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LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Much as we complain about institutions—they are too bureaucratic, rigid, and distant—we cannot imagine life without them. In fact, we cannot name a society, past or present, with no institutions. They have existed, in the ancient English phrase, “since a time to which the memory of man runneth not.”

THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONS

Institutions are such a part of everyday life that we take them for granted. For instance, we send our children (a family institution) to school (an educational institution) before we head to work (an economic institution). We trust institutions to keep us safe when we travel, ensure that our food and medicines are not harmful, serve our financial needs, and tend to us when we are sick—in sum, to provide basic common services that make our lives easier. Institutions also offer a focus for our beliefs and practices, both religious and secular. They establish the order we require to be secure and productive. They are, in brief, “humanly devised structure[s] of rules and norms that shape and constrain social behavior.”¹

Scholars have identified numerous core functions of institutions.² Among other roles, institutions:

1. Simplify the actions and work of the individual by providing rules and norms that promote order and regularity. Institutional structures and cultures allow individuals to focus on other things, such as relationships, efficiency, or creativity.
2. Help to maintain order in society by assigning roles to individuals based on what they can achieve. We do not expect children to be little adults or the elderly to be soldiers.

3. Encourage individual and social progress by facilitating action. In addition to promoting cultural, social, and legal norms, democratic institutions educate, reward achievement, and enhance people’s ability to act individually and in concert to have greater control over their lives.

Throughout history institutions have emerged from common values and norms of behavior, serving as repositories of tools, resolve, and resilience to humankind’s existential challenges. The ability of institutions to meet these expectations depends on shared values among the individuals and communities they serve. We accept traffic regulation because we value an orderly movement of vehicles that helps to ensure our safety. We support education because it enables individuals to achieve more with the skills and knowledge that schools provide. We fund nonprofits to help individuals and families in need because we want people to become fully contributing members of society.



Source: Woodleywonderworks via [Wiki Commons](#)

At times, the values that support institutions conflict with other values we hold in common. We want orderly traffic but object if the rules that promote that end are applied unfairly or prejudicially. We want our children to gain the knowledge required to succeed but protest when they are taught views

that are ideologically slanted or at odds with what we know to be true—for example, if an instructor told them that the sun circled the earth. We want to help individuals in need but insist they strive to become as self-sufficient as possible.

When we believe institutions have become too overbearing or rigid, we demand reforms. We want institutions, in sum, to be more responsive to the values we hold. Such reforms fill the history of American democracy. The 1820s and 1830s witnessed successful efforts to expand voting from property-holding adult white males only to all free adult males, to make education a public good, to shift the basis of criminal punishment from retribution to rehabilitation, and to lobby for the abolition of slavery—an institution antithetical to freedom—among many other reforms. The post-Civil War era brought other institutional reforms: expanding the electorate to African American males (and, later, to women), curbing the monopolistic practices of large corporations, alleviating the burdens of impoverished immigrants and others in rapidly growing cities, and the like. Other major reforms came in the 20th century, including then-controversial ones we accept as essential today, such as Social Security to support the elderly and regulation of financial markets to ensure our savings are protected from mismanagement.

In democratic societies, reform is an inevitable response to social, cultural, and economic change. The modern civil service is a good example of how the institution of government adapted to a new industrial economic order. In 1883—prompted by evidence of corruption and inefficiency and triggered by the assassination of President James A. Garfield—Congress passed the Pendleton Act to award civil service positions on merit rather than political patronage. This reform allowed the federal government to enlist experts to help it respond effectively to an increasingly complex society and a new industrial and global economy.

During the past half-century, we have asked institutions to assume roles that have stretched their capacities and resources. Consider public education. It has moved well beyond instructing students and providing them with extracurricular opportunities, like clubs and sports. We now expect schools to support a range of social services from after-school programming to accommodate the needs of working parents to mental health counseling,

food assistance, and individualized programs for students with learning and other disabilities. Nongovernmental institutions face similar strains, made worse by large-scale social and economic dislocations during recent decades.

Today, institutions of all types face growing skepticism about their effectiveness and responsiveness, making it difficult for them to serve their core functions in a democratic society. Intense partisanship, sharp ideological divisions, and tribalism account for part of these challenges. Also, modern society has become more individualistic and less communitarian in its values, a circumstance magnified by a highly fractured media environment. Institutions themselves share the blame for the public loss of faith when they do not meet their obligation to be inclusive, transparent, and accountable.

