



Effective presidential transitions can earn the public's trust

Almost half of Americans are unsure a 2024 transition would be peaceful

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BY Paul Hitlin and Betsy Super



PARTNERSHIP FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

CENTER *for* PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

About the Center for Presidential Transition

The Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition is the nation's premier nonpartisan source of information and resources designed to help presidential candidates and their teams lay the groundwork for a new administration or for a president's second term.

About the Partnership

The Partnership for Public Service is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to revitalize the federal government by inspiring a new generation to serve and by transforming the way government works. The Partnership teams up with federal agencies and other stakeholders to make our government more effective and efficient.

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Photo credit: U.S. Marine Corp/Cpl. Christina O'Neil

Introduction

The peaceful transfer of power between presidential administrations is a hallmark of American democracy. While the United States ultimately transitioned to a new president on Inauguration Day 2021, the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and the unwillingness of the outgoing president to accept the results of the election demonstrated that a peaceful and orderly transfer of presidential power is not guaranteed.

We are almost two years out from a presidential transition to a new administration—should a new candidate win the 2024 election—or a transition to a second term. In either case, orderly transitions succeed with the cooperation of Congress along with years of planning by civil servants, sitting administrations and teams associated with the campaigns of presidential hopefuls. This work can only be effective if the public trusts that the people involved will honor the results of democratic elections and value the need for new administrations to prepare to govern even before taking office.

Following the tough transition of 2020-21, the Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition® sought to understand the country's views on the custom of presidential transfers of power. When we surveyed the public in 2022 about whether they agreed a peaceful transition would take place if a different candidate wins in 2024, 56% said they expected such a transition to be peaceful. At the same time, 25% said they disagreed a transfer would be peaceful and another 19% said they were unsure. Combined, that means 44%—almost half—of Americans were uncertain that a possible 2024 transition to a new president would go smoothly.

The respondents' uncertainty should serve as a call to action and an opportunity. Government leaders and organizations such as the Center for Presidential Transition must support public understanding of the importance of peaceful transitions as a critical function of our democracy. They must also make certain that safeguards are in place to ensure election results are observed. The more people who expect an orderly and peaceful transfer of power, the more that all groups involved in transitions will devote valuable resources to the planning and execution in the best interests of the country.

If a different candidate wins the 2024 presidential election, there will be a peaceful transition of power to the newly elected president.

	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
Overall	56	25	19
Dems	61	20	19
Female Dems	56	22	22
Male Dems	66	18	17
GOP	54	32	14
Female GOP	44	41	16
Male GOP	64	23	13
Ind/DK	53	24	24
Female	49	29	22
Male	64	21	15
Under 50	54	28	18
50+	59	22	20
Non-college grad	54	26	20
College grad	61	23	16
Post grad degree	73	15	12

Table: Partnership for Public Service • Source: Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition survey of 800 U.S. adults from Nov. 29 to Dec. 6, 2022. • Created with Datawrapper



Photo credit: U.S. Department of State

Trust in a peaceful transfer of power in 2024

Survey respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: If a different candidate wins the 2024 presidential election, there will be a peaceful transition of power to the newly elected president.

More than half (56%) agree that there would be a peaceful transfer of power. One-quarter say they disagree, and 19% say they do not know—possibly because many Americans do not think much about transitions.

For self-identified Democrats, 61% predict a peaceful transfer of power, compared with 20% who do not and 19% who do not know. Republicans express slightly less confidence—54% agree, 32% disagree and 14% do not know.

Previous research shows partisan affiliation often affects political views more than most other demographic differences.¹ However, the Center’s poll shows that gender affects levels of trust in the peaceful transfer of power more than political affiliation. For all Americans, far more men (64%) expect a peaceful transfer of power than women (49%). The gender split within each party—especially for Republicans—is notable. Forty-four percent of female Republicans say there will be a peaceful transfer of power, compared with 64% of Republican males. The gender split among Democrats is smaller, but still significant. Almost the same number of Democratic males (66%) agree with the statement as Republican males, but just 56% of female Democrats agree.

¹ Sides, J., Tesler, M., & Vavreck, L. (2017). “The 2016 U.S. Election: How Trump Lost and Won.” *Journal of Democracy* 28(2), 34-44. doi:10.1353/jod.2017.0022; Camobreco, J., & He, Z. (2022). “The Party-Line Pandemic: A Closer Look at the Partisan Response to COVID-19.” *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 55(1), 13-21. doi:10.1017/S1049096521000901



Photo credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Trust in civil servants during a presidential transition

Slightly more of the public expresses trust in civil servants than in a peaceful transition itself. Civil servants are the federal employees who have the responsibility to make sure every agency is ready for a potential change in administration.

Some 63% of respondents say they trust civil servants “a lot” or “somewhat” to faithfully carry out a transition to power. By contrast, 25% say they trust them “not too much” or “not at all.” Another 12% say they do not know.

Unlike the question on a peaceful transfer of power, trust in the role of civil servants differs more by partisanship than by gender. Almost three-quarters of Democrats (73%) trust civil servants to faithfully carry out a transition compared with 58% of Republicans. The gender difference is within the margin of error, with 64% of men and 62% of women trusting civil servants.

If a different candidate wins the 2024 presidential election, how much do you trust civil servants to faithfully carry out the transition of power to the newly elected president?

