemplate whether the skills identified in this study are adequately incorporated into higher education, professional recruiting, and training programs. But the inherent traits identified as important factors pose a different challenge. If building public trust is at least partly influenced by attracting and retaining naturally talented officials and employees, what does that mean for the future of public service?

Governments may need to gradually change the way they perceive themselves. If public units continue to think of themselves only as *government*, options for a brighter future are limited. However, if public officials begin to see themselves as community builders, priorities start to change (Ibarra, 2020). The recommendations put forth in this study, in combination with future research opportunities, provide an array of possible paths forward. There is no question that any course of action will be fraught with challenges and obstacles. But the current trends are equally troublesome. Even the smallest, most incremental steps in the direction suggested here would seem to be steps worth taking.

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Appendix A

Survey Form

Survey Consent

Project Title: Public trust in local government: Exploring the importance of communication

Investigator(s): Amanda Cantlin; Mark Davis

Project Overview: Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Amanda Cantlin as part of her Doctoral Dissertation. This study asks whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of public trust citizens have in their local government. This research will help advance our understanding of how governments can begin to rebuild the public's trust.

This survey will take less than five minutes of your time. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form.

You may ask Amanda Cantlin any questions to help you understand this study. If you don't want to be a part of this study, it won't affect any services from West Chester University. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study? This study asks whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of public trust citizens have in their local government.

If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked: To take a survey that will take less than five minutes of your time.

Are there any experimental medical treatments? No

Is there any risk to me? No

Is there any benefit to me? While there are not any individual benefits, the Investigators hope that the findings will provide much-needed clues to how government can begin to rebuild the public's trust.

How will you protect my privacy? Your records will be private. Only Amanda Cantlin, Mark Davis, and the West Chester University Institutional Review Board will have access to your responses. Your name will not be used in any reports. Records will be encrypted. Survey responses will be numbered without any personal identifying information. Records will be destroyed three years after study completion.

Do I get paid to take part in this study? No

Who do I contact in case of research related injury? For any questions with this study, contact:

Primary Investigator: Amanda Cantlin at 484-880-7314 ac240581@wcupa.edu
Faculty Sponsor: Mark Davis at 610-436-2017 or MDavis2@wcupa.edu

What will you do with my Identifiable Information? Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Acknowledgement and Consent: I have read and understand the above information. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk. For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the West Chester University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 610-436-3557.

Acknowledge/Accept

Survey Questions

1. Do you live within the West Chester Area School District?
   The following municipalities are in the West Chester Area School District: East Bradford Township, East Goshen Township, Thornbury Townships (Delaware and Chester County), West Chester Borough, West Goshen Township, West Whiteland Township, and Westtown Township.
   - Yes
   - No
   - Don't know

2. Do you own your home/property, pay rent, or other?
   - Own or is buying
   - Pays rent
   - Don't know
   - Other: ____________________

3. In which municipality do you live?
   - East Bradford Township
   - East Goshen Township
   - Thornbury Township, Chester County
   - Thornbury Township, Delaware County
   - West Chester Borough
   - West Goshen Township
   - West Whiteland Township
   - Westtown Township

- Don't know
- Other: ____________________

4. How much of the time do you think you can trust your local government to do what is right?
   - Just about always
   - Most of the time
   - Only some of the time
   - Almost never
   - Don't know

5. Would you be willing to participate in a focus group discussion on the topic of public trust in local government?
   - Yes. Please provide email address: ________________________
   - No

Focus Group Screening Questions

6. How long have you been living in your municipality?
   - Less than one year
   - One to three years
   - Four to ten years
   - More than ten years, but not entire life
   - Entire life
   - Don't know

7. In the last few years, how often would you say you have communicated with municipal public officials?
   Communication could be in any form – dialog, phone call, email, etc. Public officials include elected officials and public employees.
   - Frequently
   - Sometimes
   - Seldom
   - Never
   - Don't know

Appendix B

Letter of Approval from Institutional Review Board

Date: 6-16-2021

IRB #: IRB-FY2021-135
Title: Public Trust in Local Government: Exploring the Importance of Communication
Creation Date: 3-10-2021
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Amanda Cantlin
Review Board: West Chester University Institutional Review Board
Sponsor:

