



How do Americans view government workers?

Initial findings from the Perceptions of Public Servants survey series

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ABSTRACT

Negative stereotypes of government workers are widespread in media and public discourse, yet relatively little is known about the extent to which these stereotypes are held by the general American public, how they vary across groups, or how they relate to broader beliefs and interactions with government. This paper presents initial findings from *Perceptions of Public Servants*, an ongoing series of quarterly, nationally representative surveys and related survey experiments launched by The People Lab in December 2025 to track Americans' stereotypes about public sector employees across four dimensions: warmth, competence, integrity, and innovation.

Across four studies ($N = 3,765$), we find that most Americans hold broadly favorable views of public servants' warmth, competence, and integrity — yet consistently rate them more negatively than private sector workers on the same dimensions. Stereotypes are highly polarized by party affiliation and vary by respondent characteristics and experiences, such as prior government work experience and interactions with the public sector. We also document large variations in stereotypes across specific occupations (e.g., police officers vs. librarians), as well as the labels used to describe government workers (e.g., public servants vs. bureaucrats). Importantly, stereotypes — particularly those about integrity — are also strong predictors of trust in government, as well as two consequential and timely outcomes: interest in public sector careers and beliefs about broader government efficiency. Taken together, these initial findings have implications for public sector recruitment, institutional communication, and efforts to rebuild trust in government.

1. Introduction

For decades, popular discourse and media have depicted the government — and its workers — as lazy, slow, and wasteful (Goodsell, 2004; Goodsell, 2014; Lerman, 2019; Milward & Rainey, 1983; van de Walle, 2004). In more recent years, narratives in the US have often framed the government and its workers as not just inefficient but deceptive, self-serving, and corrupt — stereotypes that may be further entrenched by recent efforts to reshape the federal workforce. These stereotypes are more than a matter of image: negative portrayals of public servants may undermine service delivery, resident-government relations, trust in public institutions, and interest in public sector careers at a time when trust in government is already low. At the same time, discourse about the federal workforce has become increasingly politicized, raising the possibility that stereotypes about public servants are diverging even further along partisan lines.

Despite this — and despite extensive research on Americans' broader trust in and perceptions of government institutions — research on how Americans view the public sector employees who carry out the work of government remains limited. To address this gap, The People Lab launched *Perceptions of Public Servants* in December 2025, a series of online quarterly surveys and related survey experiments designed to track Americans' views of public sector workers and their work, what changes these beliefs, and how they relate to broader attitudes toward government and engagement with the public sector. This paper presents initial findings from the first two waves of quarterly surveys, conducted in December 2025 and March 2026, as well as results from two companion studies examining how perceptions of public sector workers compare to those of private sector workers, how stereotypes vary by occupation, and how the labels used to describe public servants shape the stereotypes they elicit.

Across these studies, we answer a series of key questions: (1) what stereotypes do Americans hold about government workers in the US, how do they change over time, and how do they vary by respondent characteristics? (2) how do these stereotypes vary across different types of public servants? (3) how are stereotypes linked to trust in government and policy-relevant beliefs including interest in public sector employment and views of government efficiency?

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 briefly describes existing research on stereotypes of public sector workers. Section 3 details the four studies included in this paper and our methodology. Section 4 presents descriptive findings on Americans' stereotypes about public sector workers and how they vary by respondent characteristics. Section 5 examines how stereotypes vary across different types of public servants. Section 6 explores the relationships between stereotypes, trust in government, and two key outcomes: career interest and beliefs about government efficiency. Section 7 discusses implications and directions for future research.

2. Background

Since 2007, the share of Americans who say they trust the federal government to do what is right always or most of the time has never been higher than 30% — and has hovered at or below 20% for much of the last decade (Pew Research Center, 2025). Trust in specific public sector institutions is similarly low: recent data suggest fewer than one-third of Americans have high confidence in institutions including Congress, the Supreme Court, public schools, or the criminal justice system (Gallup, 2025a). At the same time, views appear to be increasingly partisan, with sizable gaps between Democrats and Republicans when it comes to how favorably they view federal agencies including the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Department of Education, and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS).

A growing body of research examines not just how citizens view the government and its institutions, but also the public sector employees who staff them — including how stereotypes about these workers differ across cultural and institutional contexts. Studies find that some respondents associate government workers with negative traits — such as laziness, greed, and corruption — while many others associate them with positive ones, including being caring, helpful, and dedicated (Willems, 2020; Neo et al., 2024). Respondents also commonly associate public sector workers with more neutral characteristics, such as "high job security", "boring", and "going home on time" — though these may speak more to the perceived culture and constraints of government work than characteristics of the workers themselves.

A nascent evidence base also documents the drivers and consequences of these stereotypes. Some research suggests experience working for government, media exposure, and institutional trust are all linked to how favorably citizens view public sector workers (Bertram et al., 2022; Szydłowski & Charbonneau, 2025), though none of these studies track how stereotypes evolve over time. Meanwhile, experimental studies on the consequences of negative stereotypes have found that activating negative stereotypes of public servants lowers citizens' satisfaction with public services (Bertram et al., 2024) and trust in administrative institutions more broadly (Hansen, 2022). Jakobsen & Homberg (2025) provide evidence from the UK that negative stereotypes about public sector workers are associated with lower interest in public sector careers. McCrea et al. (2025) further show that perceptions of both public servants and the services they deliver are sensitive to the language used to describe public workers: "public servants" elicit more trust and satisfaction than "bureaucrats", for instance.

We extend this literature at a critical moment in time in the United States context, when the roles of both governmental institutions and public sector employees are being questioned. Through *Perceptions of Public Servants*, we seek to develop an evidence base on how Americans' views of public sector workers change over time, what descriptively and causally drives these views, and how they relate to policy-relevant behaviors (e.g., interest in public service), as well as what interventions can causally reduce negative stereotypes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview of studies

We report findings from four nationally representative surveys conducted between December 2025 and March 2026 (Table 1).

Studies 1 and 2 measure Americans' stereotypes of public sector employees, and two related but distinct concepts: (1) trust in government writ-large, measured at both the federal and local level using items that assess competence, benevolence, and integrity (adapted from Grimmelikhuisen & Knies, 2017); and (2) views of public sector jobs including beliefs about pay, stability, and growth opportunities, using items developed for these studies. We also measure public sector career interest (operationalized as the share of respondents who report they are 'somewhat' or 'very' interested in working in the public sector in the next five years) as well as views of government efficiency (operationalized as the share of every tax dollar respondents believe is wasted).

In Study 3, we compare stereotypes across six groups: Americans, private sector employees, public sector employees (as in Studies 1 and 2), government employees, public servants, and bureaucrats. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of these six groups, and then asked a 16-item stereotype scale. In addition, respondents were asked to describe the first person who comes to mind for their assigned group (e.g., private sector employee, public servant, etc.) and report that imagined person's race, gender, social status, and party affiliation. We then examined the variation in trait and demographic stereotypes across these groups.

Table 1. Overview of Perceptions of Public Servants studies

| STUDY* | TIMEFRAME | N | SAMPLE | PURPOSE |
|---------|---------------|-------|--|--|
| Study 1 | December 2025 | 1,767 | Nationally representative sample recruited via Prolific and CloudResearch Connect. | Establishing baseline measures of public servant stereotypes across four dimensions, alongside beliefs about public sector jobs, career interest, institutional trust, and perceptions of government efficiency and waste. |
| Study 2 | March 2026 | 1,680 | Nationally representative sample recruited via Prolific and CloudResearch Connect, including $N = 1,076$ return respondents from Study 1. | Tracking changes in stereotypes and related beliefs over time by re-administering the Study 1 survey. |
| Study 3 | March 2026 | 1,318 | Nationally representative sample recruited via Prolific and CloudResearch Connect, excluding those who participated in Study 1 or Study 2. | Measuring how stereotypes differ between broad groups including typical Americans, private sector employees, public sector employees and other labels, e.g., bureaucrats. |
| Study 4 | March 2026 | 1,317 | Nationally representative sample recruited via Prolific and CloudResearch Connect who had participated in Study 1 or Study 2. | Measuring how stereotypes differ between specific types of public sector employees, including firefighters, librarians, police officers, and ICE agents. |

* All studies pre-registered on OSF (see osf.io/ezxvf)

In Study 4, we compare stereotypes across eight specific public sector occupations: firefighters, librarians, postal workers, election officials, police officers, Transportation Security Administration (TSA) agents, IRS employees, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of these eight groups, after which they were asked our standard 16-item stereotype scale.

All surveys also collected standard demographic information, respondents' party affiliation, prior public sector work experience, and self-reported attention to politics. Studies 1 and 2 additionally included measures of recent civic and government engagement — for example whether respondents voted in the most recent national elections, have donated money to political organizations, or applied for government programs, services, or benefits.

3.2 Stereotype measures

We use a 16-item, four-dimensional scale to measure respondents' stereotypes of public sector employees (or other target groups) across four dimensions — **warmth** (e.g., friendliness, sincerity), **competence** (e.g., reliability, laziness), **integrity** (e.g., honesty, ethics), and **innovation** (e.g., willingness to take risks). For each dimension, we construct a mean-index that is measured on a scale from 1 (very unfavorable) to 7 (very favorable).

To develop this scale, we conducted a series of four pilot studies using online samples recruited through Prolific and CloudResearch Connect. Initial pilots combined two approaches: (1) a deductive approach that drew from the literature (e.g., de Boer, 2020; Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2017; Neo et al., 2024; Willems, 2020) to assess respondents' views of public sector employees along a variety of attributes commonly used by scholars to measure stereotypes; and (2) an inductive, respondent-driven approach that captured the attributes most typically associated with public sector employees. We narrowed the resulting list of candidate items through an exploratory factor analysis that identified underlying latent factors, as well as by examining individual items' distributions. This process yielded the four dimensions included in our final surveys. The final set of measures is included in Appendix A.

