

WHY MILLENNIALS DON'T VOTE FOR MAYOR

Barriers and Motivators for Local Voting



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INTRODUCTION



Local government often has more real-world impact on the everyday lives of citizens than other levels of government. Police departments, libraries and schools all fall under local government jurisdiction, and for homeowners, local government significantly affects their cost of living through taxation. Even the White House says “most Americans have more daily contact with their state and local governments than with the federal government.”

Voting is perhaps the quintessential indicator of civic engagement and a well-functioning democracy. For young adults, voting indicates current and future attachment to the cities where they live. Local elections, including the candidates and ballot initiatives, provide a crucial opportunity for residents to influence how their city approaches and invests in the issues that matter most to them.


But whereas voter turnout for presidential elections nears 60 percent, local election turnout is often a third of that or lower. Among millennials (20- to 34-year-olds) in urban areas, this turnout gap is even more pronounced.

Local elections are missing millions of millennial voters who participate in national elections but not ones in their cities. This led Knight Foundation to embark on research to explore factors that may be hampering turnout in local elections among millennials, focusing specifically on millennials who participated in the last national elections but not in their local elections. The research aims to identify the causes of low millennial voter turnout in local elections and possible approaches for encouraging more informed local voting which brings more citizen voice to local government.



METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- Understand statistical trends in local voting and factors which affect turnout
 - Explore millennial motivations and barriers for voting in local elections
 - Consider ways to promote stronger millennial participation in local elections
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METHODOLOGY

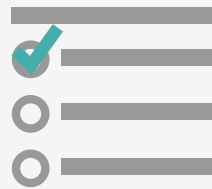
Knight worked with Lake Research Partners to conduct focus groups with millennial drop-off voters, people ages 20 to 34 who voted in the past national election but not in their most recent local election. The focus groups explored attitudes toward local government and local voting, and how to frame voting to motivate greater millennial participation in local elections.

Lake Research Partners designed the focus groups after reviewing existing research about local voting rates and factors that affect turnout in local elections. They conducted six focus groups that included a total of 60 millennial drop-off voters across **Akron, Miami** and **Philadelphia**, with participants selected to represent the underlying demographics of their community. The research was designed to identify key themes about millennial attitudes that could help shape future research but is not meant to be a statistically representative summary of all millennials.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lake Research Partners began by examining local election turnout data, political science research and other studies pertaining to factors influencing voter turnout, particularly among millennials.

