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The Pew Charitable Trusts

Trust

As America celebrates 250 Years

Pew continues its work to strengthen democracy

Winter 2026 | Vol. 28, No. 1

The Pew Charitable Trusts

49%

A national poll by The Pew Charitable Trusts found that people with disabilities are far more likely to have engaged with the court system—49%—than those without disabilities (29%).

Despite legal requirements to provide reasonable accommodations for court users with disabilities and calls from court leadership to enhance access for all, the accessibility needs of people with disabilities often go unmet. Pew's courts and communities project works to build open, effective, and equitable state and local legal systems that enable all people to meaningfully participate in court processes.

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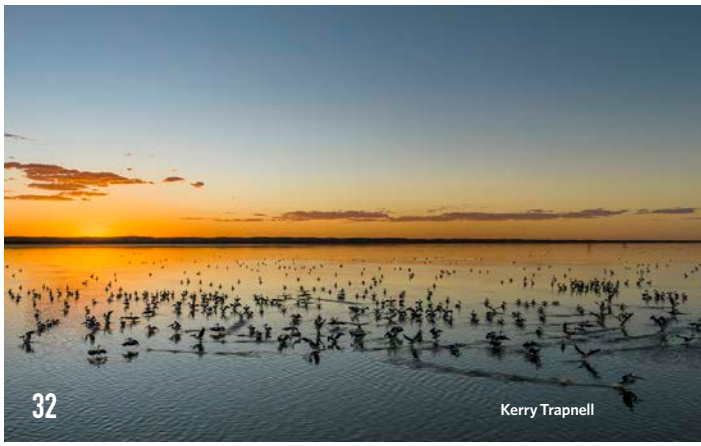

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Founded in 1948, The Pew Charitable Trusts uses data to make a difference. Pew addresses the challenges of a changing world by illuminating issues, creating common ground, and advancing ambitious projects that lead to tangible progress.

The Power of an Informed Citizenry

As Americans come together to celebrate the 250th anniversary of our nation's founding, many of us are reflecting on the aspirations expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Self-governance, preservation of liberty, and protection of the rights of the people were inspiring goals in 1776. And one of the key debates after independence was simple: how best to ensure that the people had the information they needed to fully participate in the new republic.

The Pew Charitable Trusts was founded in Philadelphia in 1948, and the American ideals of a pluralist, striving citizenry were hardwired into our organization. A commitment to an informed populace and a responsive government initially led members of the Pew family to fund schools and universities. Decades later, the same impulse led to an interest in understanding the views of a changing country, explaining public attitudes—especially through Pew Research Center work—and finding common ground on matters of public policy.

In many ways, access to information is the lifeblood of democracy, creating a base of facts for more focused and civil conversations, as well as both innovation and compromise. And that's as true today as it was in 1776 and 1948. This issue of *Trust* highlights some of our accomplishments from last year and demonstrates a multitude of ways in which data enhances civic discussion and sound policy—locally, nationally, and globally.

At the state level, Pew's evidence-based technical assistance included work in Connecticut, which made significant progress in recession-proofing its budget. Our analyses helped to inform changes to the Illinois court system that improved efficiencies and helped people in consumer debt cases. And our research supported a package of legislation in Texas to increase the construction of more affordable homes that is a model for other states.

Pew also supported the latest documentary from filmmaker Ken Burns, "The American Revolution," and sponsored a panel discussion at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia about using our shared history to inspire civil dialogue today. That discussion was later broadcast nationally on PBS, and you can read more about it—as well as an interview with Burns—in this issue.

Showcasing Pew's international support for research-based conservation, this issue also covers the ratification of two international treaties that promise to enhance biodiversity and provide benefits to communities worldwide. These agreements required intense negotiations—and environmental science amplified by Pew and our partners was essential to earning their passage. We also highlight two important ecosystems on opposite sides of the Pacific: Australia's Channel Country and South America's Gran Chaco and Pantanal. In these sparsely populated regions, nature, commerce, and Indigenous knowledge and practices are creating more sustainable land management approaches.