3.3 Analytic approach

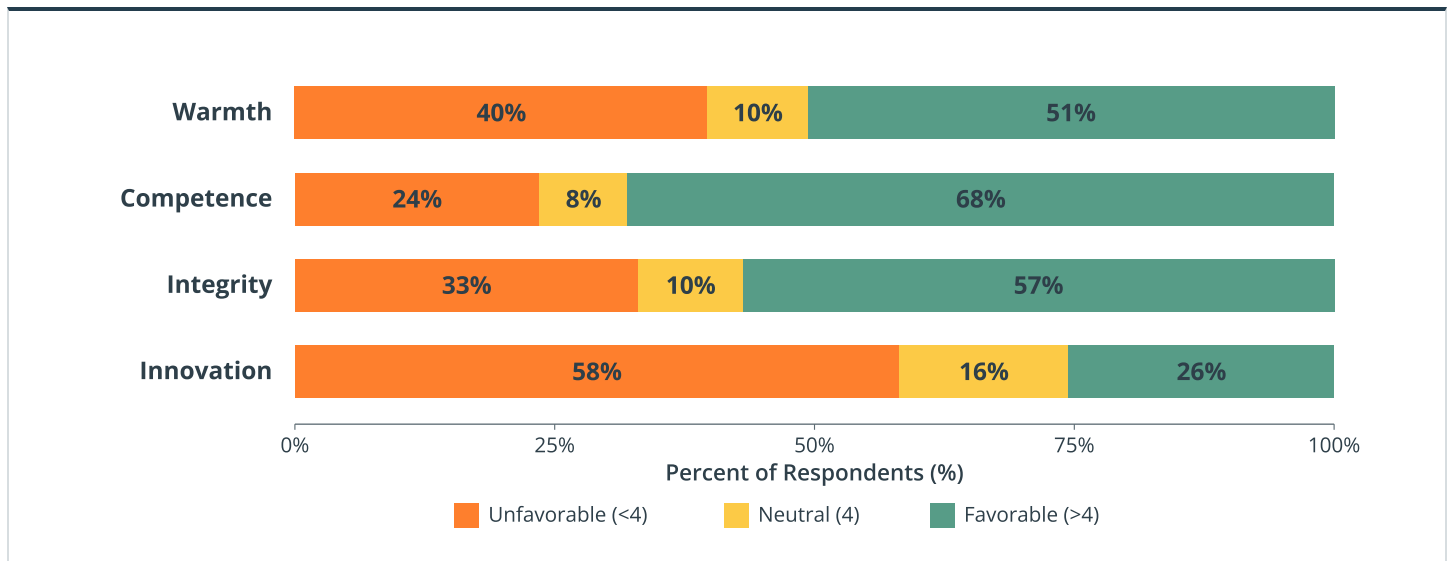
Unless otherwise noted, all analyses reported in this paper were conducted using linear regression models that control for age, gender, political party affiliation, education, employment status, income level, prior public sector work experience, use of government benefits, attention to politics, and the order of survey questions. In all analyses and across studies, final responses are weighted to be nationally representative by gender, race, ethnicity, age, and party affiliation, with population benchmarks constructed from the American Community Survey 1-year estimates.

4. What are Americans' stereotypes of public sector workers?

Most Americans view public sector workers favorably.

To examine respondents' overall impressions of public sector workers, we categorize respondents' views along each of our four stereotype dimensions as unfavorable (mean of less than 4 on a 7-point scale), neutral (mean of 4), or favorable (mean of more than 4). Consistent with prior surveys (e.g., Partnership for Public Service, 2025), we find that most Americans hold favorable views of public sector employees on three of the four stereotype dimensions (Figure 1). In our most recent quarterly survey (Study 2, March 2026), for example, 68% of respondents held favorable views of public sector employees' competence — outnumbering those with unfavorable views by more than two-to-one. Majorities of respondents also view public sector employees favorably along the integrity (57%) and warmth (51%) dimensions. In contrast, only about a quarter of respondents (26%) view public sector employees as innovative — potentially reflecting rhetoric that government is slow-moving and resistant to change. This skepticism about public sector innovation is also borne out in our measures of Americans' beliefs about public sector jobs: while public sector jobs are widely seen as offering strong benefits and job stability, fewer than one-in-five respondents believe they offer meaningful opportunities for discretion (16%) or creativity (11%).

Figure 1. Most Americans hold favorable views of public sector workers' warmth, competence, and integrity.



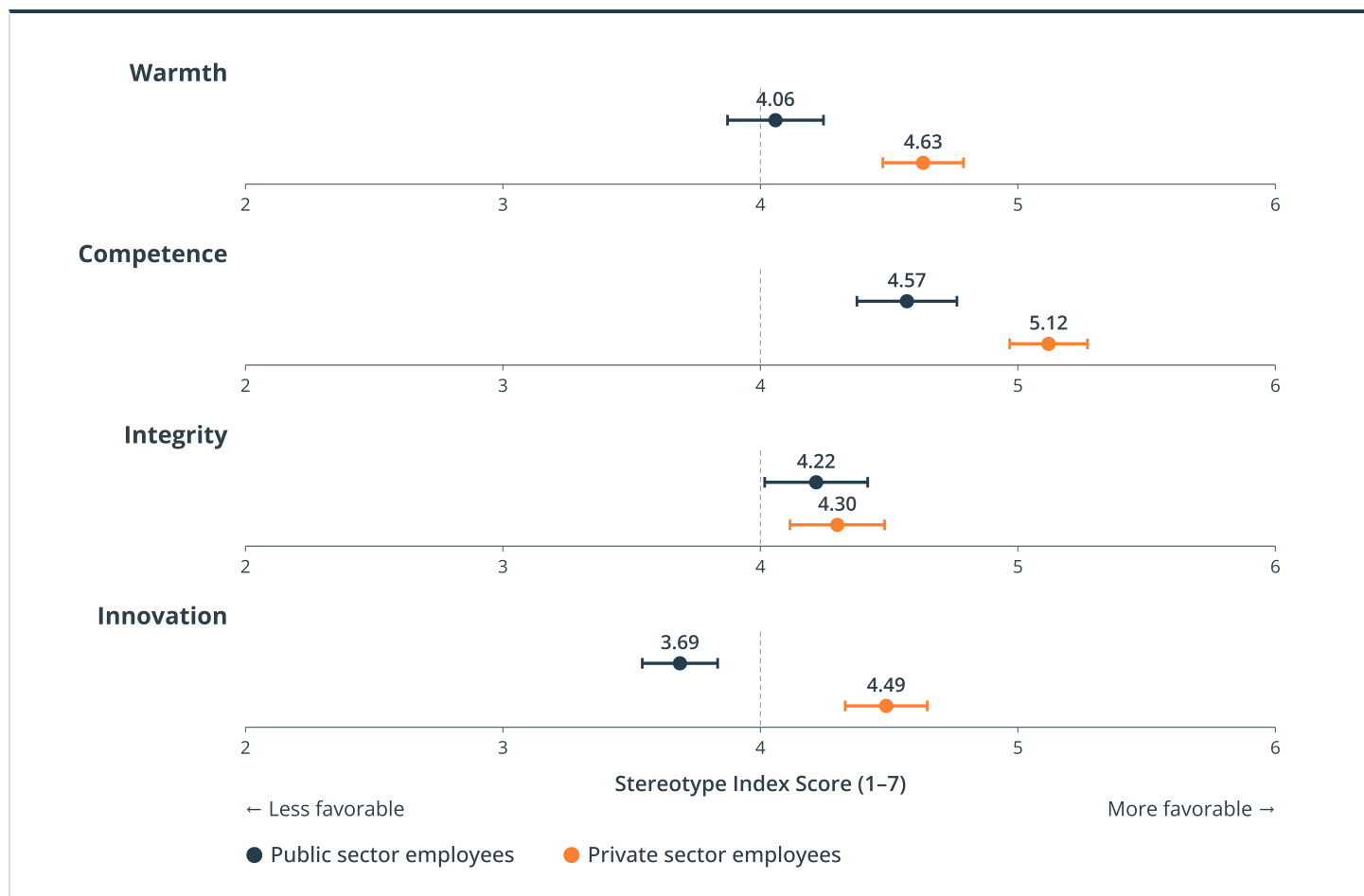
Notes. Estimated proportions of Americans with favorable (>4), neutral (4), or unfavorable (<4) views of public sector employees along each stereotype dimension. Each stereotype dimension is measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates the least favorable view and 7 indicates the most favorable view. Percentages displayed within stacked bars may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding. $N = 1,680$ respondents, Study 2, March 2026.

Initial evidence suggests that, on average, these stereotypes are largely stable across time, at least in the short-term. Between December 2025 (Study 1) and March 2026 (Study 2), respondents' views remained remarkably consistent across warmth (mean of 4.21 on a 7-point scale in December vs. 4.20 in March), competence (4.73 vs. 4.75), and integrity (4.40 vs. 4.39) dimensions. Stereotypes of public sector employees' innovation, however, decreased significantly in this same timeframe (3.57 vs. 3.47, $p = 0.01$) — though this difference is small in magnitude.

Yet public sector workers aren't seen as favorably as their private sector counterparts.

Consistent with our quarterly survey results, in Study 3 we again find that majorities of respondents view public sector employees favorably on all stereotype dimensions other than innovation (i.e., warmth, competence, integrity). But we also document that Americans' stereotypes of public sector workers look somewhat less favorable when benchmarked against perceptions of private sector employees (Figure 2). While there is no significant difference in overall perceptions of public and private sector employees' integrity (4.22 vs. 4.30, $p = 0.55$), private sector workers are perceived as significantly more warm (4.63 for private sector workers vs. 4.06 for public sector workers, $p < 0.01$), competent (5.12 vs. 4.57, $p < 0.01$), and innovative (4.49 vs. 3.69, $p < 0.01$). The gap in stereotypes of innovation is particularly large, which is consistent with the prevailing views of government as slow-moving relative to the private sector.