Study History

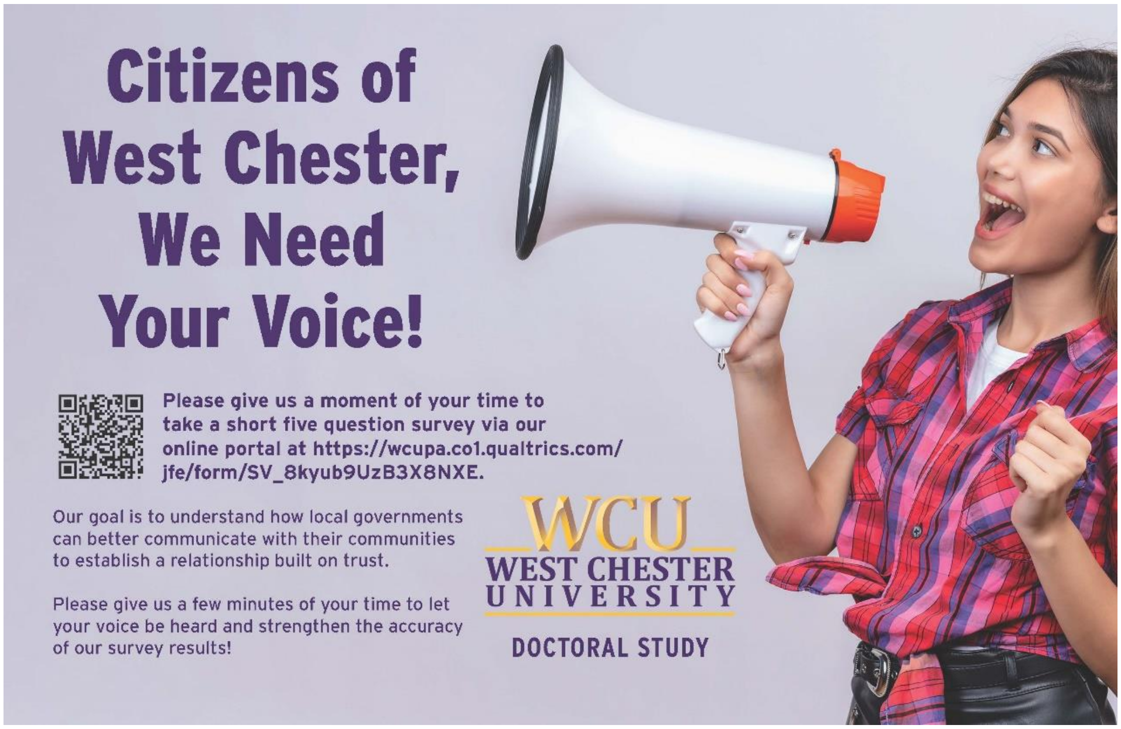
Submission Type Initial	Review Type Expedited	Decision Approved

