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Public Attitudes toward Federalism

The Public's Preference for Renewed Federalism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For much of its history, the United States had a notably decentralized government structure. Since the 1930s, the national government has undertaken new efforts to regulate the economy and society and to redistribute resources. Those new efforts have implied a greater centralization of authority in Washington. In the past the public often supported such centralization. Public opinion about federalism has changed. Voters are more supportive of decentralized policymaking on many issues where they previously supported a stronger national role. This shift in

the public mood is consistent with other polling data that indicates profound distrust in the capacity of the federal government to act on behalf of the public good. On some issues, like national defense, much of the public continues to support national primacy. Such issues are often assigned to Washington by the Constitution. In contrast, much polling finds that many citizens believe state and local governments are likely to perform better than Washington. Americans support a more decentralized federalism than in the past both on particular issues and as a general matter of institutional confidence.

“Contemporary federalists argue that moving decisionmaking closer to the voters will be more efficient, pragmatic, and responsive.”

INTRODUCTION

It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.

—Justice Louis Brandeis¹

On November 6, 2012, voters in Washington and Colorado voted to legalize small amounts of marijuana, even for recreational purposes. Nevertheless, marijuana remains illegal under federal law: the Controlled Substances Act, passed in 1970, prohibited the use, sale, and cultivation of marijuana for all states. Since 1970 serious questions have been raised about the efficacy of federally imposed marijuana prohibition: the high annual cost to taxpayers (\$3.6 billion), the high arrest rates of nonviolent marijuana users (half of all drug arrests), and the deleterious impact on young people (two-thirds of marijuana possession arrests involve 18–24 year olds) whose career prospects are limited by their criminal record.² The United States thus has two policies toward marijuana: prohibition and permission, some states allow its use while others and the federal government do not. This approach comes from the division of authority in American federalism, a decentralized system which offers states the flexibility to have different laws than other states allowing them to experiment with what works best for them.

Many experts discuss federalism without fully explaining its historical significance or current meaning and relevance. The concept of federalism means powers are shared between state governments in the United States and the federal government. Throughout history American federalism has at times meant greater centralization of power and administration and at others decentralization of power and authority. In early United States history Federalists, responding to problems linked to the weak central government created under the Articles of Confederation, favored a stronger central state established by the Constitution of the United States. Even

still, the government remained relatively decentralized until the 1930s, when the national government began to gain power and revenue. Today federalism often means devolving national powers back to state governments.³ By “devolving” powers, contemporary federalists mean decentralizing decisionmaking authority such that state and local governments have more flexibility to make policies within a state.

Contemporary federalists argue that moving decisionmaking closer to the voters will be more efficient, pragmatic, and responsive because government officials will be in closer proximity to the voters affected by their decisions.

The example of drug reform suggests one of the most valuable benefits of federalism: flexibility. Justice Louis Brandeis writing the dissenting opinion in *New State Ice Co v. Liebmann*, argued that states could serve as laboratories to experiment with social and economic policy, without embroiling the whole country in the effects.

Federalism can also provide individuals choices in government. Left to their own devices, states may offer different mixes of public goods and policies as well as taxes. For instance, some states may levy high taxes and offer many public services and other states may charge lower taxes offering fewer services. Some states may prioritize job creation while others may prioritize other goals. Citizens can then choose to live in the state that offers the best combination of policies and taxes (of benefits and costs) given their preferences. Competition in a federalist framework should thus give government powerful incentives to be more responsive to taxpayers, citizens, and businesses.⁴ This salutary result occurs because, at the margin, individuals can choose to move and businesses can choose to locate or relocate in new cities or states that offer the best package of policies. For instance, the state of Texas led the rest of the nation in job creation at all pay levels between 2000 and 2013.⁵ Likewise Texas ranked third in population growth since the last census, adding over 1.3 million residents more than any other state.⁶

To be clear, federalism should not be used to infringe on individual rights. There are certain

basic, unalienable rights protected by the U.S. Constitution that state and local governments cannot take away. The states may not violate the protections contained in the Bill of Rights. Moreover, under the Fourteenth Amendment, states may not deny citizens equal protection of the laws or due process rights. Other limits on states and the national government may exist in the Ninth Amendment.

Debates over federalism might benefit from an understanding of what issues the public thinks the federal government should primarily handle and what issues they would prefer their state and local governments to deal with, why they feel that way, and how those views have changed over time. This policy analysis reviews public opinion surveys conducted from 1948 to the present, including a new Cato Institute poll, asking Americans about what level of government they trust most, which offers them the most for their money, and which level of government is best suited to handle a number of separate issues. We find that the public supports a more decentralized federalism in many ways. This support has grown over time.

A SHIFT TOWARD FEDERALISM: 1973 TO 2013

Our analysis of dozens of public opinion surveys conducted over the past several decades reveals that Americans generally have shifted in favor of a more devolved federalism. The Cato Institute commissioned a YouGov poll as another method to measure how opinion has changed about federalism. (See Appendix for full poll results.) We replicated a Harris Poll question asked 40 years ago in 1973 about whether major policy decisions about a number of issues should be made at the federal, state, or local level. Using the exact same wording as the survey question in 1973, the results allow us to measure how the public's view of the federal government's role on a number of important issues has evolved over the past four decades.

On nearly every issue asked in the 1973 Harris survey, Americans have shifted away from a preference for federal-level decisionmak-

ing, particularly on environmental protection, drug reform, prison reform, and health care (see Figure 1). In 1973 majorities favored primarily federal-level decisionmaking for pollution control (58%) and drug reform (55%), while near majorities favored federal control for prison reform (50%) and health insurance (49%). Now majorities favor state and local decisionmaking on pollution control (56%), drug reform (61%), prison reform (68%), and health insurance (62%). While Americans continue to favor national-level decisionmaking for entitlement reform and scientific research, support has declined since 1973. On a number of issues, including welfare, transportation, and housing, Americans have consistently favored state and local control, and support has continued to increase.

There has been little change in public attitudes when it comes to national defense; 9 in 10 Americans continue to view this as the federal government's job. Similarly there has been little change regarding education: only 2 in 10 Americans views this as primarily a federal responsibility.

ISSUES

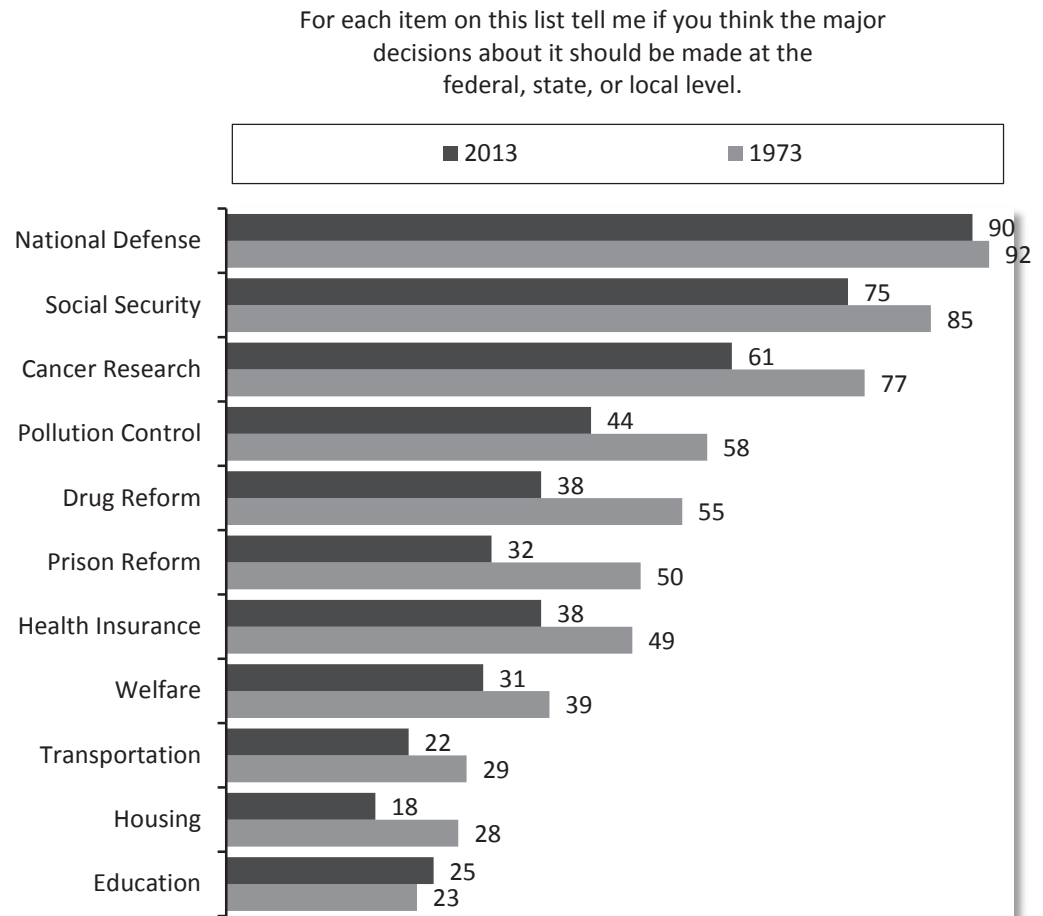
The following sections delve deeper into public attitudes across a variety of important public policy issues. We find that Americans prefer that their state legislatures and city governments have most of the decisionmaking authority when it comes to welfare programs, education, law enforcement, transportation, housing, drug laws, prisons, health insurance, and the environment. Compared to earlier eras, the public has shifted considerably on the latter four issues. We will show that while the public is divided on who should decide gun control policy and same-sex marriage legality, Americans lean toward federalism.

The public does believe the federal government should have greater say about national defense issues, immigration, entitlement reform, protecting civil rights, determining rules on scientific research and safety standards, and abortion legality. These attitudes are generally in

“Americans generally have shifted in favor of a more devolved federalism.”

“The public supports states and localities having discretion over prescriptive regulations and the provision and administration of government services.”

Figure 1
Public Support for Federal Primacy in Decisionmaking, by Issue Area, 1973 and 2013



Source: Cato Institute/YouGov Poll, December 2013; Harris, 1973.

line with a constitutional interpretation of federal responsibilities. The Constitution accords the national government power over defense and immigration. Civil rights are national constitutional protections applied to the states; the same could be said, more controversially, about abortion. Entitlement policies are not required by the Constitution; they are enacted by the U.S. Congress and would be reformed by the federal government. The public response on this matter may be nothing more than a recognition that national policies will be changed by national institutions, at least in the first instance.

Most of the issues on which the public prefers greater federal responsibility share a common theme: the public tasks the federal government with setting high-level “rules of the game” within which society operates. In contrast the public sup-

ports states and localities having discretion over prescriptive regulations and the provision and administration of government services. The consequences of such policies are predominately local and thus are best evaluated by state or local electorates and governments. States can also pursue different policies in these matters, thereby fostering competition for citizens. States experimenting with different prescriptive rules is preferable to the federal government imposing restrictive rules on everyone without any testing or experimentation and with little risk of losing taxpayers to other countries. Broadly speaking, public views about national and state governments support the ideas behind a more devolved federalism.

Now we turn to a deeper look at these issues. Using the best available data, we will elucidate the changes in public attitudes over time, while

taking account of demographic and partisan differences. To do this, we will aggregate polls by topic that asked about federalism-related issues. However, different surveys often asked questions in slightly different ways. Consequently, according to topic, we aggregate dozens of polls that asked about the same general issue, and then plot the trend line for the issue. The results vary in part because pollsters asked slightly different questions. Nevertheless, trends emerge and can be observed over time. All survey question wording used in this analysis is found in the appendix.

STATE AND LOCAL DECISIONMAKING

Drug Reform

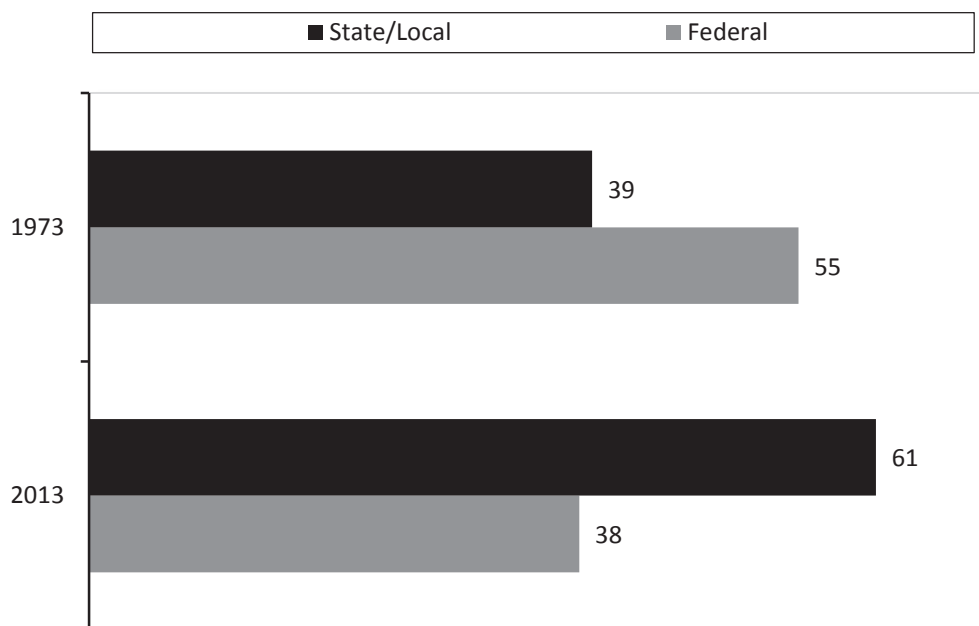
In 1973 most Americans (55%) thought drug reform should occur at the federal level and 39% preferred that it take place at the state and local level. However, in recent years attitudes have shifted, and Americans are willing to use state ballot initiatives to change drug laws in their states, federal laws notwithstanding. For instance, in

2012 voters in Washington and Colorado legalized marijuana in their states. This decision flouted the federal Controlled Substances Act of 1970 that had prohibited cannabis for the entire country. Despite new medical research and changing attitudes toward marijuana, Congress has failed to act. Consequently, it's unsurprising that Americans think federal authorities should respect the drug laws set in each respective state. Today, only 38% think major decisions about drugs should occur at the federal level, while fully 61% think this should be a state and local decision (see Figure 2).⁷

When it comes to the use of medical marijuana, an even higher share, 69%, thinks states should be allowed to set different rules than the federal government, while roughly a third believe the federal government should set medical marijuana rules.⁸ Sixty-two percent also believe states should decide whether marijuana should be legal for recreational purposes.⁹ Devolving drug policymaking to the states transcends partisanship, with majorities of Republicans (69%), independents (66%), and Democrats (51%) favoring state and local authority (see Figure 3).¹⁰

“Americans are willing to use state ballot initiatives to change drug laws in their states, federal laws notwithstanding.”