Figure 2. Americans rate public sector workers lower than their private sector counterparts.



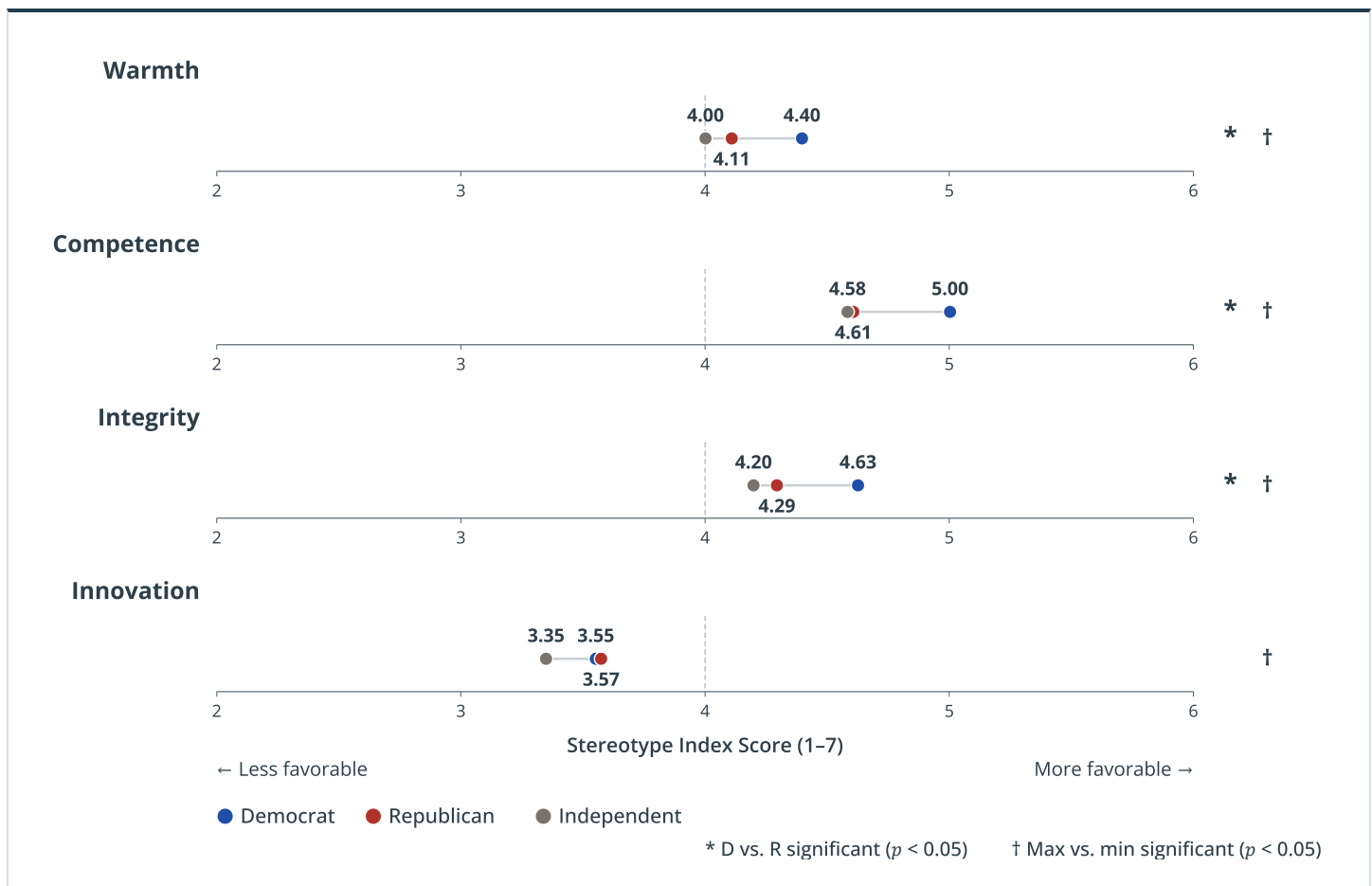
Notes. Regression-adjusted means of each stereotype dimension for public and private sector employees. Means are derived from separate linear models of each dimension on the experimentally assigned target group (public or private sector employees), controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, party affiliation, and public sector work experience. Each stereotype dimension is measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates the least favorable view and 7 indicates the most favorable view. For readability, figure x-axes are truncated to show values from 2 to 6. Dashed vertical lines mark the scale midpoint of 4.0, representing a neutral view on each corresponding 7-point scale. $N = 432$ respondents, Study 3, March 2026.

Democrats tend to hold more positive views of public sector workers than Republicans and Independents.

Party affiliation is among the strongest and most consistent predictors of stereotypes about public sector workers: Republicans and Independents view public sector workers less favorably than Democrats across the warmth, competence, and integrity dimensions (Figure 3, all statistically significant with $p < 0.05$). Republicans and Democrats have similar views of public servants' innovation, while Independents hold even more negative views.

From December 2025 to March 2026, Democrats' views of public sector employees declined slightly across all four dimensions, while Republicans' views remained the same or even became slightly more positive. This leads to a somewhat smaller gap in stereotypes between Democrats and Republicans in the second wave, compared to the first — though none of these changes are statistically significant and all are very small in magnitude (< 0.12 on the 7-point scale). Nonetheless, this points to early dynamics that are worth monitoring in subsequent waves.

Figure 3. Democrats view public sector workers more favorably than Republicans and Independents.



Notes. Regression-adjusted means of public sector stereotypes along each stereotype dimension. Means are derived from separate linear models of each dimension on respondents' party affiliation, controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, and public sector work experience. Each stereotype dimension is measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates the least favorable view and 7 indicates the most favorable view. For readability, figure x-axes are truncated to show values from 2 to 6. Dashed vertical lines mark the scale midpoint of 4.0, representing a neutral view on each corresponding 7-point scale. $N = 1,680$ respondents, Study 2, March 2026.

Partisan differences are also evident in how the public-private gap varies by party (see Appendix Figure B1). Both Democrats and Republicans rate private sector workers as warmer and more competent than public sector workers, but the gaps are significantly larger among Republicans. For warmth, for instance, the public-private gap is

0.91 points among Republicans but only 0.10 points among Democrats ($p < 0.01$). Independents likewise exhibit larger gaps than Democrats, viewing public sector employees less favorably than private sector employees across warmth, competence, integrity, and innovation.

Meanwhile, the parties diverge sharply on views of integrity: Democrats actually rate public sector employees more favorably than their private sector counterparts (4.55 for public sector employees vs. 4.04 for private sector employees, $p = 0.02$), while Republicans continue to view private sector workers as having more integrity (4.11 vs. 4.71, $p = 0.01$).

Stereotypes also vary by other characteristics and experiences.

While party affiliation is the clearest and most consistent predictor of stereotypes across our surveys, we also see differences across demographic groups and by respondents' experiences engaging with government — sometimes only slightly smaller than the partisan differences (see Appendix Figures B2 and B3). Respondents with public sector work experience and those who closely follow politics or donate to civic causes tend to view public sector employees more favorably, while those who have recently applied for government benefits, licenses, or visited a government agency hold more negative views — suggesting that experiences of administrative burden may dampen perceptions. Racial differences are also notable, with Asian and Black respondents rating public sector employees as less warm than White respondents, though Black respondents view them as more innovative.

In contrast to the differences by party described above, the gap in views of public versus private sector employees is also largely consistent across most respondent characteristics, though public sector bias appears somewhat smaller among those with higher trust in both federal and local government, as well as those with public sector work experience (see Appendix Figure B1).

5. How do stereotypes vary across different types of public sector workers?

Americans' views of public sector workers vary widely depending on the type of worker — especially across party lines.

In Study 4, we find that Americans' perceptions of public sector workers vary considerably across different occupations — overall and especially by party (Figure 4). While Democrats, Republicans, and Independents alike tend to view firefighters favorably, there is large variation in stereotypes of other professions. In particular, Democrats' and Republicans' views diverge sharply for election officials, police officers, and especially ICE agents. For example, compared to Republicans, Democrats view election officials as significantly more competent (5.56 among Democrats vs. 4.48 among Republicans, $p < 0.01$) and as having higher integrity (5.36 vs. 3.98, $p < 0.01$). Conversely, Democrats hold far less favorable views of police officers than Republicans along both of these dimensions (competence: 4.24 among Democrats vs. 5.49 among Republicans, $p < 0.01$; integrity: 3.50 vs. 4.94, $p < 0.01$). Perhaps reflecting recent events, the largest partisan differences are in perceptions of ICE agents, whom Democrats view significantly more negatively than any other group. In fact, fewer than one-in-four Democrats rate ICE agents favorably for competence, and fewer than one-in-fourteen rate them favorably for warmth or integrity.

These partisan gaps are only part of the story — there are also considerable differences in variation across occupations within party. For instance, while Republicans view the warmth, competence, and integrity of police officers, TSA agents, and ICE agents relatively similarly, Democrats' views of these groups differ meaningfully, with TSA agents seen the most favorably, and ICE agents seen the least favorably.