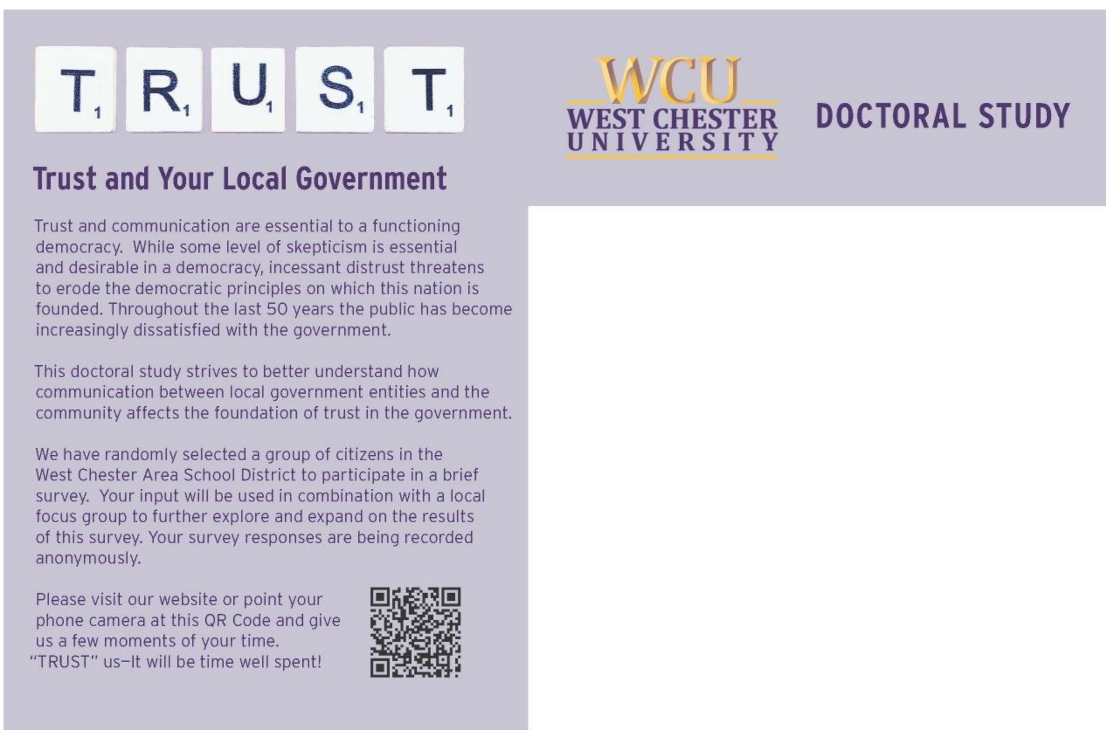
Key Study Contacts

Member Mark Davis	Role Co-Principal Investigator	Contact MDavis2@wcupa.edu
Member Amanda Cantlin	Role Principal Investigator	Contact ac240581@wcupa.edu
Member Amanda Cantlin	Role Primary Contact	Contact ac240581@wcupa.edu

Appendix C

Postcard





Appendix D

Promotional Materials

Article #1

Do you trust [*insert local government*] to do what is right?

This is the question at the heart of a West Chester University doctoral dissertation study. From about 1930 into the 1960s, the majority of citizens trusted the government to do what is right. But, as the country advanced through the middle of the century, this idyllic state transformed, and the public's trust in government steadily declined. While some distrust is essential and desirable in a democracy, incessant distrust threatens to erode the democratic principles on which this nation is founded.

This study specifically contemplates whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of public trust citizens have in their local government.

There are many factors that influence whether a person decides to trust another person – or in this case, a governmental entity. These factors include whether someone is similar to you, whether their interests align with yours, and whether they are kind, ethical, and responsive to your concerns and needs. Communication plays a particularly important role in trust building. It is only through communication that citizens can gauge public officials' credibility.

In addition to communication, size of government seems to be important, too. Attitudes about local government have fared well over time when compared with higher levels of government. Generally speaking, the closer the level of government is to citizens, the higher the level of trust.

The study focuses on property owners that live within the West Chester Area School District in Chester County. This includes residents of East Bradford Township, East Goshen Township, Thornbury Township, West Chester Borough, West Goshen Township, West Whiteland Township, and Westtown Township.

[*Insert Municipality*] hopes that the results of this study will provide insights that the [*Township/Borough*] can use to improve its communication with residents. To learn more and participate in the study, visit https://wcupa.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8kyub9UzB3X8NXE or scan this QR Code [*insert*].

Article #2

Do you trust [*insert local government*] to do what is right?

This is the question at the heart of a West Chester University doctoral dissertation study. From about 1930 into the 1960s, the majority of citizens trusted the government to do what is right. But, as the country advanced through the middle of the century, this idyllic state transformed suddenly and mysteriously, and the public's trust in government steadily declined. While some distrust is essential and desirable in a democracy, incessant distrust threatens to erode the democratic principles on which this nation is founded.

The study focuses on property owners that live within the West Chester Area School District in Chester County. This includes residents of East Bradford Township, East Goshen Township, Thornbury Township, West Chester Borough, West Goshen Township, West Whiteland Township, and Westtown Township.

[*Insert Municipality*] hopes that the results of this study will provide insights that the [*Township/Borough*] can use to improve its communication with residents. To learn more and participate in the study, visit https://wcupa.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8kyub9UzB3X8NXE or scan this QR Code [*insert*].

Social Media Post

Do you trust your local government to do what is right? This is the question at the heart of a West Chester University doctoral dissertation study. To learn more and participate in the study, visit https://wcupa.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8kyub9UzB3X8NXE.

Appendix E

Daily Local News Article

5/23/2021 LOCAL NEWS

WCU student seeks input on trust in local government

RESEARCH

MediaNews Group

Do you trust your local government to do what is right?

This is the question at the heart of a West Chester University doctoral dissertation study, authored by Amanda Cantlin. The study specifically contemplates whether the way in which citizens and local public officials communicate impacts the level of public trust citizens have in their local government.

From about 1930 into the 1960s, the majority of citizens trusted the government to do what is right. But, as the country advanced through the middle of the century, this idyllic state transformed, and the public’s trust in government steadily declined. While some distrust is essential and desirable in a democracy, incessant distrust threatens to erode the democratic principles on which this nation is founded.

