

Government Communications and Public Affairs Study

Key Findings and Analysis
April 2023



Project Overview

Schoen Cooperman Research surveyed communications professionals employed by government entities and government-associated private sector organizations in October and November, 2022. The purpose of the research is to inform a broader communications strategy for increasing public trust in the government’s messaging as well as improving communications between government and private-sector practitioners.

Respondents were reached using email lists provided by NAGC, Ragan Communications, and GW/GSPM Students & Alumni. The poll’s sampling criteria is described in the table below.

Table 1. Sample Criteria	
Group	Employer
Government Communications Practitioners	➤ Government entity or agency
Private Sector Communications Practitioners	➤ Corporation engaging in government relations or public affairs ➤ Non-profit organization or organization engaged with or communicating with the government

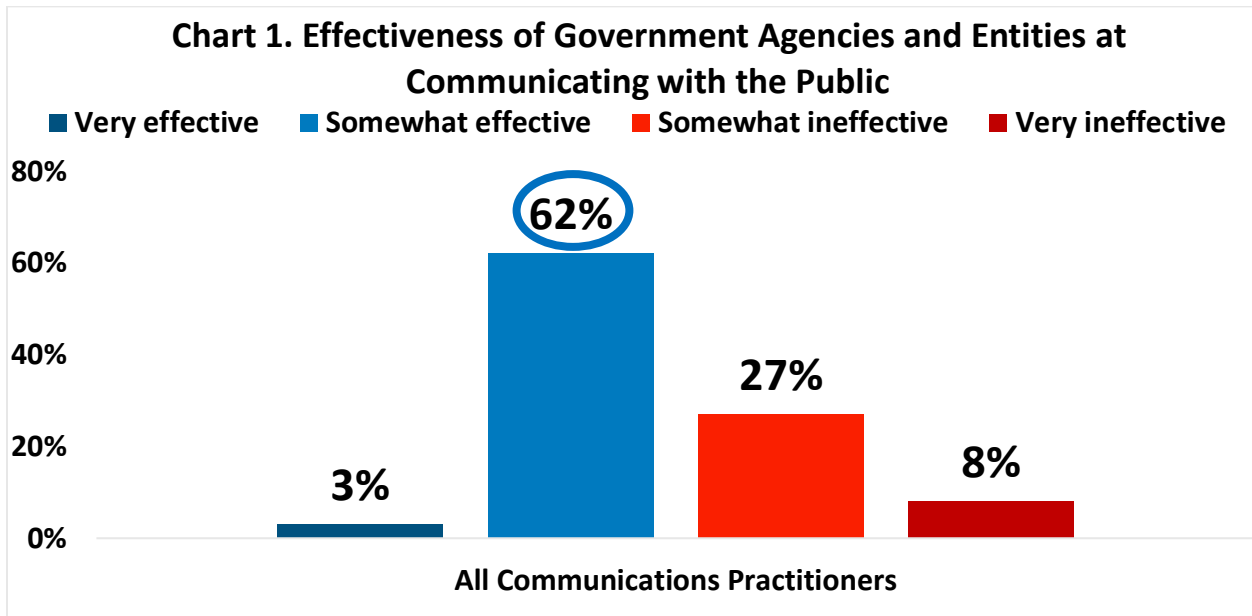
The following memo summarizes the poll’s key findings in terms of:

- Perceptions surrounding the effectiveness and trustworthiness of the government’s messaging to the public
- Communications challenges facing professionals, specifically for:
 - Government Practitioners in their messaging to the public
 - Government Practitioners and Private Sector Practitioners in interorganizational communications
- How to improve the government’s messaging to the public
- How to improve interorganizational communications
- Most important skillsets for communications professionals