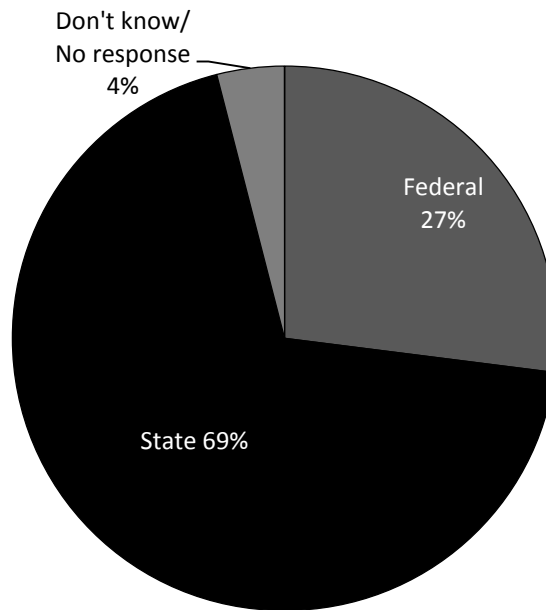
Figure 2
Who Should Deal with Drug Reform? 1973 and 2010, by Percentage of Respondents



Source: Cato Institute Poll, December 2013; Harris Survey, 1973.

“As of December 2013, two states, Colorado and Washington, have fully legalized marijuana, and 15 have legalized it for medicinal purposes.”

Figure 3
Proper Level of Government for Marijuana Regulation, by Percentage of Respondents



Source: CBS News, 2012.

As of December 2013, two states, Colorado and Washington, have fully legalized marijuana, and 15, including California, Oregon, Nevada, Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Arizona, New Mexico, Montana, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, and New Hampshire, have legalized it for medicinal purposes. Had the decision been made solely in Washington, marijuana would remain illegal throughout the nation.

Washington and Colorado voters' decision to legalize marijuana made their state laws differ from federal law. However, an overwhelming share of Americans think the federal government should not enforce federal marijuana laws on the people who use (72%), grow (68%), or sell (64%) marijuana in states where it has been legalized.¹¹

Moreover, a majority (52%) would favor a federal law limiting the federal government's own power from imposing federal laws on people in the states that have legalized marijuana, while 42% would oppose such a law.¹²

PRISON REFORM

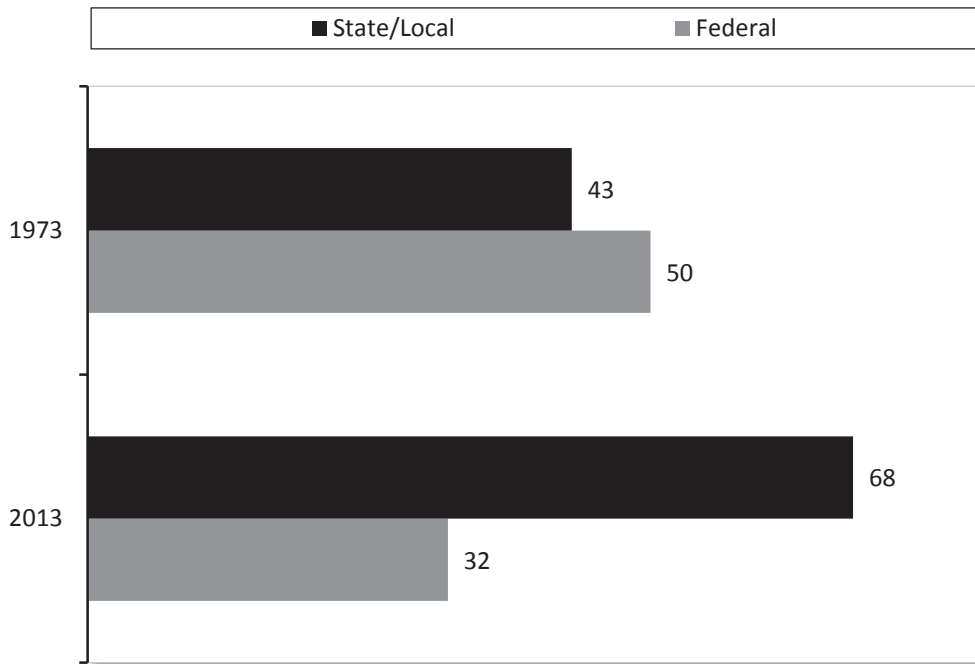
Prison reform was once generally viewed as a federal issue. In 1973, 50 percent of Americans wanted the federal government to make major policy decisions regarding reforming prisons, and 43% wanted states and localities to take the lead. However by 2013, only 38% felt the federal government was best suited to this task, and 68% preferred that state and local governments decide how to reform prisons.¹³

While majorities agree that states and cities should primarily deal with prison reform (Democrats, 54%; Republicans, 81%; independents 74%), partisan differences emerge. Forty-five percent of Democrats favor federal control compared to only 1% percent of Republicans and 26% of independents. Women are also twice as likely as men to favor federal authority (by a margin of 41% to 22%) (see Figure 4).

Health Care

In 1973 half of Americans wanted major

Figure 4
Proper Level of Government for Prison Reform, by Percentage of Respondents,
1973 and 2013



Source: Cato Institute Poll, December 2013; Harris Survey, 1973.

decisions about health insurance to occur at the federal level.¹⁴ That desire for federal primacy has generally persisted since then.¹⁵ Even though Americans had generally supported federal reform of health care, they still tended to favor state control over some specific programs. For instance, a Kaiser poll asked Americans whether state and local governments should be allowed to decide whether to use federal funds for HIV prevention activities like needle exchange programs. Six in 10 Americans felt states should be allowed to decide for themselves, compared to 34 percent who wanted the federal government to decide.¹⁶ These results follow the trend that Americans generally prefer that governments closer to home handle the administration and spending decisions of government programs.

Public opinion seems to be changing on the general question of who should decide about health care. Today support for the federal role has declined to 38 percent.¹⁷ Now 62% of Americans want state and local governments

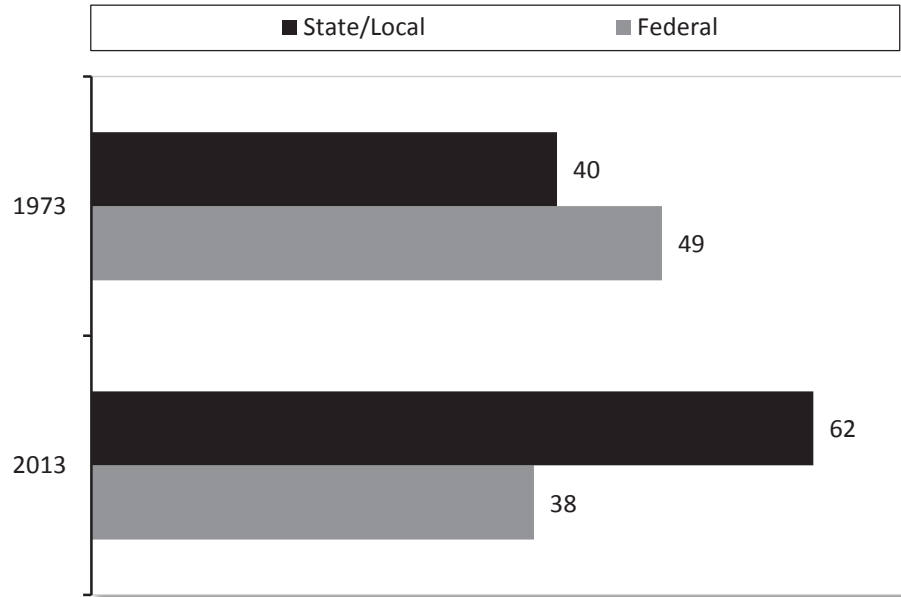
to make major decisions about health insurance. The struggle over the enactment and implementation of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act has no doubt weakened support for a federal role in health care. Further undermining support for federal control is that 7 in 10 Americans say Congress doesn't understand the health care system or the impact of the laws they pass.¹⁸ In the aftermath of the inauspicious federal health insurance exchange launch, two separate surveys found only a third viewed the federal government as best suited to handle healthcare (see Figure 5).¹⁹

Partisanship matters on this issue. Fully 65% of Democrats think health care policy should be decided at the federal level compared to 29% of independents and 13 percent of Republicans. Conversely, majorities of Republicans (67%) and independents (54%) say decisions should be made at the state level (see Figure 6).²⁰

We might wonder also if partisanship will have such strong effects in the future. While younger people, the millennial generation (those

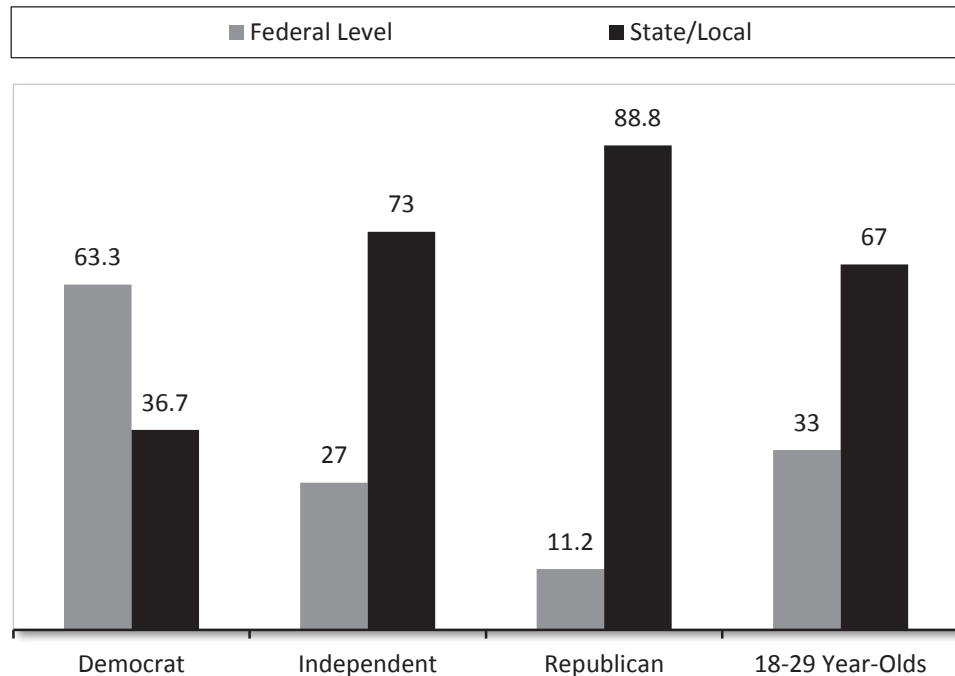
“Public opinion seems to be changing on the general question of who should decide about health care. Today support for the federal role has declined to 38 percent.”

Figure 5
Proper Level of Government for Health Care Reform, by Percentage of Respondents, 1973 and 2013



Source: Cato Institute Poll, December 2013; Harris Survey, 1973.

Figure 6
Proper Level of Government to Make Major Decision about Health Insurance, by Partisan Affiliation and Percentage of Respondents



Source: Cato Institute Poll, December 2013; Harris Survey, 1973.

born after 1980), strongly supported Barack Obama's presidential campaigns, they are much less confident in federal power over health insurance policy. For instance, while 65 percent of Democrats support national level decisionmaking, only about a third of 18–29 year olds agree.²¹ Instead, about two-thirds of millennials prefer state and local policymaking on health insurance issues, similar to older age groups.

Environment

In 1973, 58% of Americans felt that major decisions to control pollution should be made at the federal level, and 36% felt it should be done at the state level.²² However, between the 1970s and 1980s, the public has shifted toward state governments making more of these decisions. Today, only 44% believe the federal government should primarily address pollution, and instead 56% want state and local governments to take the lead on environmental issues (see Figure 7).²³

To the extent that Americans do prefer federal involvement, they have tended to support

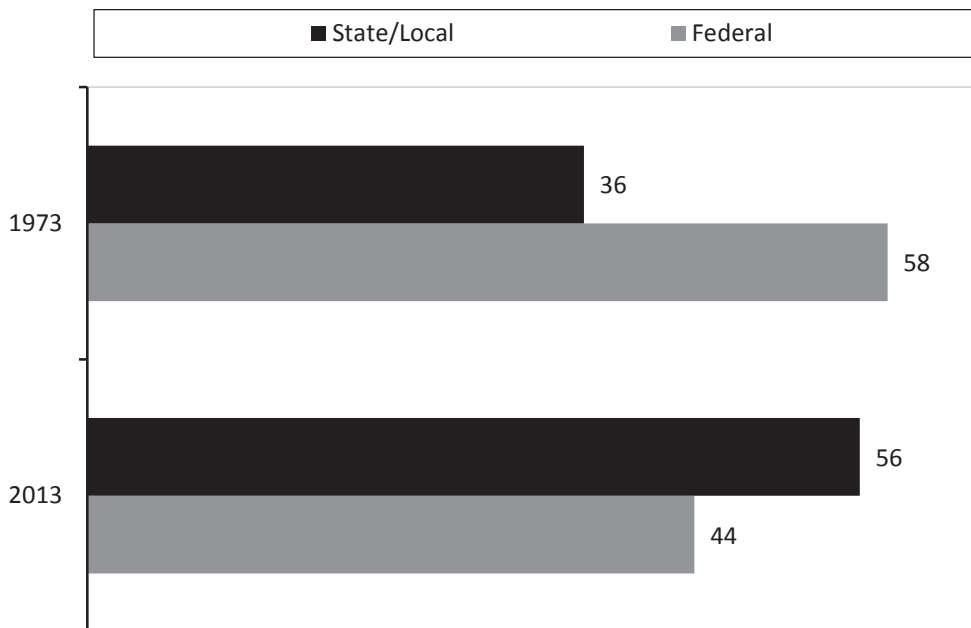
the federal government setting standards and rules. For instance, about half of Americans felt that the federal government should designate which national forest areas to protect from logging and road building; however a similar share felt states should decide this.²⁴ Nevertheless, as Figure 8, below, shows, over the past several decades Americans have grown increasingly confident that their state and local governments can and will protect the environment better than the federal government.

