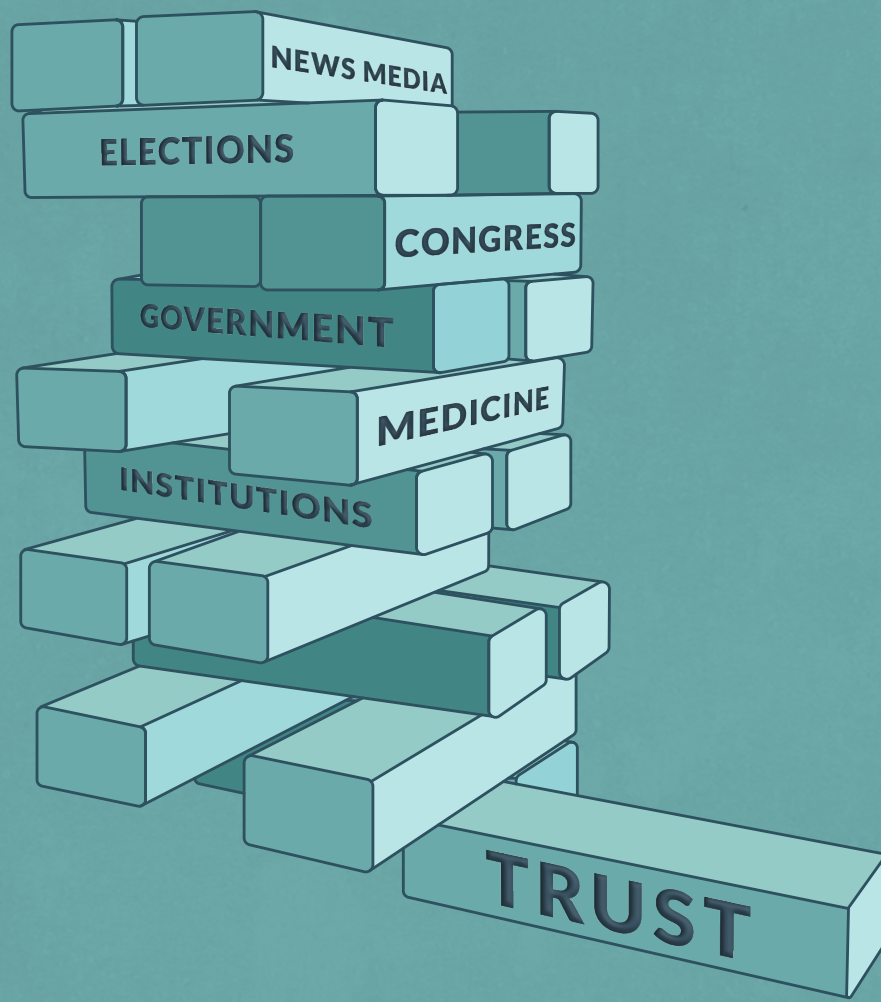
TREND

Analysis of the Facts, Numbers, and Trends Shaping the World
THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN TRUST IS GONE?



AMERICANS' TRUST IN OUR NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IS AT HISTORIC LOWS. HOW DO WE RESTORE IT?

mistrust

/ˌmisˈtrəst/

noun

1. to have no trust or confidence in
2. to doubt the truth, validity, or effectiveness of
3. to be suspicious
4. the erosion of the bond that binds society and allows progress

Founded in 1948, The Pew Charitable Trusts uses data to make a difference. Pew addresses the challenges of a changing world by illuminating issues, creating common ground, and advancing ambitious projects that lead to tangible progress.

CONTENTS

FALL 2024 / 09

Cover illustration: Cara Bahniuk/The Pew Charitable Trusts

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Americans' Mistrust of Institutions

Trust in our nation's institutions has never been lower. And experts tend to blame our politically polarized society, which certainly contributes to the deep unease that is being felt by a majority of Americans today. But the trend lines for trust in government, the news media, the medical system, and other critical institutions has been on this downward slope for decades.

Surveys from Pew Research Center and other leading polling organizations tell the tale. This spring, the Center reported that only 22% of U.S. adults said they trust the federal government to do the right thing just about always or most of the time. That's down from 77% six decades ago.

Gallup reports that 32% of people have trust in churches and organized religions, down from 65% in the early 70s; over roughly the same time, trust in the medical system has fallen from 80% to 36%.

This issue of *Trend* offers a historic perspective that goes beyond the latest headlines about the decline in Americans' trust of the institutions that bind and drive our society. And it offers a deep look at three key sectors under stress—the news media, election administration, and the health care system—with analysis about how mistrust has grown over the past half-century and what can be done to reverse it.

Our focus is on the United States, because we seem to have a truly American problem. For the

TREND

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first time, Gallup's survey found that the U.S. ranks last among the G7 nations in trust in its national government, the honesty of elections, the judicial system, and the military. Less than two decades ago, the U.S. topped the list. But now Canada, the U.K., Germany, France, Japan, and Italy all show higher levels of trust.

A healthy democracy is built on a foundation of trust and depends upon civic participation from an informed electorate and a government that recognizes the needs of its citizens. As Pew senior vice president Kil Huh writes in this issue of *Trend*, "while these numbers appear bleak, they can be turned around if government can be more effective and efficient."

His essay on ways to build public confidence notes that the performance of our nation's institutions is central to The Pew Charitable Trusts' approach to improving Americans' lives and helping our communities thrive. Whether through enhancing health outcomes, helping more people climb the economic ladder, improving our civil court system, or tackling the shortage of affordable housing, Pew seeks to help government listen to the people it serves—and to earn their trust.

Amid the gloom of the survey results, some important and optimistic findings stand out. Claudia Deane, executive vice president of Pew Research Center, writes in this issue that "if there's an upside to the fact that we have a national problem with trust, it's that we know it." And—importantly—there is bipartisan support to try to restore it.

Polling shows that improving trust can begin with each of us as individuals. A majority of Americans say it's important to increase the confidence we have in each other, and 9 in 10 say they believe we can make progress doing that.

Pew's focus on using data to make a difference can play an important role in this process. Facts help us to understand challenges, including our trust deficit, and can provide a common language for people to discuss their differences, allowing a diversity of voices and viewpoints to be heard and respected. Facts can inform the electorate, empower policymakers, and build confidence as we advance solutions. By illuminating ways our nation's institutions can improve and helping them do so, we are embracing the hard work of building trust in them—and strengthening our democracy.

Susan K. Urahn, *President and CEO*

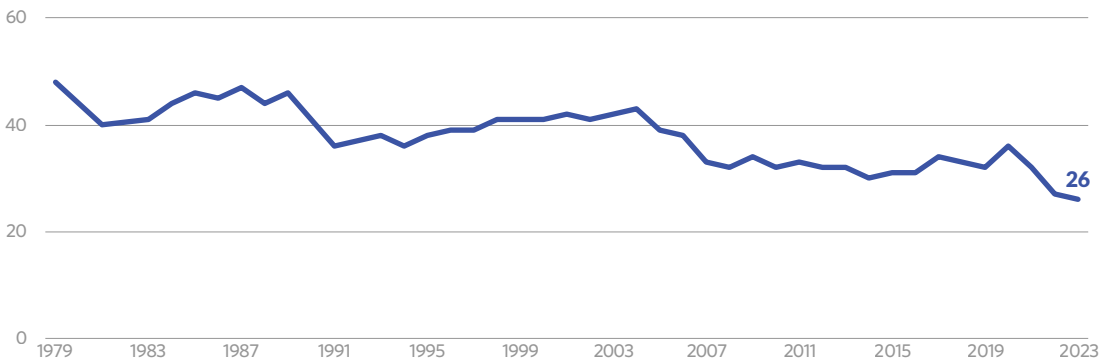
CRUNCH

Americans' Mistrust of Institutions

IF mistrust were a disease, the United States would be facing an epidemic. Over the last half-century, trust in American institutions has steadily declined, and this mistrust has rapidly increased in recent years. While not unique on a global level, the U.S. rates of mistrust are now exceeding those of many other nations.

AVERAGE CONFIDENCE IN MAJOR U.S. INSTITUTIONS, 1979-2023

Average percentage of U.S. adults who have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in 9 institutions measured consistently by Gallup



The average includes only those institutions rated consistently by Gallup since 1979. These are the church/organized religion, the military, the Supreme Court, banks, public schools, newspapers, Congress, organized labor, and big business.

EDELMAN TRUST BAROMETER: ESTABLISHMENT LEADERS NOT TRUSTED TO TELL THE TRUTH

Percentage in the U.S. who worry that

70%	59%	60%
Government leaders	**Business leaders**	**Journalists and reporters**

are **purposely trying to mislead** people by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations.

Sources: Gallup and Edelman Trust Barometer

EDELMAN TRUST BAROMETER: TRUST INDEX

Average percentage of trust in nongovernmental organizations, business, government, and media

2024 General population

56	**Global 28**
79	China
76	India
74	UAE
73	Indonesia
72	Saudi Arabia
70	Thailand
68	Malaysia
67	Singapore
64	Kenya
61	Nigeria
59	Mexico
56	Netherlands
53	Brazil
53	Canada
52	Australia
50	Italy
49	South Africa
49	Sweden
47	Colombia
47	France
47	Ireland
46	Spain
46	**U.S.**
45	Germany
43	South Korea
39	Argentina
39	Japan
39	U.K.

A DECLINE IN TRUST ACROSS AN ARRAY OF INSTITUTIONS

Gallup regularly surveys Americans on their trust in a range of institutions, and most have shown steep declines. U.S. adults who said in 2024 they had a great deal or quite a lot of trust in:

Church or organized religion

32% ↓ Down from **65% in 1973**

Banks

27% ↓ Down from **60% in 1979**

Public schools

29% ↓ Down from **58% in 1973**

Higher education

36% ↓ Down from **57% in 2015**

Medical system

36% ↓ Down from **80% in 1975**

U.S. LAST IN CONFIDENCE IN NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AMONG G7 COUNTRIES IN 2023

In 2006, the U.S. led Gallup's National Institutions Index, which measures confidence in a country's leadership: the military, the judicial system, the national government, and the honesty of elections. Today, the U.S. is at the bottom.

FOREWORD

THE FOUNDING DEBATE ON TRUST

BY JEFFREY ROSEN

In the fall of 1791, mobs in western Pennsylvania took up arms against the federal tax collector. The Whiskey Rebellion was triggered by resentment at Alexander Hamilton's whiskey tax and at the federal government's pattern of ignoring settlers' requests for protection against attacks by Indians. The uprising posed the greatest threat to federal authority since Shays's Rebellion five years earlier, when armed, tax-protesting farmers had mobbed a federal armory in Massachusetts. In both cases, Hamilton insisted on the need to empower the national government to defend itself against the insurrectionist mob. And in both cases, Thomas Jefferson pleaded for leniency for the aggrieved farmers.

The Whiskey Rebellion crystallized the opposing views of Hamilton and Jefferson, as heads of the newly emerging Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties, about the question of trust in government. Hamilton believed that citizens owed a "duty of confidence" to trust the government, particularly between elections, and that dissent should be channeled through the ballot box. Jefferson, believing in a public right to hold accountable an overreaching government, supported mass demonstrations and generally opposed the use of force to suppress them.

