



The State of Public Trust in Government 2024

**Despite declining views of the federal government,
the public overwhelmingly supports a merit-based,
nonpartisan civil service**

JUNE 10, 2024

About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that is committed to building a better government and a stronger democracy.

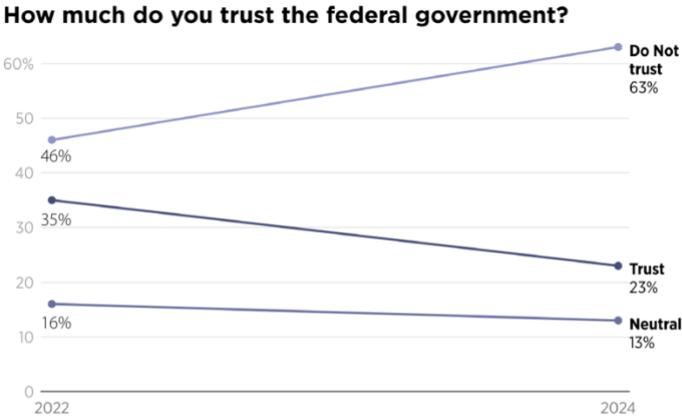
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Introduction

A new national survey conducted by the Partnership for Public Service confirms that America’s crisis of public trust in government is growing.

The survey, given to a nationally representative sample of 800 adults in the spring of 2024, found that only 23% of Americans trust the federal government, down from 35% in 2022.¹ Furthermore, only 15% believe the government is transparent, down from 21%, and 66% believe the federal government is incompetent, up 10 percentage points. In addition, only 29% say that democracy is working in the U.S. today compared with 68% who say it is not. These findings come from the third in a series of national surveys conducted by the Partnership on public trust in government. The first two were issued in [2021](#) and [2022](#).



Question was asked on a scale of 0 to 10. "Do not trust" includes answers from 0 to 4. "Neutral" includes answers of 5. "Trust" includes answers from 6 to 10.
Source: Partnership for Public Service surveys

Low levels of trust in major institutions—particularly the federal government—are a persistent problem in the United States. [Trust in government](#) has been in decline since the 1960s. But recent years have seen distrust in both government and politicians reach near record levels. These trends have serious consequences for the country and for the health of our democracy.

When people don’t trust their government, they are more likely to opt out of voting and other types of civic participation. With less engagement, the public feels less empowered to influence government—and, in turn, government “hears” people’s needs and preferences less.

As a result, the points of interaction between our government and the public deteriorate and a fundamental disconnect emerges between Americans and the only institution in the country with the resources, responsibility and authority to serve all. This breakdown hampers agencies’ ability to provide modern, equitable and accessible services that respond to the major challenges threatening the health, national security and overall well-being of our nation.

Our survey results offer leaders within and outside government a roadmap to improve this situation. While our findings show low levels of trust, they also demonstrate that the American

¹ In 2021, the Partnership conducted a [survey](#) with a question regarding trust that used slightly different wording and answers that did not include a “neutral” option. In that survey, 40% of respondents said they trusted the government, 56% said they did not trust the government, and 3% said they did not know.

public overwhelmingly views an effective government and a professional, nonpartisan civil service as crucial for a strong democracy.

Critically, the American people do not believe that further politicizing the civil service is a good way to improve our government’s ability to deal with national problems. Across the political spectrum, the public believes civil servants should be hired based on merit, not partisan loyalty, and serve the people more than any individual president. In addition, nearly three-quarters disagree with the idea that presidents should be able to fire “any civil servant that they choose for any reason,” and nearly 90% believe that the federal government is less effective when decisions are driven by politics.

These nuanced findings—low trust in government and a strong belief in the value of a professional civil service—suggest that Americans want a government that serves the public good but do not believe they have that type of government today. While some have sought to exploit this dissatisfaction by calling for the firing of civil servants and the weakening of civil service protections, the better course of action—one far more in line with public opinion—would be to build a well-functioning government that more effectively serves the people. The nonpartisan civil service ensures our government maintains the continuity of knowledge and expertise to achieve this goal.