Significant partisan differences emerge over which level of government is most effective in handling environmental protection. Sixty-two percent of Democrats think the federal government should do so, compared to 28% of Republicans. Conversely, 71% of Republicans and 64% of independents think state and local governments should take the lead, while 28 percent and 36 percent, respectively, think the federal government should (see Figure 9).²⁵

Support for federal authority also declines

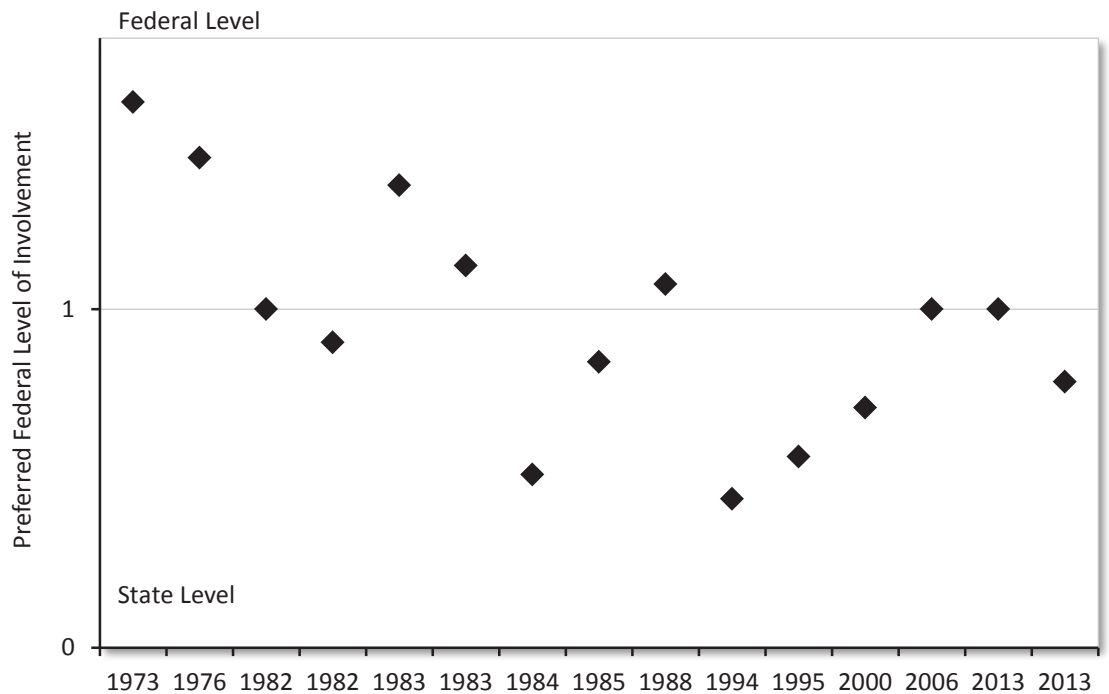
“Americans have grown increasingly confident that their state and local governments can and will protect the environment better than the federal government.”

Figure 7
Proper Level of Government for Environmental Protection, by Percentage of Respondents, 1973 and 2013



“Since pollsters first began asking Americans about the federal government’s role in education in the 1970s, Americans have consistently favored state and local control over such policies.”

Figure 8
Federalism Index for Environmental Issues, 1973–2013



Note: Federalism Index represents the ratio for federal control to nonfederal control over a variety of environmental issues (see Appendix for exact wording) between 1973 and 2013. A score of 1 means preference for federal or state control was at parity. Louis Harris & Associates, 1973; Roper Organization, December 1, 1976; Louis Harris & Associates, December 1, 1982; Roper Organization, April 1, 1983; Cambridge Reports/Research International, July 7, 1983; Cambridge Reports/Research International, July 1, 1984; Cambridge Reports/Research International, July 1, 1985; Cambridge Reports/Research International, July 1, 1988; Mellman, Lazarus & Lake, November 1, 1994; Hart and Teeter Research Companies, March 1, 1995; ICR-International Communications Research, July 1, 2000; Los Angeles Times, August 3, 2006; YouGov, November 25, 2003; Cato/YouGov, December 15, 2013.

with age. Among millennials (18–29), 50% want major decisions made at the national level compared to 34% of seniors.²⁶ From these data alone it is unclear if young people will change their minds as they get older or if they will continue to demand greater federal control on this issue.

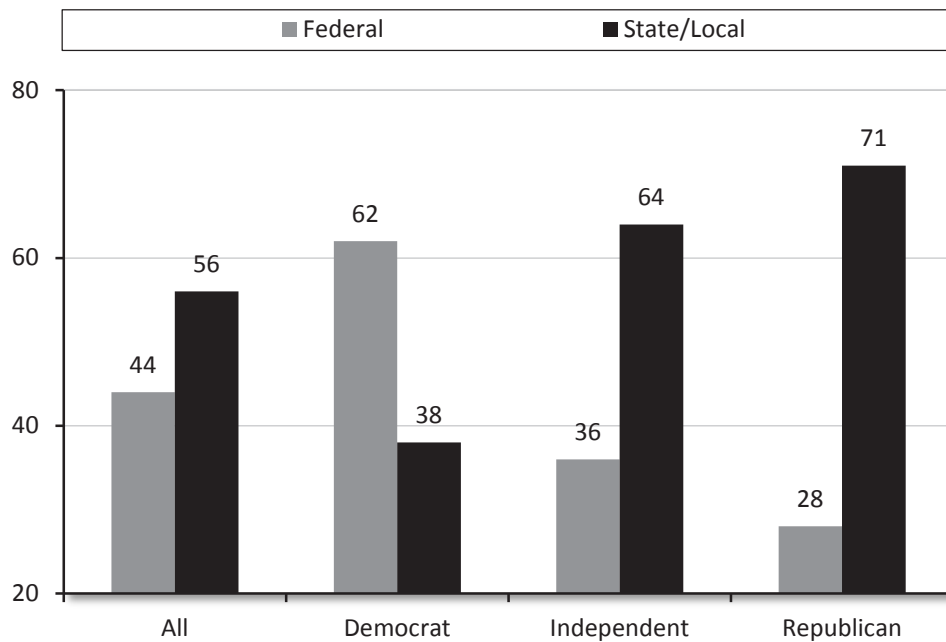
Education

Since pollsters first began asking Americans about the federal government’s role in education in the 1970s, Americans have consistently favored state and local control over such policies. At the same time, Americans favor a “national commitment” to education and the idea of “national standards” for education to try to preclude a wide disparity in educational quality across schools. Moreover only 34% favor eliminating the federal Department

of Education.²⁷ However, when asked about how to deal with concrete problems, like how to deal with a failing school, Americans want the federal government to step back and allow state and local school boards the flexibility to decide how to solve the problem.²⁸

Aggregating a variety of survey questions over time shows that while opinion has ebbed and flowed, the public has consistently favored state and local control over funding and administration of public education. For instance in 1973, 23% said the federal government was best suited to make major decisions about education, and 72% favored state and local control. Similarly in 2013, a quarter (25%) favored federal handling, and 75 percent preferred state (45%) or local (30%) control instead (see Figure 10).

Figure 9
Proper Level of Government to Decide about Pollution Control, by Partisan Affiliation and Percentage of Respondents



Source: Cato Institute/YouGov Poll, December 2013.

When asked about a series of specific education-related issues, Americans consistently felt state and local level decisionmaking would be most effective: including ensuring funding is adequate and stable (69%) and equitably distributed (77%), and putting decisionmaking authority in the right hands (86%). The issue receiving the most support for federal intervention was ensuring adequate and stable funding, a view taken by 25 percent of Americans.²⁹

Comparing state and local levels of government, pluralities believe state governments are best suited to ensure adequate (40%) and equitable (44%) funding compared to a third who felt local governments would be more effective at both. However, 59% felt that local governments would best put decisionmaking authority in the right hands, compared to 27% who felt so about state governments, and 9% about the federal government.³⁰ In sum, Americans think state governments will do the best job at allocating educational funding, and local governments will make better operational decisions for local schools (see Figure 11).

While support for state and local control over education is nonpartisan in popularity, Democrats are significantly more likely to favor federal decisionmaking (41%) than Republicans (12%) or independents (20%).³¹ Nonetheless, partisanship is weaker here than with other issues.

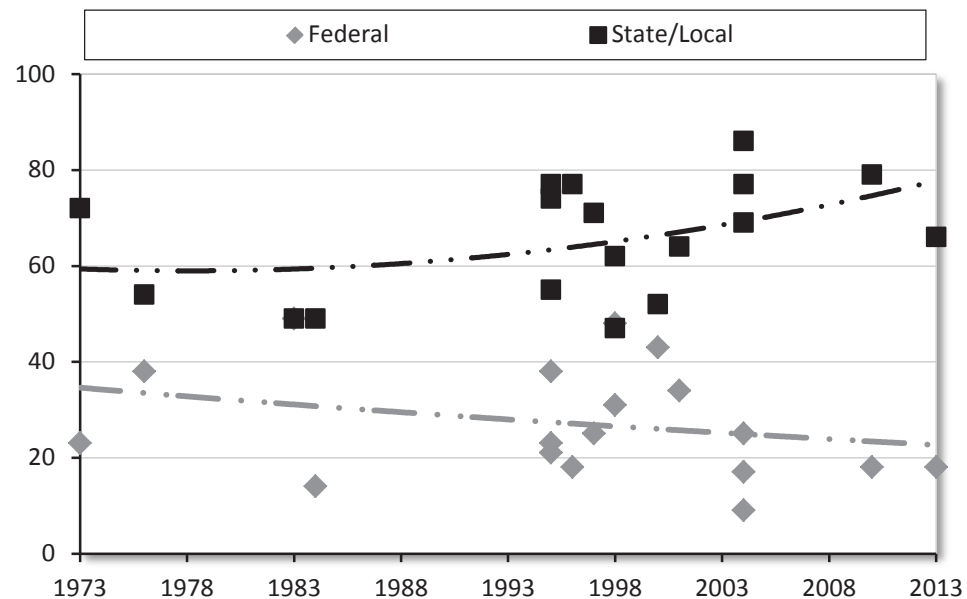
Americans disagree whether creationism and evolution should be taught together in schools: a slim majority (51%) says the federal government should decide, and 44% say each state should decide for itself.³² This suggests that while Americans want governments closer to home to primarily decide how to run and pay for schools, they are more likely to favor national standards about fundamental issues taught in schools.

Overall, Americans prefer that education decisions regarding running, improving, and paying for schools occur at the state and local levels. They want some federal involvement and like the ideal of a national commitment to education, but when it comes to the nuts and bolts of how to teach children in America, the public prefers decisionmaking at the state and local level.

“Americans think state governments will do the best job at allocating educational funding, and local governments will make better operational decisions for local schools.”

“Americans have consistently favored state and local governments handling welfare issues and about a quarter to a third have preferred federal control.”

Figure 10
Proper Level of Government to Deal with Education, by Percentage of Respondents, from 1973 to 2013



Source: Survey aggregated by the authors: Roper Organization, December 1, 1976; Roper Organization, April 1, 1983; Cambridge Reports/Research International, January 1, 1984; Hart and Teeter Research Companies Council for Excellence in Government Poll, March 1, 1995; Roper/Reader's Digest/Institute For Social Inquiry Poll, July 1, 1995; The Tarrance Group and Lake Research, U.S. News & World Report Poll, November 9, 1996; Pew Research Center Poll, January 16, 1997; PSRA/Newsweek Poll, March 21, 1998; Tarrance Group and Lake, September 8, 1998; Snell, Perry & Associates Battleground 1998 Survey, September 8, 1998; Program on International Policy Attitudes, October 1, 2000; University of Maryland Education Survey, January 1, 2000; Gallup Organization/Phi Delta Kappa Attitudes toward the Public Schools Survey, August 22, 2001; Hart and Teeter Research Companies/Educational Testing Service Americans Speak Out on Public School Funding Survey, June 30, 2004; Associated Press/Stanford University Poll, December 14, 2010.

Welfare

In 1973, 4 in 10 Americans said the federal government should make major policy decisions about welfare, while 56% preferred that those decisions be made by state (36%) or local (20%) governments.³³ In 2013, 3 in 10 said the federal government is best suited to make decisions about welfare, compared to 68% who prefer state (52%) or local (16%) decisionmaking.

Looking at a series of polls between 1969 and 2013, we find that most Americans have consistently favored state and local governments handling welfare issues and about a quarter to a third have preferred federal control (see Figure 12).³⁴

At the same time, the public still wants the federal government to have a role, particularly when it comes to setting certain standards. For instance, 58% of Americans favor the federal

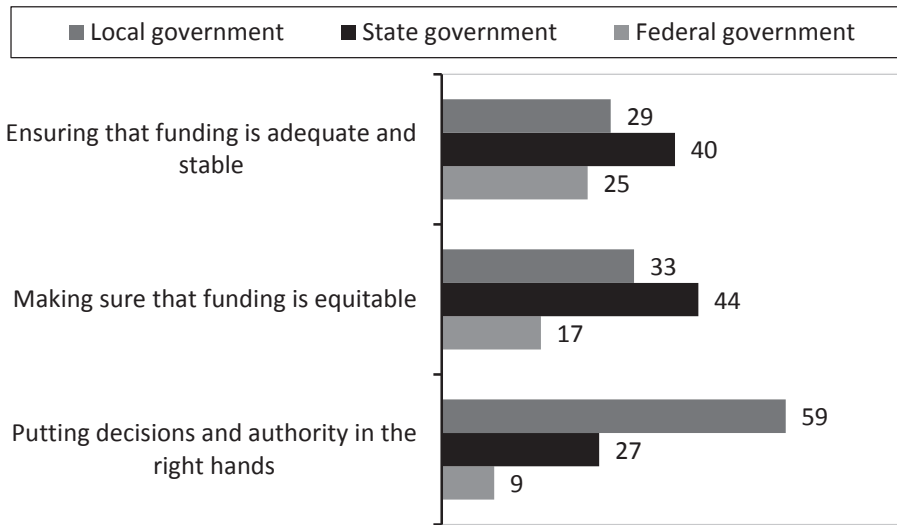
government setting the “same set of core health care benefits” for the Medicaid program while 39% want states to decide which core benefits to offer.³⁵ Most view “core benefits” as a set of minimum welfare benefits and would rather states decide about benefits beyond the minimum level and about administering the program.

Most Americans favor allowing states more flexibility in how they run their programs; for instance 60% favor offering Medicaid dollars to the states in block grants.³⁶ At the same time, most Americans (64%) would limit state flexibility if legislatures tried to eliminate health insurance coverage to some children, demonstrating they want some federal role in ensuring equity.³⁷

Beyond a set of core standards set by the federal government, Americans generally pre-

Figure 11
Education Funding and Levels of Government

Thinking about the trade-offs involved with receiving public-education funding from three levels of government, which level of government do you think would be most effective at ...