As our nation grapples with growing mistrust of all institutions, including the federal government, it's important to remember that this is not a

new debate, but one that has been embedded in the American mind from the beginning. The debate over the Whiskey Rebellion was part of a broader disagreement between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans about the role of citizens in a democracy. The Federalists envisioned passive citizens who would allow representatives to deliberate in their name and abide by the outcomes of those deliberations. The Democratic-Republicans sought to cultivate active citizens who could express their views in popular assemblies. Hamilton's Federalists believed that the people had a responsibility to express confidence in the government to strengthen its legitimacy. Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans believed that the people had a responsibility to keep watch over the government in order to protect liberty.

In *Federalist 23*, Hamilton expressed the Federalist Party's view that the people should entrust the government with broad powers to meet its obligations of providing security and safety. "Government ought to be clothed with all the powers requisite to complete execution of its trust," he wrote. "A government, the constitution of which renders it unfit to be trusted with all the powers which a free people OUGHT TO DELEGATE TO ANY GOVERNMENT, would be an unsafe and improper depositary of the NATIONAL INTERESTS." In Hamilton's view, it would be an "absurdity" to confide to "a government the direction of the most essential national interests, without daring to trust it to the authorities which are indispensible [sic] to their proper and efficient management."

Jefferson took the opposite view. He described the Constitution as a "compact" and argued that states had the unilateral power to nullify federal laws. Jefferson rejected the Federalist claim that the people had a duty to give government their confidence. "It would be a dangerous delusion were a confidence in the men of our choice to silence our fears for the safety of our rights," he wrote. "[C]onfidence is every where the parent of despotism; free government is founded in jealousy, and not in confidence."

In Jefferson's view, "[O]ur Constitution has accordingly fixed the limits to which, and no farther, our confidence may go," and he worried that through an excess of blind confidence, a gullible people risk accepting mistreatment from their government. Waving the banner of "nullification," he concluded by calling on each state to take the law into its own hands, drafting "measures of it's [sic] own for providing that neither these acts, nor any others of the general government, not plainly & intentionally authorized by the constitution, shall be exercised within their respective territories."

The Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian views about trust in government have held each other in check throughout most of American history. At times, however, an overabundance of Jeffersonian skepticism in government has exploded in dangerous ways. Civil war has broken out only once, but insurrections and mob violence have recurred throughout our history, from the tax rebellions of the Founding era, to antibank insurrections of the Jacksonian era, to the Ku Klux Klan lynch mobs that subverted Reconstruction, to the labor riots of the Gilded Age, to White resistance to the civil rights movement, to Jan. 6, 2020. During the peaceful stretches that have defined most of American history, however, coexistence between the competing principles of Jefferson and Hamilton has prevented our politics from descending into violence.

Today, trust in government—and in institutions more generally—is at an all-time low, as social media and other technologies undermine the confidence that Hamilton thought was necessary for the union to flourish. The language of nullification and secession is once again in the air. The fact that Hamilton and Jefferson disagreed about trust in government suggests that debate is an enduring feature of American history. Still, except in their more despairing moments, both Hamilton and Jefferson were committed to the project of the union itself. As their example suggests, America thrives when citizens entrust the government with a measure of confidence—while insisting that the government be worthy of our trust.

Jeffrey Rosen is president and CEO of the National Constitution Center. His new book is The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America.

Americans' Deepening Mistrust of Institutions

From the federal government to the news media to higher education, some historically respected institutions are losing people's confidence.

BY CLAUDIA DEANE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALLIE TRIPP/
THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

It's not exactly news that Americans are mistrustful of their federal government. What you may have heard less about is that trust in some historically respected institutions has also taken a hit in the post-pandemic years.

Trust in scientists has ticked down, as has the share of Americans saying that science has a positive impact on society. Trust in education is sagging. And recent years have found a record-low share of Americans with a positive view of the Supreme Court.

In most cases, these changes in opinion have a partisan cast, with supporters of one major political party shifting their views even as the other keeps faith. In this way, the long-standing narrative of institutional mistrust is increasingly intertwined with the extreme political polarization that has defined the current era.

As we head toward the nation's 250th anniversary, we're handicapped in understanding the long arc of public trust in institutions by the fact that modern-day survey research didn't come online until the mid-1930s. We do know that trust in the federal government to do the right thing topped 70% in the late 1950s, only to begin a sharp downward slide in the mid-1960s. That slide bottomed out at around 30% in the late 1970s. Measures of trust have bumped around a bit but never approached that original high point since.

Pew Research Center has been asking Americans about trust in institutions and reporting on their views for more than 25 years. Over the course of that period, some institutions have seen the faith entrusted in them wane, spike, and wane again. Others have managed to keep their hard-won credibility. Yet others tell a story of changing attitudes among subgroups of Americans.

Trust in the federal government

Americans' trust in the federal government has been low for decades now.

After spiking in the moments of national solidarity that followed the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, trust began to slide back down during President George W. Bush's time in office and hasn't recovered since then.

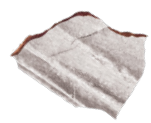
In a spring 2024 Center survey, only 22% of U.S. adults said they trust the federal government to do the right thing just about always or most of the time. Perhaps surprisingly, this was up 6 percentage points from the year before, but it's too early to tell if that's a blip or a trend. Last year's measure of 16% was among the lowest in more than six decades of polling.

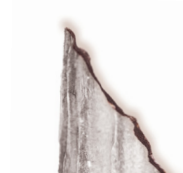
Americans can feel the sour vibe. In a 2018 Center survey, 3 in 4 said public confidence in the federal government was shrinking. And about 2 in 3 U.S. adults agreed that a low level of trust in the government makes it harder to solve the nation's problems.

What are the public's issues with the feds? In a 2022 Center survey, majorities said the federal government unfairly benefits some people over others, doesn't respond to the needs of ordinary Americans, and isn't adequately careful with taxpayer money.

Notably, mistrust of the federal government is widespread in both parties. One key distinction: Republicans' levels of trust tend to differ depending on whether one of their own is sitting in the Oval Office. Trust among Democrats, who lean toward wanting the federal government to play a larger role in public life, is a bit more stable across administrations.

Another key distinction is that partisans hold different views when it comes to the career employees who staff the federal government. In the 2022 survey, 65% of Democrats—but only 38% of Republicans—said they had confidence in career government workers.





ONLY 22% OF U.S. ADULTS SAID THEY TRUST THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO DO THE RIGHT THING JUST ABOUT ALWAYS OR MOST OF THE TIME.

There is, of course, a contradiction at the heart of all this mistrust. As the Center reported two years ago, "Americans' unhappiness with government has long coexisted with their continued support for government having a substantial role in many realms."

And there is the rub. Americans want to be protected from terrorism, have safe food and medicine, and get help when there are natural disasters, to name a few significant needs. In fact, they say the government is doing a pretty good job in several such areas. Some individual federal agencies—think the National Park Service, the Postal Service, and NASA—also continue to have high favorability ratings.

Trust in the Supreme Court, Congress, political parties

How are other parts of government doing?

Not much better. A Center survey last year found that unfavorable views of the Supreme Court exceeded favorable ones for the first time since we started asking this question in 1987, driven by sharply declining trust in the court among Democrats. Views have not meaningfully improved as of this year.

Congress has faced a growing decline in confidence. Around 7 in 10 Americans have an unfavorable view of Congress, an institution that has run in the red on this front for well over a decade. And a whopping 85% of Americans say they don't think elected officials care what people like them think.

Political parties hardly fare better. Aside from the obvious point that each side has dim views

of the other, a record 28% of Americans have unfavorable views of both the Democratic and Republican parties, up from 7% about two decades ago.

Overall, the title of a comprehensive Center report on this topic last year—"Americans' Dismal View of the Nation's Politics"—captures the sentiment best.

28% OF AMERICANS HAVE UNFAVORABLE VIEWS OF BOTH THE DEMOCRATIC AND REPUBLICAN PARTIES, UP FROM 7% ABOUT TWO DECADES AGO.

Trust in news and information sources

Americans are living through a massive shift in the way they get information about the changing world around them. Traditional mainstream media outlets such as daily newspapers and radio stations are in decline, sources that cater to one ideological worldview are proliferating, and social media platforms are providing a nonstop stream of information (and misinformation).

Whether as cause or effect, trust in the mainstream national media has dropped in recent years, most precipitously on the ideological right. Republicans' confidence in national news organizations has plummeted since 2016, even as trust in local news stays fairly solid across party boundaries.

Overall, about 6 in 10 Americans have at least some trust in information from national news organizations. But although 77% of Democrats trust the news media, only 42% of Republicans do. And many Americans think the news they see is only a portion of what they should be seeing: A majority of U.S. adults say the news media purposely avoids reporting certain stories.

For its part, social media hasn't replaced traditional media in terms of trust. But this could change as the digital information landscape evolves and as younger Americans determine which sources they'll place confidence in. Today, adults under 30 are the most likely to say they have at least some trust in the information they glean from social media: Half say so, compared with only a third of adults overall.

Trust in science

It can be a challenge for polls to measure trust in an institution as diffuse as the scientific establishment. But it's possible to lay out enough pieces to get a glimpse of the larger puzzle.

Overall, it seems most Americans continue to trust the scientific endeavor, even as trust took a hit during the pandemic.

In April 2020—the early days of COVID-19—87% of Americans had confidence in scientists to act in the public's best interests. By fall of last year, a majority of adults still expressed that view, but the figure had dropped 14 percentage points to 73%. This was driven by a disproportionately steep loss of confidence among Republicans.

The partisan divide is also reflected in diverging views about the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which had a 78% favorable rating among Democrats in summer 2024 but only a 33% approval rating among Republicans.

Looked at through a slightly wider lens, 57% of Americans say that science itself has had a mostly positive effect on society. That's still a majority, but a smaller one than at any point in the last eight years of Center polling.