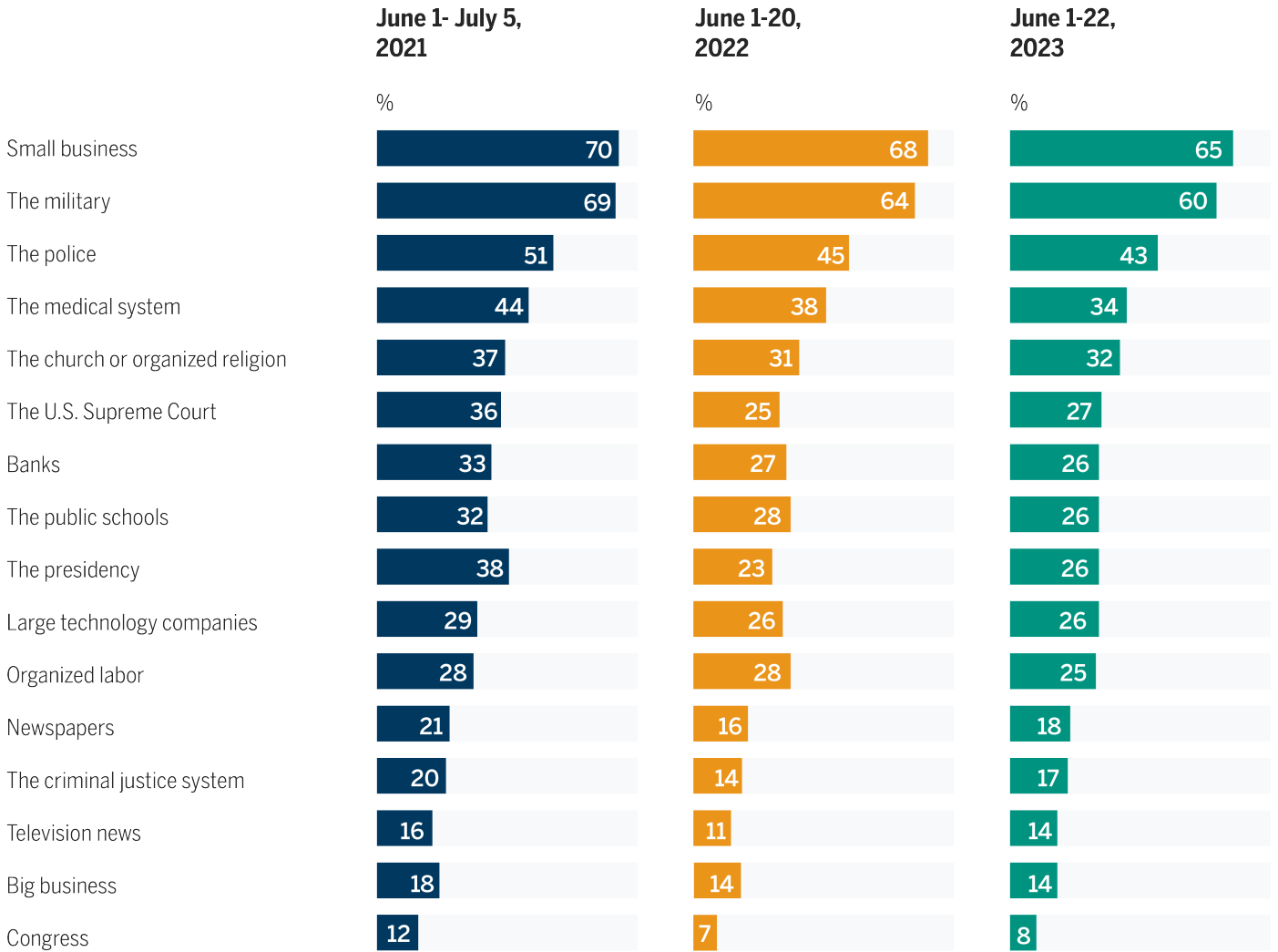
As the highest elected officer in state government, governors have a responsibility to help restore faith in the institutions that buttress their state's society and culture. This obligation applies especially to government, which as philosopher John Serle notes, engages in intentional, collective actions that provide socially beneficial functions and have status because they are publicly supported.³

Too many institutions now suffer the loss of public support. A growing literature outlines proposed solutions, but, first, we must understand more fully why we have lost confidence in institutions that until now have been central to who we are as a society and nation.

INSTITUTIONS UNDER THREAT

Regardless of how we get our news, we likely will encounter a story reporting a loss of confidence in a trusted institution. In a poll last year, Gallup reported that only “small business” and “the military” garnered majority support among 16 institutions respondents rated.⁴

FIGURE 1. Recent trend in Americans' confidence in institutions



Source: Gallup, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/508169/historically-low-faith-institutions-continues.aspx>

The three branches of our federal government had the confidence of less than one-third of respondents, with ratings of 27%, 26%, and 8% for the Supreme Court, the presidency, and Congress, respectively. Other institutions fared little better. Only 32% of the surveyed public trusted organized religion. These ratings are not just a single year's reflection of citizen sentiment. Gallup published results from the past three years—all of which revealed comparable results.

