

By the People, For the People: Celebrating 250 Years through Renewed Emphasis on Governance

Rebecca Rutland Soulen
Princeton University
School of Public and International Affairs

By the People, For the People: Celebrating 250 Years through Renewed Emphasis on Governance

Summary

On July 4th, 2026, the United States will celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This historic commemoration offers a fitting time to reintroduce the federal government to the country. According to the Pew Research Center, four in five Americans trust the government “only some of the time” or “never.”¹ In response to these troubling levels of distrust, the next administration should launch a campaign called “By the People, For the People” to reinvigorate the federal government’s commitment to accessibility, accountability, and transparency. The start of a new administration can shape history by changing how Americans feel about the federal government and reshaping how we consider our country after 250 years.

Background

In 1958, a resounding 73% of Americans trusted the government.² Today, it’s at a near record low of 23%.³ Although this is one of the lowest levels since polling began, individual departments and agencies enjoy more favorable perceptions.⁴ This is encouraging, since Americans are presumably more familiar with specific departments and agencies than the nebulous “government.” A new administration presents an opportune time to capitalize on these feelings, spark excitement for the 250th anniversary, and increase favorable attitudes toward the federal government.

The federal government has a program that attempts to address these issues, but it is not strategically located. The United States is a founding member of the Open Governance Partnership, an international organization designed to increase accessible, accountable, and transparent governance throughout member countries.⁵ The General Service Administration (GSA) manages the federal government’s responsibilities to the Open Governance Partnership, including a biannual action plan on improving governance through increasing access to information, supporting public engagement, rethinking program delivery, combating corruption, and guaranteeing the rule of law. The problem is that this strategy is buried in the bowels of the GSA, which is often thought of as the “landlord” of the federal government.⁶ While GSA has

¹ Peter Bell, “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), June 24, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>; “2024 Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel” (Pew Research Center, April 2024), 13, https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/06/PP_2024.6.24_role-of-government_TOPLINE.pdf.

² Bell, “Public Trust in Government.”

³ Bell.

⁴ Andy Cerda, “Americans Feel Favorably about Many Federal Agencies, Especially the Park Service, Postal Service and NASA,” *Pew Research Center* (blog), August 12, 2024, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/08/12/americans-see-many-federal-agencies-favorably-but-republicans-grow-more-critical-of-justice-department/>.

⁵ “U.S. Open Government Initiative,” U.S. General Services Administration, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.gsa.gov/governmentwide-initiatives/us-open-government>.

⁶ “GSA at 75: A Federal Landlord and a Good Neighbor,” U.S. General Services Administration, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.gsa.gov/blog/2024/07/10/gsa-at-75-a-federal-landlord-and-a-good-neighbor>.

done much with the resources it has,⁷ it lacks the political cachet, authority, or vision to deliver good governance practices for the entire federal government. The federal government superficially fulfills its obligations to the Open Government Partnership without creating deep engagement or lasting change. As a democracy, governance that meets the needs and champions the rights of Americans should be a cornerstone of the federal government.

Recommendation

I recommend that the new administration champions transparent government for all through a campaign called “By the People, For the People.” The administration would use an executive order to elevate a government-wide action plan to the Executive Office of the President (EOP), implement best practices in agencies, and deliver public-relations messaging that humanizes the federal government to Americans. Together, these efforts would re-establish the federal government’s relationship to Americans as one that is grounded in responsive service. In fact, previous administrations provide blueprints for this. For example, on his first day in office, President Biden signed an executive order on equity and racial justice that set the tone for his administration.⁸

Executive Order Contents

Without clear direction and a whole-of-government approach, transparency and accountability efforts will languish. A new executive order, by virtue of being a directive from the President, provides focus and galvanizes agencies in the pursuit of a well-defined goal. The executive order would build off the [Fifth U.S. Open Government Action Plan](#) and create the Office of Open Governance (OPEN) in the EOP, while leaving technical expertise with GSA (similar to how the Council on Environmental Quality and the Environmental Protection Agency work together). By elevating extant programs, the executive order would leverage current structures, resources, and personnel, while invigorating work.

Table of Key Actions in the “By the People, For the People” Executive Order

New Initiatives	Agency Action	Public Relations
1. Create Office of Open Governance	1. Complete all outstanding Government Accountability Office recommendations within 3 years	1. Release an ad campaign
2. Designate Chief Transparency Officers in every department or agency	2. Implement best open governance practices	2. Launch a traveling exhibit on open governance
3. Create Council of Chief Transparency Officers		3. Establish open governance awards

New Initiatives

⁷ “U.S. Open Government Secretariat: Year One in Review” (General Services Administration, September 2024), <https://www.gsa.gov/system/files/Open-Government-Secretariat--Year-End-in-Review.pdf>.

⁸ “Advancing Equity and Racial Justice Through the Federal Government,” The White House, accessed September 22, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/equity/>.

The new administration can transform how governance is treated at the federal level by doing the following three actions:

1. *Creating an Office of Open Governance:* Creating OPEN in the EOP would give open governance more political support and visibility. This office would take responsibility for implementing the executive order, creating and monitoring biannual action plans, producing training, and leading a whole-of-government approach to open governance. GSA staff would support these efforts, thus combining the expertise at GSA with the coordination power of the White House.
2. *Designating Chief Transparency Officers:* Currently, agencies lack designated staff on open governance. Every department or agency would designate a Chief Transparency Officer. Their duties would include coordinating agency responsibilities in the action plan and championing best practices throughout their agency. They would also serve as public advocates to identify meaningful ways to engage the public in agency policymaking and program delivery.
3. *Creating a Council of Open Governance:* All Chief Transparency Officers would join a Council on Open Governance convened by OPEN. The Council would give civil servants a voice in the biannual action plan, provide continuity and longevity, raise the profile of transparency, and ensure subject-matter expertise on programs.

