



Disconnected and Skeptical: Young Adults' Views of Government

APRIL 12, 2022 – FRANCISCO MIGUEL ARAIZA, DR CATHY J. COHEN, AND EMMA VADEHRA

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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its economic aftermath underscore how public policy not only shapes the world around us, but also affects our daily lives. From the pioneering research and development investments that helped accelerate the production of life-saving COVID-19 vaccines, to the comprehensive economic response that included critical support for millions of children and their families, to the hundreds of billions of dollars spent on the Paycheck Protection Program—too little of which, unfortunately, went to actually preserving workers' jobs—the U.S. government's reaction to the pandemic serves as a stark reminder that while the policy choices of government officials may feel opaque and disconnected, they have far-reaching impact. Looking at who benefited most from the government's policy response is also a reminder that the decisions and actions of policymakers have disparate impacts on underserved communities, including low-income individuals and people of color, who so often receive less than what they need to thrive.

In particular, research demonstrates that policy decisions and design can have an outsized impact on people of color and individuals from low-income households—communities who have been disproportionately impacted by economic (and other social) inequities, as well as the policy actions (or inactions) that create and exacerbate them. For example, as part of the initial pandemic response, policymakers chose

to expand the Child Tax Credit (CTC) for 2021, a policy choice that alone lifted an estimated 3 million children out of poverty—children who were disproportionately of Black and Latinx backgrounds. By letting the CTC expansion expire earlier this year, however, policymakers made another choice—one that forced millions of children back into poverty. The CTC is a prime example of not only how people of color and individuals from low-income households bear the brunt of policy choices, but also why it matters who is making those choices. And the undeniable truth is that those who make our policy choices are disproportionately white, male, and wealthy.

We suspect that this disconnect between the communities most impacted by public policy and those in government who have the power to make policy choices is a critical piece of the context that informs why trust in government is so low, particularly for historically underserved communities who have faced, and continue to face, systemic inequality and exclusion in many facets of our society.

That's why Next100 partnered with GenForward to better understand how the next generation perceive government. Next100 is a public policy leadership development program and think tank working to change the face and future of progressive policy by addressing the historical exclusion of individuals and communities from the policymaking

This report can be found online at: <https://thenext100.org/disconnected-and-skeptical-young-peoples-views-of-government/>

table. GenForward hosts the first of its kind, nationally representative, quarterly survey of 18–36 year olds, with oversamples of Black, Asian, and Latinx young adults. Based on data collected as part of this survey, we worked to assess whether young adults feel like the government they have reflects and understands communities like theirs. Do they view the government as an effective way to make change for their communities? Do these views vary by race and income level?

Below, we present key findings from the survey, and analysis of those findings. For more on the survey and additional results [click here](#).

The Results

The answers are disheartening—though perhaps understandable, given the inconsistently supportive, and at times harmful, actions of the government. For example, we found that just one in four young adults trust the federal government, while a higher share (27 percent) don't feel “like a full and equal citizen in this country.”¹ In addition to a pervasive lack of trust in government, we found young adults perceive government leaders as disconnected from communities, have low levels of political engagement or activity, and have a skeptical view of the role of government and of working for the government as a vehicle for change.

In this commentary, we highlight key overall takeaways from the survey, and where some of the biggest disparities within the results were observed, which often results in a focus on the data for Black respondents and respondents from households making under \$60,000 a year, which is roughly below the median income.² To be sure, there are many cases in which responses from the other respondents of color, Asian and Latinx respondents, that mirrored the trends we found among Black respondents, though we often do not list them in the text to avoid repetition and for the sake of reading clarity. However, the findings for all respondents by race and ethnicity are included in all figures found in this commentary. Overall, we find that the feelings of disconnection from and skepticism toward government and public policy as an effective form of change are felt

most acutely by those who are most disempowered by our current policies—individuals from communities of color and those from households roughly below the median income—but whose buy-in we deeply need in order to increase the functioning of our democracy and its ability to address our toughest problems.

There are also signs of hope: many respondents noted they would have more trust in the government—and presumably, its ability to make positive change—if more leaders came from and understood their communities. However, few are excited to join the government themselves; and they are skeptical of the government's desire to employ them or its ability to have a meaningful impact—signing a petition was more likely to be viewed as impactful than working in government.