Source: Hart and Teeter Research, Educational Testing Service Poll, June 30, 2004.

fer state governments take the lead when it comes to welfare policy, deciding how to run and pay for social services, and have the flexibility to innovate new ways to administer the programs.³⁸ Public support for such core standards does limit some types of state-based innovation in social welfare policy and may limit competition among the states.

Transportation

As with education, Americans have consistently favored state and local control over transportation issues, which vary according to local circumstances. Over the past several decades, roughly 7 in 10 Americans have preferred state and local government to be in charge of maintaining highways and bridges, paying for roads and highway systems, regulating billboards, and paving roads (see Figure 13).³⁹

Housing

Survey results over the years consistently show that most Americans prefer setting housing policy at the state or local level. In 1973 only 28% thought the federal government should have

primary authority over housing policy. At that time, 36% felt state governments and 29% said city governments should make these decisions. In 2013 Americans continue to view housing as a nonfederal issue; in fact, their preference for state and local power has grown over the last four decades. Today, only 18 percent prefer a national-level housing policy, while 45 percent favor state and 38 percent want local level policymaking.

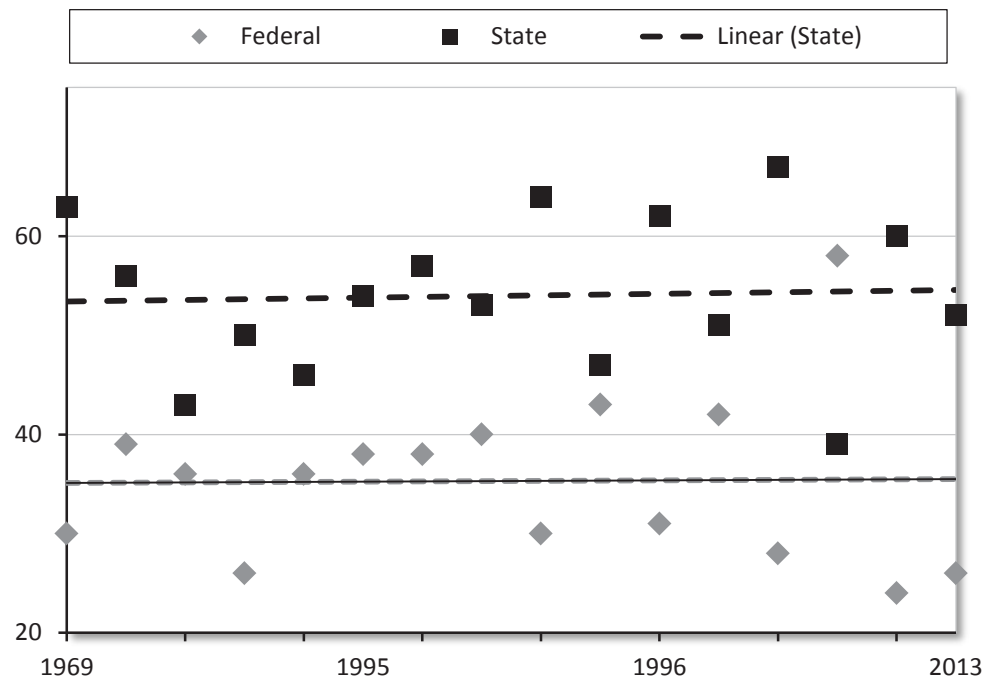
Law Enforcement

Over the past several decades, Americans have consistently viewed law enforcement as primarily a state and local concern. For instance, in the mid 1990s, nearly two-thirds of Americans felt state and local governments could best fight crime and illegal drug use, and 30% thought the federal government could do this best.⁴⁰ Moreover, 8 in 10 wanted state and local government to be responsible for running law enforcement programs, while 20% wanted the federal government to do this. Similarly, in 2000, only a fifth had more confidence in the federal government when it comes to law enforcement, compared to the state and local gov-

“Americans have consistently viewed law enforcement as primarily a state and local concern.”

“Individuals prefer to have the institutions most explicitly entrusted with policing power to be nearer to where they live, where voters have a stronger voice and impact.”

Figure 12
Proper Level of Government to Handle Welfare Issues, 1969 to 2013, by Percentage of Respondents



Source: Surveys compiled by authors: Opinion Research Corporation, 1969; Harris Survey, 1973; CBS News/New York Times Poll, 1978; Audits & Surveys 1982; Gallup Organization, 1990; Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1995; Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1995; Pew Research Center, 1995; Gallup Organization, 1996; Pew Research Center, 1996; The Tarrance Group and Lake Research, 1996; Pew Research Center, 1997; Pew Research Center International, 2005; YG Network/North Star Opinion Research, 2012; YouGov, 2013.

ernments. A similar share in 2013 felt the same about the federal government running courts.⁴¹

It makes sense that Americans would want decisions affecting their local police officers to be made by people who are aware of the conditions and environment police officers face. It is also worth noting that individuals prefer to have the institutions most explicitly entrusted with policing power to be nearer to where they live, where voters have a stronger voice and impact.

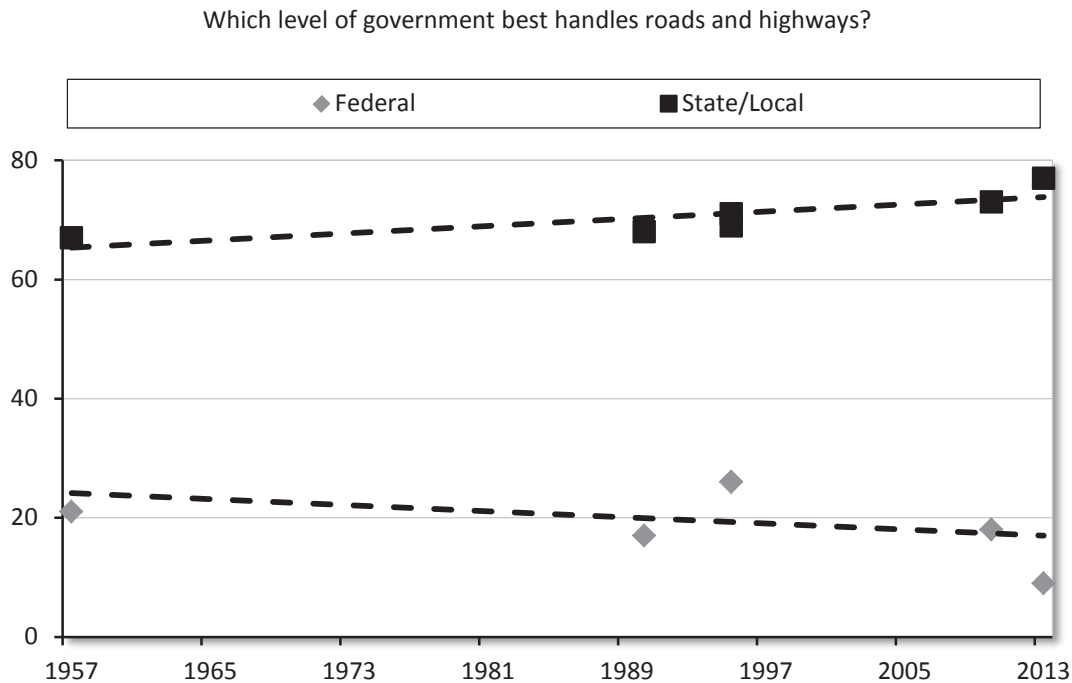
Same-Sex Marriage

Americans may be groping toward a consistent view about federalism and same-sex marriage. It would be most fair to say the public has simply not reached a consensus on this issue. What the public does tend to agree upon is that the federal government should not have the authority to ban same-sex marriage for all states.

Complicating the matter is that the legality of gay marriage divides the country, although

opinion is trending toward greater acceptance. Consequently, polls have found conflicting results on this matter. For instance, when explicitly asked if “laws regarding whether same-sex marriage is legal” should be decided at the federal level or left to each individual state to decide, 60 percent of Americans favor state-level decisionmaking, and 33 percent prefer federal-level decisionmaking.⁴² However, if the question is framed in terms of national standards, then a majority (56%) favors a “federal standard” over being “left to the states” (38%).⁴³ Since Americans do prefer that the national government set standards and frameworks, it’s less surprising that framing the marriage debate in terms of national standards will bolster support for a federal law. Nevertheless, aggregating polls over the past decade that ask about marriage laws in different ways reveals that Americans have generally given a slight preference to state government decisions (see Figure 14).⁴⁴

Figure 13
Proper Level of Government for Auto Infrastructure, by Percentage of Respondents, 1956 to 2013



Source: Surveys compiled by the authors: Gallup Organization, 1957; Gallup Organization, 1990; Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1995; Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1995; McLaughlin & Associates, 2010; YouGov 2013.

Americans have given preference to state discretion over marriage laws in several ways. First, Americans generally oppose (52%) forcing states to recognize marriages legally performed in other states.⁴⁵ Americans presumably resist allowing voters in one state to decide issues for voters in another state. Americans may also recognize that decisions by national institutions would include representation for voters in all states. Second, the public strongly believes (about 6 in 10) that the federal government should recognize same-sex marriages performed in states that allow them.⁴⁶ Third, Americans have generally resisted a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage for the entire country, averaging about 55 percent who oppose and 41 percent who favor.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, a majority would favor a “federal standard” on same-sex marriage suggesting that Americans’ views on this issue are still fluid and sensitive to specific considerations the survey question wording makes salient to them.⁴⁸

Overall, Americans are divided over the legality of same-sex marriage, are uncertain about the legal implications of allowing one level of government to decide marriage laws, and thus have mixed views over which level of government should ultimately make decisions regarding it.

In sum, as more Americans continue to accept same-sex marriage, the appeal of a nationally consistent marriage standard across states may prevail. Perhaps ironically, it was the United States’ federal structure that allowed same-sex marriages to progress politically.

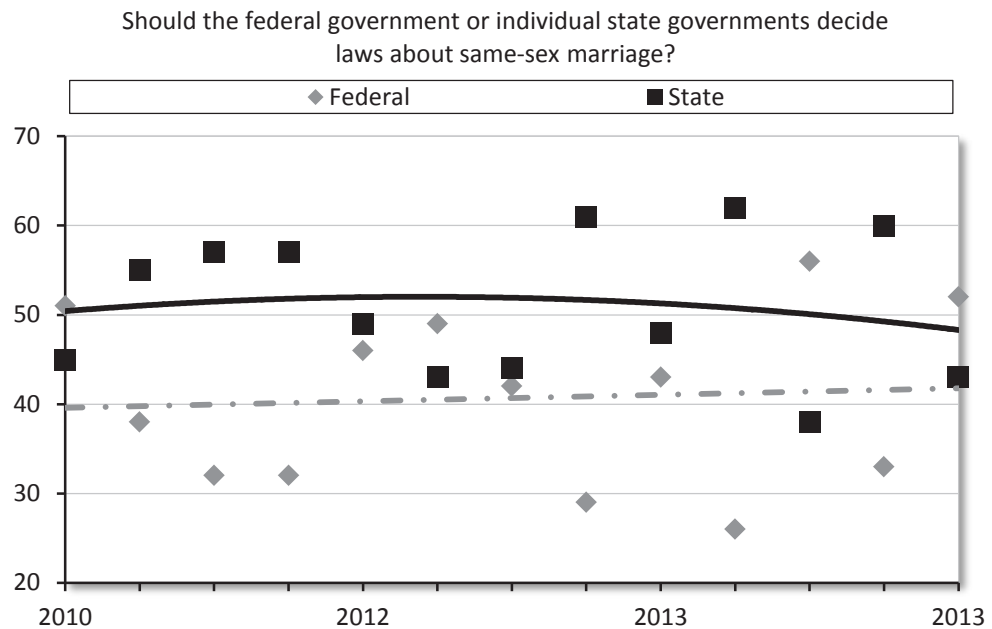
Gun Control

Americans are evenly divided over whether states or the federal government should have the primary responsibility for determining gun laws in the United States. Over the past decade though, slightly more have favored state jurisdiction over federal control. For instance, in 2012, 51 percent believed gun control laws should be decided at the state level and 46 percent

“Americans are evenly divided over whether states or the federal government should have the primary responsibility for determining gun laws in the United States.”

“In 2013, two-thirds believed the federal government is best suited to handle immigration issues generally.”

Figure 14
Support for Federal Role in Same Sex Marriage, 2010–2013



Source: Gallup, Pew Research Center; Public Religion Research Institute; AP/GFK Polls; ABC/Washington Post Poll; NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll; McClatchy/Marist.

preferred the national level (see Figure 15).⁴⁹

The absence of a majority favoring federal intervention may help explain why in the aftermath of several tragic mass shootings in recent years, the public has not been outraged that Congress has not passed additional gun laws. For instance, after congressional gun control legislation failed in May of 2013, two-thirds of Americans wanted Congress to move on to other topics rather than vote again on the issue.⁵⁰

FEDERAL DECISIONMAKING

National Defense and Entitlements

There are several issues Americans have consistently viewed as a federal responsibility. For instance, more than 90% of Americans “think the major decisions about [national defense] should be made at the federal level in Washington,” and this view has not changed since 1973 when a Harris poll first asked about it.⁵¹ Although support has declined 10 points

for federal reform of Social Security, still 85 percent think reform of the nation’s entitlement programs should occur at the national level.⁵²

Immigration

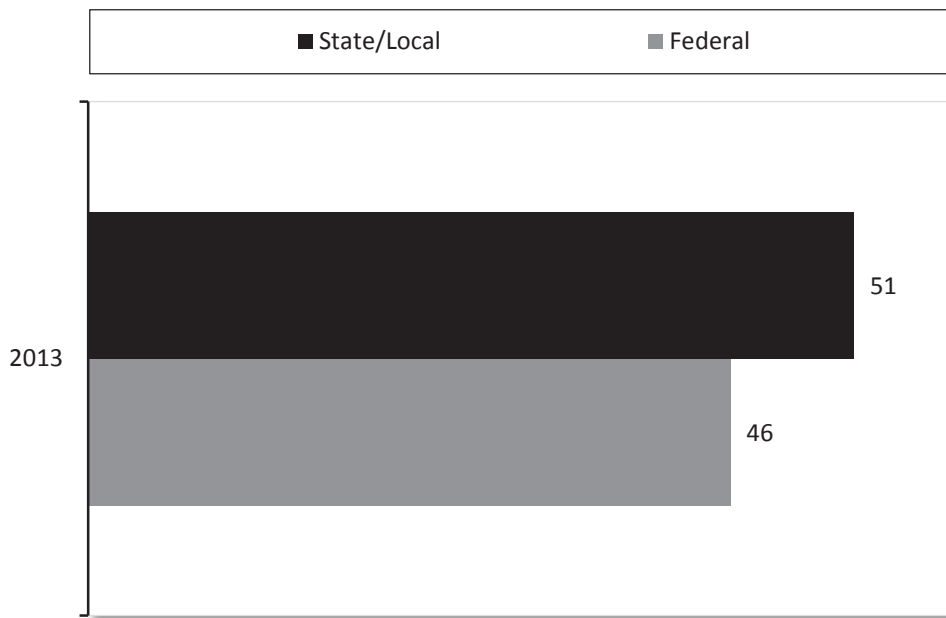
Immigration services have also consistently been viewed as part of the federal government’s job. In 1990 nearly two-thirds of Americans had the most trust and confidence in the federal government to handle services to immigrants.⁵³ Similarly, in 2013, two-thirds believed the federal government is best suited to handle immigration issues generally (see Figure 16).⁵⁴

Since the Constitution grants Congress the authority to establish uniform rules on naturalization (Article I, Section 8), it is reasonable that Congress would also determine eligibility for immigration.