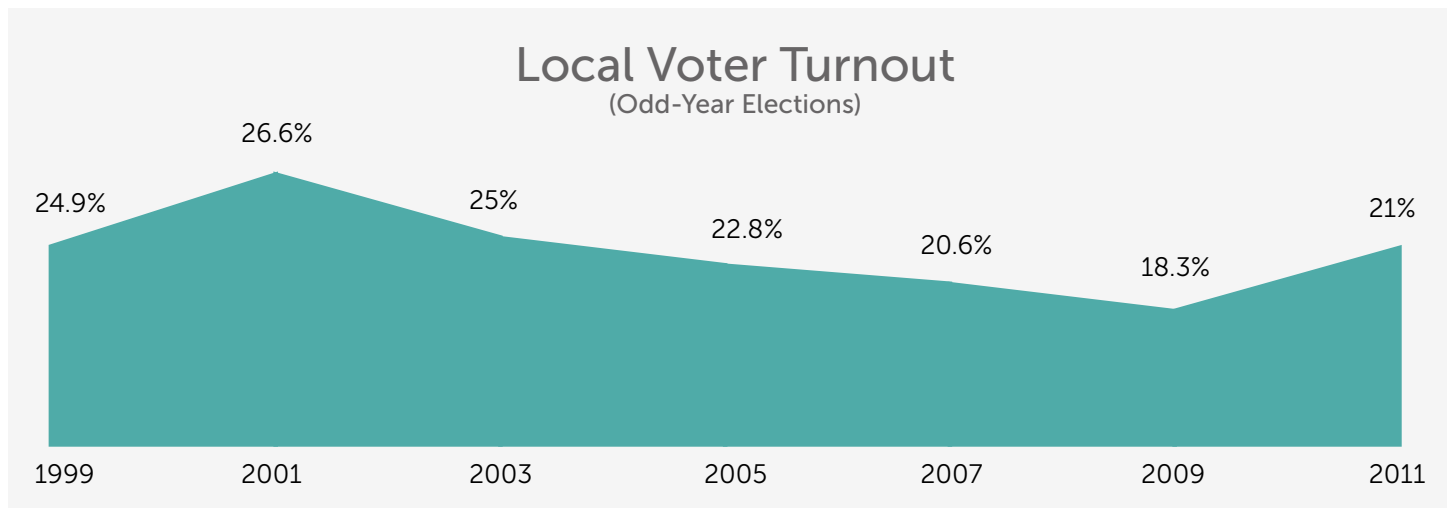
V O T E



LOCAL ELECTION TURNOUT DECLINES

As was highly documented, voter turnout during the 2014 midterm election was the lowest it's been in 72 years (36.3 percent). It was even lower among millennials (21.5 percent).

Turnout for local elections is even lower and declining. A study of turnout for mayoral elections in the 144 largest U.S. cities found that turnout dipped from 24.9 percent in 1999 to 21 percent in 2011.



Source: Aaron C. Weinschenk and Thomas M. Holbrook. 2013. "Campaigns, Mobilization, and Turnout in Mayoral Elections." *Political Research Quarterly*.

LOW TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Millennials report lower levels of trust in government than the general population. Sixty percent of people say they trust local government a great deal or fair amount compared with only 33 percent of millennial voters who reported trusting their local government a great deal or fair amount.

This same survey found that only 29 percent of millennials believe that political involvement of any kind rarely has any tangible results and the same small percentage found the idea of working in public service appealing (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2014).

Trust in Government Among Millennials

(18- to 29-year olds)

HOW OFTEN DO YOU TRUST EACH OF THEM TO DO THE RIGHT THING?

– % WHO RESPOND ALL OR MOST OF THE TIME –

	FEB 2010	FEB 2011	MAR 2012	APR 2013	APR 2014
The Federal Government	29%	27%	27%	22%	20%
Your State Government	-	28%	32%	30%	28%
Your Local Government	-	33%	37%	34%	33%

Source: Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service, Harvard Institute of Politics, 2014.

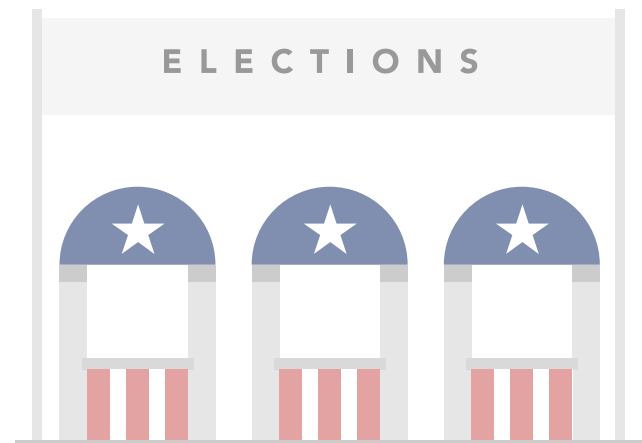
LOCAL VOTING INHIBITORS

The review of existing research also identified several factors likely inhibiting local election turnout, particularly among millennials.

- **Less local media coverage:** A recent study found that a diminished news environment depresses citizen engagement. With recent cutbacks to local and state journalism, voters have less information to evaluate candidates and ballot initiatives and ultimately are less likely to vote.¹
- **High mobility among millennials:** Research shows high mobility decreases political participation and this likely impacts millennials most since they move more often than any other age segment (Lake Research Partners, 2014).
- **Low rates of homeownership:** Studies have pointed to a correlation between home ownership and increases in local voting, with homeowners who have lived in the community for a long time voting at higher rates.² Since millennials own homes at lower rates than other age groups, this may depress their turnout.

1. Hayes, Danny and Jennifer L. Lawless. 2014. "As Local News Goes, So Goes Citizen Engagement: Media, Knowledge, and Participation in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics*.

2. J. Eric Oliver. 2013. "Local Elections and the Politics of Small-scale Democracy." Princeton: Princeton University Press.