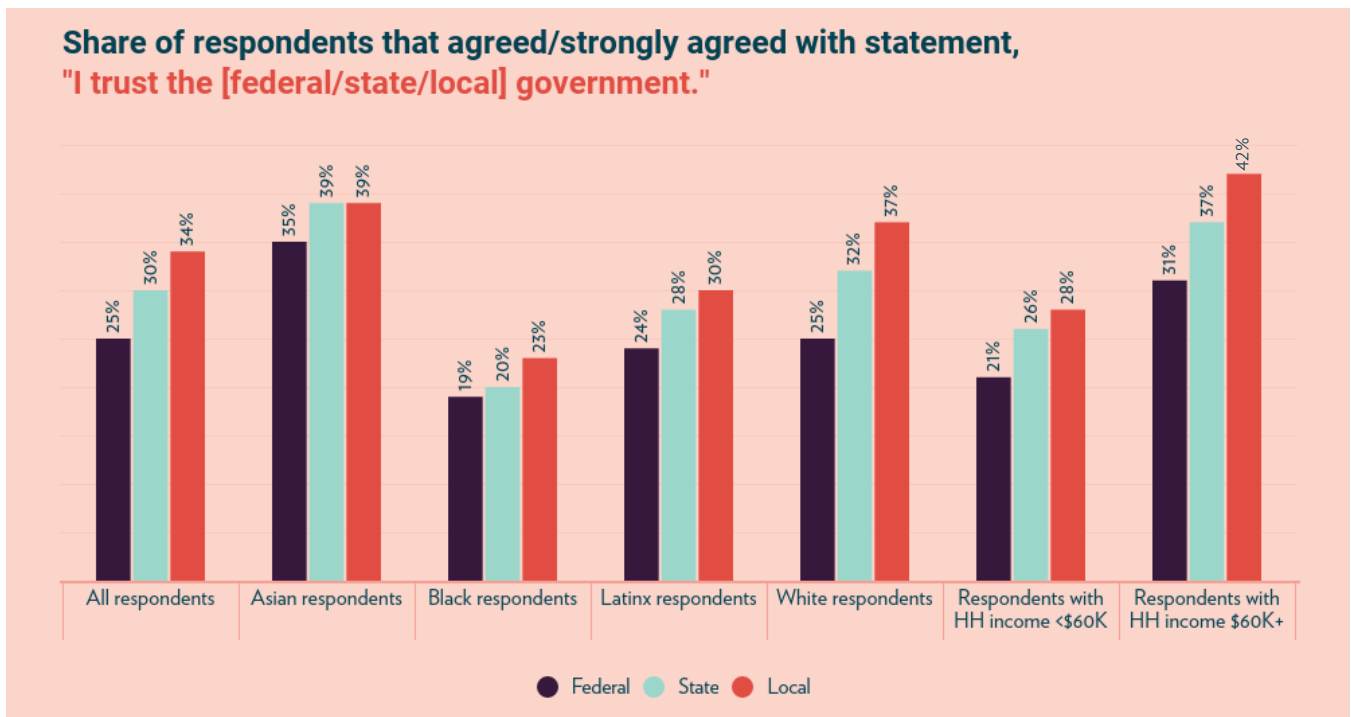
The analysis of the survey results presented below also indicates a way forward, and for those who believe that public policy is a critical tool for improving lives and communities, the work ahead is clear: to build an inclusive, representative government and policy sector that young adults from diverse backgrounds and impacted communities are willing, able, and excited to work for, and then to equip them with what they need to do that work.

Takeaway 1: Increasing proximity between government and impacted communities can have a positive influence on young adults' trust in all levels of government.

Overall, we found that trust in any level of government (federal/state/local) was low among respondents. In fact, only one in four respondents indicated that they trust the federal government (see Figure 1). Even local governments, which had the highest rates of trust among all respondents, peaked at a relatively low rate of one in three. Notably, levels of trust were lowest among Black respondents and respondents with a household income of less than \$60,000, with levels of trust for Latinx respondents close behind. For example, just 28 percent of respondents with household incomes below \$60,000 reported trusting their local

FIGURE 1

Only One in Four Young Adults Trust the Federal Government, with Lowest Levels of Trust among Black Respondents and Respondents with Incomes Below \$60,000



government, compared to 42 percent of respondents with household incomes of \$60,000 and higher.

Nowhere was the lack of trust in the current structures of power more clear for Black respondents and respondents from households roughly below the median income than when respondents were asked if they felt like “full and equal” citizens. Overall, approximately three in four (73 percent) of respondents somewhat or strongly agreed that they “feel like a full and equal citizen . . . with all the rights and protections that other people have.” On the other hand, nearly half of Black respondents (47 percent) and nearly a third of respondents with a household income below \$60,000 (32 percent) disagreed with that statement. These differences are stark, but not surprising, given how the country’s public policies have created and perpetuated systemic inequities faced by communities of color, especially Black communities, and individuals from lower income households. For example, efforts to restrict voting for these communities continue to this day and are, once again, projected to disproportionately burden communities that have been historically excluded from meaningful participation in our democracy.

However, proximity in the form of shared identity—whether respondents believed leaders to be from their communities—emerged as a mitigating factor that can increase the level of trust between government and the communities they serve. More than 60 percent of all respondents somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, “When leaders in government are from my community, I am more likely to trust them.” Even among respondents with a household income below \$60,000 and Black and Latinx respondents—who were the least likely to agree with that statement—a large majority reported that they were more likely to trust leaders from their communities (see Figure 2).

Geographic proximity also increased trust, albeit to a lesser degree. While only 25 percent of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I trust the federal government,” the share of respondents that agreed with the statement, “I trust the local government where I live,” was higher, at 34 percent. While the limited positive relationship between trust and level of government was consistently observed regardless of a respondent’s race, ethnicity, or household income, there were greater increases

FIGURE 2

More than Three in Five Young Adults Would Be More Likely to Trust Government Leaders If They Were From Their Community

