# EXECUTIVE FINDINGS </>

*U.S. Rule of Law Trends and the 2024 Election* provides a comprehensive overview of how citizens perceive and experience the rule of law in the United States and their perceptions about the institutions governing the 2024 elections. The results from the World Justice Project (WJP) General Population Poll 2024 show a decrease in the perception of the rule of law in the country compared to previous years.

## SECTION 1: Rule of Law and Trust

The current state of the rule of law in the United States is viewed negatively by a majority of Americans, despite their positive associations with the concept of rule of law itself. This dichotomy reflects growing concerns over the actual implementation and integrity of the rule of law within the country. While both Democrats and Republicans overwhelmingly agree on the critical importance of the rule of law for the future of the United States, its democracy, and their own lives, these shared values mask deeper concerns about the erosion of accountability and institutional trust.

Since 2013, public perception of accountability, particularly concerning high-ranking officials, has significantly declined, with a 30 percentage-point drop in those who believe these individuals would be held accountable for breaking the law. Although this perception has slightly improved between 2021 and 2024, accountability remains a critical issue, and the public's views are increasingly divided along partisan lines. Democrats have shown an increasing belief in accountability for high-ranking officials, while Republicans have become more skeptical. Additionally, the erosion of rule of law values is evident, with declining percentages of Americans favoring citizen participation over government efficiency and believing that the president should always obey the law and courts. Moreover, there has been a slight increase in those who believe it is unnecessary for people to obey the laws of a government they did not vote for, indicating a potential weakening of civic responsibility and respect for legal frameworks.

The public's confidence in institutions designed to check executive power, such as Congress and the courts, has also diminished since 2014, although there has been a slight recovery between 2021 and 2024. Interestingly, the only group that has seen a net increase in confidence to stop illegal actions by the president is the citizens themselves. This suggests a shift towards people’s faith in grassroots accountability rather than institutional checks.

Partisan differences further complicate these trends. Historically Republicans have had greater trust than Democrats have had in both citizens and institutions to check executive authority, but Republicans’ confidence has eroded since 2018, while Democrats’ confidence has increased. By 2024, Democrats’ trust in all of these checks on executive authority exceeded Republicans’.

Overall trust in many key institutions has eroded since 2018, with a particularly significant decline in confidence in judges and the media. Trust in local government officials has increased slightly, but national officials still hold more trust overall. Partisan differences persist, with Democrats generally trust media, executive, and judicial officials more than Republicans, who maintain higher trust in the police than do Democrats. Since 2018, Democrats’ trust has declined most significantly in the media, while Republicans’ trust has declined most significantly in prosecutors and judges. These trends underscore a growing polarization in perceptions of institutional integrity and fairness.

Generally, public perception of the justice system’s fairness and independence has significantly deteriorated since 2018, though there has been a notable improvement in the perceived independence of prosecutors between 2021 and 2024. These shifts are also influenced by political affiliation, with Democrats showing increased confidence in the fairness and independence of the justice system, while Republicans’ confidence has deteriorated sharply.

## SECTION 2: Perceptions on the 2024 Presidential Elections

The 2024 presidential election is poised to be a deeply polarizing event, with confidence in the electoral process heavily dependent on political affiliation. Democrats generally express more confidence in the fairness and legitimacy of elections compared to Republicans, with the notable exception of voting rights, where Republicans are more likely to believe that voting is equally accessible and convenient for all citizens.

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The legitimacy of the 2024 presidential election results is also in question, with approximately one-third of the electorate indicating they would not accept the results as legitimate if their preferred candidate does not win. This sentiment is particularly strong among Republicans, nearly half of whom say they would not accept the election results if the Democratic candidate wins. This points to a potential crisis of legitimacy that could undermine the stability of the electoral process.

In the event of contested election results, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to trust local and state election workers, courts, and Congress to fairly determine the outcome, while Republicans place greater trust in the Supreme Court than do Democrats. This divergence in trust reflects broader partisan divisions in perceptions of institutional integrity and fairness.

The findings of the 2024 WJP US General Population Poll underscore the mounting challenges to the rule of law in the United States, which ranked 26th out of 142 countries in the 2023 WJP Rule of Law Index. While the public continues to express a broad commitment to rule of law principles, the erosion of trust in key institutions, growing partisan divides, and the increasingly precarious perception of accountability pose significant threats to the nation's democratic foundation. The United States, long regarded as a global standard-bearer for the rule of law, now faces internal weaknesses that threaten this status.

As the 2024 presidential election approaches, the stakes are high. The deepening polarization and mistrust, especially concerning the electoral process and the judiciary, highlights the need for renewed efforts to restore faith in the rule of law. Without such efforts, the United States risks further erosion of its democratic institutions and the very principles that have long underpinned its global leadership in the rule of law. The path forward must involve addressing these issues head-on, strengthening citizens’ understanding of U.S. government and electoral processes, fostering a more inclusive, transparent, and accountable legal system, and ensuring that all Americans, regardless of political affiliation, can trust in the fairness and impartiality of the nation's institutions.

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