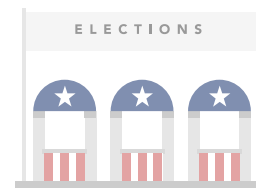
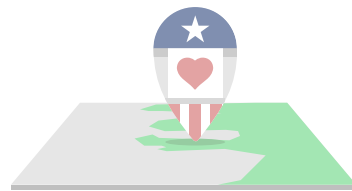
FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

Focus groups conducted with millennial drop-off voters who voted in the last national election but not in recent local elections explored their sense of ownership and loyalty to their communities, current forms of community engagement and attitudes toward local government and voting.



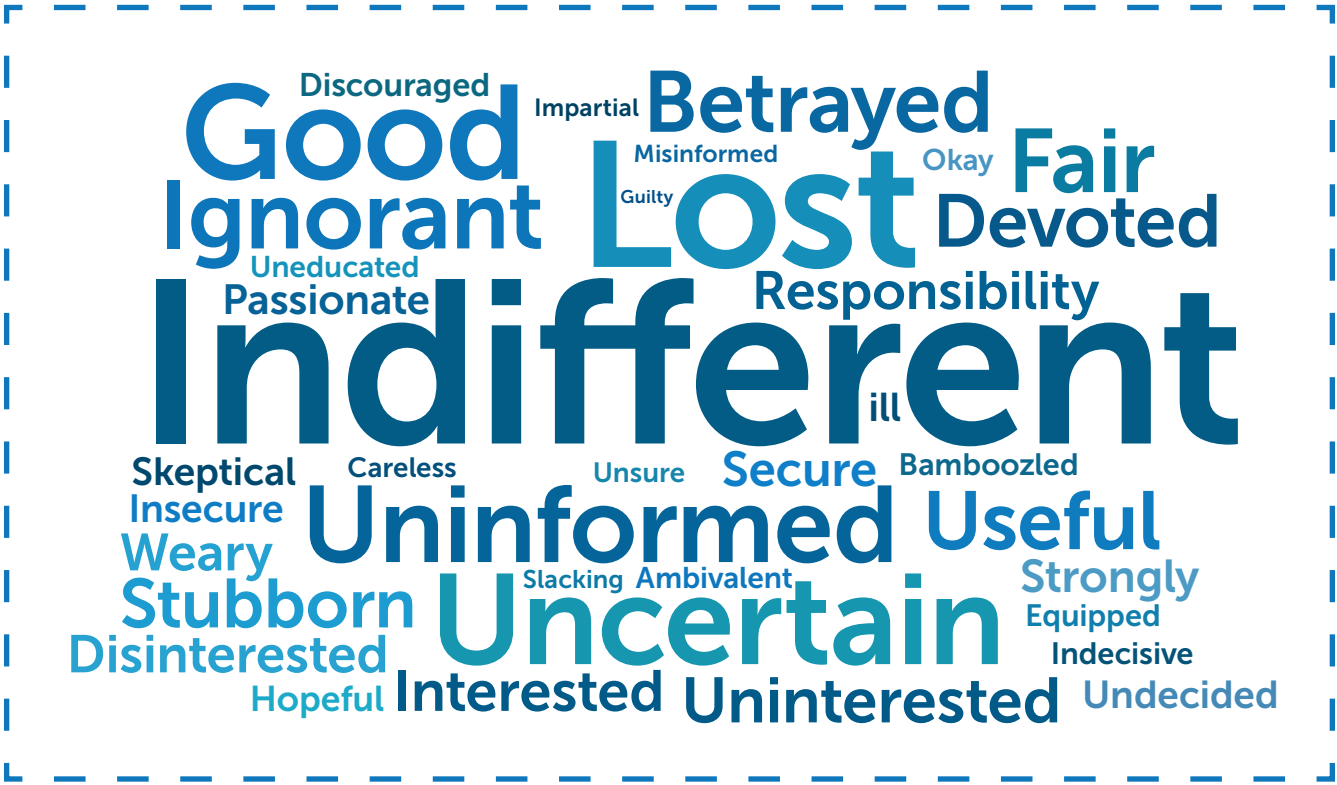
FOCUS GROUP THEMES

- **Lack of Trustworthy Information:** Millennial drop-off voters do not feel informed enough to vote in local elections. They struggle to find information about local elections and don't know which sources to trust.
- **Confusion About Local Government:** They are uncertain about the role local government plays in their daily lives and how it influences key issues they care about in the community, including education, transportation and economic opportunity.
- **Importance of Community Attachment:** Millennials who had spent a longer duration of time in the city where they reside were more likely to convey the importance of voting in local elections and becoming civically engaged.
- **Building Social Norms:** Voting and other forms of civic engagement are often learned through family and friends, so connecting with these millennials through their existing social networks and normalizing these behaviors is crucial.