Today, with America facing rising political polarization, low trust in public institutions and the prospect of a tumultuous election season, our government needs more than ever to stay resilient to promote our safety and security. [Numerous changes](#) would help make this possible, including increasing accountability for poor performers; strengthening federal leadership; streamlining the federal hiring process to ensure our government recruits top talent; leveraging data and updated technology to improve how customers experience federal services; and better communicating the role and impact of a merit-based civil service on communities around the country. Expertise and collaboration from leaders across sectors will play a critical role in making these ambitious reforms possible.

Our survey results offer an urgent call to action for those inside and outside the public sector to both defend our government from harmful proposals that would reduce its capacity while supporting practical ways to improve the performance and accountability of the federal workforce. This is a nonpartisan imperative, and it will enable our government to keep up with the evolving challenges facing our nation and to regain the public’s trust.



Photo Credit: Shutterstock

Overall trust by demographics

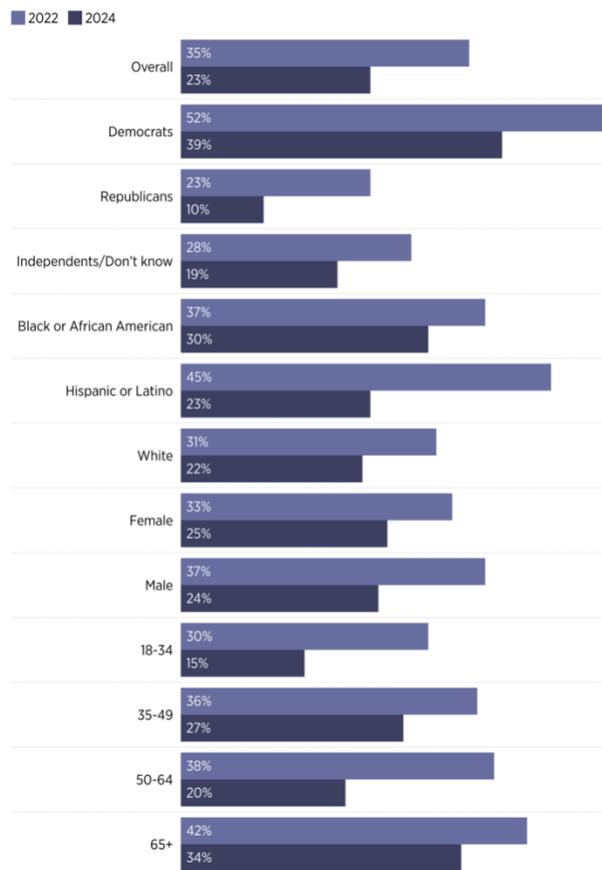
Since 2022, trust in the federal government has declined among all the demographic groups we studied.

Only one in 10 Republicans say they trust the government, down from 23% in 2022. Fully 81% of Republicans say they do not trust the government, and 9% are neutral.

While self-identified Democrats have more favorable views, fewer trust the federal government now compared with 2022. The number of Democrats who trust the government was 52% two years ago but declined to 39%. Almost the same amount, 41%, do not trust the government while 18% are neutral. These findings align with [research](#) showing that trust in government is usually higher among supporters of the party that controls the White House.

In addition, those identifying as independents declined from 28% to 19%. Sixty-seven percent do not trust the government, and 14% are neutral.

Percent of the public who say they trust the federal government



Source: Partnership for Public Service surveys.

Trust also declined across all racial and ethnic groups tracked, but to different degrees. Trust declined the most among those identifying as Hispanic or Latino. In 2022, 45% of Hispanics and Latinos trusted the government. That number dropped by nearly half, to 23%.

About a third of those identifying as Black or African American—30%—currently say they trust the government, down from 37% in 2022. For those self-identifying as white, 22% now say they trust the government, down from 31%.

Trust is also down across all age groups. Among people ages 18 to 34, trust declined by half, from 30% to 15%. The biggest decrease was among people ages 50 to 64, from 38% to 20%. Trust among those who are 65 or over decreased from 42% to 34%, although that group is still more likely to trust the government than any others.