Trust in educational institutions

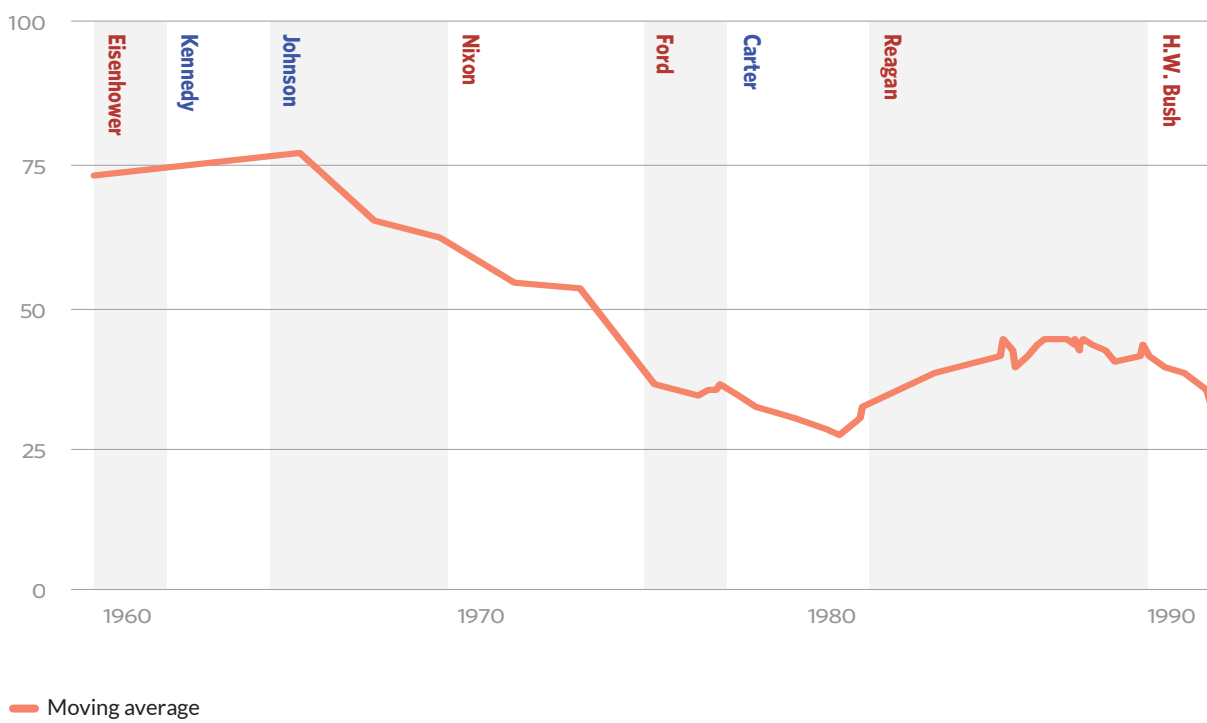
The past decade has also seen a major shift in opinion about higher education and even K-12 schools. This began long before the recent campus protests over the Israel-Hamas war and came from the ideological right.

In 2010, Republicans were more likely to say that colleges and universities were having a positive impact than a negative one on the country's progress (58% positive, 32% negative). But by the second half of that decade, their views had flipped. These views have persisted. In January of this year, only 31% of Republicans said that colleges were having a positive impact on the nation, compared with 74% of Democrats. And the majority of Republicans in a 2023 survey said it's less important now than in the past to have a college degree (57%, compared with 43% of Democrats).

A majority of Democrats, in contrast, have consistently said that colleges and universities are making a positive contribution to the country. Even so, a 2018 survey found that 52% of Democrats saw the higher education system as heading in the wrong direction. Their primary reason: the hefty price tag on tuition. About 7 in 10 Republicans also said that higher education was headed the wrong way. This group pointed a finger at tuition costs, too, but many also felt that professors were bringing their personal opinions into the classroom and that students were being intellectually sheltered.

Public trust in government near historic lows

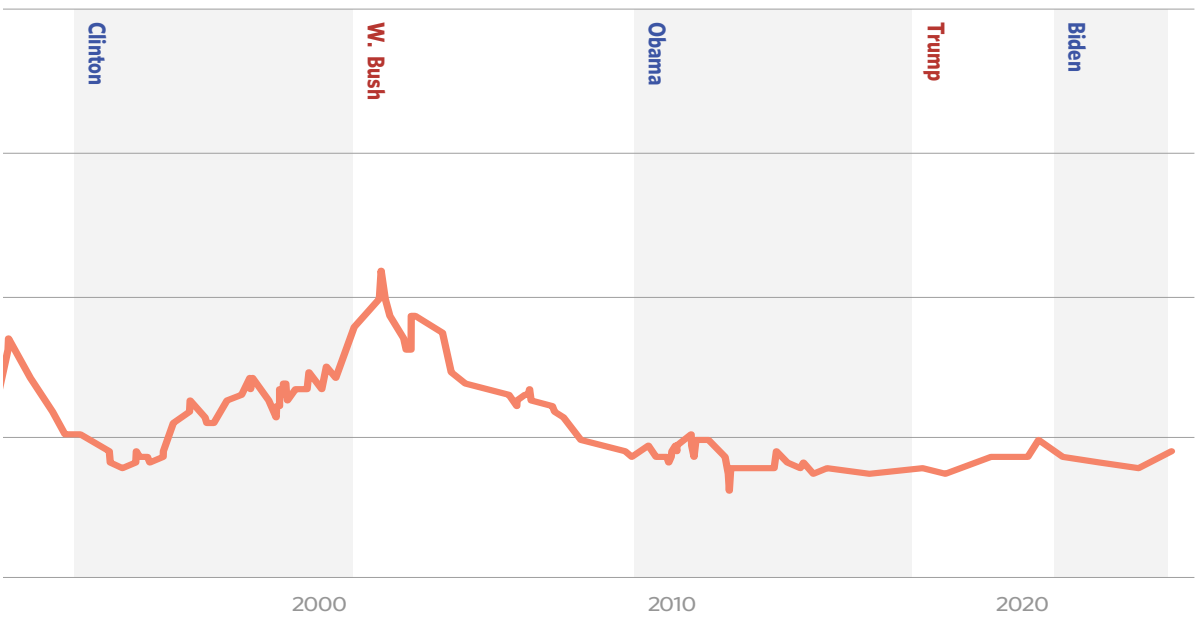
% who say they trust the government to do what is right just about always/most of the time



Following heated protests over mask policies and school closures related to the pandemic, we began asking similar questions about K-12 public schools. And we found the same pattern: In our January survey, 72% of Democrats—versus only 34% of Republicans—said K-12 public schools were having a positive effect on the way things are going in the U.S.

Teachers are aware of this changing sentiment. In a 2024 survey of U.S. public school teachers, nearly half felt that most Americans don't trust them much or at all. A large majority of teachers said that public K-12 education had gotten worse over the past five years. And just over half expect that negative trend to continue.

72% OF DEMOCRATS—VERSUS ONLY 34% OF REPUBLICANS—SAID K-12 PUBLIC SCHOOLS WERE HAVING A POSITIVE EFFECT ON THE WAY THINGS ARE GOING IN THE U.S.



Notes: The rolling average for a given date is the average of that value, the previous poll's value, and the next poll's value. Thus, the latest datapoint isn't a rolling average, but rather the most recent data point. The earliest data points are also not averages.

Sources: Pew Research Center, National Election Studies, Gallup, ABC/Washington Post, CBS/New York Times, and CNN surveys.

Who *is* trusted?

Is there a counternarrative here? Perhaps. Many observers have noted that even though trust in government is low, turnout in recent elections has been high. In the 2020 presidential election, the U.S. recorded the highest level of voter turnout in more than a century.

And there are some institutions that the public continues to deem trustworthy. A large majority of Americans (86%) say that small businesses have a positive impact on the country. Nearly 3 in 4 say they have confidence in the military to work in the public's best interests. Police officers and public school principals also garner majority trust, though both have seen their ratings go down a bit since the start of COVID-19.

Meanwhile, about 6 in 10 Americans say that churches and religious organizations have a positive impact on the country. But there is a major partisan gap in views between Republicans (a party whose largest religious subgroup is White evangelical Protestants) and Democrats (a party in which those without any religious affiliation make up the largest "religious subgroup"). Nearly 3 in 4 Republicans say that churches are making the country a better place. At the same time, just over half of Democrats think that they have a *negative* effect on the country's direction.

But organized religion has not bucked the overall trend in declining trust. According to Gallup, in the past 20 years the share of U.S. adults who express a "great deal/quite a lot" of confidence in the church or organized religion has fallen from 53% to 32%.

So now what?

If there's an upside to the fact that we have a national problem with trust, it's that we know it. About 2 in 3 Americans say it's very important that we raise the level of trust we have in the federal government.

Even better, most of us think we can do something about it. More than 8 in 10 Americans say that confidence in the government can be increased, according to a 2018 survey. Their suggestions for how to go about this range from political reforms such as increased transparency or term limits to asking for more integrity from our political leaders.

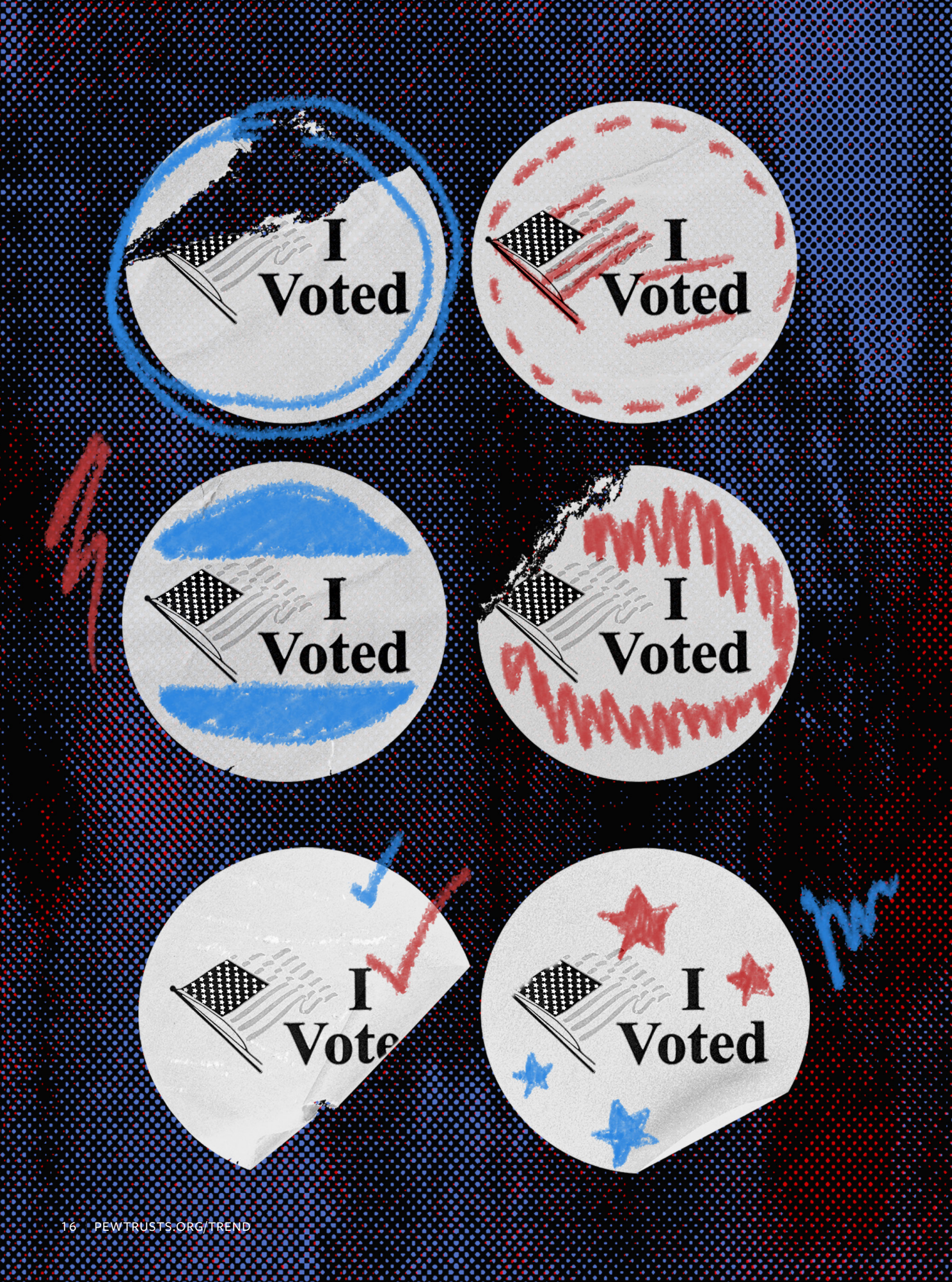
A majority of Americans (58%) also say it's important to raise the level of confidence we have in each other. And around 9 in 10 say that we can make progress here. Some of the most-mentioned suggestions: being less partisan, embracing values such as honesty and kindness, and electing more inspiring leaders.