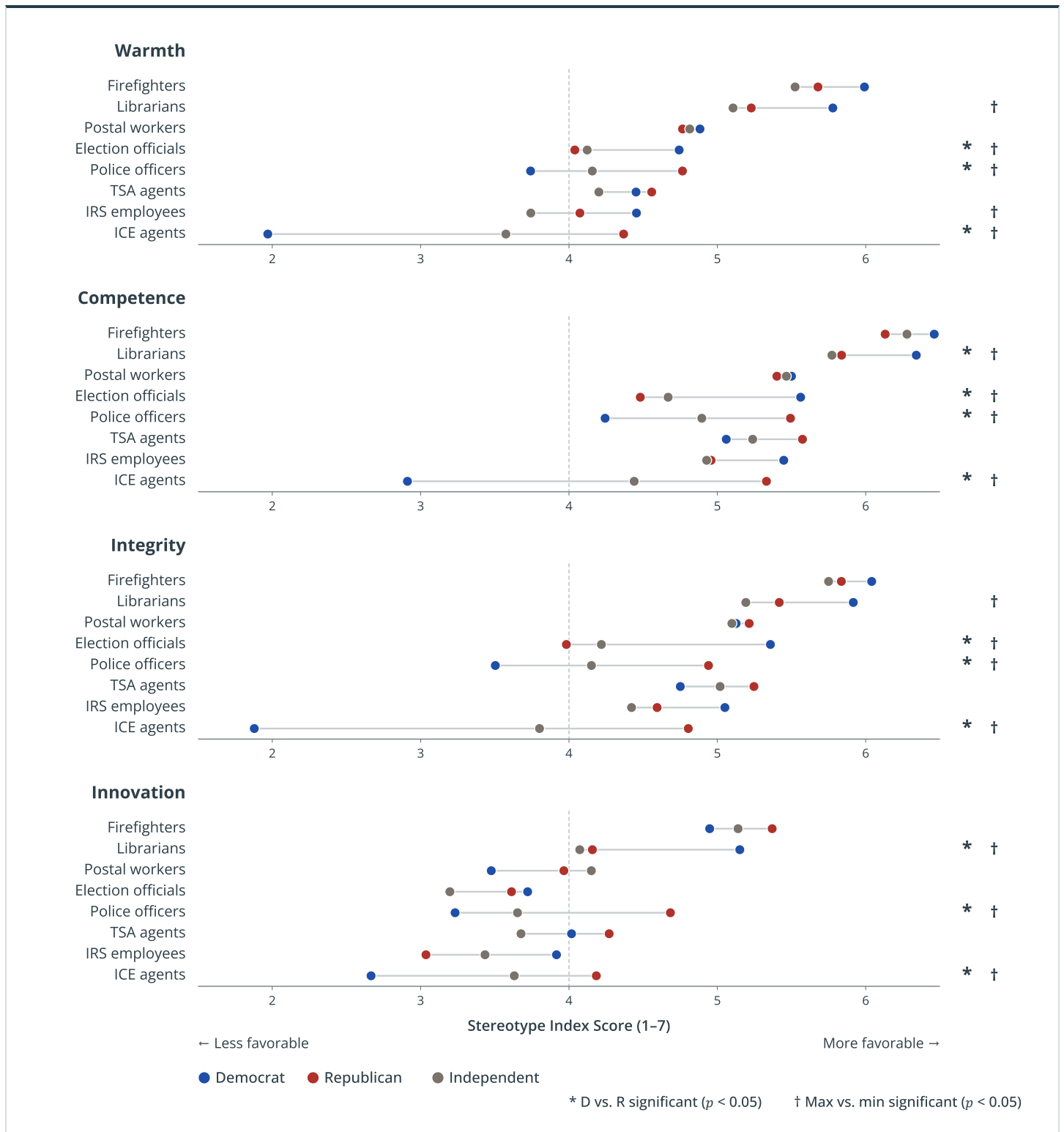
"Public Servant" or "Bureaucrat"? Labels shape stereotypes.

Not only do Americans' stereotypes of public sector workers differ by occupation, but in Study 3 we also find substantial variation by the label used to describe public servants (e.g., bureaucrat, government employee). As shown in Figure 5, public servants are viewed much more favorably than bureaucrats. There is 1.29-point gap between the two groups when it comes to stereotypes of integrity (4.37 for public servants vs. 3.08 for bureaucrats, $p < 0.01$) — more than 50% larger than the largest gap between public and private sector employee stereotypes discussed above. While the gaps are smaller, it's notable that there are also still clear differences in stereotypes of public sector employees and government employees.

These labels also seem to shape beliefs about who public servants are: compared to those described as public servants, workers labeled as bureaucrats are more likely to be imagined as White (58% for public servants vs. 74% for bureaucrats, $p < 0.01$), male (63% vs. 75%, $p = 0.10$), and lower in prestige or social status¹ (27% vs. 48%, $p < 0.01$). Bureaucrats are also less likely to be seen as belonging to the same political party as the respondent themselves (38% for public servants vs. 25% for bureaucrats, $p = 0.04$). Interestingly, this last finding appears to be stronger for Democrats: while Republicans are somewhat more likely to associate public servants than bureaucrats with a fellow Republican (63% vs. 47%, $p = 0.21$), Democrats are more than twice as likely to associate public servants with a fellow Democrat than bureaucrats (51% vs. 20%, $p < 0.01$). By contrast, Independents are unlikely to associate either public servants (13%) or bureaucrats (12%) with fellow Independents.

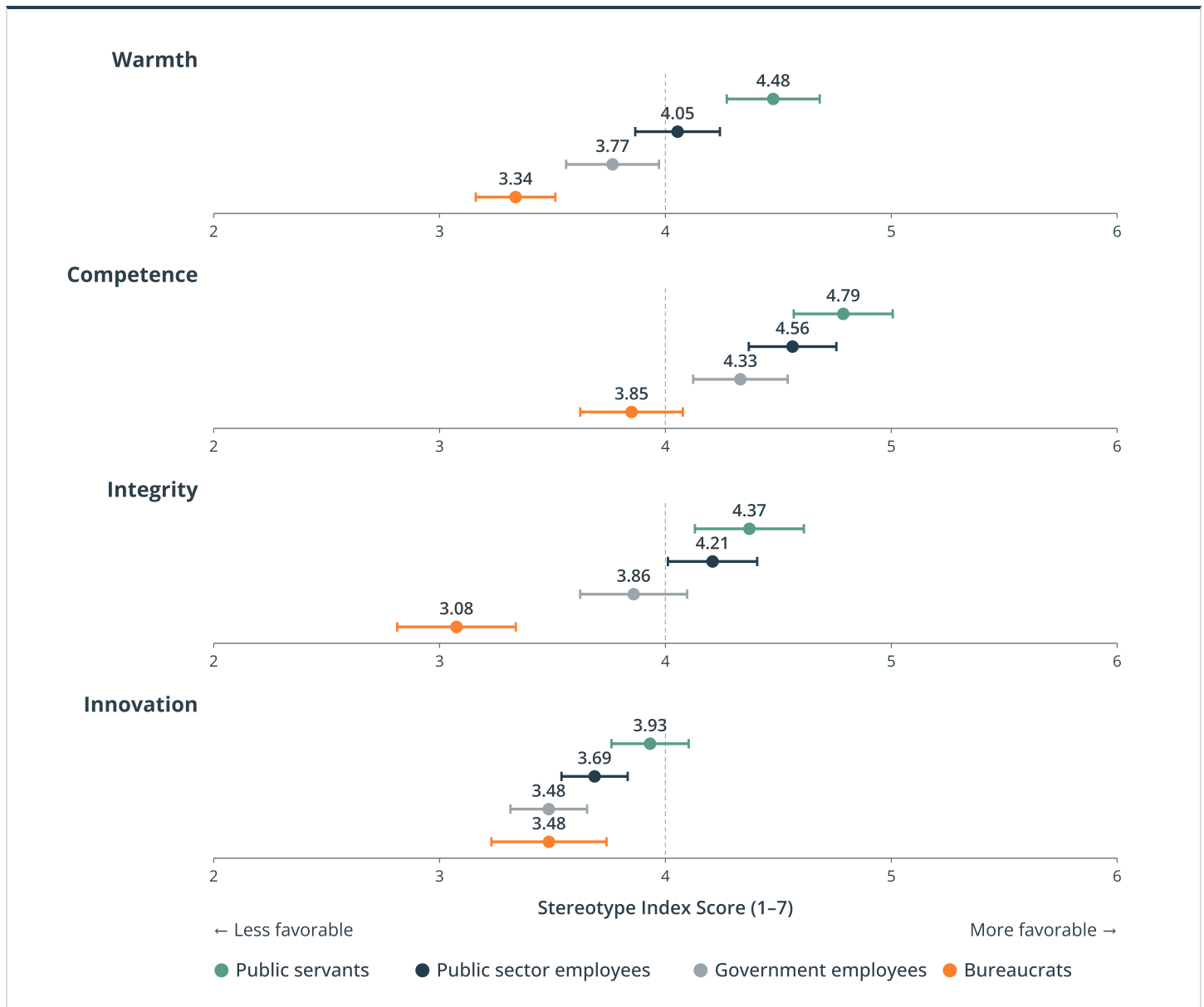
¹ Perceived prestige and social status is assessed using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler et al., 2000). We consider a worker to be rated low in prestige or social status if they are rated as a 3 or lower on the scale, where 1 represents the people who are worst off in society and 10 represents those who are the best off in society.

Figure 4. Democrats and Republicans diverge considerably in how they view certain public sector employees.²



Notes. Regression-adjusted means of each stereotype dimension by specific public sector occupations. Means are derived from separate linear models of each dimension on the experimentally assigned occupation group (Firefighters, Librarians, etc.), controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, party affiliation, and public sector work experience. Each stereotype dimension is measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates the least favorable view and 7 indicates the most favorable view. For readability, figure x-axes are truncated to show values from 1.5 to 6.5. Dashed vertical lines mark the scale midpoint of 4.0, representing a neutral view on each corresponding 7-point scale. $N = 1,317$ respondents, Study 4, March 2026.

Figure 5. Respondents view Bureaucrats far more negatively than Public Servants.