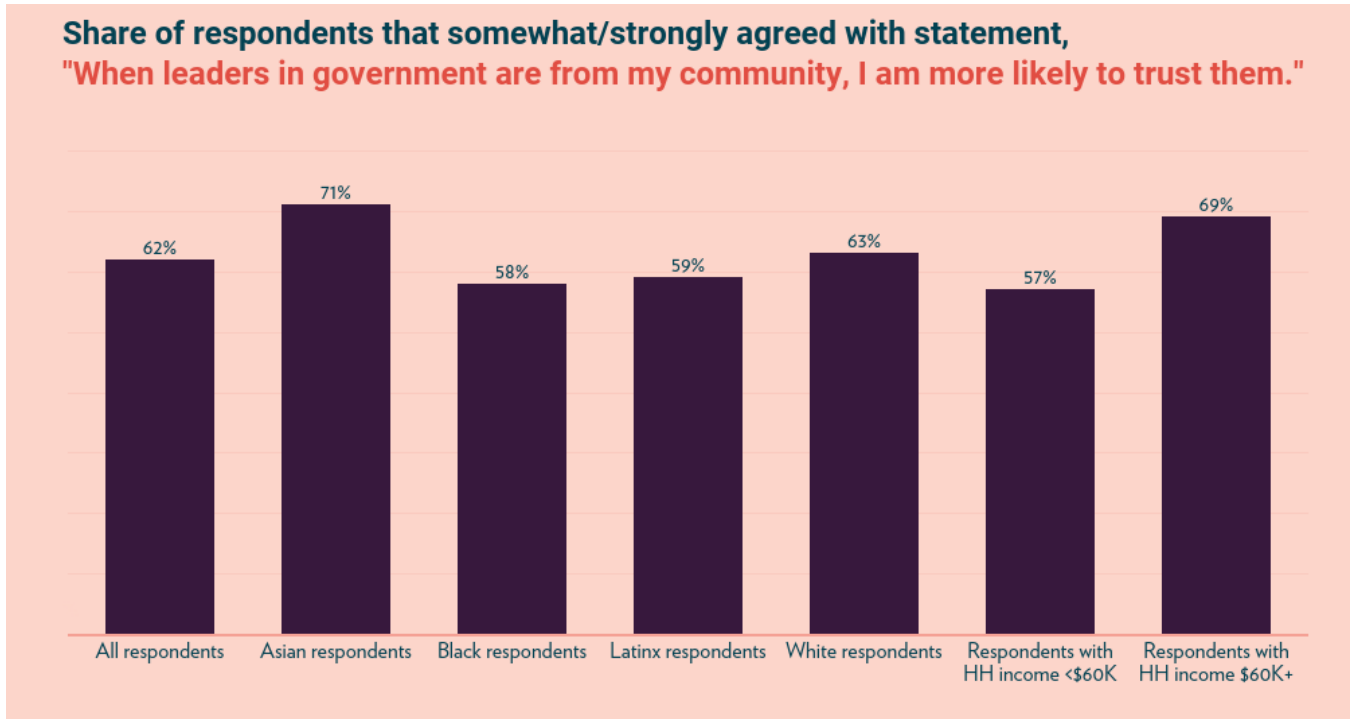


FIGURE 3

Only One in Five Young Adults Feel the Leaders in Federal Government Care About People Like Them