What ties our work together is our historic commitment to civil dialogue underpinned by data and research. Pew's founders believed in the power of an informed citizenry to collectively make decisions through the democratic process. As stewards of the organization and our founders' values, all of us at Pew have remained committed to this goal, helping policymakers across eras to use data to make a difference.

Susan K. Urahn, *President and CEO*

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THE BIG PICTURE

Immortalized in bronze, a life-size Alexander Hamilton stands among other signers of the U.S. Constitution in Philadelphia's National Constitution Center, a longtime grantee of The Pew Charitable Trusts. The scene brings to life the final day of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, when the founders reached compromises on their major disagreements—the balance of power between states, the election of a president, and the future of slavery—and gave birth to the United States of America.

The Pew Charitable Trusts

Sebnem Coskun/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

It's Time to Act Boldly on Plastic

BY JENNIFER V. DOCTORS

Plastic pollution has become ubiquitous in modern times, and more use of plastic means more of it discarded in the environment. The evidence is everywhere—along the side of the road, hanging from trees, or littering beaches—and that's just the plastic that's easy to see. But plastic is also in drinking water, the air and soil, and even people's bodies, where it is linked to health risks to digestive and reproductive systems. And plastic production and the open burning of plastic waste can also contribute to heart disease, asthma, cancer, and more. By 2040, one of two things is possible: Plastic pollution will more than double, threatening the climate, the Earth's biodiversity, and human health—or the global community will transform the world's plastic system to cut 83% of plastic pollution flowing into the environment and drastically reduce the risks to people and the planet.

Those choices are outlined in a major new report from The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Breaking the Plastic Wave 2025: An Assessment of the Global System and Strategies for Transformative Change," which documents the scale of today's plastic pollution problem and details a slate of policies that can solve it within a generation. The research expands on Pew's groundbreaking 2020 study of plastic pollution in the global ocean to also examine plastic pollution on land and in the air; take a deeper dive into microplastic pollution; and explore plastic's toll on the environment and human health.

The report also delves into an array of policies proven to address this growing threat while considering the social and economic implications of changing how plastic is made, used, and disposed of worldwide. The policies center on four themes: establishing measures to reduce plastic production and use; rethinking chemical, product (packaging, toys, tires, etc.), and system design; expanding participatory waste management systems; and creating transparency around the plastic supply chain.

"Breaking the Plastic Wave 2025" outlines two scenarios for plastic pollution and its associated risks through 2040: Business as usual, which assumes no action by the global community; and system transformation, which presumes a prompt worldwide effort to reimagine the plastic system.

Under business as usual, plastic pollution more than doubles, dramatically increasing the human health effects of plastics as well as greenhouse gas emissions over the next 15 years.

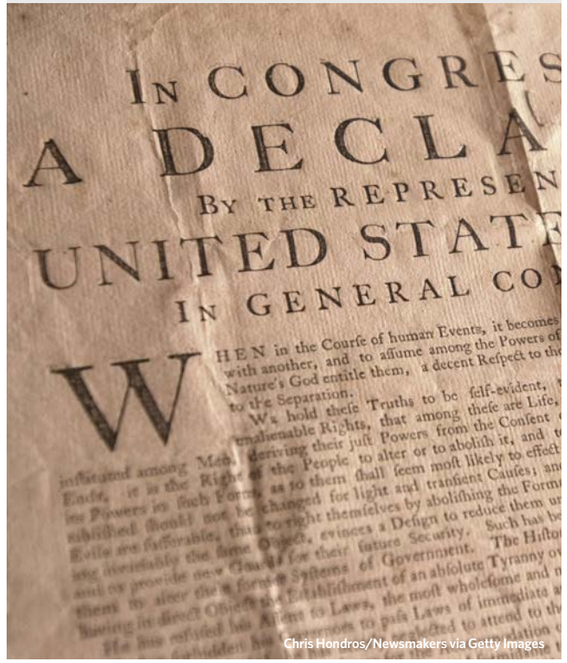
By comparison, system transformation cuts annual plastic pollution by 83%, including nearly ending pollution from plastic packaging, and reduces greenhouse gas emissions and harm to human health from plastic by 54% and 38%, respectively—all while saving governments worldwide about $US19 billion a year. "This is a solvable problem within a generation," says Winnie Lau, who leads Pew's work to reduce plastic pollution. "Our report lays out a clear path to significantly cut plastic pollution and the threat it poses to people and the planet. The only question is, will the world act with ambition and urgency to meet this challenge?"