These are hard asks, of course. But the belief in the possibility of change is bipartisan, and that's a start.

Claudia Deane is executive vice president of Pew Research Center.

THE TAKEAWAY

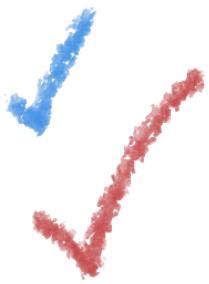
Americans' trust in some key national institutions, often riven by political polarization, is at historic lows—but most people say we can increase confidence. Suggestions include being less partisan, embracing kindness, and electing inspiring leaders.


I Voted
I Voted
I Voted
I Voted
I Vote
I Voted

How to Restore Trust in Elections

Americans' faith in how we choose our leaders is slipping. But we can do something about it.

BY MICHAEL CAUDELL-FEAGAN



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRIANA OKEBALAMA/
THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

A recent Pew Research Center survey shows that almost 60% of Americans are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in the United States. And one of the basic cornerstones of a democracy—electing our government representatives at every level—is suffering.

Put simply, a significant number of Americans don't trust that the outcome of the upcoming federal election will be valid. While a Bipartisan Policy Center poll in February 2024 found that 69% of respondents were either very confident or somewhat confident that their votes would be counted accurately at the national level, the findings mean some 3 in 10 Americans were less than confident that their votes would be counted accurately. That is a sizable portion of the population and shows how deeply mistrust has taken hold for many people.

But despite that measure of concern, the Center's poll also offers some guidance on how to rebuild trust. It found that the closer an election is held to home, the more confident Americans are: The poll found that 74% of respondents are confident that votes will be counted accurately in their community compared with 64% believing that votes would be accurately counted throughout the country.

The findings aren't an outlier. Going into the 2022 midterm elections, Pew Research Center found that 70% of registered voters believed that elections would be well run at the national level, and that number increased to 90% when respondents were asked about their expectations on how elections in their community would be administered.

The confidence gap between how elections are conducted at the community, and national levels is an opportunity to restore trust in our elections—not just in the November elections, but in the coming years. Restoration of trust will take time. And over that time it'll be essential to educate voters on how—and how well—America's election process works.

The facts show that elections are well run in the United States. Today, more than 10,000 jurisdictions accommodate more than 160 million registered voters in school gymnasiums, community centers, town halls, and houses of worship all across the country. And local election offices are overseen by trained, dedicated public servants and supported by volunteer poll workers who are neighbors of those voting.

These events happen at the community level. No single point of access exists; no grand "election office" can be hacked. Rather, numerous measures, devised by states and localities, ensure that the process is fair and accurate. It begins with registration and improved methods for removing people from the rolls when they move or otherwise become ineligible to vote, continues with testing of voting equipment and the monitoring of polls, and ends with paper trails to allow audits that ensure the results have been tabulated correctly.

Let's look at these safeguards more closely: Every state has a process for testing the equipment used for voting and tabulation before elections to verify that it's working. Representatives of the political parties or the public also observe the polls and monitor vote counting in many states. Election officials must follow strict chain of custody procedures to document the location of the ballots and voting equipment, with seals and signatures required at various steps. And federal law requires that the ballots and other materials be retained for 22 months should a recount or investigation be necessary—and voting systems must produce a paper record for such purposes.

In the past two decades, voting itself has become easier, more convenient, and transparent. Nearly all of states—47 to be precise—offer early in-person voting and/or mail-in ballots. But regardless of the voting method, in 2024, 95% of voters will most likely vote on a system with a voter-verifiable paper trail.

The election system is sound.

So what causes the mistrust, and what effect is it having on our elections? The Bipartisan Policy Center poll says 72% of Americans are concerned about inaccurate or misleading information. And it's not hard to see why—the COVID-19 pandemic

IN 2024, 95% OF VOTERS WILL MOST LIKELY VOTE ON A SYSTEM WITH A VOTER-VERIFIABLE PAPER TRAIL.

and last-minute changes to election policies and practices, with insufficient time to educate the public stoked by a steady increase in political polarization, created unprecedented levels of mistrust in the 2020 election results.

As elected officials and career election administrators grappled with the threat of contagion, 23 states made it easier to vote remotely. States as diverse as Alabama, Kentucky, New York, and West Virginia instituted vote-by-mail procedures for the first time, and some decided to mail vote-by-mail applications or ballots. And when allegations of fraud or "election rigging" poured in after votes were counted, amplified by partisans and the media, it took many months for the courts to rule that the elections had been conducted fairly.

In the elections since 2020, many election offices have faced an influx of legal challenges to voting procedures often based on inaccurate allegations, which are complicating their efforts to maintain the integrity and efficiency of the electoral process.

By May 2024, election workers were also reporting facing violent threats, harassment, or abuse, according to a poll conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice. They are leaving their jobs at a rate that grew from 28% in 2004 to 39% in 2022 across all states, in competitive and noncompetitive districts, conservative and liberal-leaning ones, according to the Bipartisan Policy Center.

So mistrust has led to new stress on the election system. But this new attention and concern also present an opportunity: We can, and should, improve our electoral process by embracing new tools and heightened transparency to earn trust.

While we have lost key top election officials in many states, they are being replaced by experienced workers in those offices. Maintaining that flow of qualified workers is paramount. To assist, the Bipartisan Policy Center and The Elections Group formed a council to help with recruitment, retention, and training designed to support a sustainable talent pipeline.

We also must empower local election officials to do their jobs well, supporting them with what they need. For example, the Electronic Registration Information Center, a bipartisan, cross-state partnership tool that The Pew Charitable Trusts helped states create, is designed to keep voter lists up to date by sharing data across states to ensure that voters don't appear twice and that rolls don't include voters who have moved, died, or are ineligible—reducing the burden on election workers.

Risk-limiting audits (RLAs), which use validated statistical methods to examine a sample of paper ballots and can document the validity of reported election results or trigger a recount before the results are certified, are another tool. These audits provide assurance that the final tally will match the number of ballots cast. Colorado conducted the first RLA statewide in 2017, followed by states like Rhode Island and Virginia.

Policymakers and the public have an appropriate role to play in oversight of our elections. And valuable contributions can be made by well-trained election monitors such as those from the Carter Center, which this year is supporting coalitions of nonpartisan citizens in Montana and New Mexico to observe and report on the November election.

Given the trust voters have in elections closest to them, local leaders also can perform a tremendous service by acting as validators of the election progress. A word from a community leader—a popular mayor, police chief, or religious leader—about the mechanics of voting, the tabulation process, and security measures can go a long way. They can also mitigate voter concerns by highlighting authoritative information sources, such as independent, nonpartisan research teams like Utah's Sutherland Institute and MIT Election Data + Science Lab, and instill confidence in election officials.

Educating and informing journalists is another crucial piece, particularly in the current environment of reduced media resources and budgets. The Knight Election Hub helps newsrooms, publishers, editors, writers, videographers, podcasters, and other storytellers by providing free resources and services for the 2024 elections at the federal, state, and local levels.

And in what is inevitably a crowded environment of information, the Voting Information Project (VIP)—which Pew helped create in 2008—offers online tools so that voters can find polling locations, ballot information, early voting guidelines, and any changes in election policies sourced directly from state election offices. Building on its longtime partnership with Google to ensure accurate information in search results, VIP also has recently expanded its efforts in a partnership with the AI company Anthropic to combat the danger of misinformation driven by artificial intelligence.

To ensure safety, election officials can engage with law enforcement early. The Committee for Safe and Secure Elections has been convening election officials and law enforcement for such purposes, with Georgia leading the charge. In July, the state mandated election security training for law enforcement officers. Recruits in police academies also get a course on election laws, learning about election interference, threats, de-escalation tactics, and how to protect voters from intimidation.

Embracing these practices and other impartial tools should be one piece of rebuilding confidence in the electoral process. But on a grander level it involves local and state election workers and communities being transparent when mistakes occur, rolling up proverbial sleeves, and doing the work.

An example of that was in May when the Gary R. Herbert Institute for Public Policy at Utah Valley University, the SNF Agora Institute at Johns Hopkins, and the Sutherland Institute, a public policy think tank based in Salt Lake City, held an election trust forum to explore how to restore faith in the election process. The forum's joint statement acknowledged that "as conservatives, we recognize the damage caused by the drumbeat of falsehoods repeated about the 2020 elections, largely undisputed and noncontroversial" and that "there are still many voters who don't believe they can have confidence in the 2024 elections."