The widening trust gap for those ages 18 to 34 is concerning given that the federal government struggles to recruit and retain young, diverse talent. For our government to be prepared for the future, it needs to [recruit and retain a new generation](#) of public servants. These results further suggest that agencies must [find new ways to connect with young people](#).



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Declining views of the government's impact

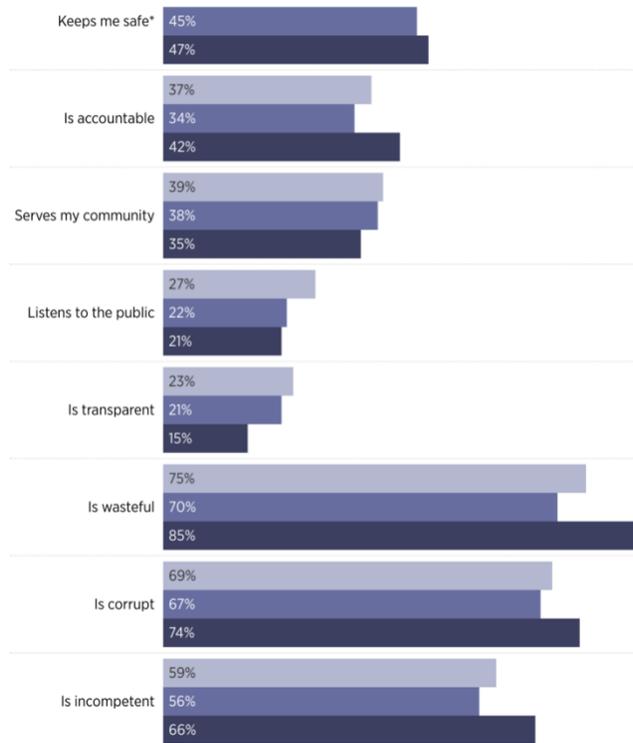
Not only has overall trust declined, but so has the perception of the government's impact.

Only 31% now say the impact of the federal government on the U.S. is positive, down from 42% in 2022. At the same time, 66% say the impact is negative.

Views of the federal government

Percent agree

■ 2021 ■ 2022 ■ 2024



*Question was not asked in 2021.
Source: Partnership for Public Service surveys.

Views of the government's impact

Percent agree

■ 2021 ■ 2022 ■ 2024



*Question was not asked in 2021.
Source: Partnership for Public Service surveys.

Higher percentages of the public also characterize the federal government negatively. Today, 85% of the public agree the federal government is “wasteful,” up 15 percentage points from 2022. About three-quarters of respondents say the government is “corrupt,” up from 67%, and two-thirds agree the government is “incompetent,” up from 56%.

By contrast, some positive views of the government have not declined. For example, 42% agree that the government is “accountable,” up from 34%. The percentage of people who agree that the government “keeps me safe,” “serves my community” and “listens to the public” has barely changed since 2022.



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More people are satisfied with federal services than not

Overall, 48% of the public say their personal experiences with the federal government have “generally been positive,” while 44% disagree.

In general, the public is satisfied with many commonly used services, although there are a few exceptions. At least 70% of those who have passed through a security checkpoint at an airport, used passport services, applied for Medicare or received COVID-19 economic injury disaster loans say they are satisfied with that experience.

Sixty percent of those who have received benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs say they are satisfied, as are 53% of those who have filed federal taxes. The only service more people are dissatisfied with is federal student aid. Half of those who have applied for aid say they are dissatisfied with the experience, slightly more than the 45% who say they are satisfied. The troubled [rollout](#) of the Department of Education’s new federal student aid application in early 2024 likely contributed to this frustration.