Independence, Documented

To celebrate the upcoming 250th anniversary of the United States, an exhibition at Philadelphia's Museum of the American Revolution shines a light on the history and ripple effects of the nation's Declaration of Independence. An array of documents shows how the declaration has influenced rights movements in more than 100 nations around the world, including how declaration documents from Chile, Czechoslovakia, Haiti, Mexico, and South Korea as well as Native American Declarations of Sovereignty and Independence have integrated the declaration's ideals. The exhibit, "The Declaration's Journey," also includes artifacts that touch on the document's history and importance, such as the chair that Thomas Jefferson is thought to have used in 1776 while writing the declaration; the hard metal bench upon which Martin Luther King Jr. composed "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" in 1963; the desk used by Elizabeth Cady Stanton while she wrote *The History of Woman Suffrage*; and a copy of the 1852 Frederick Douglass speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"

The exhibit, funded in part by The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, will be on display until Jan. 3, 2027.

—Daniel LeDuc



Chris Hondros/Newsmakers via Getty Images

State Reserves Recede

In fiscal year 2025, the capacity of states' rainy day funds—meaning the number of days they could cover state operations—fell for the first time since the Great Recession of 2007-09. According to estimated numbers from the National Association of State Budget Officers, at the end of fiscal 2025, the median state could run operations for 46.9 days, down from the fiscal 2024 record high of 53.2 days. While the decrease represents a major shift, most states retain more money in rainy day funds than they had before the pandemic, according to analysis from The Pew Charitable Trusts' Fiscal 50 project, which provides data and research on state fiscal conditions.

However, this resource can vary: 22 states increased rainy day fund capacity in fiscal 2025. Of those, 18 increased reserve balances, while four had flat reserves but decreased their expenses. States are also depleting their leftover budget dollars, or ending balances, at the fastest rate since the Great Recession. As a result, the overall fiscal cushions—reserves plus ending balances—in states are rapidly declining, leaving them with fewer resources to address widespread budget imbalances, both current and projected.

At the same time, demands are growing on reserve balances. Another layer of risk for state budgets is created by increased uncertainty around the availability of federal funding—including aid in the event of a recession and perennial support for health care, transportation, education, and other key public services. While reserves cannot permanently replace such federal support, they can act as a temporary bridge that provides policymakers with time to assess their options. Further, elevated recession risk means that states may also need reserves for their traditional purpose of helping to close shortfalls during economic downturns. "States should use fiscal management tools to navigate these competing demands, especially long-term budget assessments and stress tests, to ensure that their savings levels are adequate," says Justin Theal, who works on Pew's Fiscal 50 project. "And states should regularly update these analyses to adapt to the rapidly evolving fiscal landscape."

As policymakers navigate today's fiscal pressures—the greatest since at least 2020—budget reserves will be a crucial tool that can help stabilize state finances. But leaders need to be careful about relying on rainy day funds to close deficits because many states' budget gaps stem from structural imbalances—when recurring revenue cannot support recurring expenditures—rather than short-term shocks. While reserves can help during times of need, they're not a sustainable solution for persistent shortfalls.

