

Executive Summary

Trust in the public sector has been declining for years. According to the 2024 Gallup and Edelman Trust Barometer, the United States ranks last in trust in national institutions among the G7 countries. These institutions include the military, judicial system and national government, and the honesty of elections. There have been precipitous declines in trust in churches or organized religion, the banking system, public schools, higher education and the medical system. These institutions used to enjoy majority public support, and now, not one of them scores above 36% in trust.

Strong democracies rely on trust. Studies have shown that declining trust in key institutions correlates with openness to authoritarianism. Perceptions of fairness and impartiality regarding the public sector are also key to democratic legitimacy.

Trust must be built, not demanded. That is why a healthy skepticism and calls for accountability are also bedrocks of a thriving democracy. But high levels of distrust arising from frustrating experiences with the public sector's performance, while not necessarily stemming from an anti-democracy frame of mind, may lead to undercutting democratic institutions and democracy itself.

This report provides data on how people who need the public sector for food, health care and the ability to support their family face enormous obstacles to being able to access these benefits. The report details what individuals need to do to qualify for help in nine states: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Texas. The experiences in these states are replicated in others as well.

Numbers on a page when talking about millions in cuts or millions being thrown off the rolls do not really tell the human story. Let's take an example. Jessica has lost her job due to funding cuts in research at the university where she works in North Carolina. She is a college-educated, middle-aged, recent widow working on her master's degree and is now a single mother of three children between the ages of 10 and 15. She needs all the help she can get to keep food on the table, pay her mortgage, care for a disabled child, buy clothes for growing children, repay student loans, manage childcare costs while she looks for a job and receive health care for herself and her family.

To receive food assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), she must complete an eight-page application, with an additional two pages explaining the requirements and providing instructions on how to complete. SNAP also has work requirements.

To receive the North Carolina equivalent of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), she must complete a 10-page application. This program also has work requirements. She may need Medicaid and, therefore, would be required to complete a 20-page document, with one page for instructions.

But she is not yet done. After completing each application, she then needs to be interviewed by a caseworker from the Division of Social Services. The wait times for interviews may be growing due to underfunding of the public sector.

And, after all that, each program requires periodic recertification of eligibility — some even after just six months.

Cuts in these programs and additional documentation, paperwork and barriers will make life even more difficult for Jessica due to the Trump Administration's One Big Beautiful Bill Act.

For someone who is desperately in need to be required to go through such an arduous process is punitive. The public sector is supposed to serve. When it makes navigating life so difficult, it not only hurts individuals but also some of the very foundations of our democracy.