MILLENNIALS' FEELINGS ABOUT LOCAL ELECTIONS

I feel _____ about voting in local elections,
like those for mayor and city council.



OBSTACLES TO LOCAL VOTING

Focus group participants said **not enough information** about local candidates and issues as well as a **lack of news coverage** are the biggest obstacles to local voting.

Barriers	
I don't have enough information about the candidates.	75%
I don't know enough about local issues.	62%
There's not enough news coverage of local elections.	40%
I don't know when local elections are held.	20%
I don't have enough time to vote in local elections.	17%
It's not worth it. My vote doesn't matter.	17%
I don't feel a connection to the city.	12%
Local elections are less important than the national ones.	10%
I don't know where my polling place is.	7%
I haven't lived in the city long enough to know who to vote for.	5%

Note: percentages based on 60 focus group participants. This is a small sample to identify themes but not meant to be a statistically significant representation of all millennials.

INFORMATION BARRIERS

Focus group participants felt they had almost **no information about the candidates and issues in local elections**. Unlike presidential elections, during which voters face an onslaught of media coverage, local elections feature significantly fewer avenues of communication and significantly less coverage by sources of media.

Equally as important, **many millennials do not seek out the information that does exist**. They report having neither the time nor, in most cases, much interest in pursuing this information.

Millennials in the focus groups do not see the process of voting as a major barrier, though it's worth noting these were all drop-off voters who voted in the last national election so may not represent all millennials. They had recommendations for simplifying the process but reported few issues with registering to vote, knowing their precinct location or obtaining a ballot.

"I watch a lot of news and I don't see stuff about local elections on the news. Yeah, I watch the news every morning, there's always something about the weather. I don't never see nothing about ... elections."

– Akron man

"I don't vote in [local elections], but I feel like I should or you know like I don't quite always know what's going on with the issues and the candidates."

– Philadelphia woman

"[I say I want to be] aware...I say that but then I don't really do the work to keep up with what's going on."

– Miami woman



TRUSTWORTHY INFORMATION

Millennials in the focus groups cited a **mistrust of media sources**—both traditional and social—and find them to be partisan, distorted or irrelevant.

Millennials convey a near total **lack of information sources they can trust to provide unfiltered, real information on local candidates and issues**. Without information, they are at a loss as to how to cast an educated vote so they don't bother.



"I feel like when you want to find out about the candidates like it's very biased. They only tell you the good things and then the opposing candidate will like completely trash everything."

– Miami woman

"It changed...it's not news. There's not enough unbiased information."

– Philadelphia woman

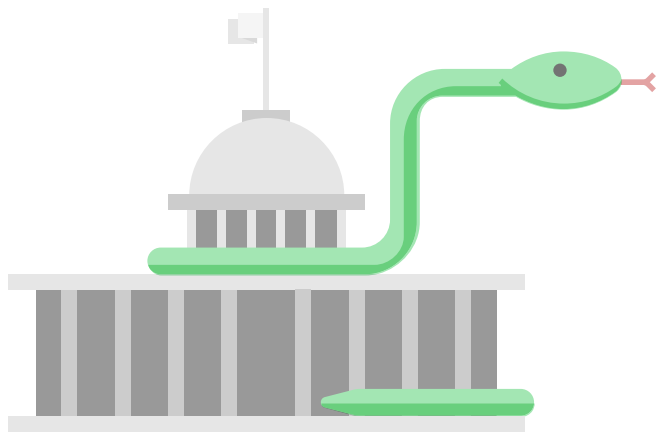
"There should be an unbiased third party that's separate from other parties. [Can you think of any unbiased third party right now?] I don't know."

– Miami woman

POOR UNDERSTANDING OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government is seen as distant and anonymous at best and corrupt at worst—not as a central part of what makes a city appealing and livable. Some millennials don't even know their mayor much less the names of other local officials.