— Demetra Aposporos

FROM OCEAN AND LAND CONSERVATION TO SOLUTIONS EASING THE NATION'S HOUSING SHORTAGE, PEW WORKED TIRELESSLY LAST YEAR TO IMPROVE PEOPLE'S LIVES AND HELP COMMUNITIES THRIVE.

A Year of Taking ACTION

PROTECTION FOR THE *High Seas*

A historic United Nations treaty to protect the high seas received its 60th ratification in September, allowing it to enter into force at the beginning of 2026. The high seas—areas beyond any national jurisdiction—cover two-thirds of the ocean. The agreement paves the way for parties to the treaty to establish marine protected areas, which can help governments meet the target of preserving 30% of the ocean by 2030, a goal adopted by 200 countries in 2022.

The treaty also allows assessments of environmental impacts to ensure that new and unregulated high seas activities minimize damage to marine life, permits transfers of marine technologies, and ensures that monetary and nonmonetary benefits from the genetic materials of sea life are shared with developing countries.

Pew worked for passage of the treaty and praised the speed of the process, saying it demonstrates the power of multilateralism.

Benjamin Lowy/Getty Images

Benjamin Lowy/Getty Images

Philadelphia

The Philadelphia Tax Reform Commission issued a report in February with findings and recommendations from its review of the city's tax structures at a time of major shifts in the local economy and in federal aid. Pew provided technical assistance and ideas, several of which are reflected in the commission's report. The effort was part of the continuing work to support city policymakers in strengthening fiscal management in Pew's hometown.

Crowds bustle through Reading Terminal Market in Center City Philadelphia.
Kriston Jae Bethel for The Pew Charitable Trusts

Expanding Housing IN TEXAS

With the nation facing a severe housing shortage, Texas took major steps in June to make it easier to build more homes. Seven bipartisan laws, based on evidence-based practices, will reduce barriers to permitting and construction that drive up development costs; increase the overall housing supply; and expand consumer choice so that buyers and renters don't have to spend more than they can afford.

The laws allow homes on small lots, apartments on commercially zoned land, office-to-residential conversions, single-stair small apartment buildings, and manufactured housing in more areas; reform permitting; and remove roommate restrictions in college towns.

Pew provided technical assistance for the office-to-residential legislation, and its research was used extensively in support of the other legislation. The Texas laws provide a model for other states as they seek to address housing shortages, improve affordability, bring homeownership within reach of more people, and reduce homelessness.

Brandon Bell/Getty Images

Court REFORMS

Illinois will exempt $1,000 in a person's bank account from garnishment in consumer debt cases, eliminating the need for people to request this protection in court, under legislation signed into law in June. Supporters of the new law relied on Pew research showing that few people request these exemptions. Automating the protection reduces burdens on the public and court staff. Pew's research, which seeks to improve public participation in the courts by reducing costs for people and removing unnecessary interactions with the system, also informed an Illinois Supreme Court order issued in April that removes fees for people responding to consumer debt and guardianship cases.

Brian Finke/Kintzing

STATE FISCAL *Improvements*

Connecticut's legislative and executive branch fiscal staff will begin to produce annual budget stress tests that will help the state better prepare for recessions under a law passed in June. Pew experts who help states develop policies and practices that improve fiscal stability met with state policymakers and helped draft the legislation. Connecticut becomes the sixth state to require regular stress tests by law, joining Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Carolina, and Utah. Pew's team also encouraged Connecticut lawmakers to pass legislation requiring more realistic long-term spending forecasts to help determine whether the state faces structural budget deficits.

The Connecticut State Capitol in Hartford.
SeanPavonePhoto/Getty Images

TECHNOLOGY *and* SOCIETY

With the benefits and risks of artificial intelligence being debated in society, Pew Research Center in April issued a report showing deep divides—and some common ground—in the views of experts and the American public.