Notes. Regression-adjusted means of each stereotype dimension by different public servant labels. Means are derived from separate linear models of each dimension on the experimentally assigned label (Public servants, Public sector employees, etc.), controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, party affiliation, and public sector work experience. Each stereotype dimension is measured on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates the least favorable view and 7 indicates the most favorable view. For readability, figure x-axes are truncated to show values from 2 to 6. Dashed vertical lines mark the scale midpoint of 4.0, representing a neutral view on each corresponding 7-point scale. *N* = 877 respondents, Study 3, March 2026.

² Our quarterly surveys and other experiments measure innovation stereotypes using three items: 'innovative', 'willing to take risks', and 'risk-averse'. In our study comparing specific public sector occupations, we use only the 'innovative' item, as risk-related items may carry different meanings across occupational contexts (e.g., physical risk for Firefighters) in ways that distort the intended construct.

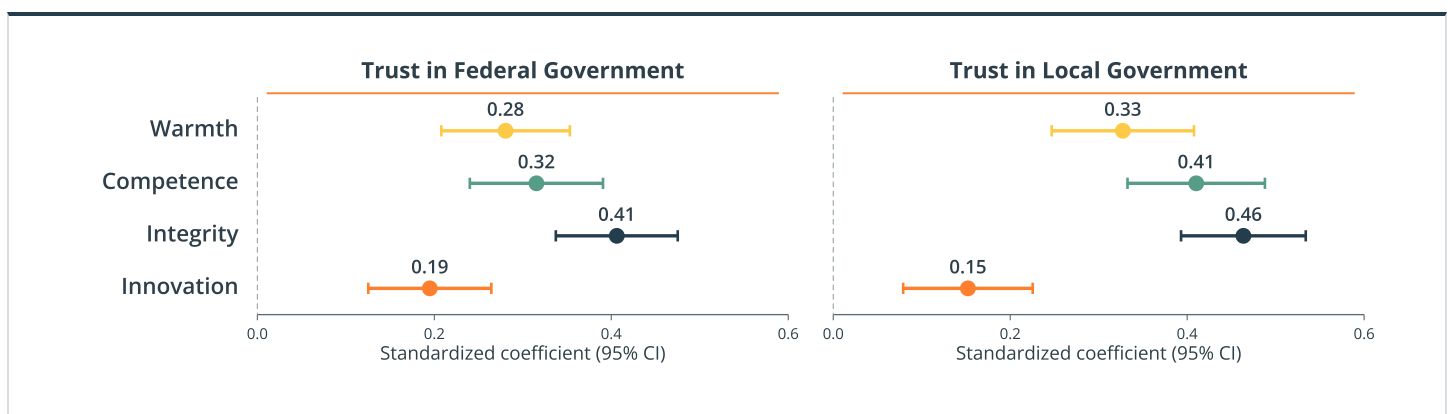
6. How do stereotypes shape views of government and interest in public sector careers?

Stereotypes of public sector workers are closely related to trust in government.

Similar to other large national surveys (e.g., Gallup, 2025b; Pew Research Center, 2025), we find that Americans have low levels of trust in the federal government. In our most recent pulse survey (Study 2), fewer than one-quarter of respondents (23%) rate the federal government as trustworthy, which we define as scoring above the neutral midpoint of 4 on a 7-point trust scale. By contrast, a majority (52%) rate their local government as trustworthy.

Across analyses, respondents' stereotypes of public sector workers emerge as some of the strongest predictors of this broader (mis)trust of government. Americans with more favorable views of public sector workers' traits — and especially their integrity and competence — report significantly higher trust in both the federal government and their local government (Figure 6). A one standard deviation increase in perceived integrity is associated with a 0.41 standard deviation increase in trust in the federal government, equal to roughly two-thirds of a point on our 7-point scale. The association is even stronger for local government: the same one standard deviation increase in perceived integrity is associated with a 0.46 standard deviation increase in trust (0.73 points on the 7-point scale). These relationships are somewhat stronger among Republicans, but remain significant across respondents of all political party affiliations.

Figure 6. Stereotypes about public sector employees' integrity, warmth, competence, and innovation strongly predict trust in both federal and local government.



Notes. Each panel shows the relationship between each stereotype dimension (standardized) and trust in government. The left panel reports associations with trust in the federal government; the right panel reports associations with trust in local government. Coefficients reflect the standardized change in government trust associated with a one standard deviation increase in stereotypes; bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients are from separate linear models that regress each outcome on each stereotype dimension, controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, party affiliation, and public sector work experience. $N = 1,680$ respondents, Study 2, March 2026.

The predictive importance of these stereotypes is striking, particularly given the link between stereotypes of public sector employees and broader trust in public sector institutions. Though it remains unclear whether government trust shapes views of public servants, or vice versa, we find evidence that the relationships may run both ways: when respondents are asked about government trust before the public servant stereotype questions in the survey, they subsequently rate public sector workers less favorably; and when asked about public servants first, they report higher trust in government.

Stereotypes about public sector workers — especially their integrity — strongly predict interest in public sector careers, above and beyond trust in government.

Our surveys suggest that interest in public sector careers may be falling. Between December 2025 and March 2026, the share of quarterly survey respondents 'somewhat' or 'very' interested in public sector work dropped by 4 pp — a decline of about 9% ($p = 0.06$). Yet this masks notable variation across groups (Figure 7). Drops in public sector career interest appear sharpest among Democrats (-8.7 pp, $p = 0.03$), female (-7.8 pp, $p < 0.01$), late career (-10.4 pp, $p < 0.01$), and especially Black respondents (-20.5 pp, $p < 0.01$). In contrast, interest appeared to increase over this same period among some other groups, including Hispanic respondents (+7.7 pp, $p = 0.16$), unemployed respondents (+1.7 pp, $p = 0.65$) and early career respondents (+1.2 pp, $p = 0.75$) — though these increases are not statistically significant.

Figure 7. Interest in public sector careers appears to be falling — particularly for Democrats, Black Americans, women, and late career respondents.

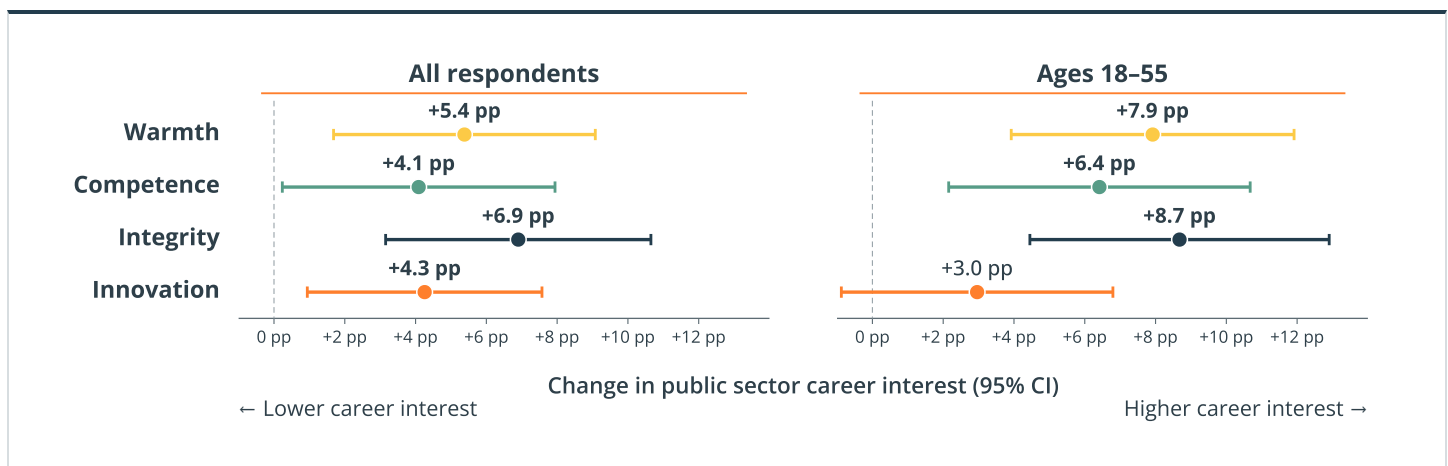


Notes. Estimated change in public sector career interest between December 2025 (Study 1) and March 2026 (Study 2), shown separately by subgroup. Means are derived from linear probability models of career interest on the interaction between a wave indicator and the corresponding subgroup indicator. Asterisks (*) indicate changes significantly different from zero at $p < .05$. $N = 2,359$ respondents, Study 1 and Study 2, December 2025–March 2026.

Amid these trends, we find that stereotypes of public sector employees are strong, consistent predictors of career interest — even after accounting for trust in government and beliefs about public sector jobs. Respondents with more positive stereotypes of public sector workers' warmth, competence, integrity, and innovation are significantly more likely to express interest in public sector careers (Figure 8). Integrity is especially predictive: a one standard deviation increase in how favorably respondents view public sector employees' integrity is associated with a 7 percentage point increase in career interest (about 20% relative to the overall interest rate of 35%).

These associations are even stronger among early early- and mid-career respondents (18-55 years old). Among these respondents, we find that warmth, competence, and integrity stereotypes consistently explain more of the predicted variation in public sector career interest than any respondent characteristic we examine, including political affiliation, race, and education, or other mindsets, such as trust in federal or local government and beliefs about public sector pay, stability, benefits, and opportunities for growth. Across specifications, integrity stereotypes explain between one-third and one-half (31–47%) of the predicted variance in public sector career interest; warmth stereotypes explain 28–44%; and competence stereotypes explain about 21–36%, respectively. Among other mindset measures, only respondents' beliefs about whether the public sector is the best place to "make an impact" rival the warmth, competence, and integrity stereotype dimensions as a predictor of career interest.

Figure 8. Stereotypes about public sector employees' integrity, warmth, and competence strongly predict public sector career interest.