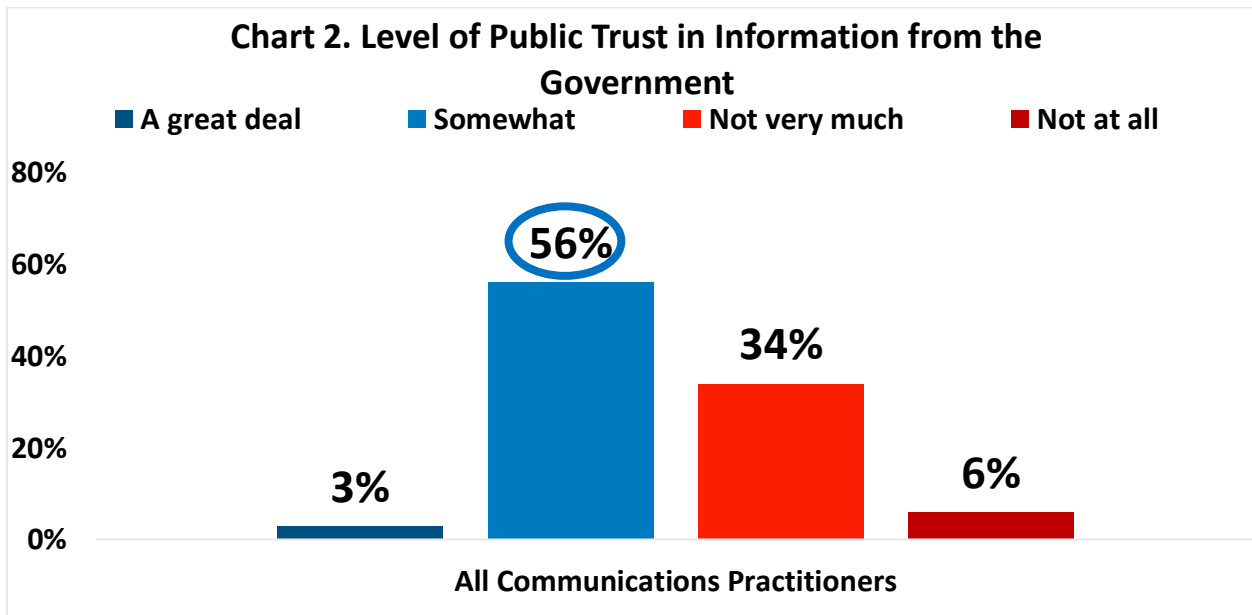
Effectiveness & Trustworthiness of Government's Messaging

All Communications Practitioners (Overall Sample)

The poll's overall sample of communications practitioners considers the government to be just **somewhat effective** when it comes to **messaging to the public**.



Accordingly, and to a lesser degree, the communications practitioners surveyed believe that **the public only somewhat trusts the government's information**.



Further, the overall sample of communications practitioners surveyed perceive the lack of public trust in government to be due largely to **external factors**, namely the **rise in disinformation**, and **views that the government is politically motivated**.

Table 2. Reasons for Lack of Public Trust in Government	
Reason	All Communications Practitioners
The rise in disinformation is harming public trust in government	68%
The government is viewed as being politically-motivated	58%
The “one-size-fits-all” approach that doesn’t account for regional, demographic and/or socioeconomic differences	31%
The government is too slow to share information	26%
The government’s approach is outdated	23%
The government lacks resources to effectively communicate	19%
The government has withheld information in the past	19%
The government has lied or provided inaccurate information in the past	14%
The government’s inability to effectively use social media to enhance communications	8%
The person delivering the message isn’t trustworthy	8%
The government can be deceptive	4%

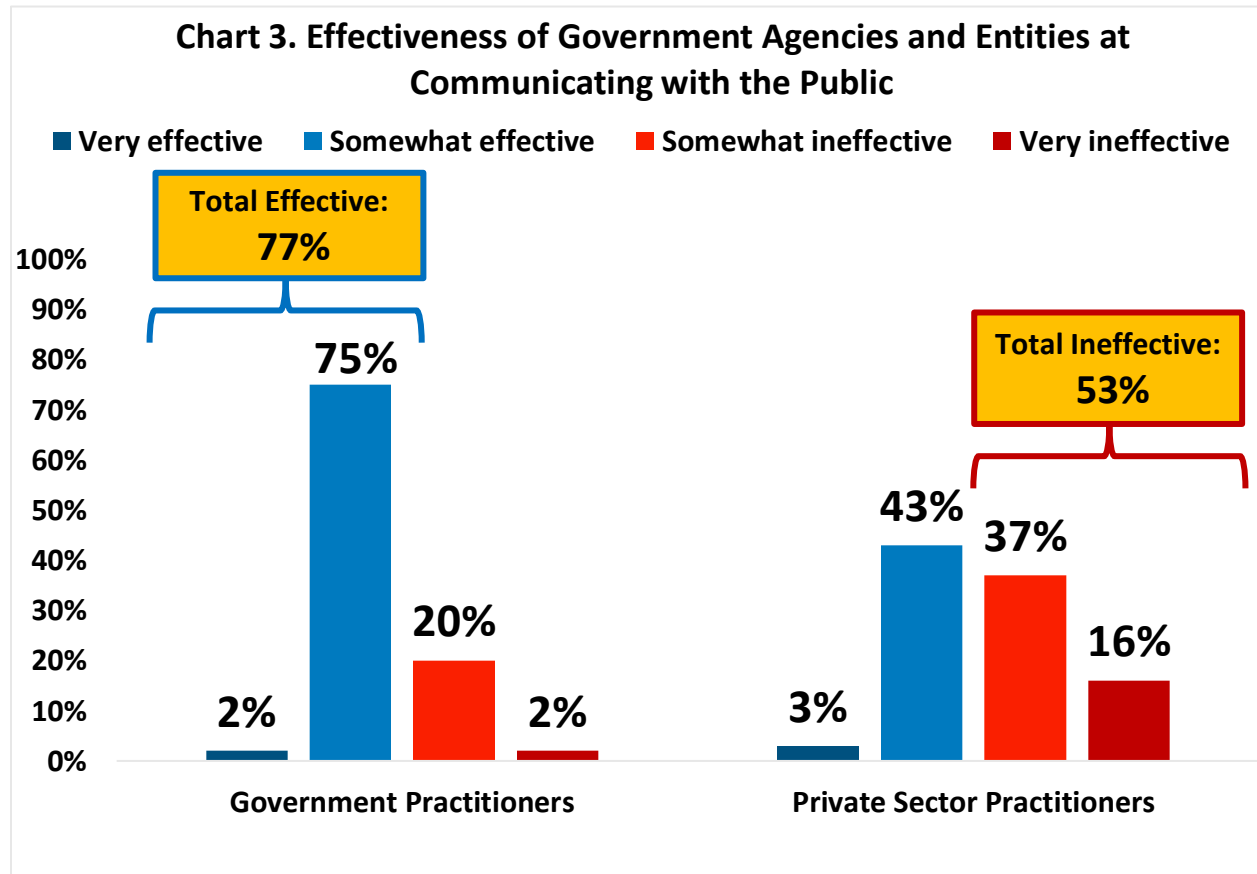
Indeed, the communications practitioners surveyed say that **hyperpolarization in politics is the main cause of the lack of trust in government**, rather than a bureaucratic and outdated approach.