For public institutions, status as a trusted organization that can address public needs is important to our well-being, resiliency, and social development. Without confidence in institutions, we risk losing knowledge, experience, and support systems that enable our society to function well, particularly in times of crisis. And when our confidence in historically valued institutions such as government, religion, medicine, and the news media is shaken, where do we turn when large-scale threats to our country or our communities—war, pandemics, inequality, discrimination, among others—challenge us?

Driven by social media, institutions are under attack. With a flood of social media apps and platforms, individuals easily find a community that affirms their beliefs and grievances. When Congress, the courts, or public agencies take actions with which we disagree, social media and political discourse—two self-reinforcing mechanisms—personalize these decisions. Our disagreements too often become vitriol aimed at the institution itself and the individuals associated with them. To borrow a metaphor used frequently (and inaccurately) elsewhere, we have weaponized political discourse.

These assaults reveal little sense of the history and roles of institutions, the reasons for their existence, and the experiences of the people who serve in them. Rarely is the rhetoric of divisiveness translated into overt interference with institutional functions, yet they still shake our confidence. Our confidence in institutions links to our values—which give us social cues as to what to learn—how to behave, engage with others, and structure our communities; and other things from which our culture and collective identity emerge. Repeated attacks on government and other public institutions cannot help but alter how people view them. Ultimately, how much these attacks

erode confidence in these institutions will determine whether they can continue to function with the status and resources they need to serve the public.

Loss of confidence in our most important institutions is not a recent problem. Political scientists Henry Brady and Thomas Kent describe how political divides have negatively affected Americans' faith in political and nonpolitical institutions during the past 50 years.⁵ Additionally, unlike the Supreme Court and Congress—in which constituents' focus is drawn to singular actions of each body, such as passing or adjudicating laws—confidence in the president isn't just based on the individual actions of the office of the president but also the actions of millions of federal workers, and many events not in the president's control—such as the performance of the economy, international disputes, or even the actions of the courts and state governments. As a result, agencies that provide valuable services daily also may be subjected to unwarranted or undeserved low public support simply because they are seen as part of a larger administration.

Lack of trust in institutions—and attacks on them—applies to all institutions. School boards and educational leaders experience verbal and sometimes physical threats from parents unhappy with their decisions about curriculum, school hours, and superintendents. Parents even attack them regarding issues that are part of larger social-political arguments.⁶ Additionally, only 36% of Americans have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education.⁷ Students are the ones who suffer when loss of confidence results in less funding or when their teachers and administrators are under threat—making this both a national and local problem.

Other institutions long considered fundamental to a democratic society are experiencing a loss of trust. The press received only 20% support in the latest Gallup survey. Print media reflects this loss of confidence, with smaller circulations and with many cities and towns losing their daily local newspapers.⁸ Morning Consult, another respected polling firm, reported in November of 2023 that 70% of U.S. adults used social media for news.⁹ The loss of daily local news and consumers' easy access to lower-quality social media substitutes perpetuate the loss of confidence, which may also spill over into other institutional

domains as people consume and substitute expert findings with information from people who are not experts.¹⁰

Loss of confidence in our institutions threatens to undermine social order, respect for each other, acceptance of established and beneficial knowledge, and disregard for the law and safety of others, all norms of a democratic society.

At the heart of the problem is how we seem to have lost our way in seeking change when we are dissatisfied with governance or institutional actions that we disagree with. What we have lost is an essential lesson from our founders, as imperfect as they might have been. They emphasized reasoned discourse (and disagreement) and a modification of institutions, primarily governance, which needed change, not an abandonment of important governing and social institutions, as well as appropriate norms of behavior.¹¹

HOW DO WE RESTORE CONFIDENCE IN INSTITUTIONS?

As we already noted, the decline of confidence in American institutions affects most institutions—among them Congress, the Supreme Court, and religion—and has emerged over an extended period, surfacing as early as the 1960s. A shift of this magnitude and longevity is likely multifaceted and could take an equally broad array of initiatives to reverse declines in confidence.

IMPROVE INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE

Among the initiatives proposed to reverse declines in confidence is to improve the performance of institutions. Pew Research Center's surveys of trust and distrust in America¹² indicate many Americans believe changes in performance could increase confidence in institutions such as the federal government and Congress. Among the reforms perceived to be consequential for improving performance are less secrecy in government activities and more collaborative problem solving, replacing polarization and gridlock. Survey respondents frequently cite media coverage as another avenue for improving confidence in government and politics. Those respondents who refer to media coverage often mention a need for positive coverage of government and politics to offset more common attention to their problems and shortcomings.