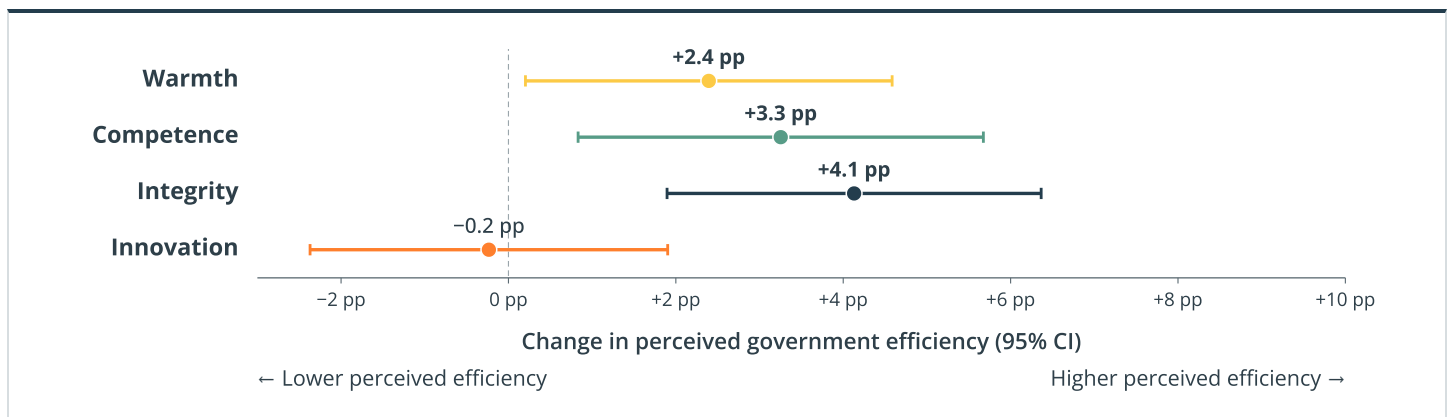
Notes. Figure shows the relationship between each stereotype dimension (standardized) and public sector career interest for all respondents (circular points) and respondents 18–55 years old (triangular points). Coefficients reflect the change in public sector career interest associated with a one standard deviation increase in stereotypes; bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients are from separate linear models that regress public sector career interest on each stereotype dimension, controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, party affiliation, public sector work experience, trust in federal and local government, and beliefs about public sector jobs. $N = 1,680$ respondents, Study 2, March 2026.

Stereotypes of public sector workers also help explain partisan differences in public sector career interest. In Study 2 (March 2026), we find that public sector career interest was 9 pp higher among Democrats than Republicans, even after controlling for trust in government and beliefs about public sector jobs. Accounting for integrity stereotypes shrinks this gap to 6 pp; accounting for warmth or competence shrinks it to about 7 pp. While innovation stereotypes are also a significant predictor of career interest, they do not differ meaningfully between Democrats and Republicans — so accounting for them in analyses does not explain a significant share of the partisan gap.

Beliefs about public servants' competence and integrity are closely related to beliefs about government efficiency — even after accounting for broader trust in government.

Recent efforts to restructure the federal government have thrust questions of government efficiency into the public spotlight. In Study 2 (March 2026), we find that beliefs about government efficiency — measured as the share of every tax dollar respondents believe is wasted — are closely tied to respondents' broader trust in the federal government. Yet stereotypes of public sector employees also strongly predict beliefs about government efficiency (Figure 9). Among the stereotype dimensions, integrity stereotypes are again the strongest predictor: after controlling for trust in government and beliefs about public sector jobs, a one standard deviation increase in perceptions of public servants' integrity is associated with a 4.1 pp increase in perceived government efficiency (about 7% relative to the overall perceived efficiency rate of 55%). This relationship is about half as large as the relationship between trust in the federal government and perceptions of government efficiency — but larger than those between perceived efficiency and any other mindset measure. More favorable warmth (2.4 pp) and competence (3.3 pp) stereotypes are likewise associated with significant, though smaller, increases in perceived efficiency. Notably, innovation stereotypes are not significantly associated with efficiency beliefs once broader trust in government and job beliefs are accounted for.

Figure 9. Stereotypes about public sector employees' integrity, warmth, and competence strongly predict perceptions of government efficiency.



Notes. Figure shows the relationship between each stereotype dimension (standardized) and perceived government efficiency. Coefficients reflect the change in perceived government efficiency associated with a one standard deviation increase in stereotypes; bars reflect 95% confidence intervals. Coefficients are from separate linear models that regress perceived government efficiency on each stereotype dimension, controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, party affiliation, public sector work experience, trust in federal and local government, and beliefs about public sector. $N = 1,680$ respondents, Study 2, March 2026.

Examining relationships between different predictors in separate models, we similarly find that trust in the federal government explains about 39–51% of the model's explained variance in perceived government efficiency, while integrity stereotypes explain about a quarter (26%) — about the same as trust in local government (22–30%), and more than any other demographic characteristic or mindset, including party affiliation, education, income, and beliefs about public sector jobs. Competence (17%) and warmth (15%) stereotypes are less dominant predictors than integrity and trust in government measures, but remain stronger than other demographic characteristics or mindsets.

As above, stereotypes also explain a portion of the partisan gap. Before accounting for any of the stereotype dimensions, Democrats rate the government as about 7.5 pp more efficient than Republicans. Accounting for integrity or competence stereotypes shrinks this gap to about 6 pp, while accounting for views of warmth reduces it to about 7 pp.

7. Policy Implications and Future Directions

As trust in government hovers near historic lows and public discourse increasingly frames government workers as inefficient or corrupt, understanding how Americans actually view public servants — and what drives those views — takes on added importance. Our results suggest the picture is more nuanced than prevailing narratives might imply: most Americans hold broadly favorable views of public servants' warmth, competence, and integrity, even as they rate them less favorably than private sector workers and express skepticism about their innovativeness. At the same time, stereotypes are highly polarized by party and vary considerably across occupations and the labels used to describe government workers. This underscores the importance of not treating public servants as a monolithic category in research and communications, and points toward the role of deliberate language choices on public perceptions and behavior.

Meanwhile, we find that stereotypes of public servants — especially their integrity — are strongly linked to broader trust in government, both federal and local. But even after accounting for trust in government, stereotypes remain significant predictors of two outcomes of practical importance: interest in public sector careers and beliefs about government efficiency. These findings are particularly notable given growing concerns about an aging federal workforce and declining interest in public sector careers, which we document over just a three month period — particularly among Black Americans, Democrats, and women. That stereotypes of public sector employees are predictive of these outcomes even while controlling for trust in government and other mindsets suggests that targeting perceptions of public servants may be a meaningful policy lever for improving recruitment and views of government.




Over the next several months, we will continue to track Americans' views of public sector workers through additional quarterly survey waves, examining whether — and for whom — stereotypes change over time and how those changes relate to broader shifts in career interest, trust in government, and other attitudes. Future work will also move beyond description to experimentally test what narratives, information, or other interventions can reduce negative stereotypes of public servants.

ABOUT TPL

The People Lab aims to empower the public sector by producing cutting-edge research on the people of government and the communities they serve. Using evidence from public management and insights from behavioral science, we study, design, and test strategies for solving urgent public sector challenges in three core areas: strengthening the government workforce; improving resident–government interactions; and reimagining the production and use of evidence.



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Stereotype Measures

Stereotype items: Participants were asked a series of stereotype measures, each measured on a 1 to 7 scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". All questions were presented in a random order.

Warmth items

- Public sector employees are rude
- Public sector employees are cold
- Public sector employees are friendly
- Public sector employees are sincere
- Public sector employees are inflexible

Competence items

- Public sector employees are competent
- Public sector employees are lazy
- Public sector employees are unreliable
- Public sector employees are responsible

Integrity items

- Public sector employees are honest
- Public sector employees are ethical
- Public sector employees treat everyone fairly
- Public sector employees act in the best interests of citizens

Innovation items

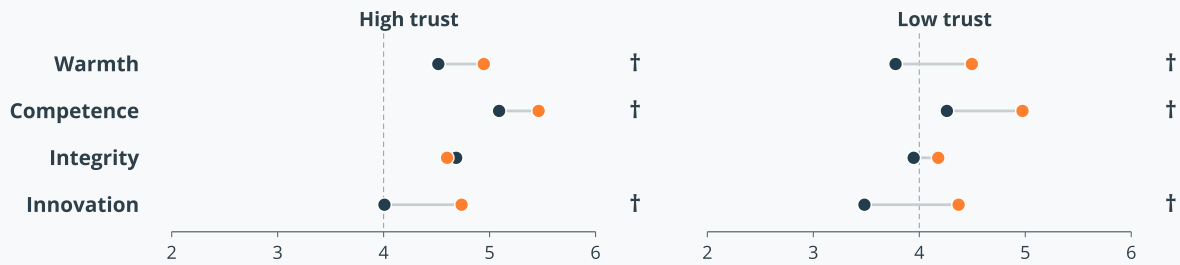
- Public sector employees are willing to take risks
- Public sector employees are risk-averse
- Public sector employees are innovative

Additional Figures

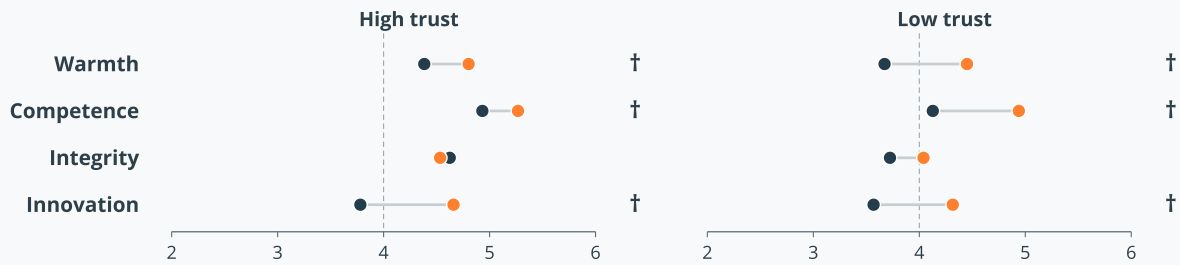
Figure B1. The public-private stereotype gap is largely consistent, but tends to be smaller for Democrats, those with public sector work experience, and those with higher trust in government.