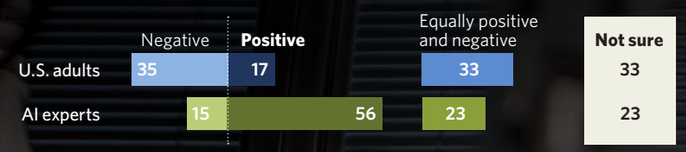
The AI experts are far more likely than Americans overall to believe that artificial intelligence will have a very or somewhat positive impact on the United States over the next 20 years (56% vs. 17%). Far more of the experts believe that AI will benefit (76%) rather than harm (15%) them personally. And although 73% of experts say artificial intelligence will have a very or somewhat positive impact on how people do their jobs over the next 20 years, that share drops to 23% among U.S. adults.

However, both groups are skeptical of AI's role in news and elections. Only about 1 in 10 U.S. adults and experts think artificial intelligence will have a positive impact on elections. Small shares in each group say the same for news. Similar shares of the public (55%) and experts (57%) want more control and regulation of AI. And both groups are more worried that government regulation of the new technology will be too lax rather than overly excessive.

A Center survey of 25 countries released in October found that many people are worried about AI's effects on daily life. A median of 34% of adults say they are more concerned than excited about the increased use of artificial intelligence, while 42% are equally concerned and excited. A median of 16% are more excited than concerned.

AI experts more likely than the public to say AI will have a positive effect on the U.S. over next 20 years

% who say they think the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the U.S. over the next 20 years will be ...



Note: "AI experts" refer to individuals whose work or research relates to AI. The AI experts surveyed are those who were authors or presenters at an AI-related conference in 2023 or 2024 and live in the U.S. Expert views are only representative of those who responded. "Very/somewhat positive" and "very/somewhat negative" are combined. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Philip Fong/AFP via Getty Images

Ending FISHING SUBSIDIES

Government subsidies that contribute to overfishing and illegal fishing will be curtailed thanks to ratification of a World Trade Organization agreement in September.

Under the agreement—the first binding multilateral WTO agreement focused on environmental issues—countries will prohibit government subsidies to vessels and operators engaged in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing. It also prohibits subsidies for fishing of overfished stocks unless the governments paying those subsidies are working to rebuild the stocks to a sustainable level. And it bans subsidies for fishing on the high seas, the international waters beyond national jurisdiction that make up two-thirds of the ocean.

Along with a partner group, the International Institute for Sustainable Development, Pew worked in every part of the globe to provide WTO members with a tool to assess the changes they would need to make to bring their subsidies into compliance with the agreement, which will improve ocean health and put depleted fish stocks on a path to recovery, sustaining livelihoods for generations to come.

Atlantic bluefin tuna in a maze of nets.
Eleonora de Sabata/Blue Planet Archive

Dolina Modlitwy/Unsplash

Religion

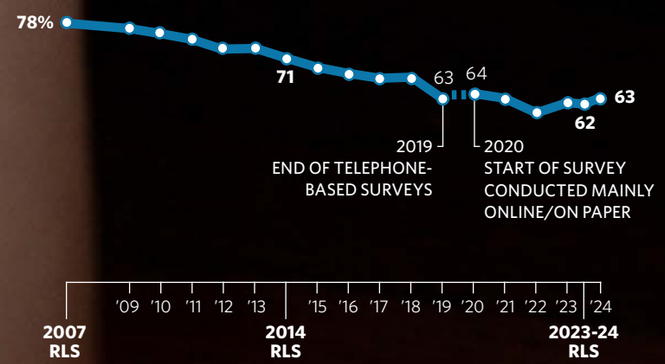
After many years of steady decline, the share of Americans who identify as Christians shows signs of leveling off—at least temporarily—at slightly above 6 in 10, according to a massive Pew Research Center survey of 36,908 U.S. adults released in February. The Religious Landscape Study (RLS) is the largest single survey the Center conducts, aiming to provide authoritative figures on the size of U.S. religious groups because the U.S. census does not collect that information.