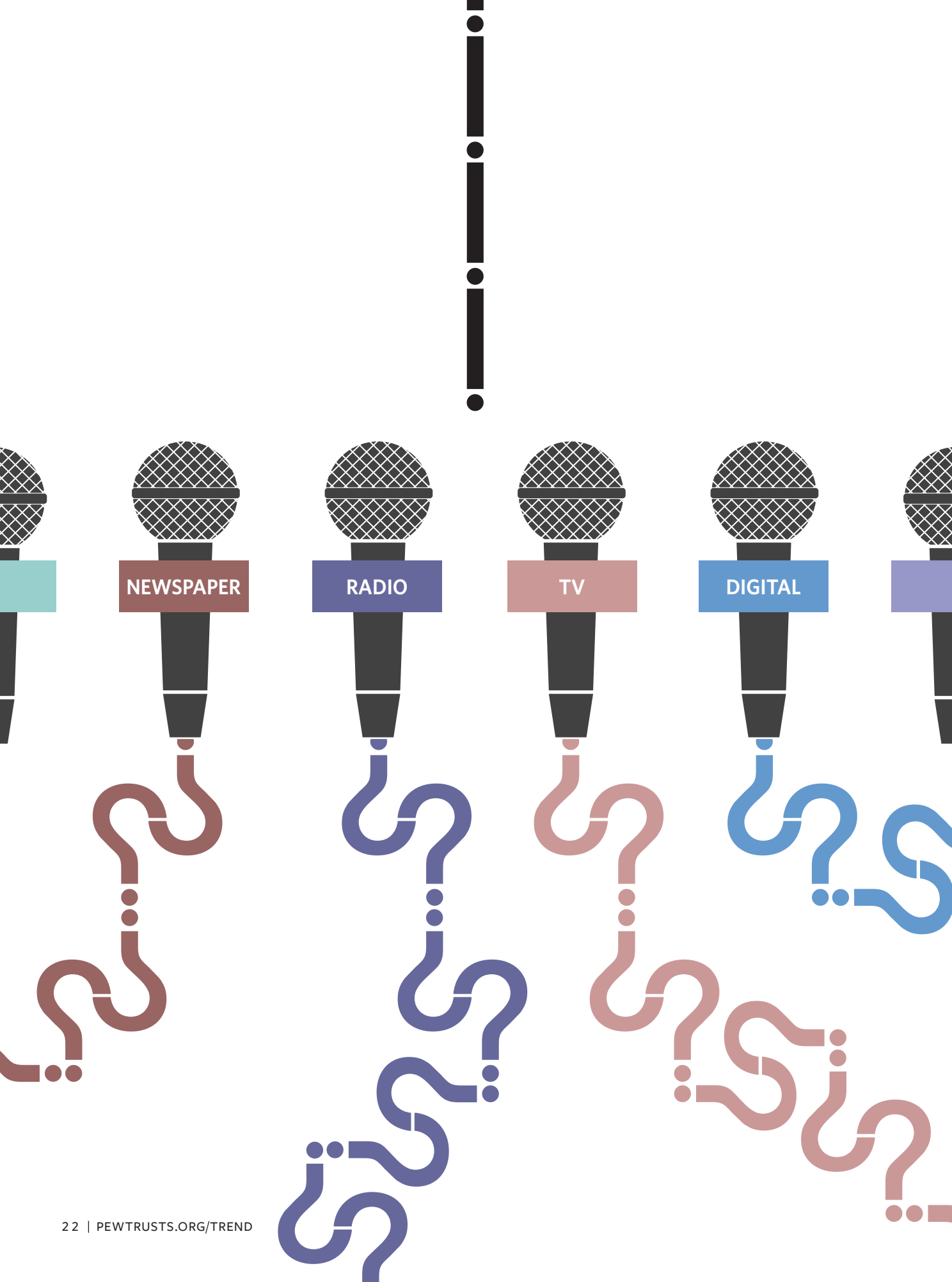
Also seeking to restore faith, a group of Republican secretaries of state, including Idaho's Phil McGrane, Kentucky's Michael Adams, Georgia's Brad Raffensperger, and Kansas' Scott Schwab, along with Utah Lt. Governor Deidre Henderson came together to speak out last December. There is plenty of blame to go around, they believe, thanks to a "toxic stew of disinformation, misinformation, and deliberate lies for profit or political advantage. ... Both parties have helped weaken trust in our electoral system. Both must help restore it," they said in a statement.

These leaders demonstrated a willingness to hear voters' experiences and consider reforms. It will require this kind of dialogue to take a system that is working well and make it even better. Restoring the trust that has been lost by a large number of Americans is essential for all of us, for we all share in the health and future of our democracy. And our democracy rests on trusting that our votes count.

Michael Caudell-Feagan is executive vice president and chief program officer of The Pew Charitable Trusts and oversees the Election Trust Initiative, a Pew subsidiary.

THE TAKEAWAY

U.S. elections are well run but can be improved with more transparency and a recognition that increasing trust in how the nation elects its leaders is essential to our democracy.


NEWSPAPER
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Media Mistrust Has Been Growing for Decades—Does It Matter?

Journalism is buffeted by political polarization, economic challenges, and the rise of social media, but at its best it's also an antagonist to power.

BY JESSE HOLCOMB

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CARA BAHNIUK/THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

Midway through the 20th century, the news media was among the most trusted institutions in the United States. Today, it sits near the bottom of the list, outflanked only by Congress in most surveys. It's one of those social facts that elicits a sense of self-evidence ("We needed a survey for that?"). *Everybody knows* the media has a credibility problem. And seemingly everyone has got a beef with the news.

What happened?

In truth, the origins, diagnosis, and prescription for the public's trust issues with journalism are complex and contested and—despite the current rhetoric about "fake news"—have been decades in the making.

For instance, how we define "news media" can influence how we understand public attitudes. Surveys show that Americans generally trust local news organizations more than national ones and that they trust the media they themselves consume over and above "the media" in general.

Or consider the range of attributes the public weighs as they consider whether news media can be entrusted to perform certain jobs: Does trust depend on a news outlet's ability to be transparent? Independent? Accurate?

And assuming we agree on our terms, who's to blame for the trust deficit?

We ought to be cautious about oversimplifying a decades-long phenomenon. But the broad contours of the news media's fall from grace can be sketched by summarizing three big trends, each of which interact with the other two: the acceleration of political polarization, the proliferation of new media platforms, and the economic disruption of the news industry.

The impact of polarization

Following the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s, a major political realignment began to take place in Washington and in the electorate more broadly, a realignment that today has resulted in partisan ideological consistency on both sides of

the aisle. As Democrats increasingly aligned around a liberal/progressive agenda and Republicans aligned along a conservative one, it became more common for voters to evaluate any number of policies and institutions through their partisan lens. Additionally, elected officials and voters started to express more hostility toward the out-group, a phenomenon known as "affective polarization."

Gallup's decades-long polling trends illustrate what that looks like in the media context. In 1973, most Americans expressed a high degree of trust and confidence in the news media to do its job. Democrats (74%) and Republicans (68%) were generally on the same page. But by 2023, while the media had lost ground with both groups (and with independents), the gap had widened dramatically, with just 11% of Republicans trusting the media, compared with 58% of Democrats.

Are these polarized views of the news media a response to media behavior? Surely, in part. Over the past half-century, for example, the journalism profession has become more highly educated and more politically lopsided as fewer and fewer in the business tend to identify as Republican. And in the digital news era, news workers tend to cluster in the major coastal (and progressive) urban centers in what one observer called a "game of concentration."

But political polarization has steadily increased over the last couple of decades, sorting the news audiences' affective responses along increasingly partisan lines. And a growing number of new entrants into the media business have provided friendly venues for amplifying partisan attacks on the media.

More media choices hasn't meant more trust

In the early 1970s, when most Americans expressed a high degree of trust in the news, their choices were limited. American households got their news from one of the three major broadcast networks on television or on the radio, and from their local newspaper, which carried a mixture of national and local headlines. This limited-choice environment continued into the 1980s, even with the launch of the first 24-hour news platform, CNN.

But the 1990s saw the emergence of a set of powerful national media brands that would offer alternatives to Americans who wanted something different. "The Rush Limbaugh Show," nationally syndicated in 1988, put conservative talk radio on the map. Through his acidic commentary, Limbaugh pioneered a particular brand of media criticism that castigated the national press as lapdogs for the Democratic establishment while presenting his own voice as an unvarnished and trustworthy source for disaffected conservative listeners. In the mid-1990s, Fox News debuted, combining CNN's always-on news and commentary approach with a distinctly conservative voice. MSNBC showed up on the cable dial that same year and soon carved out a liberal niche in response to Fox.

When the bumper crop of internet-born news companies came along in the 21st century, conventional wisdom said that differentiation would breed success. This approach wasn't altogether new but rather an extension of the niche branding pioneered on radio and cable TV. But inherent in the idea was a perverse incentive structure: These new news programs and websites could burnish their brands through attacking the credibility of other media. Gawker Media's irreverent style implicated stuffy New York media, while Breitbart News Network's website verticals included a section entirely devoted to exposing "Big Journalism." And this helped further funnel at least some Americans into political silos, allowing them to follow the news that reinforced their views and to marginalize the sources they disagreed with.

The rapid rise of social media as a source of news has shaped public attitudes about journalism in ways we are still trying to fully understand. Research has found that social media use has led to burnout and news avoidance, fueled general mistrust of all media, and introduced an epistemic

crisis. Although social media users may be exposed to a negative view of news media based on algorithmic incentive structures that reward certain types of messages, there's little evidence that these individuals are seeing kinder representations of the news media offline. Even as a majority of Americans now turn to social media as a source of news, they are even more wary of these platforms than they are of professional news organizations.

Taken together, it's unlikely that platforms like Facebook, X (née Twitter), and Instagram have nurtured public trust in the news, even as the promise of the early social web suggested that these tools would foster opportunities for journalists and citizens to interact through crowdsourcing story ideas and soliciting audience feedback.

Economic challenges to the news industry sow doubt about its product

A third major blow to American trust in the news media came as a result of economic disruption to the news industry, a disruption caused in large part by the technological changes in consumer media that were occurring in the 1990s and beyond. Here, as in other cases of external threats, the industry was not a passive actor.

The U.S. newspaper business was at its zenith in the first decade of the 21st century, even as readership had been slowly declining; in 2005, it generated nearly $50 billion a year in advertising revenue, according to a Pew Research Center analysis. But as internet companies such as Craigslist, Google, and Facebook began supplanting services such as classified ads offered by newspapers, audiences—and advertisers—left print. By 2020, newspapers were taking in just $10 billion annually.

Increased competition for a shrinking pot of advertising revenue produced a kind of desperation in the industry and a race to the bottom. To be sure, print had never been an altruistic enterprise—take the metropolitan dailies, for instance, that followed their affluent, White customer base to the suburbs, often abandoning Black audiences in the urban core. But when the Great Recession of 2008 put the squeeze on owners—some of them hedge funds with no real interest in the mission of journalism—many were quick to cut costs by laying off reporters and editors, hollowing out local and metropolitan newsrooms around the country. Newspaper employment went from 71,000 in 2008 to 31,000 in 2020.

Fewer journalists, thinner reporting, and increasingly desperate advertising content did not escape readers' attention. A 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that Americans were not only skeptical about the quality of the reporting they saw but also cynical about the business motivations behind the news. It found that no more than half of Americans had confidence in journalists to act in the best interests of the public, and that the public was more likely than not to say that news organizations don't care about the people they report on.

Media myths obscure both the problems and the solutions

Experts, pollsters, and commentators have done a good job diagnosing the multifaceted issue of American mistrust of the news. So why does it seem to be so difficult for the industry to reverse its fortunes in the court of public opinion?

Some persistent myths have made it difficult to find an obvious way forward.

Political scientist Jonathan Ladd argues in *Why Americans Hate the Media and How It Matters* that industry insiders too often embrace the notion that a trusted, independent prestige press is the natural order of things. In fact, prior to the 20th century, few news organizations fit the definition of a prestige press, and many had partisan agendas. Ladd writes that in this historic context, the so-called golden age of American journalism that gave us the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate investigation is more of an anomaly than a status quo.

Ladd also argues that news leaders fall prey to the myth that trust used to be high because journalists were especially competent at their jobs decades ago. In fact, trust was high for a variety of reasons, including the low-choice media environment described previously, as well as a more forgiving political culture. Though this myth persists, it has begun to crumble as newsrooms reckon with their own legacies of racism, sexism, and elitism.

A third myth views mistrust as inherently a bad thing, a phenomenon that must be reversed. Columbia University journalism historian Michael Schudson has argued that mistrust might mean that journalists are actually doing their jobs, particularly when reporters deliver unwelcome news about a party or politician or public figure. But when our news institutions falter and fail, mistrust should be interpreted as an important signal, not dismissed simply as misdirected partisan noise. And although public mistrust can be uncomfortable for those who are invested in preserving institutions, it's important to remember that mistrust itself doesn't automatically lead to worrisome social effects.