TRUST IN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT



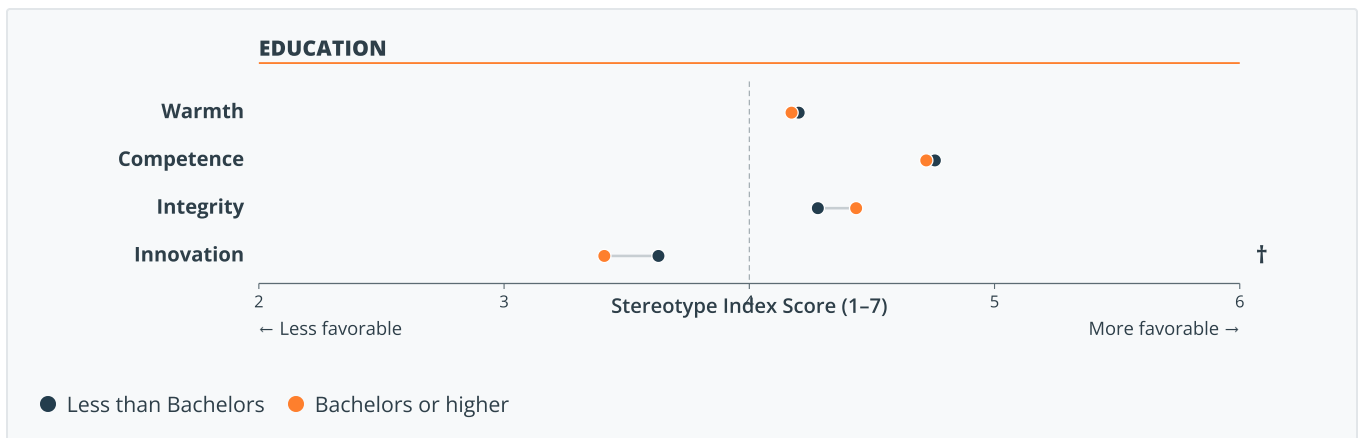
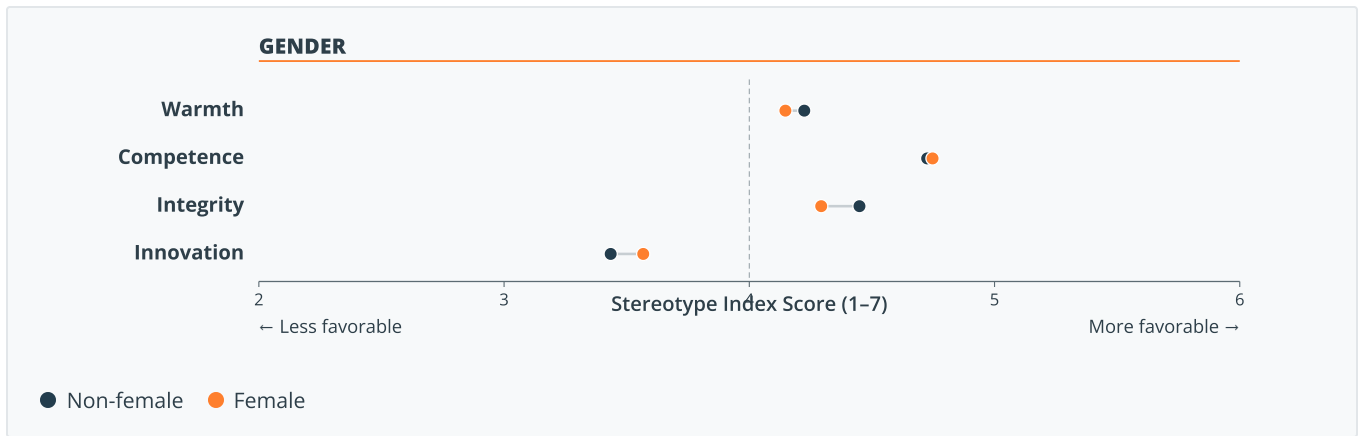
TRUST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

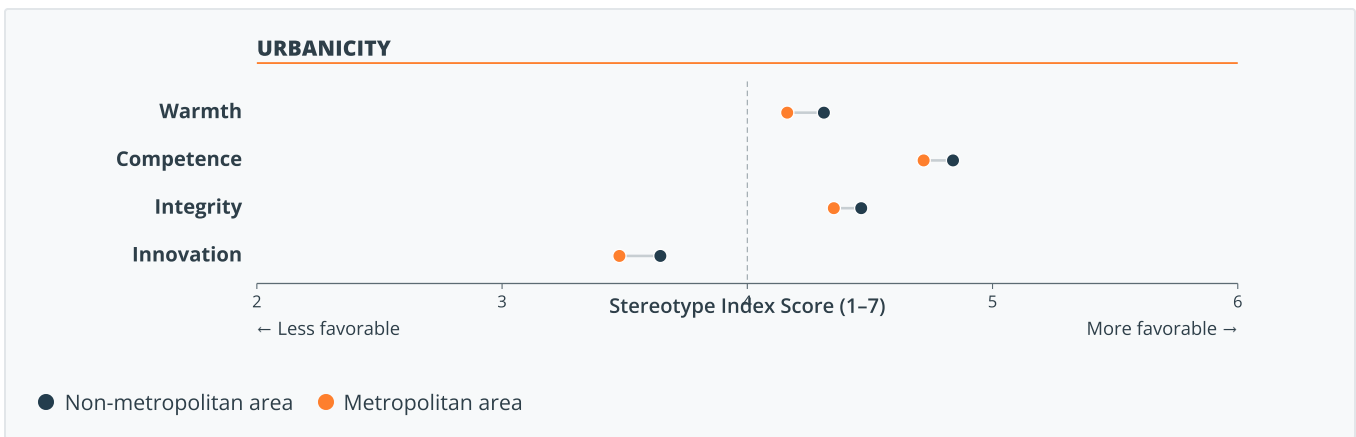
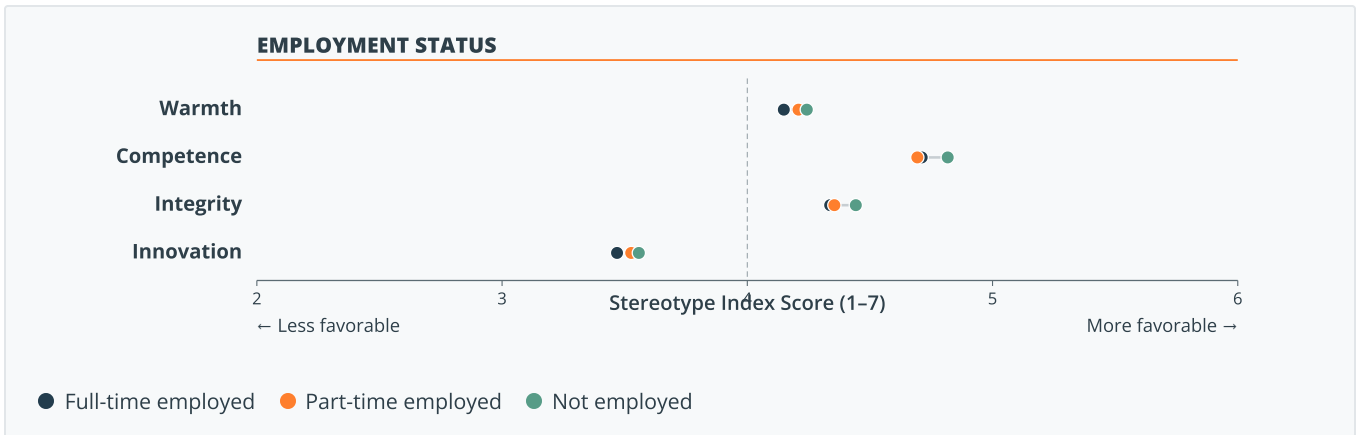
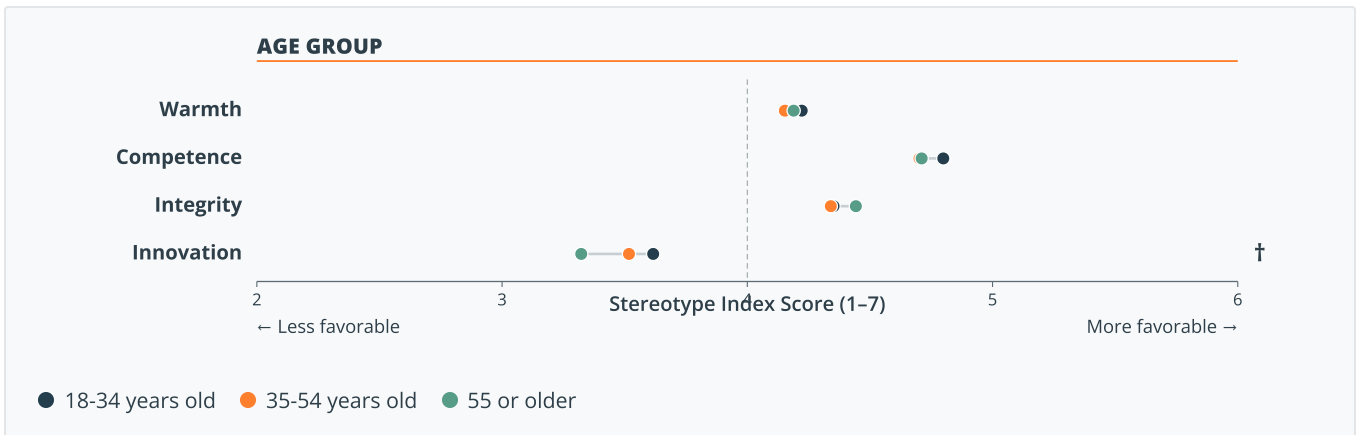


- Public sector employees ● Private sector employees
- † Public-private difference significant ($p < 0.05$) within that subgroup level.