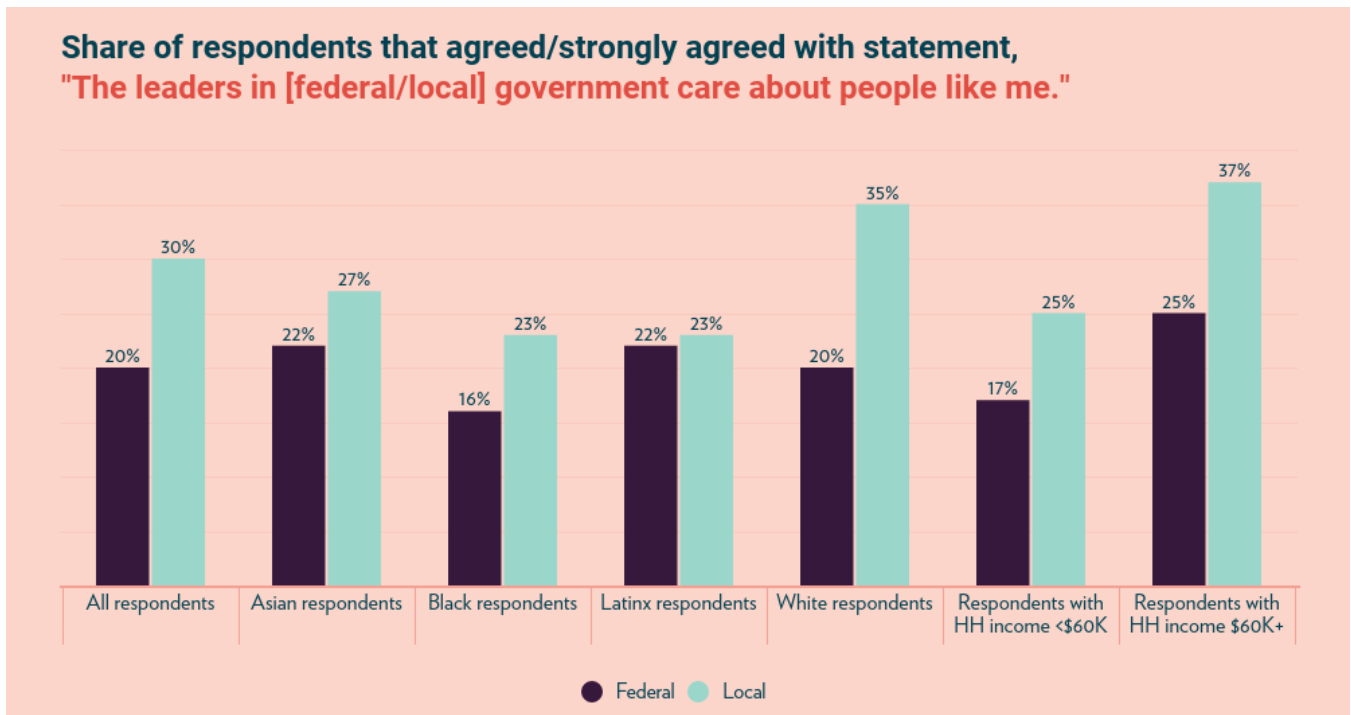
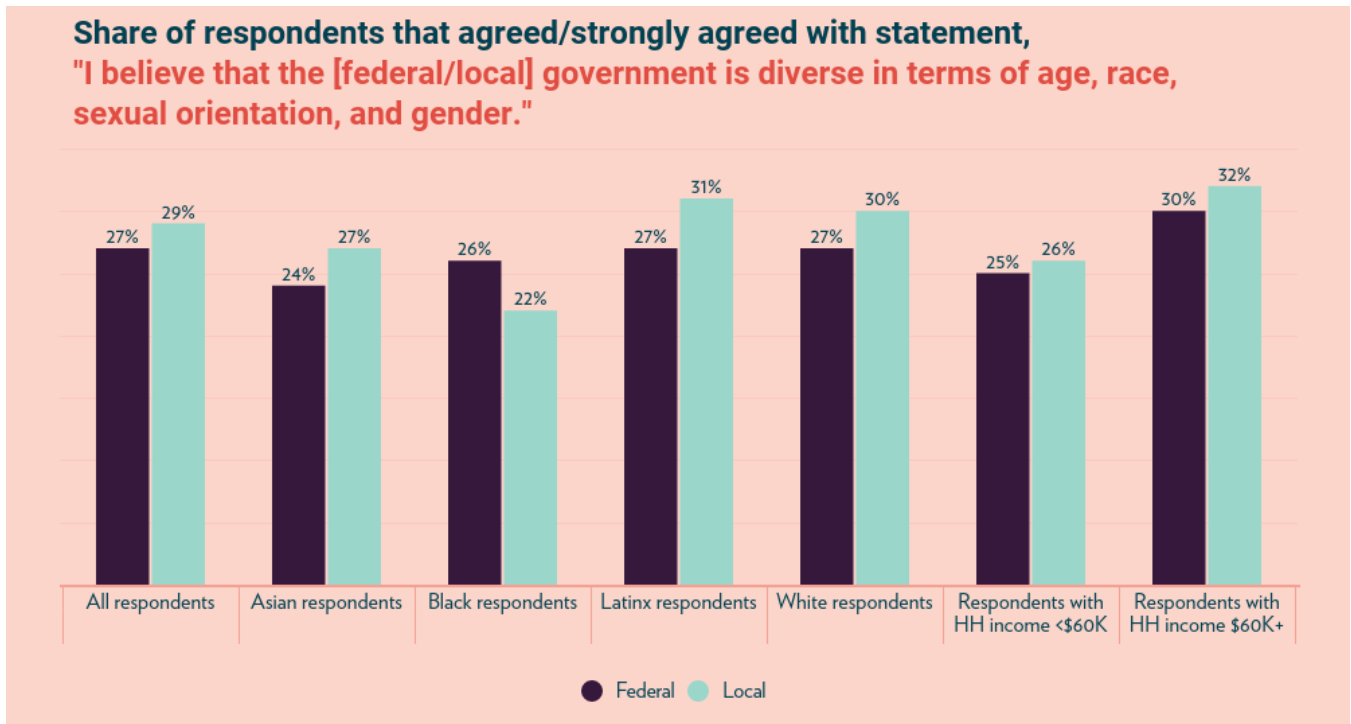


FIGURE 4

Only One in Four Young Adults Believe the Federal Government Is Diverse



in government trust for white respondents and respondents with a household income of \$60,000 and higher, than for Asian, Black, and Latinx respondents and respondents with household incomes below \$60,000 (see Figure 1).

When asked about the federal government, only 20 percent of respondents agreed that leaders “care about people like me”—an astoundingly low percentage that is lower than findings from 2019 that found 27 percent of all adults (ages 18 and older) agreed with a similar question. The response rates were even lower among respondents from historically underserved communities: just 16 percent of Black respondents and 17 percent of respondents making under \$60,000 agreed or strongly agreed that the federal government cared about people like them (see Figure 3). While respondents were more likely to have positive beliefs about local government, the numbers were still relatively low, with approximately 30 percent of respondents agreeing with those statements. Asian (27 percent), Black (23 percent), and Latinx (23 percent) respondents all were less likely to agree that leaders in local government “care about people like” them than white respondents (35 percent).