REALIGN PERCEPTION WITH VALUES AND INSTITUTIONAL EXPECTATIONS

Although improving the performance of American institutions presents one answer to how we restore confidence, it may not be effective for all institutions and is only a partial solution even for those institutions for which improved performance may reverse declines in confidence. Another path for reversing the decline of confidence is for those responsible for stewarding institutions to avoid major contradictions between what Americans value in their institutions and what the institutions are perceived to represent. The decline of confidence in religion in America illustrates how elevated expectations and reality can diverge. Sex scandals in the Catholic Church and Southern Baptist Convention have triggered an erosion of confidence within these denominations and in religion in general. Some committed Catholics and Southern Baptists have acted in response to reports of abuse and misconduct by working for needed reforms—and, at times, by disaffiliating and beginning new institutions.

How stewards have managed the line between religion and politics has created another potential contradiction between expectations and reality affecting religion as an institution. The Moral Majority, founded in 1979 and dissolved in 1989, may be the most prominent example in recent memory of how a religious leader, Jerry Falwell, sought to tie religion to American politics. It is not the only example, but the years the Moral Majority was active immediately predate a sharp decline in religiosity in America.¹³ Tim Alberta—a staff writer for *The Atlantic*, a pastor's son, and an evangelical—documents the continuing struggle between religion and politics in his recent bestseller, *The Kingdom, The Power, and the Glory*.¹⁴ Alberta describes the consequences of American evangelicals seeking simultaneously to embrace politics and Jesus.

Religion is not the only institution to experience decline when confronting contradictions between institutional values and expectations. The federal civilian workforce—a long-standing mainstay of American democracy—has been attacked in recent years as a “deep state.” The label “deep state” originated in Turkey and Egypt and referred to how military and security agencies worked behind the scenes to affect politics.¹⁵ Defenders of the federal civilian workforce¹⁶ point to the essential role federal civil servants play in

assuring quality outcomes for citizens and protecting an ethical commitment to their constitutional oaths.

Critics of the administrative state indicate that federal civil servants enjoy excessive autonomy, giving them leverage over their superiors—including elected and appointed political leadership—in two ways that thwart democratic accountability.¹⁷ Poor performers can be difficult to remove, owing to civil service (e.g., reforms associated with the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978) and other legal protections (e.g., union contracts and equal employment appeals) that have emerged during the past 60 years. Calls for increased executive power, especially replacing civil servants with political appointees, stem in part from the belief the civil service is unresponsive and unaccountable to publicly elected officials.

Using their expertise and familiarity with administrative rules and processes has surfaced as a second, more sinister way federal civil servants can undermine democratic processes. David Bernhardt, secretary of the interior from 2019–21, documents a variety of cases across federal agencies in which federal civil servants resisted and used their strategic positions to resist or undermine their political superiors' directives and decisions.

REDUCE THE EFFECTS OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION

Reducing the effects of misinformation and disinformation is a third path for reversing the decline of public confidence in institutions. As we noted above, social media makes it easy for individuals to find a social community, which gives participants comfort and affirms their personal beliefs and grievances. The rise of social media has coincided with the decline of traditional print and broadcast media. These developments in the media landscape have diminished the reliability of information citizens receive.

How do we reduce the effects of misinformation and disinformation, which contribute to the erosion of institutions fundamental for healthy democratic systems? The Brookings Institution's Darrell West argues that "to maintain an open, democratic system, it is important that government, business, and consumers work together to solve these problems." His call for collaboration and collective action among government, business, and

consumers comes precisely at a moment when confidence in government and big business is at or near all-time lows and disinformation casts a dark cloud over collaborations among the partners West calls to "work together." The barriers to progress on this front are daunting.

Despite the barriers, West and others offer promising solutions. He identifies avoiding the pitfalls of government regulation as key and urges the government, businesses, the media, and technology companies to confront disinformation without sacrificing freedom of expression and journalistic professionalism. West suggests governments avoid censoring content, that the news industry focuses on high-quality journalism, and that technology companies identify fake news using algorithms and crowdsourcing.

Another solution is showing people examples of disinformation so they recognize the feel and look of fake news before exposure to it—"inoculating" them against it.^{18,19} Inoculation campaigns have had success outside the United States (for example, in Eastern Europe, to address misleading rhetoric about Ukrainian refugees). We, however, are unaware of the application of similar techniques in the United States.

The three paths for rebuilding confidence in institutions are neither sure-fire solutions nor the only paths forward. They represent a start for reestablishing the trust that is so vital for institutions to fulfill the purposes for which they emerged in the first place. So, the question for candidates is which paths will they pursue.

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