Civil Rights

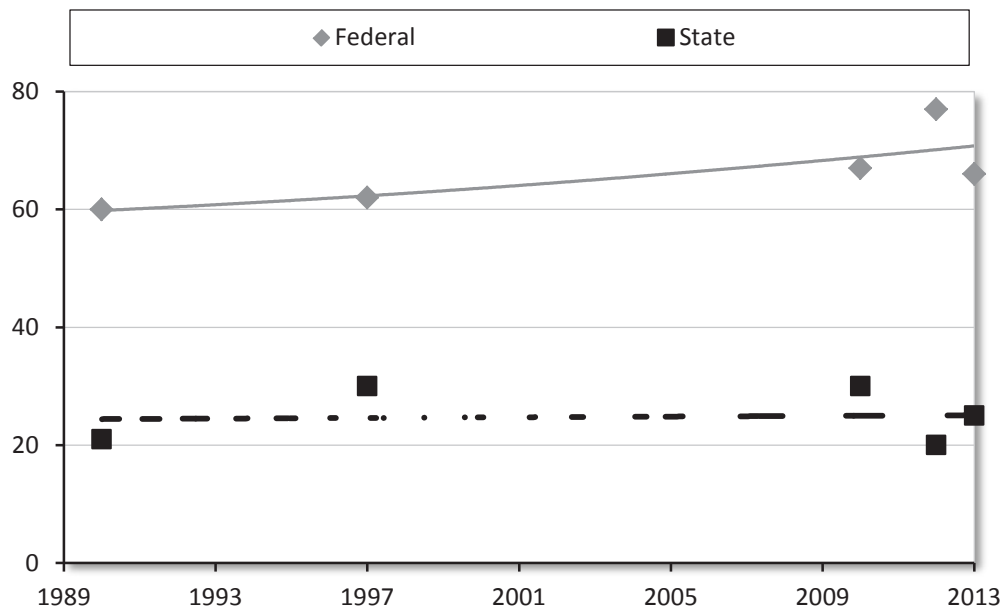
When it comes to writing rules and standards to protect Americans’ civil rights, most (roughly 6 in 10) view this as the federal gov-

Figure 15
Proper Level of Government for Gun Control Policy



Source: Public Religion Research Institute, August 2012.

Figure 16
Proper Level of Government for Immigration Issues, 1989 to 2013



Source: Surveys compiled by authors: Gallup 1990, Pew Research Center 1997, Public Religion Research Institute 2010, Public Religion Research Institute 2012, YouGov 2013.

“Only about one-third of the public thought the federal government should have responsibility to reduce achievement gaps between Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic students.”

ernment’s job.⁵⁵ However, in the 1950s, most Americans thought states should decide civil rights laws.⁵⁶ Of course, the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution establish civil rights standards applicable to the states. Throughout much of American history, some state officials ignored or resisted these constitutional mandates. Public opinion on these issues may still in part reflect a distrust of state and local level officials from that period.

While attitudes have shifted toward having the federal government set rules and standards to promote equality and protect civil rights, the public generally wants the states to operate and to pay for programs intended to improve opportunities for racial minorities.⁵⁷ Only about one-third of the public thought the federal government should have responsibility to reduce achievement gaps between Caucasian, African-American, and Hispanic students; nearly two-thirds felt this would be best handled at the state

and local levels.⁵⁸ Moreover, 8 in 10 Americans thought state and local governments would better ensure that education funding was equitable (see Figure 17).⁵⁹

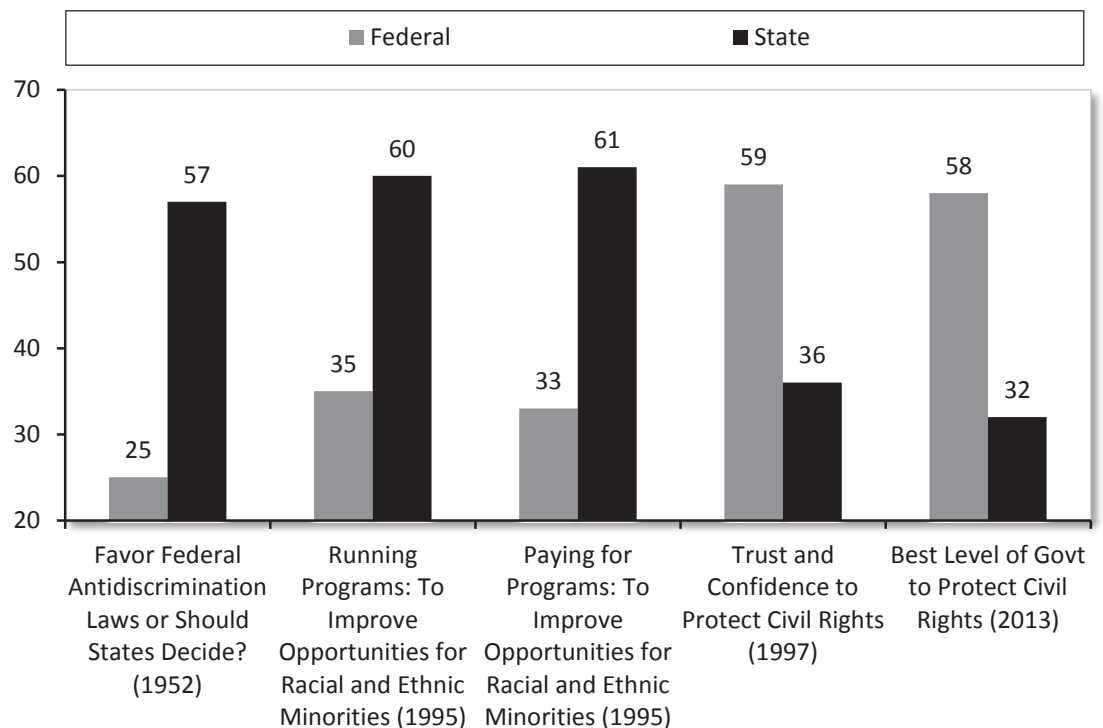
Scientific Research

The public also thinks that rules affecting scientific research should be made at the federal level. For instance, 69% say regulations determining whether stem-cell research can be conducted should be decided at the national level.⁶⁰ Similarly, 61% of the public wants the federal government to make rules regarding cancer research, while 39 percent want state and local governments to decide.⁶¹

Abortion

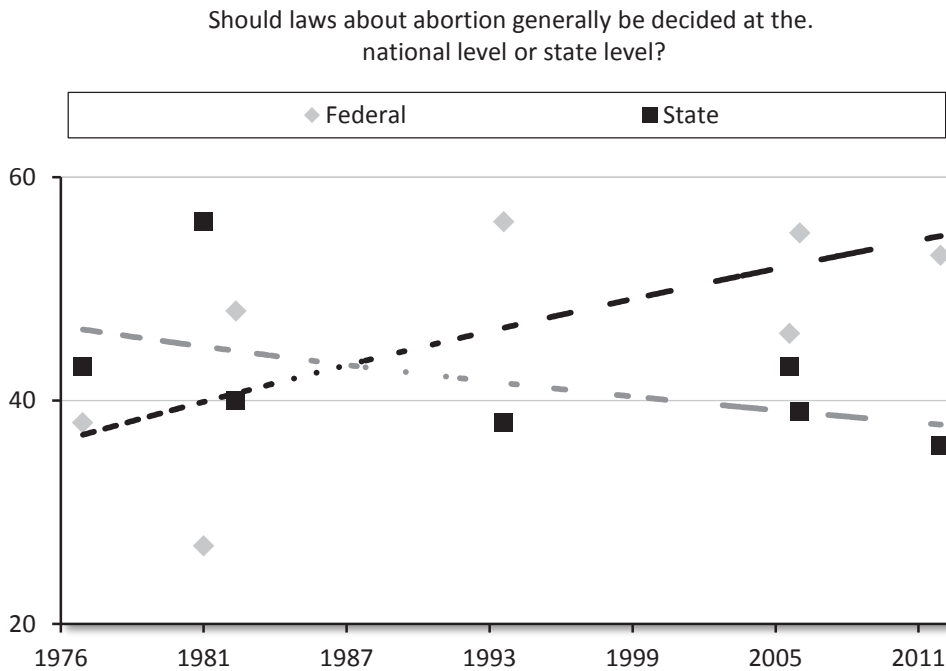
In the early 1970s, before the *Roe v Wade* Supreme Court decision and soon thereafter, Americans generally preferred that the states make laws about the legality of abortion. Over

Figure 17
Proper Level of Government to Promote Equality and Civil Rights, 1952 to 2013, by Percentage of Respondents



Sources: Opinion Research Corporation, 1952; Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1995; Hart and Teeter Research Companies, 1995; Pew Research Center, 1997; YouGov Poll, November 2013.

Figure 18
Proper Level of Government for Abortion Policy, 1976 to 2013, by Percentage of Respondents



Sources: Survey aggregated by authors: SurveyOrg, 1976; Roper Organization, 1981; Yankelovich, Skelly & White, 1983; CBS News/New York Times Poll, 1994; Ipsos-Public Affairs, 2006; Schulman, Ronca, & Bucuvalas, 2006; Public Religion Research Institute, 2012.

the course of the 1980s and 1990s, Americans began to prefer abortion laws be set at the federal level. By 1994, 56% supported a “national standard” while 38% wanted states to decide.⁶² Similarly in 2012, 53% preferred abortion laws be determined at the national level while only 36 percent wanted each state to decide for itself.⁶³ This does not necessarily imply that Americans want all abortion laws decided at the federal level but that they want the federal government to set general standards on abortion legality.

Figure 18 aggregates a series of polls asking about whether the federal government or state governments should determine abortion legality, with the trend favoring greater federal control.

The Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* no doubt strongly influenced public preferences about federalism on this issue. After *Roe*, pro-choice advocates were defending a *national* right. Pro-life advocates saw themselves as defending human life which implied a right. After

all, if life is at stake, why seek a federalist policy that permits taking a human life in the name of policy flexibility or moral diversity? While *Roe* shifted the public away from federalist solutions on abortion, that shift was more about the issue itself than about a judgment against federalism.

Safety Regulations

Americans have tended to prefer that the federal government set national standards when it comes to water and food safety. In the 1980s, two-thirds of Americans supported the federal government setting disclosure laws identifying potential hazards or toxic substances used in the workplace.⁶⁴ In the 1990s two-thirds agreed that the federal government should maintain consistent national drinking water standards, and 28% thought these standards should be set by the states.⁶⁵ In 2000 half the population had the most confidence in the federal government when it comes to food safety standards while 44% preferred state and

“While *Roe* shifted the public away from federalist solutions on abortion, that shift was more about the issue itself than about a judgment against federalism.”

“Americans largely prefer state or local decision-making over federal institutions in business and government.”

local control.⁶⁶ These data suggest that Americans generally favor the national government setting safety standards.

ABOLISHING DEPARTMENTS

Despite Americans' frustration with the federal government and preference for state and local governments, Americans are not willing to overhaul the D.C. establishment. A Reason-Rupe poll asked Americans if they would favor abolishing and consolidating a variety of federal departments or would prefer to keep them as they are.⁶⁷ Majorities opposed abolishing federal departments, with the greatest support for keeping the Departments of Education, Homeland Security, and Transportation as they currently are (roughly 60%). However, Americans were fairly evenly divided over some federal departments. For instance, 45% favor abolishing and consolidating the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), while 46% oppose. About 4 in 10 Americans would favor abolishing the Departments of Energy, Interior, Commerce, and the

Environmental Protection Agency, while about half would oppose (see Figure 19).

WHAT DRIVES SUPPORT FOR FEDERALISM?

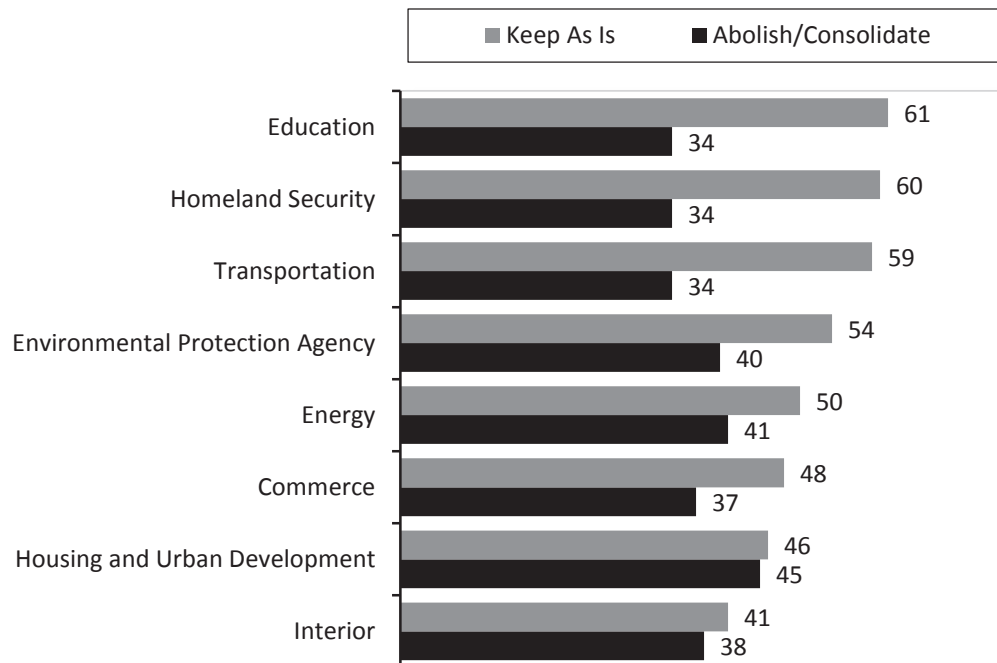
It is difficult to ascertain why exactly attitudes have shifted away from centralized national control over many public policy issues in favor of state and local decisionmaking. Nevertheless, we can identify several important factors underlying support for federalism.