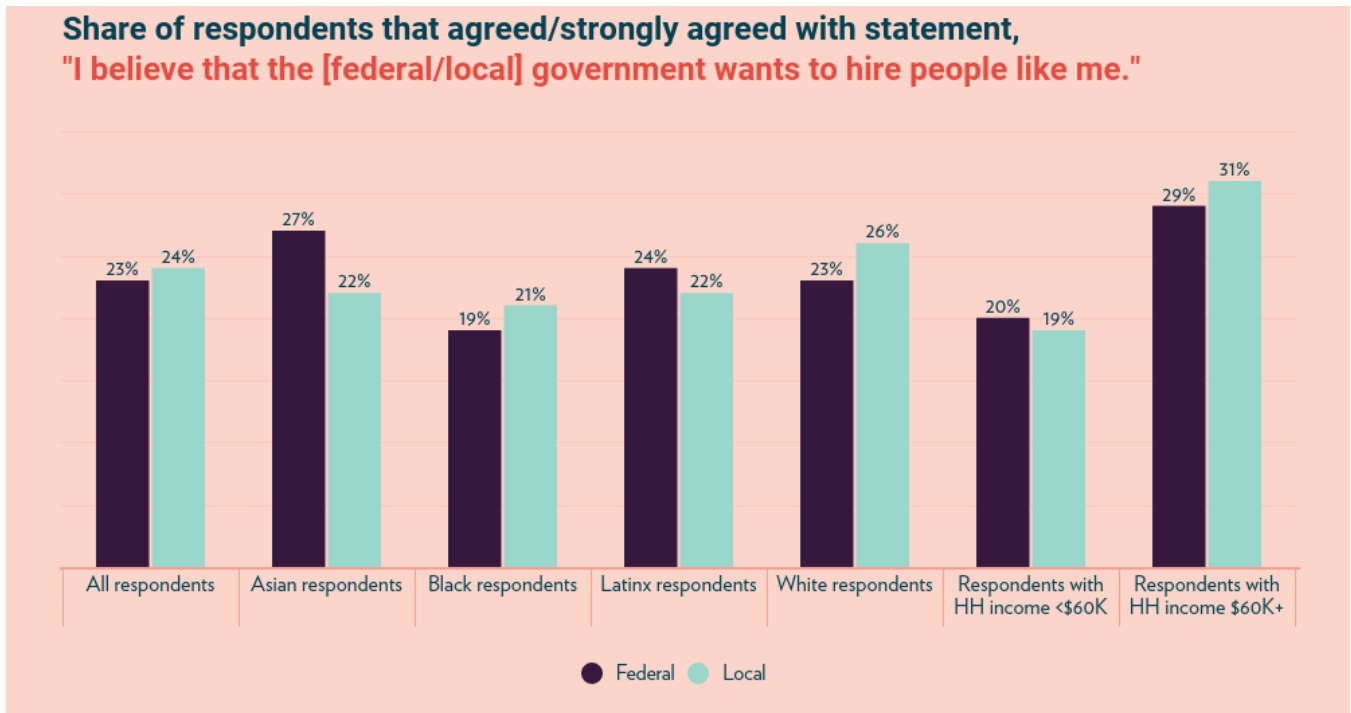
Just 19 percent of respondents believed federal government leaders could “relate to the challenges communities like mine face,” with Black and Latinx respondents and respondents with a household income below \$60,000 once again the least likely to agree.

Respondents were keenly aware that—despite reaching record breaking levels of diversity in some areas of identity (gender, race and ethnicity, LGBTQ status)—government at all levels is still not reflective of the country’s demographics. Approximately 27 percent of respondents believe the federal government is diverse; a slightly higher share, 29 percent, believe that local governments are diverse (see Figure 4). Across all racial and ethnic identities, Asian respondents were the least likely to agree that the federal government was diverse (24 percent) and Black respondents were the least likely to agree their local government was diverse (22 percent).

These survey responses indicate that the next generation is aware of a persistent truth: government leaders and their staff fall short of representing the full diversity of our country.

FIGURE 5

Fewer Than One in Four Young Adults Believe That the Federal Government Wants to “Hire People Like Me”



An overwhelmingly large share (77 percent) of members of Congress are white, and that lack of diversity extends into their top staff positions. According to the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, despite the fact that people of color represent 40 percent of the total U.S. population, only 8 percent of Senate committee staff directors are people of color. In addition, men make up 73 percent of members of Congress and 69 percent of state legislators. While President Biden’s Cabinet has been touted for its historical diversity, diversity continues to be a challenge across the executive branch. Only 9 percent of the administration’s chiefs of staff are Black and only 4 percent are Latinx—there are no Native American or Middle Eastern/North African chiefs of staff, nor are there any people with disabilities in these positions.

Overall, these responses—on trust in the government, and on the impact of shared identity on trust—highlight both a challenge and an opportunity. There is a deep disconnect between the government and young adults of all backgrounds, particularly among young Black adults and those with a household income below \$60,000. This

disconnect could be partially addressed if young adults believed those in government came from and understood communities like theirs. Right now, they (accurately) do not believe this to be the case.