Satisfaction with federal services

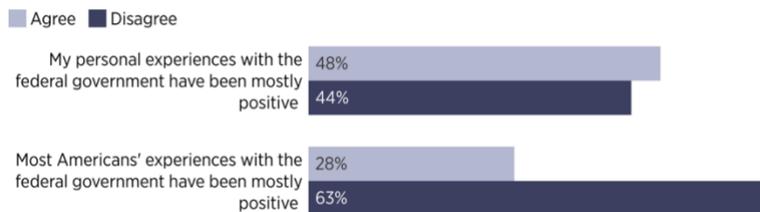
	% who have done this since Jan. 2020	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied
Filed fed taxes	91%	53%	10%	37%
Security checkpoint at airport	76%	70%	7%	24%
Passport services	44%	77%	7%	16%
Applied for Medicare	30%	73%	3%	23%
Filed for Soc Sec	27%	70%	4%	26%
Applied for student aid	22%	45%	5%	50%
VA benefits	15%	60%	7%	33%
Received COVID loans	11%	73%	9%	27%

Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 800 U.S. adults from March 25 to April 1, 2024.

Despite many people saying their own experiences with the federal government have been generally positive—and high scores for many commonly used services—that view does not translate to how people perceive others’ experiences. While 48% say their personal experiences are generally positive, only 28% agree that the same is true for “most Americans.”

Personal experiences with government



Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 800 U.S. adults from March 25 to April 1, 2024.



Photo Credit: Shutterstock

Americans strongly believe in an effective and competent federal government

Even though the public holds negative views of the federal government as a whole, there is widespread agreement that it—and a nonpartisan, effective civil service—are vital to a healthy democracy.

Eight in 10 people agree that the federal government is an important part of a “strong American democracy”—including 87% of Democrats, 71% of Republicans and 86% of independents. An even greater number, 90%, agree that a federal government that “functions effectively” is important for a strong democracy.

The importance of competent civil servants

Overwhelmingly, the public views a nonpartisan and competent civil service as critical to a well-functioning democracy. Fully 91% say that “competent civil servants” are important for a strong democracy, including 94% of Democrats, and 91% of Republicans and independents.

The importance of a nonpartisan civil service—one composed of people hired based on merit, not loyalty to a particular party—is viewed in nearly the same way. Overall, 87% of the public say an apolitical civil service is critical to a strong

How the federal government and civil service relate to democracy

	Agree	Disagree
The federal government is an important part of a strong American democracy.		
Overall	80%	17%
Democrats	87%	10%
Republicans	71%	25%
Independents/Don't Know	86%	14%
Having a federal government that functions effectively is important for having a strong American democracy.		
Overall	90%	8%
Democrats	94%	5%
Republicans	89%	7%
Independents/Don't Know	85%	12%
Having a nonpartisan civil service is important for having a strong American democracy.		
Overall	87%	7%
Democrats	88%	9%
Republicans	87%	6%
Independents/Don't Know	79%	8%
Having competent civil servants is important for having a strong American democracy.		
Overall	91%	6%
Democrats	94%	6%
Republicans	91%	4%
Independents/Don't Know	91%	6%

*Emphasis added for question wording.
Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 800 U.S. adults from March 25 to April 1, 2024.

democracy, with both Republicans and Democrats agreeing at almost the same rate. In fact, support for a merit-based civil service grew across most demographics from 2022 to 2024.

During this same time period, the percent of the public that believes civil servants are competent and committed to helping “people like me” has remained relatively stable.

In 2024, 55% say that most civil servants are competent, the same percentage as in 2021, and one-half say that most civil servants are committed to helping “people like me,” also the same percentage as in 2021.

Views of civil servants

Percent agree

	2021		2022		2024	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Most civil servants are competent	55%	27%	57%	25%	55%	35%
Most civil servants are committed to helping people like me	50%	33%	46%	39%	50%	41%

Source: Partnership for Public Service surveys.