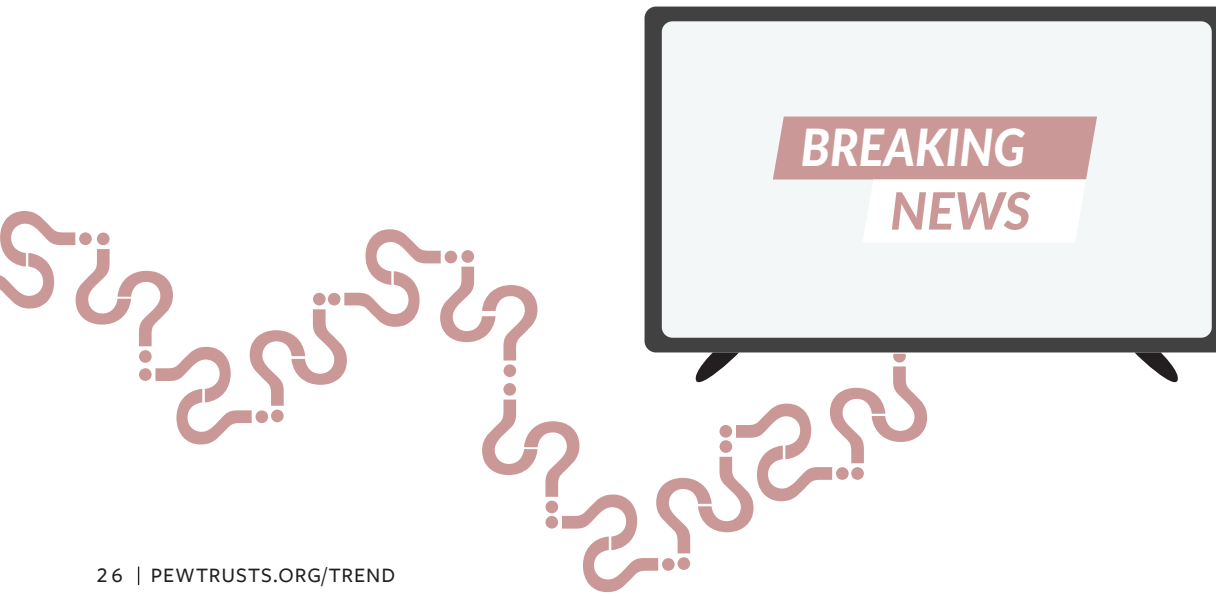
The news industry needs to reckon with these myths. To be clear-eyed about the way forward, it needs to be clear-eyed about its past. But reckoning is only one part of the strategy. The 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that three-fourths of Americans believe it's possible to improve public confidence in the media. So what else should news organizations do to repair relationships with their most skeptical audiences?

For one, continue to put in the spadework of practicing transparency, engaging at the street level, and prioritizing coverage that matters to communities. Strive for accuracy and fairness and acknowledge mistakes when they're made. There's no secret trick or shortcut to building credibility. But there's evidence that these practices can make a difference, at least around the margins. (For example, one study by the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin found that using "person-centered" language instead of stereotypical labels can make readers from marginalized groups feel more respected and more likely to trust the news article.)

But even if the industry were to shore up its weaknesses, that might not be enough to fully reverse the current trends. After all, much of the broader social and political environment is not within the industry's control. There are probably steps the media could take that might build trust with certain groups, but doing so would compromise journalistic values if reporters are seen as trying to pander to audiences.

At the end of the day, public trust is one very important barometer of a healthy press. But it need not be the only one. Journalism at its best is often an antagonist to power, a disquieting force in society, and even an agent that helps communities flourish. The news media must find its way forward without ignoring public opinion—but also without obsessing over it as the final measure of journalism's performance.

Jesse Holcomb is associate professor of journalism and communication at Calvin University and a former principal adviser to the trust, media, and democracy project at the Knight Foundation.



THE TAKEAWAY

Mistrust of the news media has steadily increased for more than a half-century because of polarization, the proliferation of news sources in the internet age, and the industry's retrenchment in the face of economic disruption. Improving trust is essential—but may not be the only measure of journalistic success.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GABY BONILLA/
THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

From Distrust to Confidence: Can Science and Health Care Gain What's Missing?

Although the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a loss of trust in medical care, distrust in many communities is not new.

BY MONICA WEBB HOOPER

Since the COVID-19 pandemic shook the globe four years ago, headlines and public conversations have focused on the public's trust—and the lack of it—in science and medicine.

But trust, mistrust, and distrust—we'll get to the meaning behind those terms—have been changing shape in the U.S. for decades. Surveys show declines in trust in health care, especially among populations that historically have been harmed by medical research and scientific abuses whose legacies persist today.

As a licensed clinical psychologist, behavioral scientist, and health disparities researcher, I have witnessed these effects up close on a professional level:

A middle-aged Black American patient with late-stage head and neck cancer, whom I treated for anxiety and depression some years ago, delayed seeking medical care because of prior negative experiences with doctors (such as perceived disrespect and the hesitation of clinicians to touch him during physical exams); a preference for natural remedies (such as herbs and vitamins); costly medical bills; and a history of repeated clinic visits for other symptoms with no diagnoses but multiple prescriptions. By the time he sought help, the lump on his neck had grown to the size of a large apple, and the cancer had spread to other organs.

Still another example was a woman who is a member of my own family. A mother of six, she had such negative experiences in medical settings over the years and during previous pregnancies—feeling ignored and minimized, not given pain medication when needed, and discriminated against because of her race by White doctors—that she skipped all prenatal care and went to the ER only when she went into labor with her last three children, requesting cesarean sections based on her past deliveries.

And I've been affected by these concerns on a personal level through my own experiences in medical settings, and simply by the fact that I'm a Black American woman in a field that has historically marginalized people like me. I was moved to partner with a community advisory board I worked with on research called the Forward Movement Project, which asked patients and residents from medically underserved populations to weigh in on health care concerns. The findings from this study and other research and surveys make clear that today many Americans deliberately avoid seeking out health care or participating in medical research until they have no other choice, reflecting personal and community experiences with these institutions that have led to widespread and deeply rooted medical distrust.

Trust, mistrust, and distrust: defining the terms

The psychological concepts of trust, mistrust, and distrust are interconnected, yet distinct and nuanced.

Trust refers to a belief in the reliability or ability of an individual or institution. In health care and science, it's essential for cooperation and compliance with health interventions, treatment plans, and science-based clinical guidelines as well as clinical trial participation. Studies show that patients who trust their clinicians are more likely to follow medical advice, seek help when needed, and maintain ongoing care.

Mistrust involves a vague unease or a gut feeling of skepticism, often based on past experiences, but has not yet become full-stop rejection. The sources of the doubt may not always be clear. In health care, mistrust may lead to hesitating to accept information, expressing concern about the motives for a treatment plan, or seeking second opinions specifically for validation. The scientific literature often refers to mistrust for science and medicine especially among racial and/or minority populations, but distrust is the more accurate term.

Distrust is more severe than mistrust, and reflects a firm belief that doctors, scientists, and/or health care institutions are untrustworthy, often rooted in personal or community experiences of harm or betrayal. It can result in underutilization of health care services, belief in conspiracy theories, or outright rejection of medical advice.

And, unfortunately, history is replete with cases that fuel distrust for many people.

Historical sources of medical distrust

The U.S. Public Health Service Untreated Syphilis Study at Tuskegee is one of the most infamous examples of institutional betrayal, fueling deep distrust in science and health care, particularly among Black Americans.

From 1932 to 1972, Black men with syphilis were misled into believing they were receiving free health care but were deliberately left untreated, even after penicillin was found to be a cure. This unethical study symbolizes racial exploitation in medicine. Although its ongoing impact on distrust is debated, Tuskegee has left a legacy of institutional distrust for many Black Americans.

And there are other egregious examples of human exploitation and intentional harm in science and health care that targeted specific communities.

The eugenics movement in the early 20th century in the U.S. aimed to eliminate what its proponents considered "undesirable" traits within the population. This movement sought to "improve" the human gene pool by promoting traits associated with White individuals and those without visible disabilities who were considered the most "fit." Consequently, Black women and Latinas, including many Puerto Rican women, endured decades of coerced sterilization that persisted into the 1970s.

Even more recently, in 1989, members of the Havasupai Tribe, a small, economically disadvantaged Tribe of 650 people, asked an Arizona State University professor for help in understanding and addressing the increase in diabetes in their community. They supplied genetic samples, only to later learn that those samples were also used for purposes they had not consented to—including research on inbreeding and alcoholism. They brought a lawsuit against the university that was settled in 2010 with the samples returned, a monetary settlement, and help obtaining funding for a health clinic.

Recent sources of distrust: COVID-19 and beyond

The COVID-19 pandemic brought distrust in science and health care to the forefront, particularly among Black or African American,

Latino or Hispanic, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander populations, who experienced disproportionately high rates of infection, hospitalization, and death—especially in 2020, 2021, and 2022.

Despite the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines thanks to years of mRNA research, vaccine hesitancy and low uptake were widespread.

Although political discourse, misinformation, and disinformation played roles, vaccine hesitancy among populations experiencing health disparities stemmed from historical roots as well as ongoing experiences of discrimination and neglect within the health care system.

The hesitancy, particularly in communities hardest hit by COVID-19, didn't surprise me. Many patients I encountered expressed concerns like, "We don't want the vaccines at all" or "We don't want the vaccines first." People feared they would receive a "bad batch," questioning why underserved communities were suddenly prioritized for the first time in modern U.S. history.

Ironically, the prioritization was due to public health leaders' aim to promote racial and ethnic equity in vaccine access. But the long-standing and justified distrust left many skeptical—showing just how challenging building trust in many communities will be. This distrust extends beyond vaccines, affecting areas such as cancer treatment, maternal health, and mental health services, where access and outcome disparities persist.

The conversation around distrust in science and medicine tends to focus on racial and ethnic minority populations, though a Gallup Poll indicated that only 36% of U.S. adults overall say they have a great deal of confidence in the medical system, compared with 80% in 1975.

Moreover, other populations experiencing health disparities—including sexual and gender minority groups, people with low socioeconomic status, people living in underserved rural areas, and people with disabilities—also report trust-related concerns for clinicians or the health care system because of the way they are treated.

These concerns are ripe for repair. But building trust will require hard work and showing trustworthiness and genuine engagement with the people who have the least confidence.

The Forward Movement Project

My own research on distrust in science and health care, the Forward Movement Project, offered an approach for examining these significant issues. We created a community-academic partnership to understand some aspects of the multilayered factors related to trust or distrust. Our community advisory board members were involved in every step of the research process—from identifying priorities to developing an intervention—giving them a sense of ownership and agency that are critical to rebuilding trust. We first went on a "listening tour," hosting town hall-style meetings with members of underserved communities.

The research participants spoke candidly about their personal experiences, as well as those of their family and friends, within medical settings, and many were related to their current medical distrust. "We don't trust the system, because it can't be trusted. Health care should come first, but it's become a business," one person told us. Another said, "Trust was broken long ago in the African American community when it comes to medical research. People should be informed before they agree to participate, but the health care system hasn't done enough to ease our concerns." We shared the findings with hospital leadership, clinicians, other researchers, and the very people we listened to.