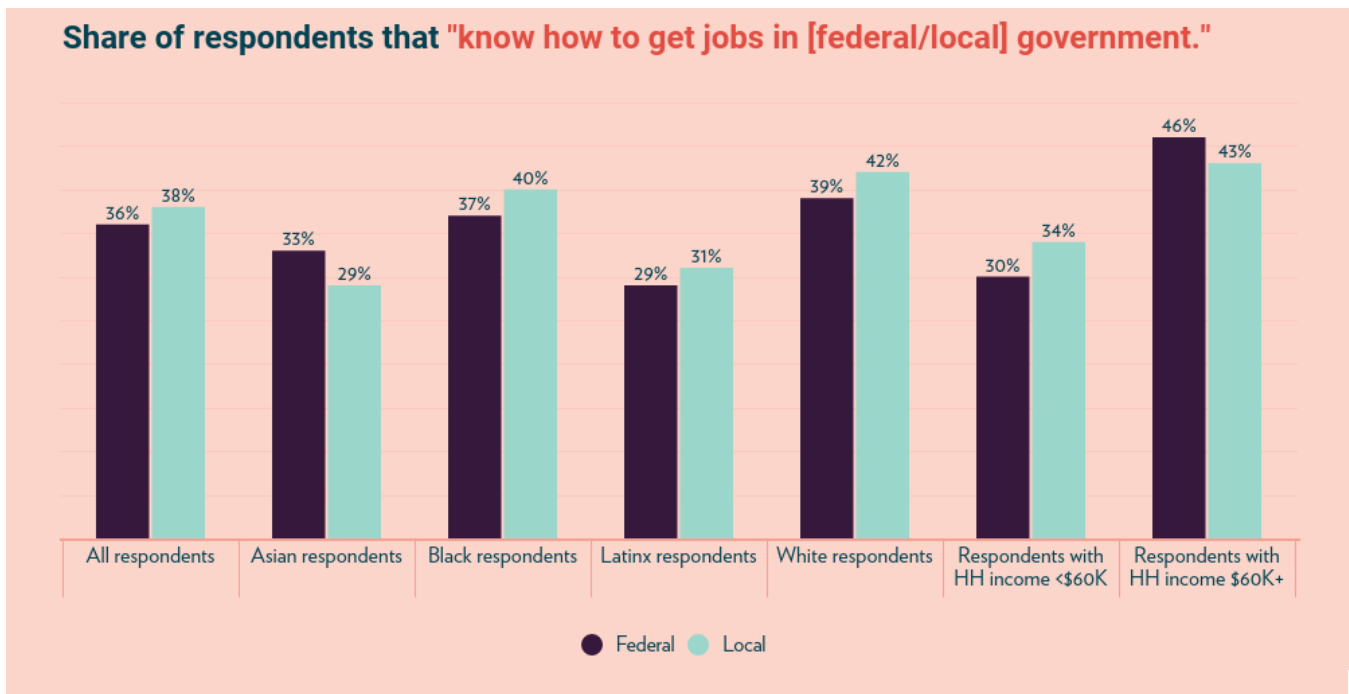
Takeaway 2: Improving young adults’ trust in government requires meaningful efforts to make government career paths more accessible, welcoming, and meaningful to people of color and individuals from low-income households.

Many young adults surveyed believed the government would be more trustworthy if it actually reflected their communities, but relatively few believed that the government would actually want to hire them, or reported knowing how to get jobs in government.

Just 23 percent of the respondents believed that the federal government “wants to hire people like me.” The respondents least likely to agree with that statement were Black respondents (only 19 percent agreed or strongly agreed) and respondents with a household income below \$60,000 (only 20 percent agreed or strongly agreed). Asian

FIGURE 6

Fewer Than Two in Five Young Adults “Know How to Get Jobs in [Federal/Local] Government”



respondents were the most likely to believe that the federal government “wants to hire people like me,” but even they had a low rate of agreement (27 percent agreed or strongly agreed). The rates of agreement remained stubbornly low for respondents who were asked the same question about local government (see Figure 5).

Only a little more than one-third of respondents (36 percent) reported knowing “how to get jobs in the federal government,” with similar rates of respondents (38 percent) reporting the same for local government. Unlike many other cases in which Black respondents had the lowest positive response rates among racial and ethnic groups, in this case Latinx and Asian respondents were the least likely to “know how to get jobs” in federal or local government, along with respondents with a household income below \$60,000 (see Figure 6).

Unsurprisingly—given the responses previously shared on trust in government and beliefs about the government—only one out of five respondents (21 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that “I would like to work in the federal government.” That rate actually decreases to 18 percent for respondents

who were asked the same question about local government. Across all racial and ethnic identities, Asian respondents (24 percent) were the most likely to report wanting to work for the federal government and Latinx respondents (24 percent) were the most likely to report wanting to work for local government, although only by slightly greater shares than other respondents (see Figure 7).