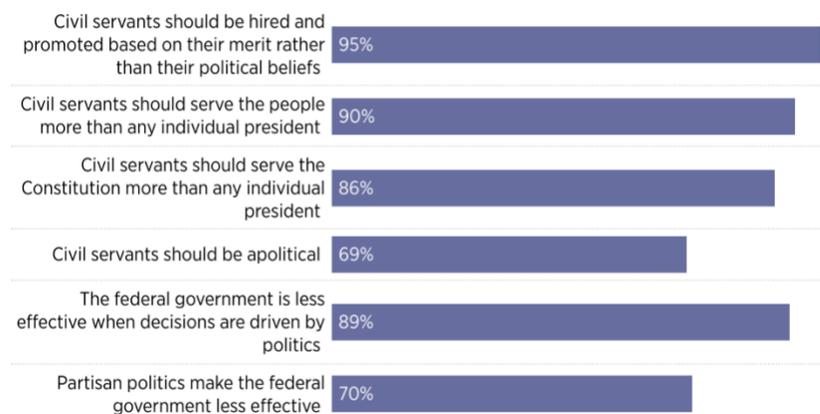
Photo Credit: Shutterstock

Widespread agreement that politicizing the federal workforce is not the answer for a more effective government

These survey results indicate widespread support for sustaining a federal workforce that embodies merit-based principles and puts serving the public first. Recent proposals to permit a potential future administration to arbitrarily fire thousands of nonpartisan career federal civil servants and replace them with political loyalists threaten the ability of our government to deliver effective and equitable services and respond to our country's most significant challenges. These proposals, which value partisan alignment over professional qualifications, hinder the ability of career federal employees to give American taxpayers the government they deserve—one committed to the public good above all else.

The role of politics within the civil service

Percent agree



Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 800 U.S. adults from March 25 to April 1, 2024.

Importantly, Americans across the political spectrum strongly oppose these plans. There is almost universal agreement that civil servants should be hired and promoted based on merit rather than their political beliefs. Fully 95% of the public agree with that idea, including 96% of Democrats, 95% of Republicans and 94% of independents.

In addition, almost 70% of the public believe that civil servants should be “apolitical,” including 75% of Democrats and 69% of Republicans. A smaller makeup of independents—59%—agree.

Nine in 10 people also agree that civil servants should serve the “people” more than any individual president, including 91% of Democrats, 90% of Republicans and 83% of independents. Fully 86% agree that civil servants should serve the Constitution more than any individual president, and only 25% say that presidents should be able to fire “any civil servants that they choose for any reason,” including only 37% of Republicans and 11% of Democrats. By contrast, 72% of the public disagree with this idea.

In addition, 79% develop a more favorable opinion of civil servants when asked to respond to the statement, “Civil servants pledge to uphold and defend the Constitution, not swear loyalty to any individual,” while only 7% say this statement makes them see civil servants less favorably.

Notably, almost 90% say that the federal government is less effective when decisions are “driven by politics.” A majority agreed with this statement across all demographic groups, including more than 90% of Republicans.



Photo Credit: Motion Array

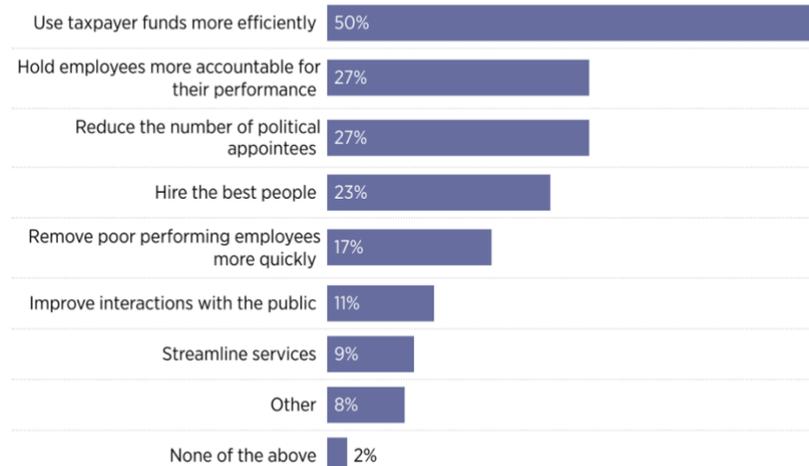
Where the public wants to see improvement

Despite strong support for a merit-based, nonpartisan civil service and a competent and effective federal government, the public doesn't believe the current system meets this vision. Two-thirds of the country believe there "are many civil servants who work to undermine policies they disagree with," including 79% of Republicans and 55% of Democrats. Only 23% say that civil servants are "nonpartisan." Less than half—45%—say that "most civil servants can be trusted to serve leaders of both political parties." These views may stem in part from recent portrayals of civil servants as members of a nefarious "deep state," but additional research is needed to further explore this issue.