Keeping It Local

Americans largely prefer state or local decisionmaking over federal institutions in business and government. Americans prefer entities closer to home because they feel as though they have a greater voice and impact over the institutions.

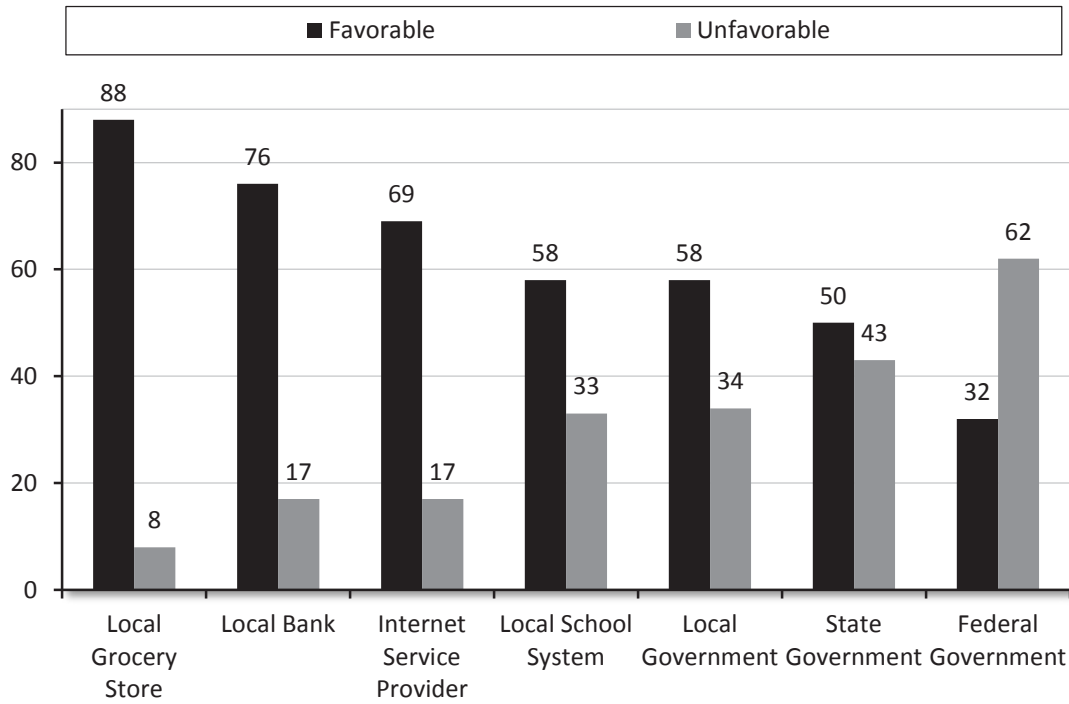
A 2011 Reason-Rupe poll asked Americans about their support for several societal and governmental institutions, revealing that the most highly rated institutions were closer to home: 88% had a favorable opinion of their

Figure 19
Public Support for Abolishing Federal Departments, by Percentage of Respondents



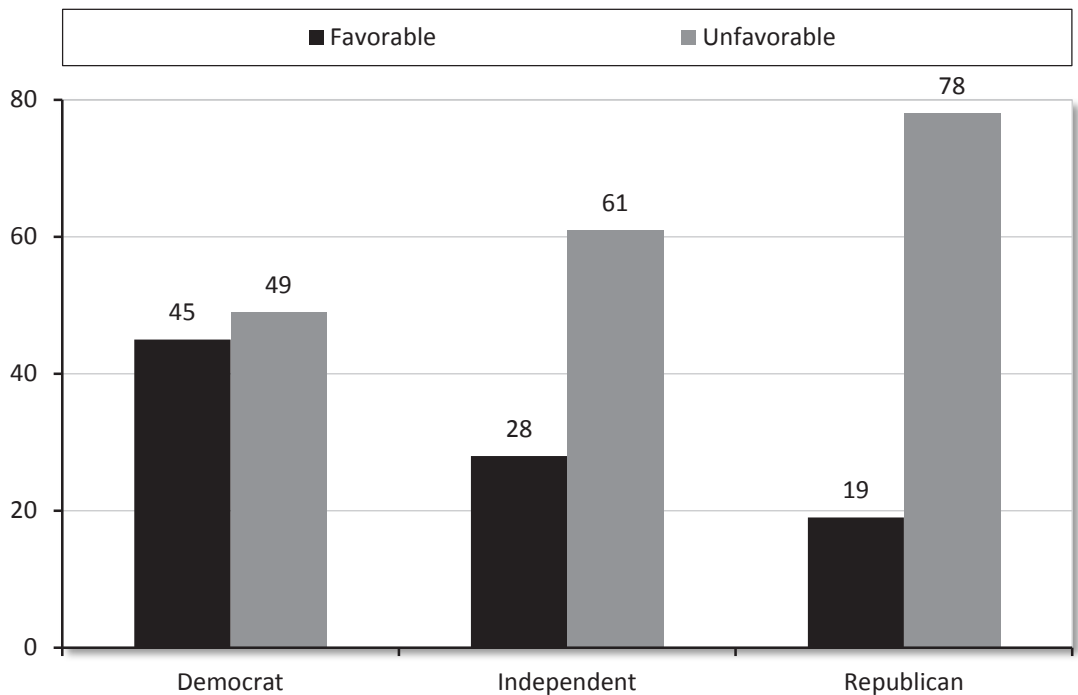
Source: Reason-Rupe Poll, December 2011.

Figure 20
Public Opinion toward Various Institutions, 2011 by Percentage of Respondents



Source: Reason-Rupe Poll, December 2011.

Figure 21
View of Federal Government by Partisan Affiliation and Percentage of Respondents



Source: Reason-Rupe Poll, December 2011.

“Local government attracts the highest ratings from Americans: 62 percent of Republicans, 59 percent of Democrats, and 47 of independents take a positive view of local institutions.”

local grocery stores, 76% of their local bank, 69% of their Internet service provider.

Disapproval rises for public institutions, but is still more positive for local rather than federal entities: 6 in 10 Americans have a favorable view of both their local school district and local government, while a third have unfavorable opinions of both. The public is evenly divided in their favorability toward their state government, but disapproval soars to 62 percent for the federal government. Only 32 percent of Americans have a positive view of the federal government (see Figure 20).⁶⁸

Democrats have a considerably more favorable view of the federal government (45%) than independents (28%) and Republicans (19%) (see Figure 21). (Of course, the federal government is now headed by a Democrat; this positive view might weaken if a Republican held the White House). Republicans are more likely to favor state governments (59%) compared to Democrats (49%) and independents (36%). Local government attracts the highest ratings from Americans: 62 percent of Republicans, 59 percent of Democrats, and 47 of independents take a positive view of local institutions.

Such partisanship should not be misinterpreted. We live in a polity deeply affected by partisanship as we can see in the public's view of the federal government. What is remarkable here is the relatively small differences between partisans in their views of state and local government.

EXPLAINING DISAPPROVAL OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

Trust in Government

Over time Americans have lost confidence in the institutions that compose the federal government. For instance in 1973 about 7 in 10 Americans trusted the legislative branch a great deal or fair amount. This number stood at roughly 6 in 10 in the 1990s, but by 2013 trust plummeted to a near all-time low of 34% who trust the legislative branch. Waning confidence is not confined to the legislative branch: while

68% trusted the executive branch in 1973, that percentage has declined 17 points to a bare majority (51%) in 2013. Even trust in the judicial branch has declined from 75 percent in 2002 to 62 percent in 2013.⁶⁹

While the public is less likely to trust the federal government, they are more likely to trust their local government. When asked in the 1990s and 2000s nearly twice as many Americans trusted their local governments as the federal government.⁷⁰

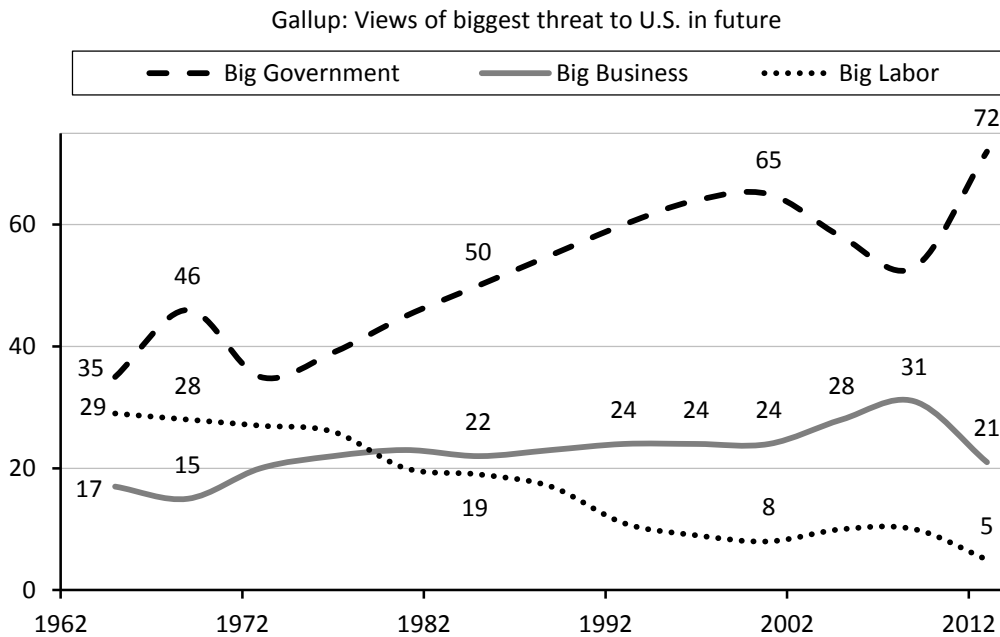
Americans Think the Federal Government Is Too Powerful

Many Americans have come to believe the federal government has become too powerful. In contrast, in 1948, 40% of Americans thought that shifting more state government activities and responsibilities to the federal government was a “good idea” and 35% thought it was a “bad idea.”⁷¹ In 1982, a plurality (41%) agreed with President Reagan's position “on turning more federal activities over to the states.”⁷² By 1995, 75% favored turning more responsibilities from the federal government to the state governments.⁷³ In fact, during the 1990s, when pollsters asked Americans what they liked most about the Republican Congress, respondents most often replied “transferring federal programs to the states” (39%).⁷⁴ During this time, 6 in 10 Americans said the federal government had too much power, and 56% wanted their state and local governments to have more power.⁷⁵ Today that number is even higher.

Measured in a slightly different way, Gallup has found over time that an increasing share of Americans have come to believe that “big government” is the greatest threat to the country, over “big business” and “big labor.” The percentage that held this belief rose from 50% in 1985 to 65% in 1999 to 72% in 2013, a record high (see Figure 22).⁷⁶

AMERICANS THINK THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IS WASTEFUL. Americans believe they get more value for their tax dollars from lower levels of government. Since the 1970s, a steadily increasing number of Americans have believed

Figure 22
Public View of Biggest Threat to U.S. Future, 1962 to 2012, by Percentage of Respondents



Source: Jeffrey M. Jones, "Record High in US Say Big Government Greatest Threat: Now 72% Say It Is Greater Threat than Big Business or Big Labor," 2013; Gallup Organization, December 18, 2013, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166535/record-high-say-big-government-greatest-threat.aspx>.

they get more value for their tax dollars from state and local governments than from the federal government. State and local governments have always enjoyed an edge in public perception of value for money, but over the past several decades state and local governments had a 2 to 1 advantage over public perception of federal taxpayer dollars.⁷⁷ As of 2009, two-thirds (67%) of Americans trusted their state and local governments to provide the greatest value for their tax dollars, compared to 33 percent who felt this way about the federal government (see Figure 23).⁷⁸ This is hardly surprising given that Americans believe the federal government wastes \$0.60 of every dollar it spends (see Figure 24).⁷⁹

Interestingly, we see few differences between the parties or between partisans and independents about federal government waste. Republicans (67%), Democrats (68%), and Independents (69%) all agree that state and local governments offer taxpayers the most value for their money.

This also suggests that perception of federal government waste is not sufficient in convincing the public to devolve powers to the states.

Perception of government waste varies by race and ethnicity, with one qualification. Caucasians are least likely (28%) to say the federal government offers them the best value for their money, followed by 37% of African Americans and 58% of Latinos. However, once taking into account where respondents' parents were born, Latinos reflect national trends. Among Latinos whose parents were born in the United States, only 34 percent felt the federal government offered the best value similar to all respondents. Overall, racial and ethnic groups generally agree that state and local governments offer their taxpayers the best value for their money (see Figure 25).

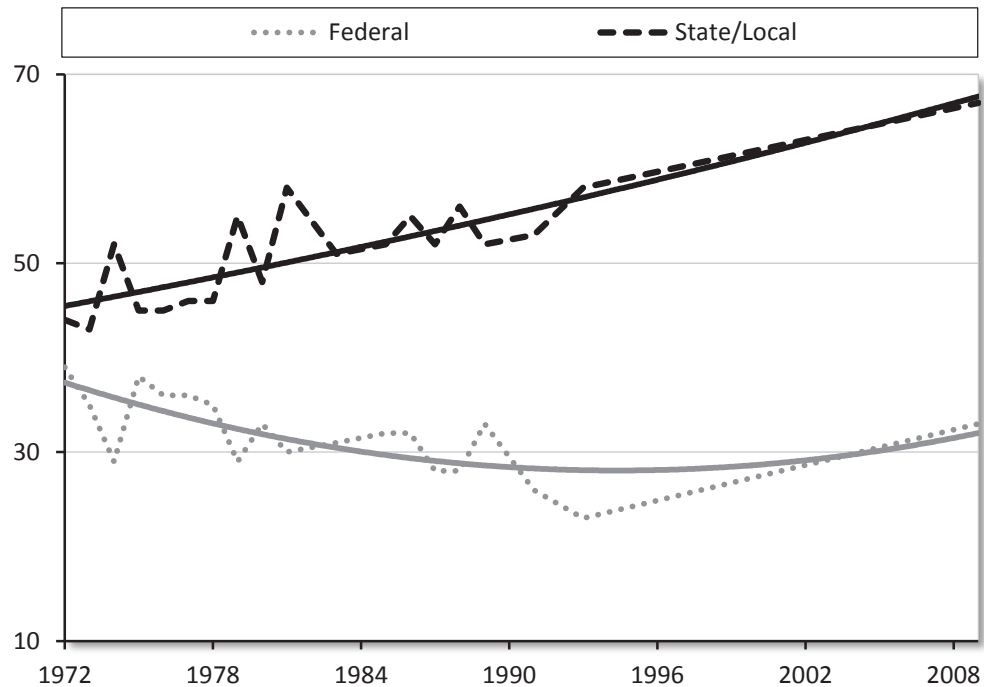
Taxes

When it comes to income taxes, Americans see those levied by the states as substantially

“Overall, racial and ethnic groups generally agree that state and local governments offer their taxpayers the best value for their money.”