Many are involved in charity, service or social activities in the community and see many needs and issues to address. They recognize that local government should be more connected to their daily lives but do not see the connection between local government and issues they care about. Thus, they are less likely to participate in local elections.



"I haven't really felt that local officials made any impact in my life, like day-to-day life, but I realize as I get older it may be getting important way to look into it."

– Akron man

"I mean even when we said you know the mayor, I didn't know who it was. I'd love to be more aware..."

– Miami woman

"...you have more control over your involvement in the community when it comes to like activism or volunteering. But when it comes to voting, I feel like it's all the same or you have two choices usually, essentially the lesser of two evils and so you go and you make your decision and then at the end of it you feel like is that really doing anything, is anything going to change, probably not."

– Akron woman

SOCIAL NORMS

Millennials are often **missing triggers to pay attention and participate in local elections**. They are surrounded by peers who themselves don't vote and feel voting is not important.

Those who express being deeply invested in their city and engaging in other ways besides voting often had these behaviors ingrained through their families when they were growing up.

Also, those born and raised in the city where they reside feel a stronger civic identity and are more likely to report a desire to be civically active than newcomers to cities who are unsure if they will remain in the community.



"I mean [my friends] totally lost trust. They don't care. They don't want any parts of it. They tell me I'm crazy for going to vote. For some reason I still do it."

– Philadelphia man

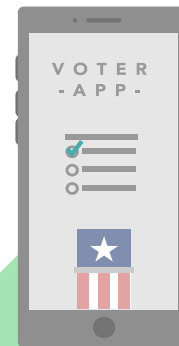
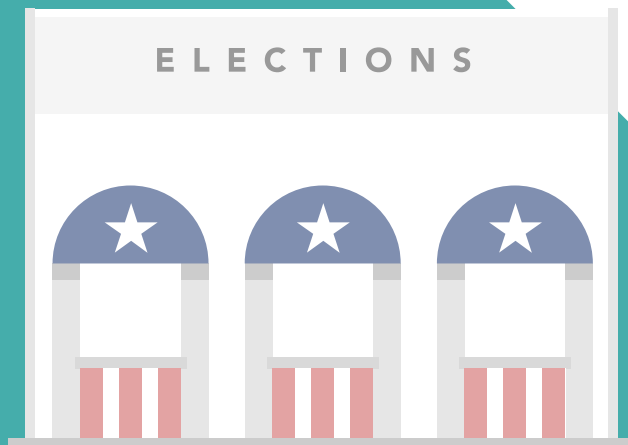
"When I turned 15 is when I was able to start volunteering finally. And it was just like a family thing because it's always been like [my mom] and me but it was also you know for the arts; for the community."

– Miami woman

"I was raised that way. My grandmother took me into the booth and taught me how to do it. My grandmother worked the polls so it's like...my mother's school was a poll waiting so I had to go straight downstairs to it. So I'm just sitting there observing everybody. And I just used to want to know about it."

– Philadelphia man

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS





WHAT MOTIVATES MILLENNIALS TO VOTE

Focus group participants were most motivated by messages **that were positive, elicited pride in their city and framed how voting could tangibly impact issues they find important**. They find it particularly powerful to include a list of the ways in which local government specifically plays a role in their everyday lives and how voting allows their voice to be heard.

In contrast, they were less motivated by messages that were negative and cynical, and are **especially tired of hearing that the system is “broken.”**

TOP-PERFORMING MESSAGES



Focus group participants were asked to rate the persuasiveness of several messages framing the value of local voting. The two messages below received the highest ratings.