There are many factors that influence whether a person decides to trust another person – or in this case, a governmental entity. These factors include whether someone is similar to you, whether their interests align with yours, and whether they are kind, ethical, and responsive to your concerns and needs. Communication plays a particularly important role in trust building. It is only through communication that citizens can gauge public officials’ credibility.

In addition to communication, size of government seems to be important, too. Attitudes about local government have fared well over time when compared with higher levels of government. Generally speaking, the closer the level of government is to citizens, the higher the level of trust.

The study focuses on property owners that live within the West Chester Area School District in Chester County. This includes residents of East Bradford Township, East Goshen Township, Thornbury Township, West Chester Borough, West Goshen Township, West Whiteland Township, and Westtown Township. To learn more and participate in the study, visit https://wcupa. co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/ SV_8kyub9UzB3X8NXE.

Appendix F

Focus Group Facilitation Guide

Introduction (15 min)

Before Session / As People Arrive. Welcome each individual into the session individually. Change names to generic title (participant 1). Give participants option to leave camera off or turn on. Return to waiting room until this process is complete for all.

> *Hi, I'm Amanda Cantlin. Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this focus group. In order to keep everything as anonymous as possible, I'm going to rename you with a generic identifier. I have the system set up to default to cameras off, but you're welcome to turn it on if you want to. I'm going to return you to the waiting room until I have a chance to do the same for others. Then, I'll join everyone together.*

Welcome

Bring people into session group together. Encourage conversation as individuals come together (weather, clothing cues, etc.) to make people comfortable.

> *Good evening and welcome. Thank you for taking the time to join this discussion about public trust in local government. Again, my name is Amanda Cantlin and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Public Policy and Administration at West Chester University. This discussion is part of dissertation research project.*
>
> *Before we get started, I'm going to give you a brief overview of the project, provide some basic information, and go through some fundamental disclosures.*

Overview of Topic

> *First, an overview…*
>
> *My project explores the role of communication in building and maintaining public trust in local government. I am looking forward to learning about how your interactions with local officials have shaped your perception of your local governments. Focus groups were formed in an effort to join people who reported similar levels of trust.*

Ground Rules

> *Second, a few ground rules…*

I'd like to hear from everyone, and I want to make this into a conversation. Feel free to build on what others say or to present different perspectives. There are no wrong answers. My purpose here is to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to share. If I feel that someone is dominating the discussion, I may direct discussion to give others a chance to talk. If someone isn't saying much, I may ask that person to share their perspectives.

I am recording this session because I don't want to miss any of your comments. Only audio is being recorded and actual names are not being used or recorded. These precautions are being used to keep comments as confidential as possible.

Even though we are not together in person, I ask that people silence their cell phones and limit background noise. If you need to address something in your environment, please mute yourself and step away from the discussion.

Disclosure

Finally, some fundamental disclosures…

This focus group will be about 90 minutes.

In terms of risk, there are no physical risks. In order to limit this discomfort, the I've removed personal identifiers and defaulted to the camera being off. Only the audio will be recorded. If you experience discomfort, you have the right to exit the discussion at any time. In addition to myself, Mark Davis, and the West Chester University Institutional Review Board are the only others who will have access to the focus group discussions. Your name will not be used in any reports. Records will be encrypted and destroyed three years after study completion.

That is the extent of my opening comments. With that, let's get started.

Questioning Route

1. (Opening; 5 min) Let's start simple. Tell us how long you've lived in your present community. You're welcome to share where you live – which municipality – but you don't have to.
2. (Intro; 10/15 min) What's the first thing that comes to mind when you think about the municipality where you live?
3. (Trans; 10/25 min) When you hear the word "trust" what comes to mind?
4. (Key; 15/40 min) Think back to a time when you had an engagement with a public official that left you with the feeling that you <u>trusted</u> that person. Tell me about that interaction(s).
5. (Key; 15/55 min) Similar question… Think back to a time when you had an engagement with a public official that left you with the feeling that you <u>did not trust</u> that person. Tell me about that interaction(s).

6. (Key; 10/65 min) All things considered, what would you say is the most important thing for local public officials to know if they want to build a more trusting relationship with their citizens?
7. (Key; 10/75 min) How do you learn about things that are going on within your local governments?
8. (End; 10/85 min) We covered a lot during this session. Is there something that you wanted to say earlier but did not get a chance to? Or, what do you consider to be the most important topic discussed tonight?

Conclusion (15 min)

We are coming to the end of our session and I want to thank you all again for your time and input.

Before we conclude, are there any questions?