Based on comments like these, the challenges for repairing confidence in the medical system loomed large. A key finding from the Forward Movement Project was the importance of *reciprocal trust-building* between communities and institutions. Participants stressed that trust must be earned through transparency, accountability, and collaboration, with institutions showing a willingness to listen, learn, and adapt their practices based on community input.

So, about a year later, we returned to the same neighborhoods for the second phase of the research, bringing clinicians with us so that they could talk directly with community members and answer questions raised about the health care system. This was what we called a "user-generated" intervention, which consisted of participant-driven dialogues with oncology clinicians and support professionals. This was a rare opportunity for

conversations between community members and health care professionals and researchers, allowing participants to discuss their questions about care, and to initiate important discussions. Findings from this second phase of the project were positive and indicated that this activity helped people learn new things about science and medicine and would help them during future medical encounters, and over half reported more willingness to join a clinical trial than before the intervention. This kind of open communication is a crucial first step toward building trust.

The Forward Movement Project also highlighted the importance of *representation* in reducing distrust. Community participants noted that racial or ethnic matching with clinicians improves culturally competent communication and empathetic care. Other research supports increasing the number of scientists and health care professionals from underrepresented backgrounds to create a workforce that better reflects the communities it serves.

The road toward trust

Trust is a fragile, underappreciated psychological construct that must be earned and is difficult to repair once broken. In that way, institutional distrust is not unlike repeated betrayals in personal relationships, but on a much larger and intergenerational scale.

It's up to those with power and authority to take concrete actions for improvement so biomedical institutions and health care systems hold the primary responsibility for addressing distrust. Here are some ways they could start:

Publicly acknowledge the historical wrongdoings that have contributed to distrust, such as the Tuskegee syphilis study and forced sterilizations. This includes issuing apologies, acknowledging ongoing harm, and outlining the tangible steps to ensure that these violations never happen again.

Recruit and retain well-qualified individuals from underrepresented backgrounds at all levels—from students to leadership positions. Reflecting the diversity of the populations served is important, as is ensuring that these persons are committed to the intentional and long-term efforts needed to make progress on building trust.

Implement continual and comprehensive training on factors known to influence trust and distrust, such as cultural competency, bias, and practices and policies that foster and maintain inequities.

Invest in long-term partnerships with communities, not just when there is a need for research participants or representatives to serve on patient advocacy boards without decision-making authority. The exchange of knowledge is critical, and community members can offer informed views on health care policy, research agendas, and institutional priorities.

Move beyond traditional metrics of success such as patient satisfaction surveys, and instead work with communities to define what successful relationships and outcomes look like, which might include measures of trust, community empowerment, and perceived respect. This also involves engaging in health education, supporting local health initiatives, and contributing to overall community well-being.

Demonstrate a genuine desire to build and maintain trusting relationships. This will require efforts to strengthen oversight and accountability, such as independent panels consisting of scientists, clinicians, and community voices; community-identified and well-resourced public health initiatives; regular equity-focused audits of policies, treatment, and health outcomes, research enrollment and patient demographics; and corrective actions when disparities are identified.

Reducing distrust that has built up over a long time is far from simple. However, science and health care institutions can choose to take proactive, transparent, and sustained steps toward rebuilding trust. Equally important, they should raise awareness at local, state, and national levels about their efforts to prioritize the best interests of all communities for a more equitable future.

Monica Webb Hooper is a clinical psychologist and deputy director of the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities at the National Institutes of Health.

THE TAKEAWAY

Many Americans deliberately avoid seeking health care because of justified distrust of the medical system. But if institutions work to become more trustworthy—such as partnering with communities to address their needs and increasing the number of scientists and medical workers who reflect the communities they serve—confidence can be slowly gained.

Here's How to Build Trust

Making government more effective and efficient can build public confidence.

BY KIL HUH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALLIE TRIPP/
THE PEW CHARITABLE TRUSTS

Evictions are one of the most traumatic events any family can experience. So in the early 2000s, Michigan's Department of Health and Human Services made rental assistance and other resources available to tenants with children who were facing being put on the street. The support was meant to provide families a softer landing at a turbulent time.

If only they *knew* about it.

The availability of that potentially life-altering assistance often went unknown by those eligible for it, the resources hidden by two fundamental ways in which another branch of government, civil courts, usually work: Judges and clerks operate neutrally to maintain impartiality, and less than 10% of tenants facing eviction have legal representation to advocate in their interests. That meant that if families in need didn't know to ask, they usually didn't get the help.

It's the kind of example that crystallizes why people lose confidence in their government and institutions. Fortunately, Michigan has since made some headway with the development of eviction diversion programs. But what happened in the state illustrates the challenges facing governments. Whether it's dated policies that have yet to catch up with how people do business, poorly crafted policies that unintentionally limit access to services, or well-intended policies that falter in their implementation, gaps in services or outreach have the potential to undermine Americans' trust that their government is there to serve them.

According to Pew Research Center, the percentage of people that say they trust the federal government to do the right thing all or most of the time has not surpassed 30% since 2007. Gallup reports increasing declines in state and local governments as well. And whether it's steady declines in trust among state and local public health agencies or all-time lows in confidence in police and state courts, few institutions are spared the negative vibes.

But while these numbers appear bleak, they can be turned around if government can be more effective and efficient. After all, nothing will restore trust more than if the public can see the government be more responsive to their needs and provide the results that improve their lives and help their communities thrive.

We have seen poor public opinion of institutions and policies improve when government responds to the people. The Affordable Care Act, for instance, after a disastrous rollout in October of 2013, slowly improved in favorability over time as subsidies were provided and insurance coverage expanded. Americans reporting it had a positive effect on the nation eventually jumped from 24% to 44% between 2013 and 2017.

The performance of government institutions is a critical component of The Pew Charitable Trusts' approach to enhancing health outcomes for people in the U.S. and ensuring they can climb the economic ladder. We see a range of tangible (though often unheralded) opportunities to improve our institutions' standing with the people they're meant to serve—whether related to the legal labyrinth that is our civil legal system, the nation's lack of attainable housing, or how we respond to people in a mental health crisis. And we've seen through our work across various domestic issues that instilling confidence in our institutions and its leaders means pursuing policies and practices that show foresight, are driven by data and research, and maximize those moments when people intersect with agencies and the courts.

THE PERCENTAGE OF PEOPLE THAT SAY THEY TRUST THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO DO THE RIGHT THING ALL OR MOST OF THE TIME HAS NOT SURPASSED 30% SINCE 2007.

Get ahead of the problem

Let's start with money because most taxpayers do.

When the Great Recession struck in 2007, state capitals across the nation found themselves in a fiscal free fall. Sharp declines in tax revenues and increased demands in public services created a crisis for most state budgets, often resulting in one of two severe solutions: cuts to services people depended on or increases to taxes people couldn't afford.

Americans should be able to rely on their government and its leaders to safeguard them from the potential tremors of the next big economic shock or downturn.

The scars left by the 2007 crash motivated states to make changes. Often with Pew's help, many states enlisted a range of prudent practices aimed at fortifying their long-term outlook—from building substantial rainy day funds to paying down public pension liabilities.

By fiscal year 2019, states had built up significant budget stabilization funds, which allowed them to better weather the sharp economic contraction resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Utah is a good example. The state had been actively stress testing its budget for more than five years—assessing its ability to withstand various economic downturn scenarios. As a result, state leaders had developed sufficient budget reserves to cover most revenue shortfalls. While few foresaw the pandemic and the economic shock that accompanied it, Utah's thoughtful planning meant resources would be available for its residents when they needed it most.

Despite that progress, many state policymakers still manage budgets for the short term, and as pandemic-era funding to states begins to dry up, they're staring down the barrel of more short-term challenges and tough decisions. For example, federal funding that helped support child care providers during the pandemic expired last fall, triggering a series of closures, resignations, and cost hikes. States like Virginia, Indiana, and Connecticut are actively considering whether to intervene or risk the closure of as many as 70,000 programs that will affect more than 3 million children.

These and other pressing needs can dent the long-term fiscal outlook of states, which all face looming threats—from sudden shocks like a recession or natural disaster to pains caused by emerging technological and population trends—and in the process undermine the trust of constituents who expect government to be prepared.

Pew works with policymakers to reimagine their approach to fiscal management, reaching beyond the budget conditions of today to also plan for the risks and investment needs of tomorrow.

But planning for the future is never easy. It requires leaders to think beyond the immediate needs of the day and the ever-looming political cycle, which has generated extremely high turnover in recent years. In 2018, elections for governor led to 20 administrations changing hands. In 2022, nearly a third of the top leaders in the nation's 99 state legislative chambers quit their posts. And 36 states will hold gubernatorial elections in 2026—16 of them open seats.

This high turnover makes maintaining future planning all the more difficult but all the more essential. To earn the public's trust, leaders must put constituents first—for the long haul. And that also means showing foresight, rather than relying on old thinking.

Identify and rethink dated and arcane policies and approaches

Here's a question that isn't necessarily on the minds of most Americans: How many megabits per second (Mbps) constitutes quality upload and download speeds for internet service? The Federal Communications Commission definition had stood at 25 Mbps and 3 Mbps, respectively. Advocates have argued for 100 Mbps and 20 Mbps.

Most of us may not think about the actual speed of our internet service, but these definitions of what quality internet looks like matter. They serve as a baseline to determine which areas of the country are able to engage in a society that relies on high broadband speeds to do business, visit with doctors, and communicate with colleagues—and which ones can't.

Americans should be able to trust that their government can keep pace with an increasingly digitized world and help ensure everyone can participate in it. Instead, for nearly a decade, the FCC steadfastly stuck with the speeds it established in 2015. Even nearly a year after the COVID-19 pandemic catapulted the essential need for affordable, high-speed broadband, the FCC declared the standing benchmarks were "an appropriate measure." That resistance to change maintained poor connections—predominantly in rural and other underserved areas.

But things do change, and it often starts with states leading the way: Many states began charting their own course for delivering broadband access and what that meant. Minnesota, for example, established a goal of border-to-border broadband access at speeds of 100 Mbps and 20 Mbps by 2026, well above the FCC's 2015 speeds.

In November of 2021, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act was signed into law and helped to create a new speed standard for broadband of 100/20 Mbps. That change in the definition of high-speed internet and new federal funding was instrumental in advancing the country's connectivity, and an opportunity to help rural communities and underserved households across the U.S. improve their broadband infrastructure. In March, the FCC finally followed suit, changing its definition of broadband to match those higher download and upload speeds.

These types of goals can always hit snags, and fluctuating funding is a constant driver of whether they're met. But avoiding policy rooted in old definitions and thinking is a start to ensuring new policy isn't outdated as soon as it's enacted. It also shows government and other leaders of our institutions can look for opportunities to do new things—at the local, state, and federal level.