“Americans believe their state and local governments are more likely than the federal government to provide competent service.”

Figure 23
Most Value for Money, by Level of Government, 1972–2010, by Percentage of Respondents



Source: Surveys compiled by authors: Opinion Research Corporation, March 1, 1972; Opinion Research Corporation, May 1, 1973; Opinion Research Corporation, April 1, 1974; Opinion Research Corporation, May 1, 1975; Opinion Research Corporation March 1, 1976; Opinion Research Corporation May 1, 1977; Opinion Research Corporation May 1, 1978; Opinion Research Corporation, June 1, 1979; Opinion Research Corporation, May 1, 1980; Opinion Research Corporation, September 1, 1981; Gallup Organization, May 1, 1983; Gallup Organization, May 20, 1985; Gallup Organization, May 1, 1986; Gallup Organization, July 1, 1987; Gallup Organization, July 1, 1988; Gallup Organization, June 1, 1989; Gallup Organization, May 1, 1990; Gallup Organization, July 1, 1991; Gallup Organization, December 1, 1992; Gallup Organization, December 1, 1993; Harvard University, January 31, 2009; CBS News/New York Times, January 27, 1986.

more fair than those collected by the federal government, or than the local property tax.

Over the past 20 years, most Americans have tended to view state income and sales taxes as the most fair, as well as federal Social Security taxes. In the 1990s the public perceived the “worst taxes” to be the federal income tax and local property taxes; however since the mid 1990s there has been a steady increase in the perception that local property taxes are the worst, a view that increased from 28% in 1994 to 39% in 2005. Additionally there has been a slight decline in the share of those who view the federal income tax as least fair dropping from 27% in 1994 to 20% in 2005.⁸⁰ This result is perhaps less surprising since federal income taxes declined during this period (see Figure 26).

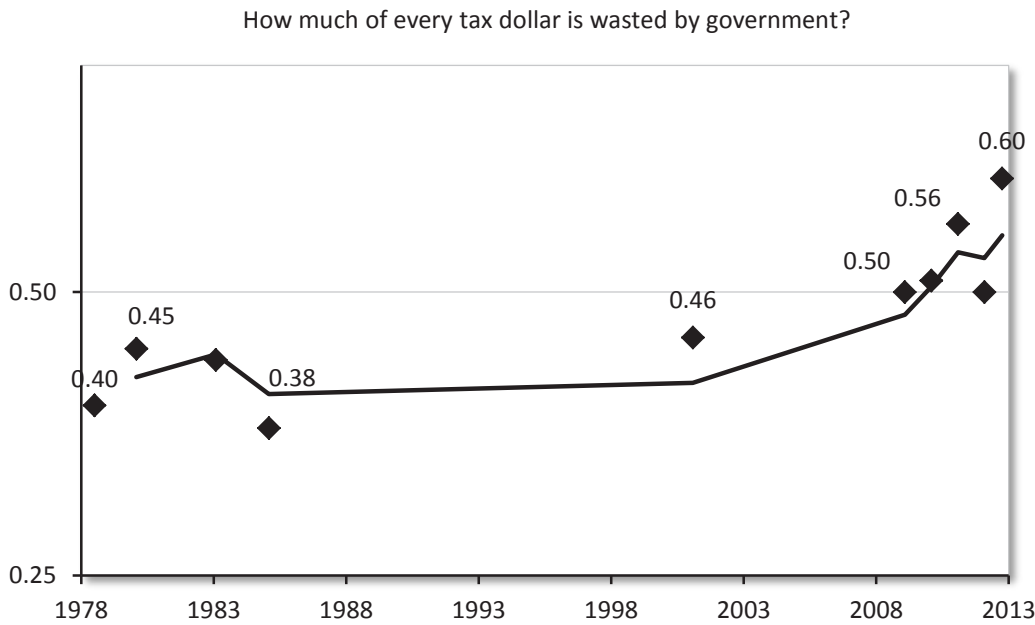
EXPLAINING THE PUBLIC'S PREFERENCE FOR STATE AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Americans Think State Governments Are More Efficient than the Federal Government

Americans believe their state and local governments are more likely than the federal government to provide competent service. About a third of Americans have a great deal or some confidence in the federal government compared to nearly half of those who have confidence in their state and local governments.⁸¹

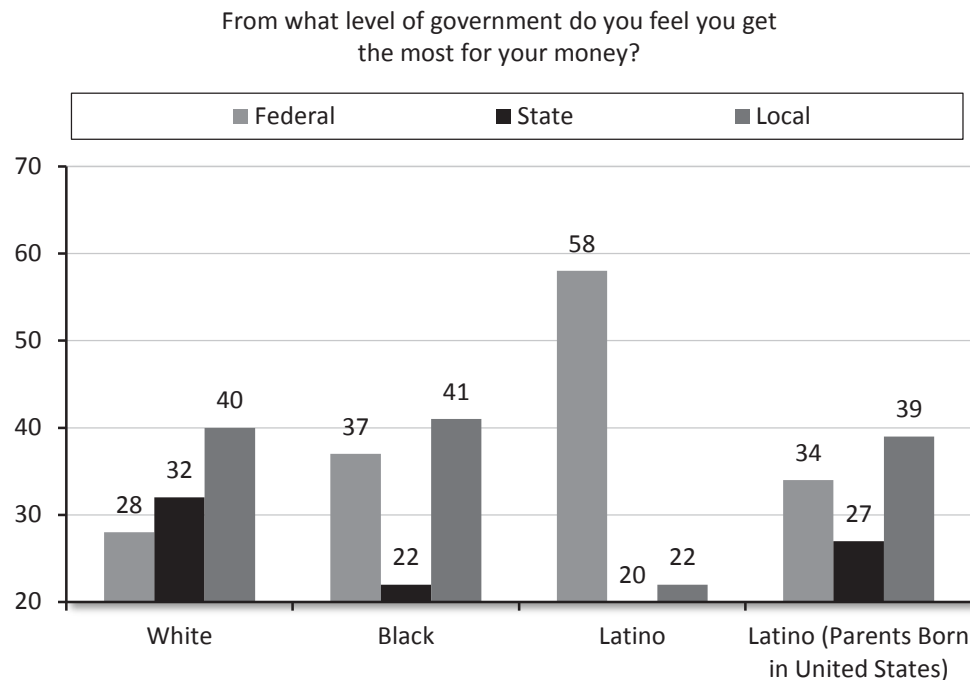
Democrats are generally more confident about the capacities of government at all levels. In fact, majorities of Democrats trust all government to efficiently provide goods and ser-

Figure 24
Perception of Waste by Federal Government, 1978–2013, by Percentage of Respondents



Source: Gallup 1979, 1982, 1984, 1986, 2002, 2009, 2011; Reason-Rupe, 2013. For Gallup data see, Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans Say Federal Government Wastes over Half of Every Dollar Believe State and Local Governments Waste Proportionately Less Money," Gallup Organization, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/149543/americans-say-federal-gov-wastes-half-every-dollar.aspx>. For Reason-Rupe data see <http://reason.com/poll/data-archive>.

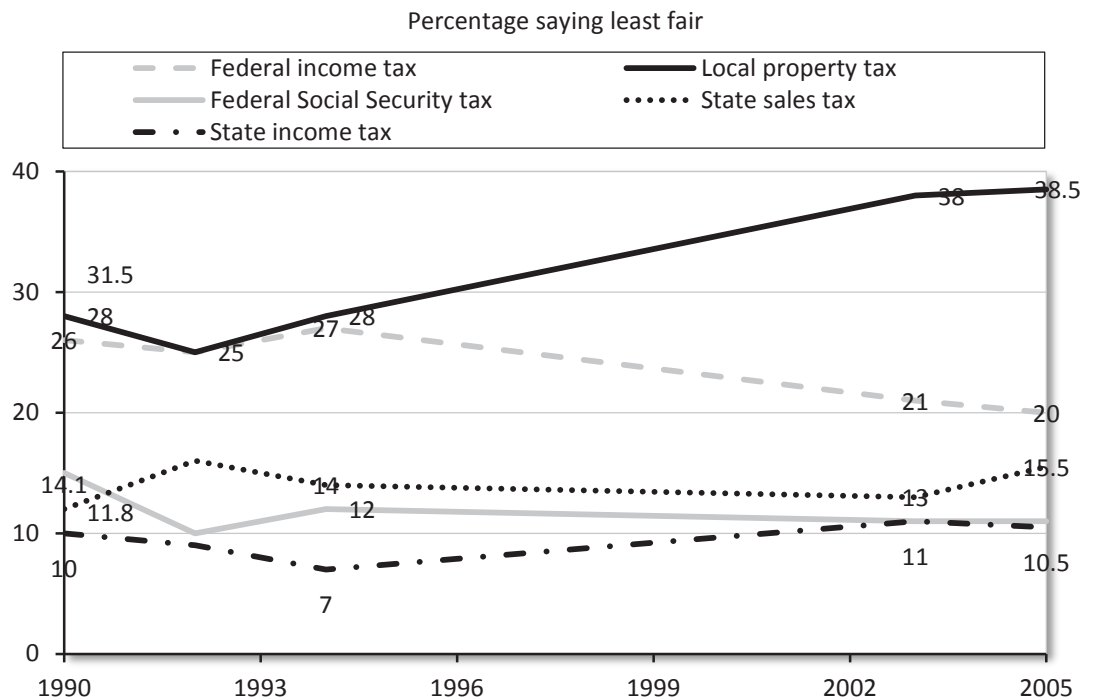
Figure 25
Public Perception of Value for Money, by Level of Government, by Percentage of Respondents



Source: Harvard JFK Poll, 2009.

“Policies devolving powers to the state and local levels are more likely to be broadly popular than those that simply further centralize decisionmaking authority.”

Figure 26
Public Perception of Tax Fairness



Source: Gallup.

vices including at the federal (53%), state (57%), and local level (51%).⁸² However, independents and Republicans are far less confident in the federal government's ability. Only 21 percent of independents and 16 percent of Republicans trust the federal government to efficiently govern.⁸³ However, a majority (53%) of Republicans trust their local government, as do 44% of independents.⁸⁴ In general, independents are more skeptical toward all levels of government (see Figure 27).

Perceptions of the federal government's competence vary by race and ethnicity. African Americans tend to have greater trust in all levels of government compared to Caucasians and Latinos born in the United States, who generally have more favorable views of local and state governments. For instance, a majority of African Americans (51%) have some or a great deal of trust in the federal government, compared to 31% of Caucasians and 19% of Latinos have little or no trust in the federal government. Instead, 65% of Caucasians and 60% of Latinos have little to no confidence in the federal gov-

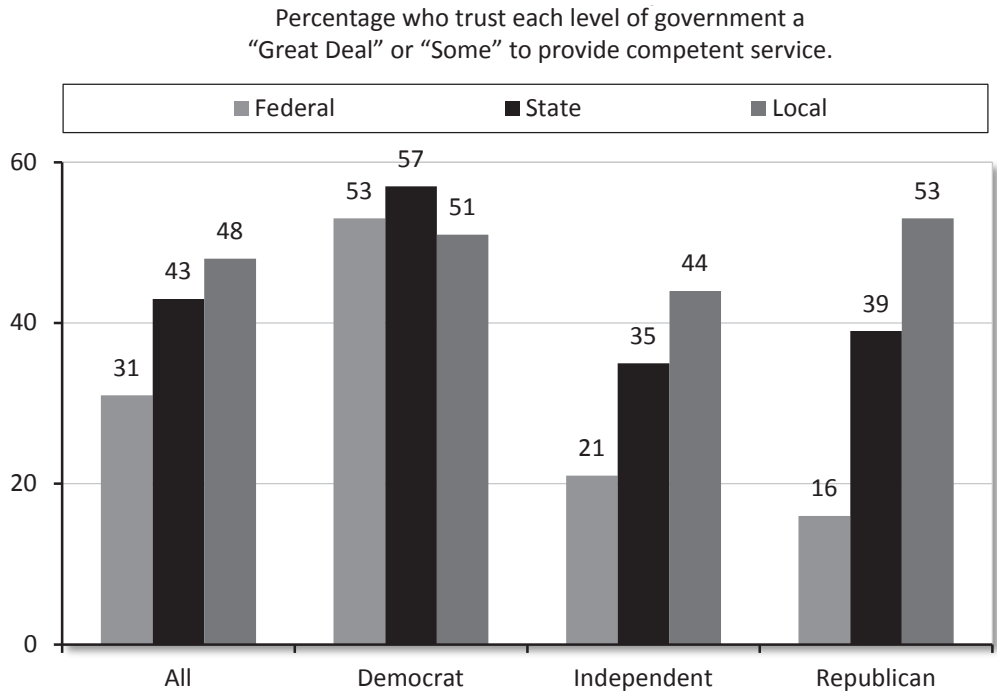
ernment, compared to 41% of African Americans. Notably, about a quarter of Latinos say they haven't formed an opinion about the federal government's competence (see Figure 28).

Perception of government competence improves for Caucasians and Latinos as government gets closer to home. Four in 10 Caucasians and Latinos have a great deal or some trust in their state governments. In fact, a plurality (50%) of Caucasians has high confidence in their local governments; 40 percent of Latinos share that view.

We have found rough agreement across partisan and demographic groups that state and local government can competently provide service. This suggests that policies devolving powers to the state and local levels are more likely to be broadly popular than those that simply further centralize decisionmaking authority. Coalescing greater authority at the national level to get things done more quickly may be popular among some, but devolving power back to where the people live will appeal more broadly.