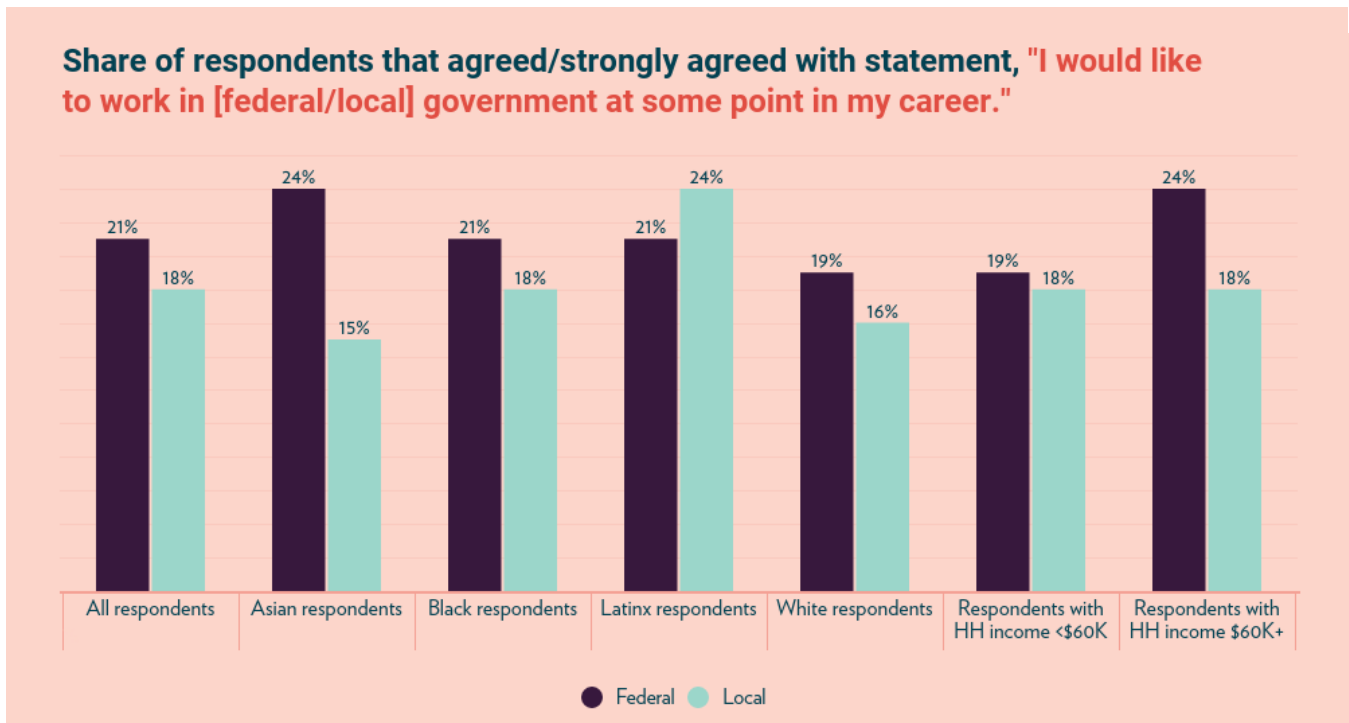
Takeaway 3: Government and public policy are not viewed as an effective path to make change.

While the low interest in working for the government among survey respondents at least partly reflects their lack of trust in government, it also reflects a skepticism by young adults—particularly those whose communities have been disenfranchised—about the effectiveness of political engagement generally, and government work in particular, as paths to achieving positive change in their communities.

About half of respondents (48 percent) considered themselves politically engaged or active, with minimal variations in the reported levels of political engagement or activity across demographic groups. Black respondents had the highest rate of reported political engagement (51

FIGURE 7

Only Roughly One in Five Young Adults Would Like to Work for the [Federal/Local] Government



percent), while Asian respondents were at 45 percent and Latinx respondents at 44 percent. The greatest difference in levels of political engagement were observed by educational attainment. Respondents with a bachelor's degree or higher were most likely to report being politically engaged or active (54 percent), and those with a high school degree, GED, or who did not complete high school, the least likely (41 percent). In addition, respondents who reported being politically engaged or active were much more likely to engage in efforts to make change in their community—such as participate in a political rally, community service and volunteering, or voting in elections—than respondents who did not consider themselves politically engaged or active.

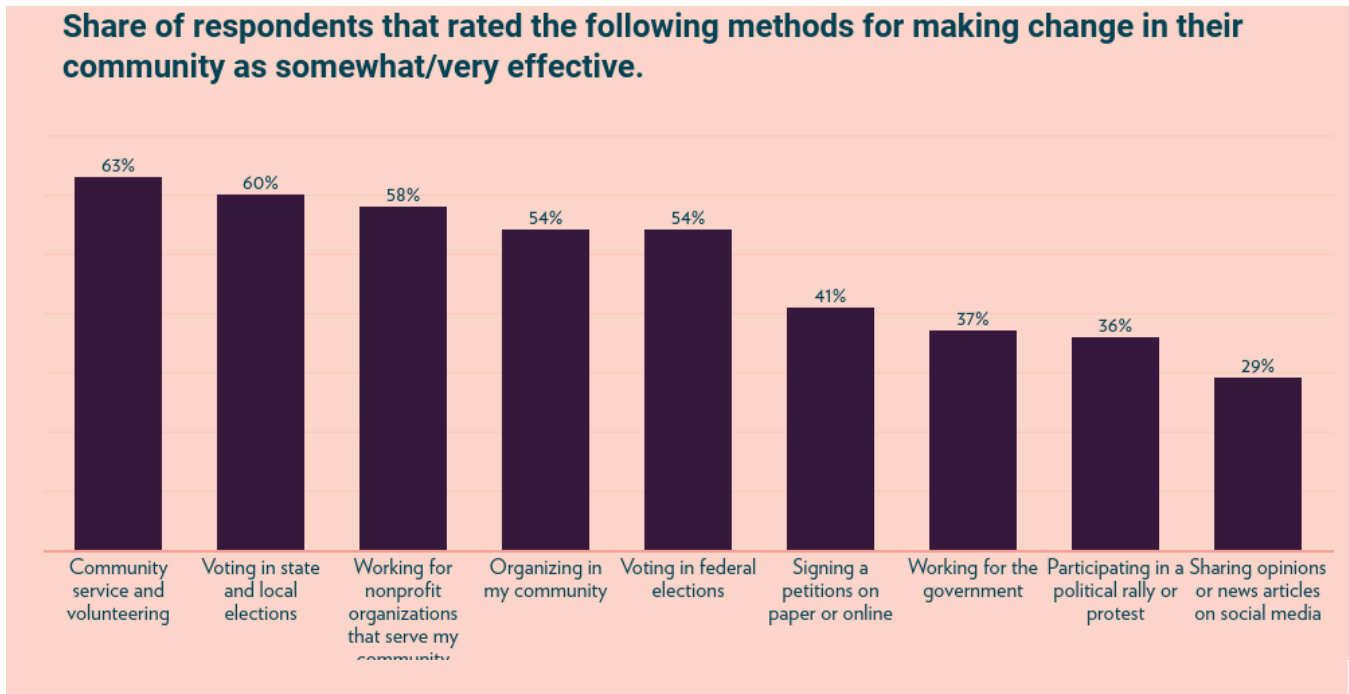
Generally, working for the government was viewed as less effective than many other forms of making change in a community. Just 37 percent of respondents viewed working for the government as an effective way to make change; a majority of respondents saw community service and volunteering, voting in state and local elections, working for nonprofit organizations that serve their community, organizing in their community, and voting in federal elections as effective methods for achieving change in their