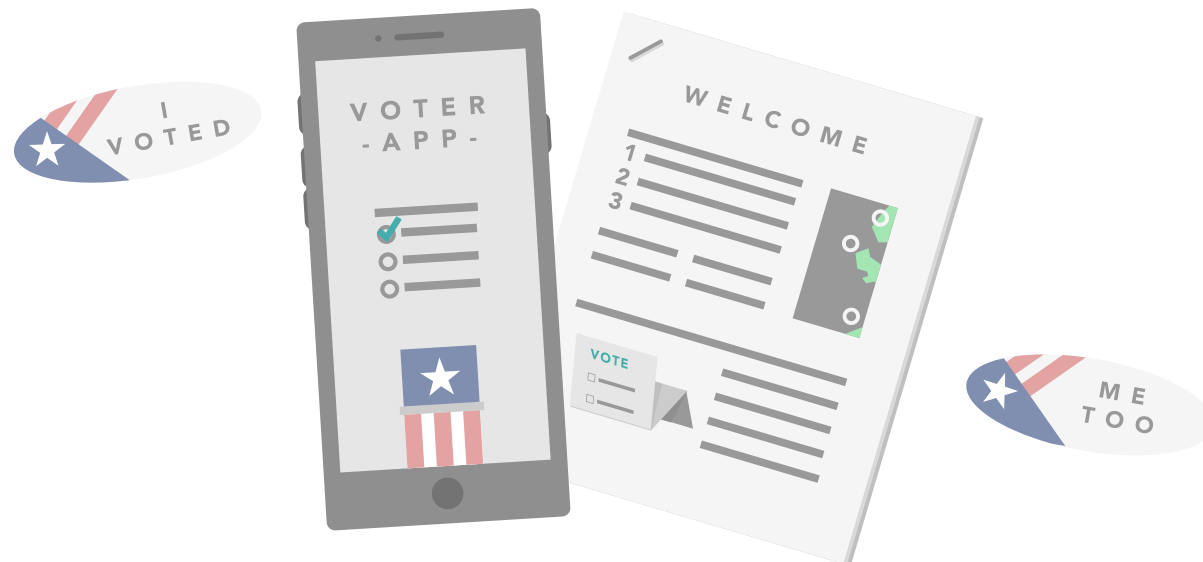
I used to think voting was a waste of time and that politics didn't affect me all that much, **but government policies affect my everyday life**. The taxes taken out of my paycheck, the interest rates I pay on my student loans and the health care benefits I get from my employer are determined by politicians. And police departments, libraries, schools, roads, bike paths and parks all fall under their local government jurisdiction. **Voting is a way for me** to have some *control* over the decisions that affect my life.

I care about this city, and I'm proud to call it my home. Voting is one of the most important ways I can embrace the opportunity to participate and show that I care about our **city's future**. As a resident here, *I root for the home teams*, I attend events in my community and try to make the most of our city's parks, activities and entertainment. **Voting is another important way** to show that I belong to this community and I'm part of making it better.

CONNECTING WITH MILLENNIAL VOTERS

Lake Research Partners outlined a few broad areas of exploration based on the findings for considering ways to advance millennial participation in local elections.

1. Millennials often decide to live in cities **because they want to participate in the recreational and cultural opportunities that exist**. These events could be utilized to inform and engage young voters.
2. They like the idea of a **welcome packet** for new residents that includes who the local elected officials are and when local elections are held.
3. **They are an incredibly digital generation** that would love a local voting smartphone application that provides basic information about local candidates and issues.
4. **Millennials often don't recognize elected leaders in their communities**. They do recognize celebrities with ties to their community who could potentially be visible as part of a voter registration and mobilization campaign.

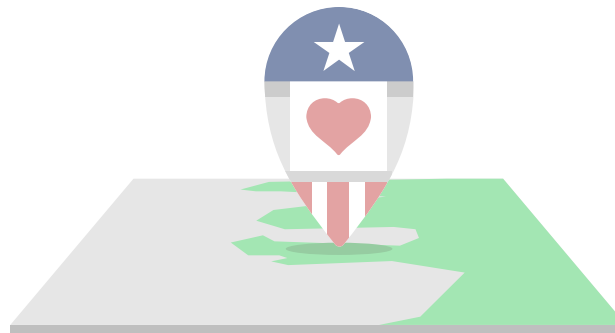


CONCLUSION

A large share of millennials who vote in national elections opt to bypass local elections. This research sheds more light about why and highlights ways to encourage greater civic engagement locally.

This research identifies that a key barrier to greater millennial participation in local elections is trustworthy information. But the research also shows that millennials are not actively seeking this information and it will be important to reach them through their existing social networks and community affiliations.

Recent studies have shown that Americans have higher levels of trust in local government than federal government. This may be true, but this research suggests millennials struggle with clearly understanding the roles served by local government. Demonstrating to millennials how local government affects their lives and its importance in addressing the issues they passionately care about in their community will be vital for encouraging them to vote in local elections.





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