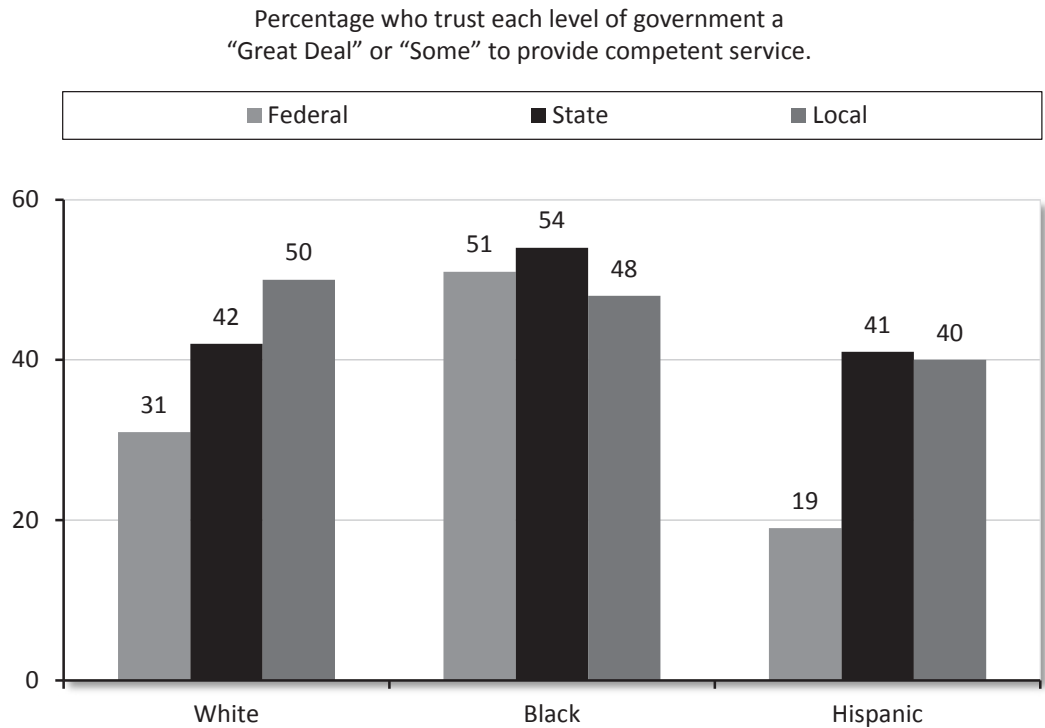
When asked in 1995 which would be the most

Figure 27
Public Perception of Government Competence, by Level of Government



Source: YouGov Poll, November 2013.

Figure 28
Perceptions of Government Competence, by Race and Ethnicity



Source: YouGov Poll November 2013.

“Americans prefer state and local governments because they believe it gives them greater voice and impact.”

compelling reason to devolve more programs from the federal to state and local governments, Americans were more likely to think lower levels of government would better address the unique needs of constituents (33%), terminate unnecessary and wasteful programs (32%), and reduce costs to the taxpayer (26%).⁸⁵ There is little reason to believe these views about why devolution is beneficial have changed dramatically.

Americans Believe They Have a Greater Voice in State and Local Government

Americans prefer state and local governments because they believe it gives them greater voice and impact. It is much more practical for a concerned citizen to attend a city council or school board meeting, or even go to their state capitol, than it is to travel to Washington and speak with their member of Congress. For example, during debate over the 2009 stimulus package, the rollout of the Affordable Care Act, and the budget and debt-ceiling debates, capitol phones were so overwhelmed with constituent phone calls people couldn't get through.⁸⁶ Back in 1989, only 18% felt the federal government best responded to their needs, compared to 61% at the state and local level.⁸⁷

Today, a majority (52%) of Americans say they deal most often with their local government, followed by 22% who say they most frequently interact with their state government, and 15% who report mostly dealing with the federal government.⁸⁸ Similarly, when asked who they contact most often, 60% say government closer to home, including 37% who most frequently reach out to their state government and 23% who primarily contact their local government. Thirty-five percent reach out to the federal government (see Figure 29).⁸⁹

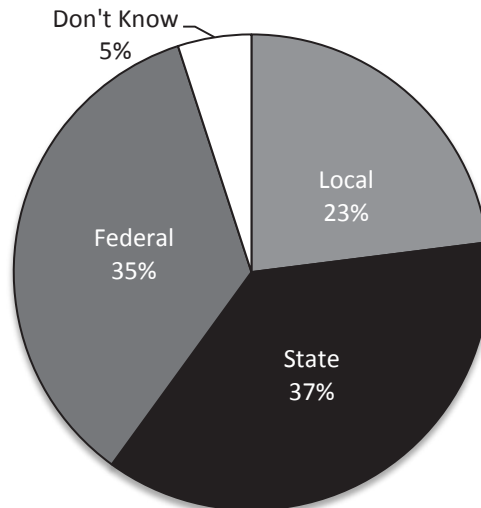
Most Americans do not have access to the resources of lobbyists and large social interest groups that have sufficient leverage to draw the attention of Congress. Thus, understandably, more Americans sense they have greater voice and influence at lower levels of government closer to where they live.

DEVOLUTION

For the past few decades, a solid majority of Americans has consistently favored reassigning more tasks, or devolving tasks, from the federal government to the state and local levels.

Figure 29
Interaction by Various Levels of Government, Percentage of Respondents

What level of government would you say contacted most often this past year—local, state, or federal?



Source: Pew Research Center, May 2004.

Since the 1980s Gallup and the Pew Research Center have asked Americans whether they think the federal government should only run things that cannot be run at the local level, a generic way to measure individuals' preference for devolution. Ideally the question would ask about state governments as well, because it is unclear how people allocate state government tasks when only offered federal and local level options. Nevertheless, this question is still useful. In 2012, Pew found 69% of Americans believed that the federal government should only run things that cannot be run at the local level. This percentage has slightly declined from a high of 78 percent in 1994, during the wave of small government sentiment that spiked during the midterm elections that year. Nonetheless, a large majority still supports state and local jurisdiction (see Figure 30).

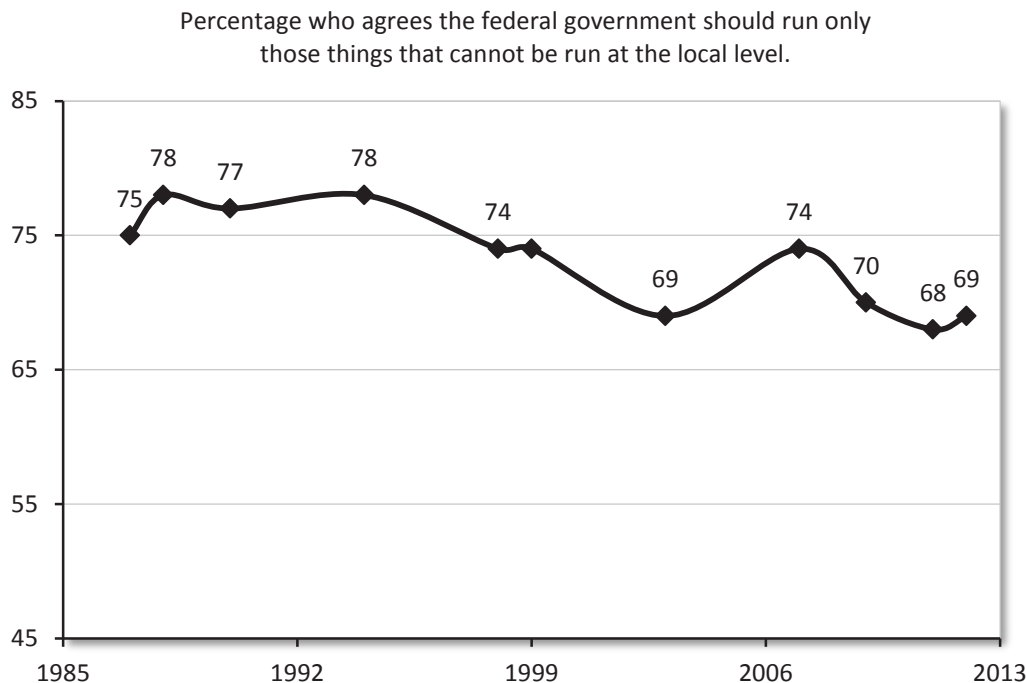
CONCLUSION

Americans like the federal system. While most may not ponder the benefits of 50 laboratories of innovation and the value of interstate competition, they have experienced the value offered through accessible levels of government. Most Americans cannot affect what happens in Washington, D.C., but they can in their city councils and often in their state governments. Americans interact more frequently with lower levels of government and believe these levels better respond to constituents' needs. Americans view the federal government as wasteful and inefficient, and although such problems are endemic to government at all levels, citizens believe they can better hold state and local governments accountable.

In this report, we have demonstrated that the public prefers state and local policymak-

“Americans interact more frequently with lower levels of government and believe these levels better respond to constituents' needs.”

Figure 30
Public Opinion about Devolution, 1985 to 2013



Source: surveys compiled by authors: Gallup Organization, September 1, 1987; Gallup Organization, May 1, 1988; September 19, 1990; September 21, 1994; March 10, 1998; November 11, 1999; August 31, 2003; Pew Research Center International, March 22, 2007; May 21, 2009; November 2, 2011; June 4, 2012.

“The public sees significant benefits for voters and taxpayers when more governmental decisions are made within their reach and closer to home.”

ing to federal control on many of today's most pressing issues. On education, welfare, transportation, housing, health insurance, prison reform, drug reform, protecting the environment, law enforcement, and gun policy, Americans want their state and local governments to have the authority to make most of the important decisions.

Our analysis also demonstrates a public preference for national-level decisionmaking on a number of issues as well, particularly those related to setting standards and frameworks that establish the legal expectations within which society operates. Americans favor federal policymaking for defense, immigration, civil rights and civil liberties, scientific research, and abortion.

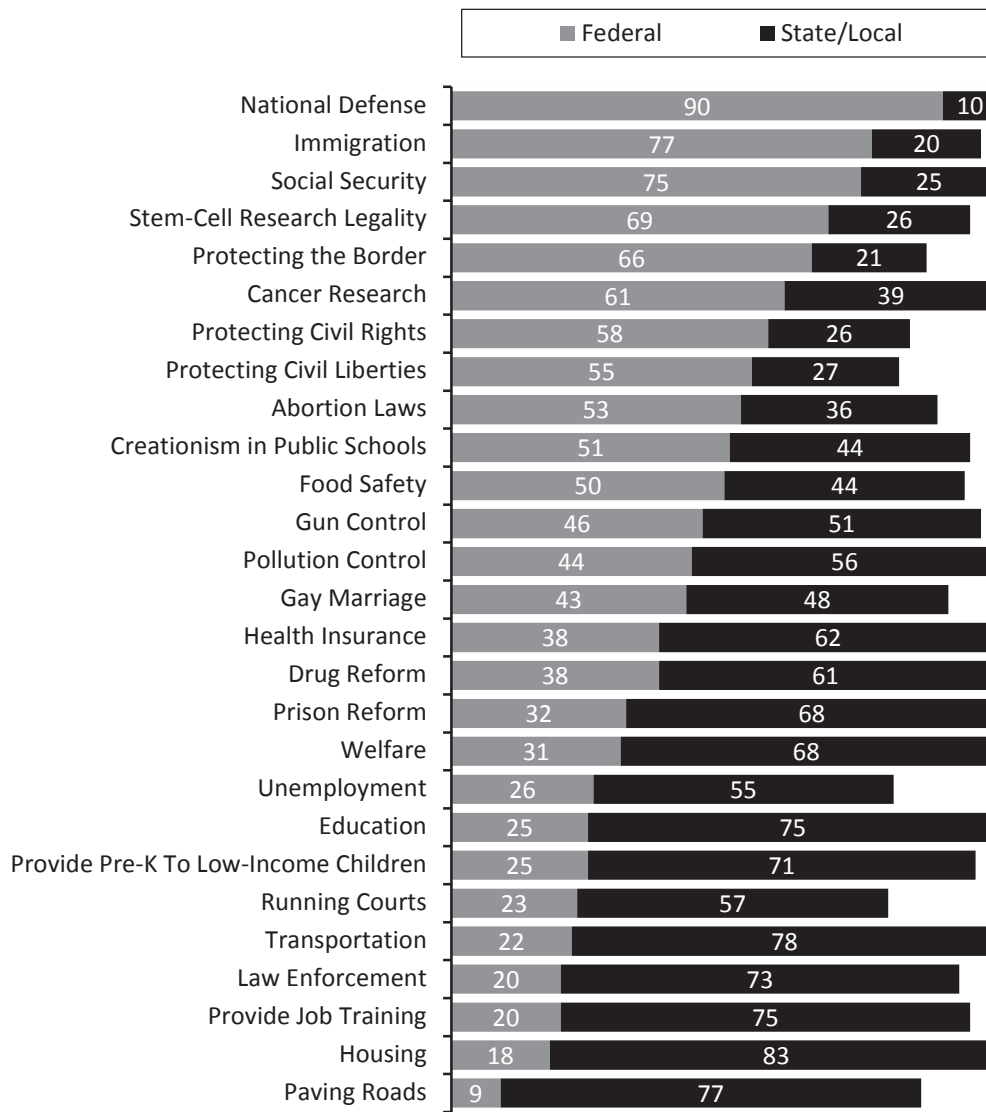
Over the past 40 years, the public has shifted in favor of greater local and state control and away from centralization of national power, particularly on the issues of drug and prison reform, health insurance, and environmental protection. The only issue we discovered that shifted in favor of greater federal authority

was determining abortion legality. Although it is too early to tell, the issue of same-sex marriage may also follow suit.

The federal government will likely seek greater and more centralized authority. Nevertheless, the public sees significant benefits for voters and taxpayers when more governmental decisions are made within their reach and closer to home. Many Americans think state and local governments can more nimbly respond to changes in the economy and society, can be held more accountable for their actions, can experiment with new policies without embroiling the rest of the nation, and are better incentivized to provide the best package of policies to attract people and businesses to live in their states. Consequently, the burden of proof lies with the federal government to justify why the programs and services it wants to control cannot be managed better at the state and local levels. Without a compelling justification, Americans prefer policymaking remain closer to home and where they have greater voice.

APPENDIX A

Figure A-1



Source: Surveys compiled by authors.

APPENDIX B

Surveys Analyzed

Note: All but the last item on this list was retrieved from the iPOLL Databank on August 15, 2013.

1. Roper Organization. Fortune. Roper/ Fortune Survey. September 1948.
2. Opinion Research Corporation. ORC Public Opinion Index. November 1952.
3. Gallup Organization. Gallup Poll (AIPO). February 1954.
4. Opinion Research Corporation. National Labor Issues Survey. December 1961.
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