Agency Action

In addition, the executive order would include immediate agency action to diffuse governance practices throughout the government including:

1. *Completing Outstanding Government Accountability Office Recommendations:* As of 2023, GAO reported that 25% of its past recommendations had not been implemented.⁹ Yet the GAO returns \$84 dollars on every \$1 invested in it.¹⁰ Financial stewardship is tied together with good governance. Agencies could realize additional benefits by implementing recommendations. Agencies would be required to complete all outstanding GAO recommendations within 3 years of the incoming administration. An agency could opt-out of a specific recommendation if a study proved it to be infeasible.
2. *Implementing Best Practices:* Many governance practices are satisfyingly concrete. Agencies would prepare civil servants to implement them by:
 - Requiring the federal training produced by OPEN
 - Adding open governance metrics to Senior Executive Service members performance plans

These actions would prepare civil servants to:

- Use plain language techniques
- Proactively share information with the public
- Increase monitoring and evaluation of program delivery
- Use evidence-based practices in policy and program formulation

Public-Relations Messaging

Just as important as elevating open governance is demonstrating to the public that the federal government is accessible, accountable, and transparent through these three actions:

⁹ “Performance and Accountability Report: Fiscal Year 2023,” *Government Accountability Office*, GAO-24-900483, November 15, 2023, 18, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/d24900483.pdf>.

¹⁰ “Performance and Accountability Report: Fiscal Year 2023,” 18.

1. *Releasing an Ad Campaign*: OPEN and other federal partners would collaborate with the Ad Council to create a public campaign for Americans about accessing government information and data. This could include showing how to file a request for information, finding information online, or accessing national archives.
2. *Launching a Traveling Exhibit on Open Governance*: Curators from the Smithsonian Institution would be invited to advise the Council of Open Governance and OPEN on the design of a traveling exhibit. This exhibit would educate Americans in places like schools, libraries, and museums on the principles and practices of open governance.
3. *Establishing Open Governance Awards*: OPEN would solicit agency nominations for their best initiatives, and the public would vote. The award ceremony would be a celebratory event for civil servants to be recognized by the public for governance practices.

Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

Any initiative can be hamstrung by a lack of resources, time, or commitment. Fortunately, the restructuring and agency actions outlined in “By the People, For the People” are designed to make use of existing government projects, programs, and staff.

Although this proposal would add 10-15 new positions, this is a low-cost, high-impact way to transform governance. In contrast, the public relations campaign cannot rely on existing resources. If the Ad Council were unable to take on this campaign, agency funding and staff would be needed.

Although this proposal would create new layers of bureaucracy, in doing so it would streamline work. Successful institutions are designed to match their purpose,¹¹ but, currently, the federal government is deprioritizing what should be most fundamental to its work: democratic governance.

Conclusion

The 250th anniversary of the United States of America is a time for celebration and reflection. The administration can transform how Americans experience the federal government through initiatives that are *already* in the civil service. Through an executive order, the administration can give voice, direction, and vision to these crucial efforts to imbue the government with accessible, accountable, and transparent tenets that embody our democratic process. This campaign can help to restore Americans’ trust in government and show that we are, truly, a government “By the People, For the People.”

¹¹ Geoff Mulgan, *The Art of Public Strategy: Mobilizing Power and Knowledge for the Common Good* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2009), 112, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/princeton/detail.action?docID=431136>.

Bibliography

- “2024 Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel.” Pew Research Center, April 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2024/06/PP_2024.6.24_role-of-government_TOPLINE.pdf.
- Bell, Peter. “Public Trust in Government: 1958-2024.” *Pew Research Center* (blog), June 24, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/>.
- Cerda, Andy. “Americans Feel Favorably about Many Federal Agencies, Especially the Park Service, Postal Service and NASA.” *Pew Research Center* (blog), August 12, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/08/12/americans-see-many-federal-agencies-favorably-but-republicans-grow-more-critical-of-justice-department/>.
- Mulgan, Geoff. *The Art of Public Strategy: Mobilizing Power and Knowledge for the Common Good*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2009. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/princeton/detail.action?docID=431136>.
- “Performance and Accountability Report: Fiscal Year 2023.” *Government Accountability Office*, GAO-24-900483, November 15, 2023. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/d24900483.pdf>.
- The White House. “Advancing Equity and Racial Justice Through the Federal Government.” Accessed September 22, 2024. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/equity/>.
- U.S. General Services Administration. “GSA at 75: A Federal Landlord and a Good Neighbor.” Accessed September 22, 2024. <https://www.gsa.gov/blog/2024/07/10/gsa-at-75-a-federal-landlord-and-a-good-neighbor>.
- U.S. General Services Administration. “U.S. Open Government Initiative.” Accessed September 22, 2024. <https://www.gsa.gov/governmentwide-initiatives/us-open-government>.
- “U.S. Open Government Secretariat: Year One in Review.” General Services Administration, September 2024. <https://www.gsa.gov/system/files/Open-Government-Secretariat--Year-End-in-Review.pdf>.