Table 3. Reasons for Lack of Public Trust in Government: Trade-Off	
Reason	All Communications Practitioners
Hyperpolarization in politics, which limits officials from being able to communicate fair and balanced information	59%
A bureaucratic and outdated approach, which prevents government from getting information out quickly	36%

Government Practitioners vs. Private-Sector Practitioners

In terms of the perceived effectiveness and trustworthiness of the government's messaging, there is a **notable discrepancy** between the two groups surveyed.

Government Practitioners broadly view the government as effective at communicating with the public, but the majority of **Private Sector Practitioners view the government as ineffective.**



While both Government Practitioners and Private Sector Practitioners cite external factors as the primary reasons for the public’s lack of trust in government – i.e., the rise in disinformation – there is a **notable difference in terms of the secondary reasons** each group identifies.

Private Sector Practitioners are more likely to point to trust issues with the government vis-à-vis the government lying or withholding information in the past, while **Government Practitioners are more inclined to cite internal failures**, including the government’s slowness, outdated approach, and lack of resources.

Table 4. Reasons for Lack of Public Trust in Government			
Reason	All Comms Practitioners	Gov’t Practitioners	Private Sect. Practitioners
The rise in disinformation is harming public trust in government	68%	66%	72%
The government is viewed as being politically-motivated	58%	55%	62%
The “one-size-fits-all” approach that doesn’t account for regional, demographic and/or socioeconomic differences	31%	30%	33%
The government is too slow to share information	26%	29%	22%
The government’s approach is outdated	23%	28%	15%
The government lacks resources to effectively communicate	19%	28%	7%
The government has withheld information in the past	19%	17%	21%
The government has lied or provided inaccurate information in the past	14%	7%	24%
The government’s inability to effectively use social media to enhance communications	8%	7%	9%
The person delivering the message isn’t trustworthy	8%	7%	10%
The government can be deceptive	4%	4%	3%

Communications Challenges

The Government’s Communications with the Public

Our research finds that these external factors at the root of the lack of public trust in government are both caused and exacerbated by internal communications challenges in government entities & agencies, specifically an inability to target different groups and excessive bureaucracy, which leads to inefficiency, disorganization, and a slow sharing of information.

The table below summarizes how Government Practitioners perceive their organization’s messaging to the public in terms of strengths, weaknesses, and challenges.

Table 5. Assessment of the Government’s Public Messaging Among <u>Government Practitioners</u>	
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Sufficient resources & strong talent ➤ Effective use of social media ➤ Communicating honest information
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Internal organizational issues ➤ Failure to message to target groups ➤ Slow and inefficient
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Inability to target different groups ➤ Too much internal bureaucracy ➤ Difficult to overcome disinformation
Solutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Hiring & training talent ➤ Restructuring to eliminate bureaucratic hurdles ➤ Tailoring messaging to reach target groups

Interorganizational Communications

Notably, **these internal challenges – bureaucracy, inefficiency, disorganization, and slowness – are also prevalent in interorganizational communications** between government agencies & entities and government-associated private sector organizations.