communities (see Figure 8). In fact, young adults viewed working for the government as less effective at making change than signing a petition, and only slightly more effective than participating in a rally or protest. Posting or sharing information on social media was seen as the least effective way to make change.

In many cases, Black and Latinx respondents and respondents with a household income below \$60,000 rated the effectiveness of specific methods for making change lower than their peers did. For example, 49 percent of Black and Latinx respondents identified voting in federal elections as effective, compared to 56 percent of white respondents. And disparities were even starker based on income, with 48 percent of respondents with household income below \$60,000 identifying voting in federal elections as effective, compared to 62 percent of respondents with household income of \$60,000 and higher. One notable exception to this pattern was “sharing opinions or news articles on social media,” which Latinx and Black respondents were more likely to rate as effective than white respondents. This is perhaps not surprising, given the role social media has played in recent social justice movements.

FIGURE 8

Young Adults Report That Working for the Government Is One of the Least Effective Methods for Making Change in Their Community



Overall, voting in federal elections was the top method that respondents reported they had or planned to engage in to make change, followed closely by voting in state and local elections—although no more than 50 percent of all respondents planned to engage in either of these options. Individuals from communities of color and individuals from households roughly below the median income said they were less likely to have engaged in voting or be planning to engage in voting, when compared to white respondents and respondents with household incomes of \$60,000 and higher.

These findings suggest that respondents are less likely to engage in an activity if they doubt its effectiveness or their ability to influence the outcome. The malaise among respondents toward government as a path for change reflects the skepticism of young adults, especially people of color and individuals with household income below \$60,000, who have historically been excluded from policymaking and who are disproportionately impacted by policy choices.

Looking Ahead: A Government That Is More Proximate and Welcoming to the Communities It Serves Makes Better Policy Choices and Strengthens Democracy

These survey findings illustrate that there is a profound disconnect between the government and young adults of all backgrounds, as well as a lack of faith in government as a vehicle for positive change. We suspect this friction is partially due to a lack of sense of inclusion and belonging for many respondents, but especially for those who have been historically excluded from meaningful participation in our government and democratic system—an insight that other emerging research is beginning to uncover. Unfortunately, that historic exclusion is reflected in respondents' divergent beliefs and perceptions about their ability to drive change in their communities and, consequently, engagement and plans to engage in methods for making change. Despite the potential to improve many lives through better policies, young adults do not see government as a viable or welcoming path for achieving change in their communities,

and we know from other research that some communities even see some representatives of the government, such as the police, as a hostile force in their neighborhoods.

While these findings certainly paint a bleak outlook, for those who believe changes in public policy are part of the solution, the path forward is clear. Government leaders must work to build relationships with communities, especially with individuals from communities of color and low-income households. Government leaders must also work to build inclusive institutions in which young adults from the communities most impacted by harmful policies—and who are most likely to benefit from transformative and impactful policies—are able and eager to work, thrive and have influence and impact in government. But making the government more inclusive of directly impacted communities is not enough—this work must be coupled with policy agendas that reflect the needs and priorities of those communities. If government policymakers work to increase access, responsiveness, and diversity at all levels of government, and among the people who work within government, impacted communities will feel better represented and heard in the halls of government. Taking these actions can improve trust in government and improve its effectiveness as a vehicle for equity instead of exclusion. The inclusion and representation of historically excluded communities must be of the highest priority, because a healthy, equitable, and just democracy requires participation from and representation of members of all communities, not just in elected positions but at each level of government, and at each step of the policymaking process.

Authors

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Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all data is from the survey, “Next100 and GenForward findings on young adults’ trust in and attitude toward government and strategies to drive change,” available at <https://thenext100.org/new-next100-and-genforward-survey-reveals-young-adults-lack-trust-in-a-government-that-feels-distant/>.

² The income threshold used throughout this commentary is \$60,000. According to the latest Census data, available at <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>, the estimated median income in the U.S. was \$67,521 in 2020. At times in this commentary, we use “roughly below the median income” as shorthand for \$60,000 and below.