To a certain extent, better explanations of the role and impact of civil servants, and how their work helps people and communities, may help neutralize these arguments. Indeed, our survey shows that a majority of Americans report more favorable views of civil servants when told that they are responsible for some of our country's greatest achievements, serve as experts in their field who keep us safe, and work in roles that directly provide essential services to the public rather than as elected officials or political appointees.

Actions the federal government could take to become more effective and trustworthy

Respondents could select two



Source: Partnership for Public Service survey of 800 U.S. adults from March 25 to April 1, 2024.

However, reforming the way government works to better serve the people is also critical. One-half of our survey respondents cite the more efficient use of taxpayer funds as one of two actions the federal government should take to become more effective and trustworthy. This perspective further emphasizes the need for Congress to fix its dysfunctional appropriations process, which has triggered too many [continuing resolutions and shutdown threats](#) that hurt service delivery and cost taxpayers money.

At the same time, 27% say that holding employees more accountable for their performance and reducing the number of political appointees are among the most important actions. By contrast, only 11% and 9%, respectively, say that improving interactions and streamlining services should be a priority.

Conclusion

There are no shortcuts to improving public trust in government. Positive change will take consistent efforts, public education, the effective use of resources and long-term investment. Only a systematic and coordinated approach will improve the relationship between the public and our federal institutions.

These survey results suggest several ways federal officials and those outside government who care about its future should meet this imperative.



First, our government needs to ensure it has a workforce with the skills required to innovate, solve new challenges and meet public needs. Prioritizing leadership development around the values of public service and a strong commitment to the public good while improving federal talent pipelines, hiring processes and pay to compete with best-in-class private sector organizations is paramount.



Second, agencies should continue their commitment to providing the best possible [experience](#) for the public, which requires modern technology and widespread use of data to make informed decisions about program effectiveness and outcomes.



Third, leaders across government—from members of Congress to political appointees to career executives—must be accountable for the management of agencies. This includes using, and empowering supervisors to use, disciplinary tools and strategies that deal with poor performance head-on and at the earliest possible point. It also includes identifying mechanisms to ensure Congress passes budgets on time so that agencies can make strategic, long-term funding decisions. [Reducing the number of Senate-confirmed positions](#) by converting some to career roles or presidential appointments would also make it easier for the president to put forth, and for the Senate to approve, nominees in a timely manner. This reform would decrease the number of leadership vacancies in government and increase accountability for agencies to serve the public effectively.



Finally, policymakers should consider ways to strengthen the nonpartisan guardrails for the civil service—guardrails that, as stated earlier, the public supports having in place. While a recent ruling by the [Office of Personnel Management](#) is a good first move to protect the merit-based civil service, more should be done to prevent partisan abuse of civil service rules and a return to the failures and corruption of the [spoils system](#) of the 1800s.

The American public does not need to be convinced that an effective federal government and a strong civil service are important for a vibrant democracy. But too many people believe they are not getting the government they want or deserve, and this distrust makes solving the country's problems even tougher. At the same time, the public does not want to see more politics in the workings of government.

The federal government is facing a crisis of trust. Yet, proposals from former President Trump and his political allies to fundamentally alter the purpose of a merit-based civil service are not the solution and would negatively impact government performance and harm the country. Our survey results suggest that Americans expect the federal government to place their needs above any single political interest. Improvements and reform are necessary, but politicizing the federal workforce is not the answer and would decrease government effectiveness at a time when our nation needs an expert and apolitical civil service working in collaboration with political leaders to solve problems at home and abroad.

Methodology

Most of the survey results in this report come from a poll conducted by the [Partnership for Public Service](#) and [Impact Research](#) from March 25 – April 1, 2024. The text-to-web survey was administered to 800 adults nationwide. Responses were weighted to reflect the demographic makeup of the country. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish with a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percentage points.

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