Maximize opportunities to help when people intersect with our institutions

People engage with agencies, legislatures, and courts in a variety of instances, but those moments are typically transactional, limited, and miss chances to have a greater impact for the public. For instance, a visit to a hospital is typically pretty straightforward—the patient is admitted experiencing a symptom and hospital staff work to address the ailment. But hospital visits also offer a key opportunity: Research shows about a half of people who die by suicide saw a health care provider at least once in the month prior to their death, yet there are no firm protocols to identify patients experiencing suicidal thoughts and connect them with the services they need.

These deaths by suicide, a leading cause of death in the United States, not only underscore the urgency of the public health crisis, but the missed opportunities within our systems to save lives. Accredited hospitals are only required to screen patients for suicide risk if the primary reason for their visit is related to behavioral health. Hospitals also commonly don't perform any of the recommended best practices to safely discharge a suicidal patient into continued care, even though research shows suicide rates are 200 times higher among people experiencing suicidality than the general public in the month following hospitalization.

Pew is working to address these admission and discharge issues, from encouraging the

Joint Commission—an independent nonprofit organization that accredits more than 20,000 U.S. health care institutions—to update its requirements to identifying opportunities for state policies to more widely expand suicide screening and discharge protocols.

WE CAN DO BETTER, AND AS WE PROGRESS, MAYBE WE CAN INSTILL SOME RENEWED CONFIDENCE IN OUR INSTITUTIONS IN THE PROCESS.

Our three branches of government—the executive branch, legislatures, and the courts—were never meant to be perfect.

The "more perfect union" our founders spoke of implied that our collective progress would never be complete. That particularly applies to the ability of our government and its leaders to help solve people's problems and avoid creating new ones. Put another way: There will always be room for government to improve.

Some of our most defining moments as a nation have come in the form of landmark reforms to existing policies and the elimination of unnecessary barriers to Americans' prosperity. Along the way, trust in government has and will continue to fluctuate. And peoples' collective skepticism will always be there, challenging us to do better.

We can do better, and as we progress, maybe we can instill some renewed confidence in our institutions in the process.

Kil Huh is the senior vice president of government performance at The Pew Charitable Trusts.

THE TAKEAWAY

With confidence in government at historic lows, it is essential that government at all levels becomes more effective, efficient, and responsive to the people to help build their trust.

5 Ways to Rebuild Trust in Government

Only 1 in 5 Americans trust the federal government—so how do we restore public confidence?

For more than two decades, the Partnership for Public Service has worked across presidential administrations to provide federal employees, leaders, and agencies with insights, training, and research to better serve the public. Through these efforts, and by improving the narrative around our federal institutions, the Partnership seeks to build a more trusted and trustworthy government—and a stronger democracy.

Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Partnership believes the health of our democracy depends on the relationship between our government and those it serves. Paul Hitlin, a senior manager at the Partnership, lays out five foundational strategies to help improve this relationship and reignite public trust in government.

1. SHOWCASE INDIVIDUAL FEDERAL EMPLOYEES.

When Americans hear the term "government," they often think of elected officials in Washington, D.C. However, more than 2 million professional, nonpartisan federal employees make up the bulk of our government—80% of whom work outside the Washington, D.C., area. The public views these civil servants more positively than the government as a whole. Fully 46% of the public say they trust civil servants, 50% believe most civil servants are "committed to helping people like me," and 55% think civil servants are competent.

Agencies need to highlight these employees to correct common misconceptions about who works in government and what they do. This approach would resonate with the public.

People want to hear more positive stories about our government, and individuals respond well to personalized stories of high-achieving federal employees who make a difference, as we've learned through reactions to the Partnership's Samuel J. Heyman Service to America Medals program. These awards, given every year, honor outstanding career civil servants who seldom receive public recognition.

2. MAKE THE GOVERNMENT MORE TRANSPARENT AND ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PUBLIC.

Today, just 15% of Americans believe the government is transparent, and less than half believe it is accountable to the public, with many Americans viewing the government as opaque and disproportionately influenced by powerful and secret interests.

There is no silver bullet for changing these perceptions, but certain improvements would help. Agencies should make data on how well they serve the people more available and easier to understand. Elected officials and government leaders need to be agile and responsive to the public's concerns. Agencies should simplify the process for removing federal employees who do not meet their obligations to the public, while ensuring that career civil servants—hired based on their skills and required to be nonpartisan—are not fired for politically motivated reasons.

3. DEVELOP MODERN, CUSTOMER-FRIENDLY SERVICES.

When encountering many common federal services, the public is largely satisfied with them. At least 70% of the people who applied for a passport, filed for Social Security, passed through an airport security checkpoint, or applied for Medicare said they were satisfied with the experience.

Still, just 21% of Americans believe the government listens to the public, and only 23% think federal services are easy to navigate.

To reverse these trends, all federal employees should be held accountable for meeting customer needs, and agencies should develop processes that make it easier to collect and share customer feedback. Congress needs to work with agencies to invest in, and do more training on, emerging technology that would enable easier-to-use digital services.

4. IMPROVE FEDERAL LEADERSHIP.

Good leaders are the most critical factors to our government's success and impact.

Government leaders must develop innovative solutions to complex problems, motivate their workforce, and hold their teams accountable for delivering critical services to the public. However, unlike organizations within the private sector and the military, the federal government does not have a systematic, deliberate approach to developing and supporting leaders.

All federal executives and managers, including political appointees, need to meet a standard for leadership that holds them accountable for running high-performing agencies. Agencies should adopt a framework, similar to the one developed by the Partnership, that requires federal leaders to not only hold technical expertise but also manage healthy agencies and teams and be good stewards of taxpayer dollars.

5. RECONNECT WITH YOUNG PEOPLE.

Just 15% of Americans ages 18-34 trust the government, the lowest of any age group in our survey, and nearly 70% think the government does not communicate effectively with them.

Agencies need to do a better job of engaging with this demographic, emphasizing the power of federal service on local communities—a theme that would resonate with young adults—and featuring success stories of young people in government.

The government also needs to draw more young people into public service. Today, people under 30 compose just 7.5% of the federal workforce but about 20% of the broader labor market. Agencies and Congress need to work together to simplify the government's complex hiring process, increase the use of federal internships, and find new ways to convert interns into full-time employees, all of which would help young people better connect with the federal government.

Nobody Roots for Goliath: Why Americans Trust Small Business

By Cindy D. Kam

In the long arc of human storytelling, nobody roots for Goliath. We root for David, the underdog facing impossible odds, who stands in contrast to Goliath, the big bully.

So maybe it's not surprising that Americans root for *small* business in contrast to *big* business.

In fact, U.S. adults trust small business more than any other institution in America: According to a recent report from Pew Research Center, 86% of Americans believe small businesses have a positive effect on the way things are going in this country. In contrast, an abysmally low 29% believe the same about large corporations.

What explains this near consensus in trust in small business?

I recently fielded a brief online survey where I asked a sample of a thousand Americans to report on what comes to mind when they think of small business or big business.

When Americans think of small business, they think of David. Perhaps not in so many words, but the top ideas for respondents were "mom and pop," "family-owned," "local," and "entrepreneur." Small business reflects that irresistible national ethos: family-owned businesses that represent the American Dream and everyday people's heroic struggles to "make it." (Indeed, "struggle" was another common word.) Small businesses represent the bucolic myth of Main Street, USA. Even big business recognizes the appeal—you can see the small business façade at Disney's Magic Kingdom Park.

And big business exists in contrast with small business. For big business, respondents volunteered phrases like "corporations," "greed, "Walmart," "Amazon," and "profit." In short, they talked about Goliath—the capitalist giant rolling in its success and stomping on the little guy.

The term "big business" emerged in 1905, coined at a time when concerns were trained on monopolists, robber barons, and the like, juxtaposing these enormous conglomerations of power with "small business"—what is now a romanticized view of mom-and-pop stores.

Big business is capitalism on steroids. At scale, it can generate economies of production, reducing prices, standardizing commodities, giving Americans what they want, as soon as possible, for the cheapest price. Yet the typical

American's stereotype of big business does not capture these benefits. By "big business" we mean its use, interchangeably, with corporate America and the fat-cat trappings that follow from monopolizing a market of consumers and a pool of workers.

The official definition from the Small Business Administration categorizes small businesses as firms with fewer than 500 employees. But what Americans have in mind is not the formal set of businesses covered by this definition, but rather the tantalizing *myth* of small business, the promise and possibility of it. They applaud the idea of supporting hardworking individuals who are supplying goods and services to their local communities. They admire the risk-taking and entrepreneurial spirit of these little guys who are trying, against all odds, to pull themselves up by their bootstraps to succeed. Who wouldn't?

Small businesses benefit from a perception of absolute and geographic scale. They are seen as family-owned entities, imagined to be an integral part of a local community. Small businesses benefit from a Teflon group stereotype. When a specific small business is accused of misconduct (for gouging customers, engaging in fraud, discriminating against groups, or simply failing to deliver), this barely registers for many Americans (this is helped by the near extinction of local news). Any account that might surface would probably focus on allegations directed toward a specific firm. Psychologically, the process of flexible stereotyping allows us to cling to stereotypes while discounting aberrational information. For small business, this means that any specific miscreants are discounted as exceptions to the rule, atypical of the overall group of small businesses. This is how the Teflon stereotype of small businesses endures.

In contrast, think about large corporations and media coverage of them. Negative news has seductive powers. Headlines featuring large corporations revel in allegations of misconduct: abuse of power, the exploitation of workers, the gouging of consumers, the unabashed self-aggrandizement. These stereotype-consistent headlines reinforce the view of big business as Goliath. On those rare occasions when a positive headline surfaces, flexible stereotyping again allows us to discount it as aberrational, an exception to the rule.

So what lessons can other institutions learn from the trust that small businesses reap?

Trust is about the perception of intentions. It centers on the belief that a given entity will act in the service of our interests, not just in the service of the entity's interests. We root for David because he acts on our behalf. Institutions that seek to build trust must focus on the beneficence of their intentions, whom they serve, and why.

Trust is also personal. The human brain is evolutionarily adapted to small-scale interpersonal relationships. This is why local mom-and-pop stores have such resonance. Some modern institutions can be nameless, large-scale entities that are difficult to personalize; others seem to be personified by self-aggrandizing bullies. Institutions can reap trust through personification that psychologically reduces scale to underscore human-to-human interactions.

Yet, the ultimate irony is that despite how much more we trust small businesses compared with big corporations, the majority of Americans employed in the private sector rely on big business for their livelihood. Americans freely give big businesses their business. The public has generated the consumer demand that has supported the big-boxing of America. Perhaps the question to ask is not why small businesses are so trusted by Americans, but what they can do with that. How might small businesses harness that reservoir of trust to improve their chances of success as they face Goliath?

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A THOUSAND WORDS

Dianne Gralnick/Getty Images

HOW TO BUILD TRUST IN SCIENCE

From Lab to Life: A podcast series from Pew

AFTER THE FACT >

With trust in their work vital to their success, many scientists are recognizing the need to communicate more effectively to the public about their research and its impact outside the lab. In this series from The Pew Charitable Trusts' "After the Fact" podcast, researchers from a range of fields discuss how they got involved in science, what motivates them, and how their work can improve the world. Listen at pewtrusts.org/afterthefact.

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