	A lot/ somewhat	Not too much/ not at all	Don't know
Overall	63	25	12
Dems	73	17	10
Female Dems	73	19	8
Male Dems	74	15	10
GOP	58	31	11
Female GOP	56	28	16
Male GOP	61	33	6
Ind/DK	55	26	19
Female	62	24	15
Male	64	26	10
Under 50	62	25	13
50+	65	24	11
Non-college grad	61	25	14
College grad	69	23	9
Post grad degree	74	20	6

Table: Partnership for Public Service • Source: Partnership for Public Service's Center for Presidential Transition survey of 800 U.S. adults from Nov. 29 to Dec. 6, 2022. • Created with Datawrapper

In addition, people who expect a peaceful transfer of power are also more likely to trust civil servants to faithfully carry out their responsibilities. More than 80% of respondents who envision a peaceful transfer of power also say they trust civil servants at least somewhat. By comparison, about 40% of those who do not expect or are unsure about a peaceful transition say they trust civil servants.



Photo credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture

Recommendations to increase trust in presidential transitions

These findings should serve as a call to action for individuals and organizations invested in a strong democracy and in the political stability that peaceful presidential transitions offer the United States. Based on this most recent survey, along with the Center’s [previous work](#), the Center recommends federal leaders and non-governmental organizations who are concerned about government effectiveness use two strategies to improve public trust in the peaceful transfer of power.



RECOMMENDATION 1

EMPHASIZE THE NONPARTISAN NATURE OF TRANSITION WORK.

Transitions represent the fulcrum between elections and governing. As a result, it can be easy to view them as the extension of a partisan political process. However, transitions are most effective when leaders from different administrations and political parties cooperate in the best interest of the country. Making clear the distinction between the political nature of elections versus the nonpartisan work that is necessary before, during and after elections is crucial for improving trust in the presidential transition process. Congress must also continue to perform its constitutional duties regarding the counting of electoral votes and supporting the work of the civil service to enact transitions. Indeed, other research shows that a major driver of declining trust of the government is when people perceive leaders are engaged in high levels of partisan

conflict.² An emphasis on nonpartisanship, highlighting that much of our government’s work is about protecting the country and its people—issues usually removed from politics—can address the roots of mistrust, as can sharing stories of this work and making clear where the norms of cooperation remain strong.



RECOMMENDATION 2

INCREASE THE PUBLIC’S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITIONS.

One way to bolster trust is to increase the understanding of transitions for all Americans—especially for segments of the population who have not thought much about whether they trust that a transfer of power would be peaceful. Educational efforts lend themselves to a variety of settings including public campaigns and the offices of public affairs within federal agencies. By focusing on what individuals want to know about transitions and finding ways to provide accessible, nonpartisan and relevant information, it is possible to increase Americans’ trust that presidential transitions will be peaceful and effective.

² Hetherington, M. and Rudolph, T. (2015). “Political trust and Polarization,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, ed. E. Uslaner. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Conclusion

The fact that only about half of Americans express confidence that a peaceful transfer of power to a new president would occur after the 2024 presidential election speaks to the enormous challenges facing civil servants, leaders and the public in our polarized times.

By emphasizing the nonpartisan nature of presidential transitions, underlining the importance of competently administering them, and increasing knowledge about the transfer of power, the opportunity is ripe for agency leaders, educators and civil society organizations to move the needle on public trust in a core facet of our democracy.



Methodology

The Center administered an online questionnaire gauging public opinion on presidential transitions and other government-focused topics in conjunction with [Impact Research](#). The online and text-to-web poll was completed by a random selection of 800 Americans from Nov. 29 to Dec. 6, 2022. Surveys were conducted in English and Spanish. The distribution of the survey and the weighting of the data were constructed to accurately reflect the full adult population of the U.S. with a margin of error of ± 3.5 percentage points. Partisanship was a self-identified measure on a 5-point scale. People identifying as leaning Republican or leaning Democratic were included in the overall Republican or Democratic groups.

Authors



Paul Hitlin manages research for the Partnership’s Center for Presidential Transition including the organization’s presidential appointment tracker produced in collaboration with The Washington Post. He also helps lead the Partnership’s research on public trust of the federal government. Paul believes information should be a public good, an idea that informed his work at the Pew Research Center where he studied media, technology and data science. Paul’s favorite public servant is former Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone who was well-known for his commitment to community organizing and campaign finance reform.



Betsy Super oversees operational activities and the integration of the Center’s work across the Partnership. Previously, Betsy worked in nonprofits and at universities, including on programs connecting public servants and the public with relevant social science research. She has been interested in how public service can improve people’s lives since learning about how her grandfather, trained as a psychologist, served in the Army Air Corp to support pilots’ reintegration into civilian life at the end of World War II. In addition to her brother, Betsy’s favorite public servants are John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who together created the model for the transition of power between outgoing and incoming administrations over 200 years ago.

Project Team

Valerie Smith Boyd

Director, Center for Presidential Transition

Audrey Pfund

Creative Director

Samantha Donaldson

Vice President, Communications

Nicky Santoso

Digital Design Associate

Barry Goldberg

Senior Writer and Editor

Max Stier

President and CEO

Paul Hitlin

Senior Research Manager

Betsy Super

Senior Manager, Center for Presidential Transition

Ellen Perlman

Senior Writer and Editor

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CENTER *for* PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION

600 14th Street NW
Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005

presidentialtransition.org
(202) 775-9111

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 [rpublicservice](https://www.instagram.com/rpublicservice)