Notes. Regression-adjusted means of each stereotype dimension for public and private sector employees, by subgroup. Means are derived from separate linear models of each dimension on the interaction between the experimentally assigned target group (public or private sector employees) and the corresponding subgroup indicator, controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, party affiliation, and public sector work experience. Respondents are classified as having high trust in federal or local government if they score that level of government above the neutral midpoint of 4 on the corresponding 7-point scale. Dashed lines represent the index midpoint of 4.0, which reflects neutral views. $N = 432$ respondents, Study 3, March 2026.

Figure B2. Views of public sector workers vary by demographic characteristics, sometimes significantly.

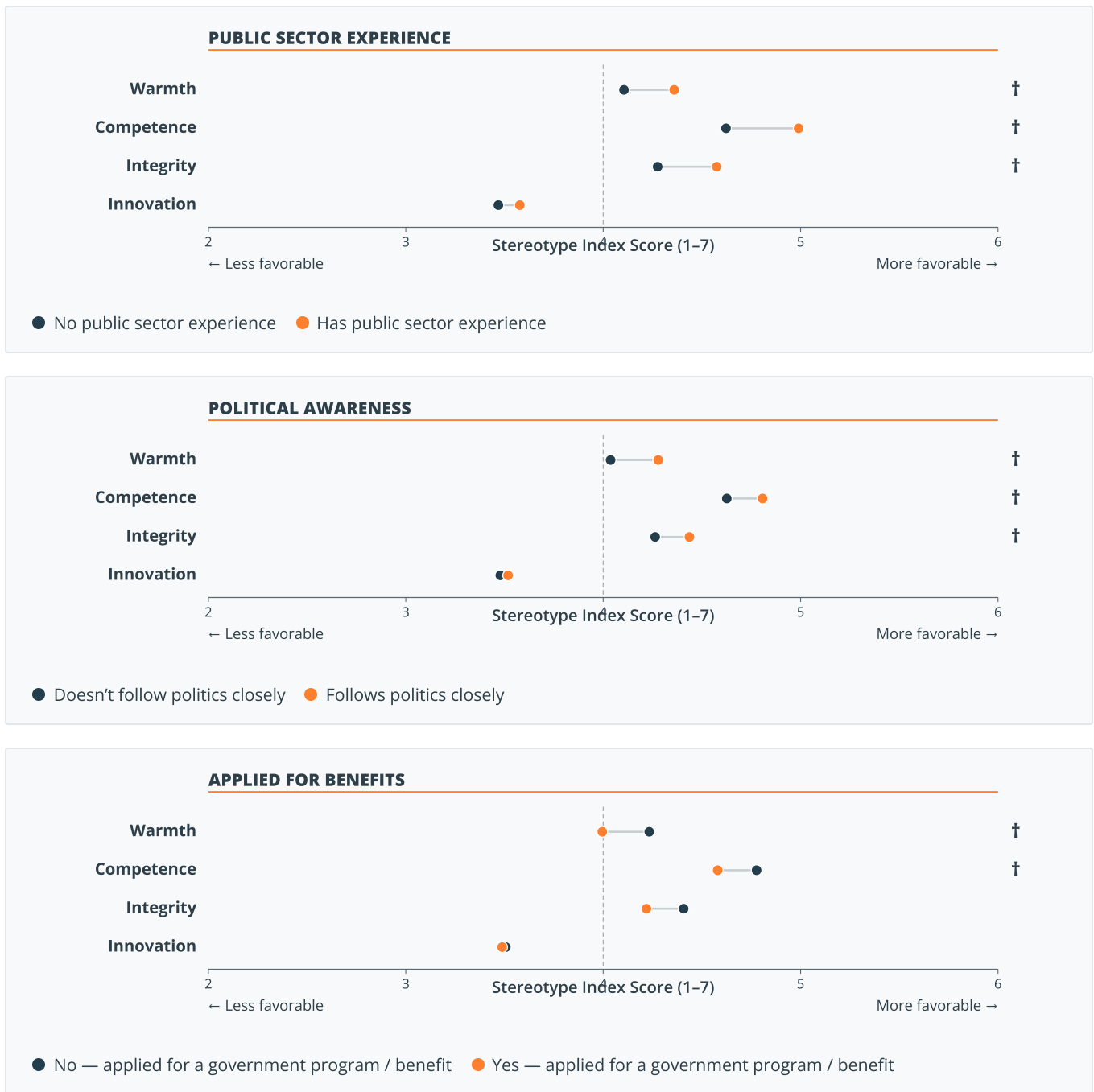




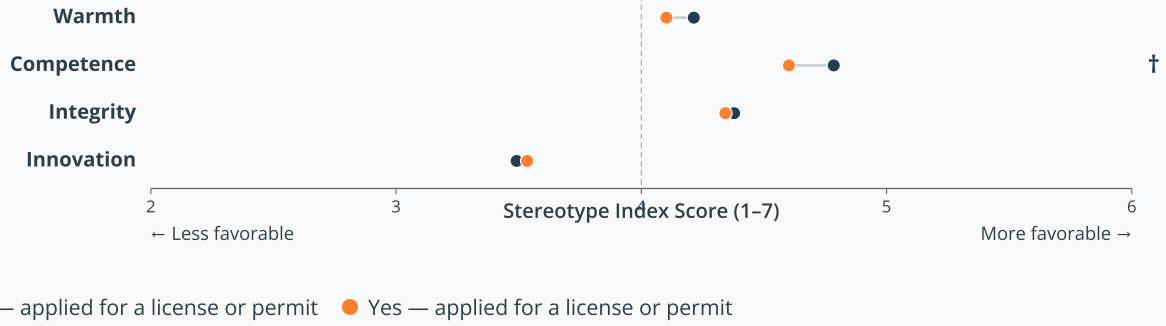
† Most vs. least favorable subgroup significantly different ($p < 0.05$).

Notes. Regression-adjusted means of public sector stereotypes along each stereotype dimension. Means in each panel are derived from separate linear models of each dimension on the group variable of interest, controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, political party affiliation, and public sector work experience. Dashed line represents the index midpoint of 4.0, which reflects neutral views. $N = 1,680$ respondents, Study 2, March 2026.

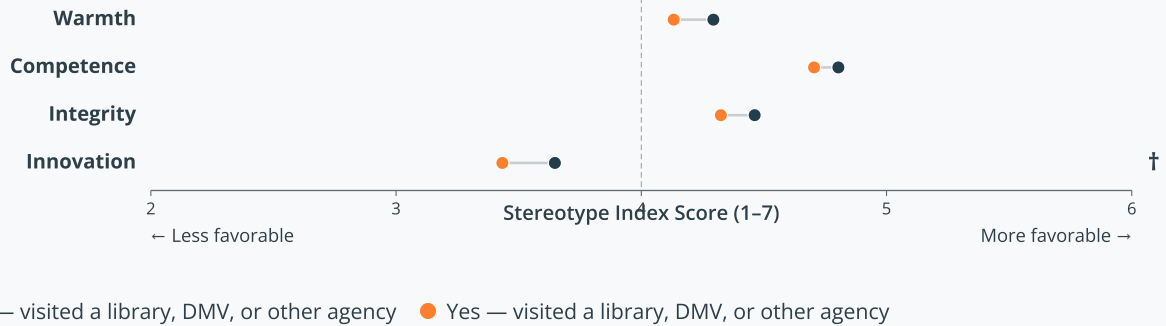
Figure B3. Views of public sector workers are related to respondents' interactions with government.



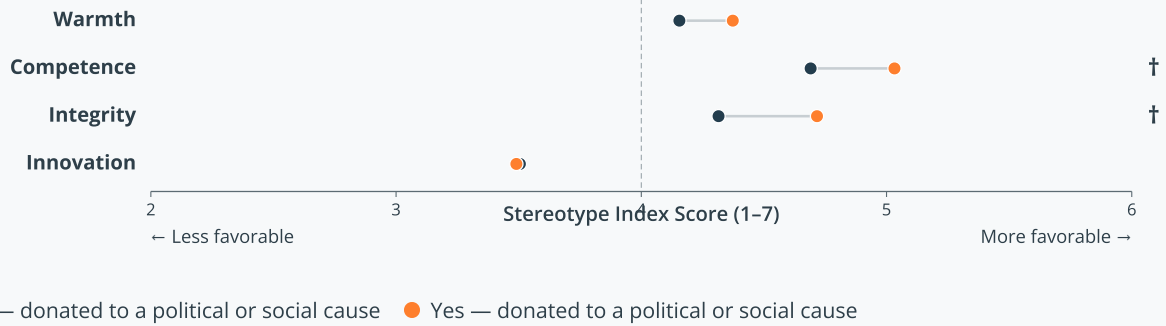
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† Most vs. least favorable subgroup significantly different ($p < 0.05$).

Notes. Regression-adjusted means of public sector stereotypes along each stereotype dimension. Means in each panel are derived from separate linear models of each dimension on the group variable of interest, controlling for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, income level, political party affiliation, and public sector work experience. Dashed line represents the index midpoint of 4.0, which reflects neutral views. $N = 1,680$ respondents, Study 2, March 2026.