The table below summarizes how Government Practitioners and Private Sector Practitioners view their communications with one another in terms of strengths, weaknesses, and challenges.

Table 6. Assessment of Interorganizational Communications		
Category	Government Practitioners	Private Sector Practitioners
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Strong interpersonal relationships with the private sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Sufficient resources and strong talent both in the government and in their organization
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Slowness and inefficiency in their organization ➤ Internal organizational issues in their organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Slowness and inefficiency in the government ➤ Internal organizational issues both in government and their organization
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Struggling to overcome private sector’s prejudices about government and politicians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Too much bureaucracy in the government

Improving the Government’s Public Messaging

Based on these challenges, in order to equip government practitioners with the tools needed to improve their messaging to the public, our research indicates organizations should focus on:

1)	<u>Modernizing their approach to more effectively reach different groups of Americans</u> across socioeconomic and political lines, forgoing the “one-size-fits-all” model and undertaking a more robust effort to <u>utilize social media</u> , specifically <u>Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter</u>
2)	<u>Restructuring to reduce bureaucratic layers</u> between top-management and frontline employees in order to <u>foster a more consistent channel of communication with the public</u>
3)	<u>Devoting more resources to hiring and training talent</u> and <u>supporting continued education for professionals</u>
4)	<u>Ensuring that talent has the know-how to maneuver the obstacles associated with hyperpolarization and disinformation</u>

Accordingly, when asked how the government can increase public trust in their messaging, majorities of communications practitioners suggest refining strategies & tactics to reach different groups, devoting more resources to training communications staff, and improving internal processes so information is shared quickly & regularly.

Improvement	All Communications Practitioners
Refine strategies and tactics to more effectively reach different groups of Americans, rather than a “one-size-fits-all” approach	55%
Devote more resources to communications including hiring and/or supporting training for current staff	51%
Improve internal processes to share information with the public quickly and more regularly	51%
Undertake a more forceful effort to combat disinformation	47%
Promote reforms to enhance bipartisanship and decrease polarization	33%
Eliminate bureaucratic challenges	26%
Improve social media usage and presence	13%

To that end, vast majorities of Government Practitioners and Private Sector Practitioners believe that their employer should do more to support continued education for professionals.

Position	Government Practitioners	Private Sector Practitioners
[Employer] should do more to support continued education for professionals	84%	72%
[Employer] is doing enough as is	10%	10%

Improving Interorganizational Communications

Our research indicates that interorganizational communications – between government agencies & entities and government-associated private sector organizations – can also be improved if:

1)	Organizations work to <u>empower communications practitioners at all levels by supporting their continued education as well as training for new talent</u>
2)	In addition to bolstering education and training programs, organizations must also make an <u>explicit effort to weed out internal bureaucracy</u> and <u>examine their own internal processes</u> in order to <u>address the root causes of disorganization, slowness, and inefficiency.</u>

Most Important Skills for Communications Professionals

The two most important skillsets identified by communications professionals are written communications and interpersonal communications.

Skill	All Communications Practitioners
Written communications skills	71%
Interpersonal communications	57%
Professional speaking ability and experience	22%
Deep knowledge of government policy	21%
Social media knowledge	10%
Ability to plan and strategize	8%
Deep knowledge of politics	6%
Ability to target specific audiences	3%
Impartiality	1%

Thus, in order to both attract top-tier talent and produce communications practitioners who are equipped for the professional world, GSPM should tailor its programs to teach written and interpersonal communications, and promote the school's programs that teach these skills.

Methodology & Sample Composition

Schoen Cooperman Research surveyed 209 communications professionals employed by government entities and government-associated private sector organizations in November and December, 2022. Respondents were reached using email lists provided by NAGC, Ragan Communications, and GW/GSPM Students & Alumni.

Among the communications professionals interviewed, 59% work in a government entity or agency, while 41% work in the private sector. The breakout is below.

Government entity or agency	59%
Corporation/consulting firm engaging in government relations or public affairs	16%
Non-profit organization or organization engaged with/or communicating with the government (local, state or Federal)	25%

Looking specifically at the Government Communications Practitioners surveyed, 37% work for a federal agency, one-third work for a local / municipal agency, and 30% work for a state agency.

GOVERNMENT COMMS PRACTITIONERS EMPLOYMENT:

Federal government agency	37%
State government agency	30%
Local/municipal government agency	33%