The RLS found that the religiously unaffiliated—sometimes referred to as religious "nones"—also have plateaued after a long period of growth. The data further shows that rates of prayer and attendance at religious services have stabilized and that large majorities of Americans have a spiritual or supernatural outlook on the world. What's more, the youngest participants in the survey—those born from 2000 to 2006—appear to be no less religious than survey respondents born in the 1990s.

These were notable departures from the downward trend in Christian identity that has occurred since at least the 1990s, when about 90% of U.S. adults identified as Christians. By 2007, when the Center released its first RLS, just 78% of U.S. adults identified as Christian. That number dropped to 71% in the Center's next RLS in 2014, an average decline of about 1 percentage point per year.

Still, the Center's researchers point to strong crosscurrents rippling through the data. Despite the recent signs of stabilization, "other indicators suggest we may see further declines in the American religious landscape in future years," the report says.

After years of decline, the Christian share of the U.S. population stabilizes
% of U.S. adults who identify as Christian



Note: The 2007, 2014, and 2023-24 data comes from Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Studies. Other estimates come from the Center's random-digit-dial telephone surveys (until 2019), and from the Center's annual National Public Opinion Reference Survey (since 2020).

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

South America CONSERVATION

In May, Chile's Council of Ministers for the Environment approved a major expansion of the Glaciares de Santiago National Park—adding 52,813 acres to the existing 185,610 acres—and the designation of a new 107,834-acre multiple-use conservation area on public land adjacent to the park in the Andes outside Santiago. Within the newly protected area, 368 glaciers and wetlands provide more than half the freshwater supply for 7 million people. It also safeguards wildlife such as condors, Chilean eagles, pumas, the endangered Andean cat, and the guanaco. Pew has been working in Chilean Patagonia to create these new kinds of protected areas on public lands.

In July, the southern Bolivian city of San Lorenzo designated the Pilaya Natural Monument and Ecotourism Reserve over a 66,080-acre portion of the Pilaya Canyon. In addition to being one of the world's deepest canyons, the Pilaya Canyon is the headwaters to the most important river in the Gran Chaco region and is home to rare and threatened species such as the Andean condor and spectacled bear. These new river and land protections are strategically located to reduce threats to free-flowing rivers, a priority of Pew's ongoing work in the region.

The Pilaya Canyon in southern Bolivia is one of the deepest in the world.
Pedro Laguna for The Pew Charitable Trusts

Patrick Hertzog/AFP via Getty Images

French Polynesian WATERS

French Polynesia is establishing one of the world's largest networks of fully and highly protected marine areas in a region of the South Pacific Ocean that hosts an array of sea life. The announcement in June means nearly 23% of French Polynesian waters will be protected, including two fully protected areas that together span 350,000 square miles.

Access to those areas will be limited and extraction such as fishing and mining will be prohibited in order to create refuges for marine life, including migratory manta rays, coral atolls, and seabirds.

Another 72,000 square miles of French Polynesian waters will become highly protected artisanal fishing zones. In these areas, industrial fishing will be prohibited while local people will be allowed to continue fishing in the same way that they have for millennia.

President Moetai Brotherson has also pledged to create additional artisanal fishing zones and two more large, fully protected marine protected areas in the next year that would increase the total of fully and highly protected areas of French Polynesian waters to 965,000 square miles—more than of the nation's territorial waters.

Communities in the Austral and Marquesas islands have championed stronger marine protections for years to preserve their environment and culture. For more than a decade, Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy worked with the government, fishers, scientists, and environmental organizations in French Polynesia to support local efforts to conserve natural marine resources.

In the Wilds of South America, Conservation Comes From Unlikely Sources

From ranches to forest settlements, local stewardship is shaping the future of the Chaco-Pantanal region.

By John Briley

Photos by Flavio Forner and Pedro Laguna for The Pew Charitable Trusts

In the Brazilian Pantanal, a vast and rugged wetland rife with jaguars, caimans, giant river otters, venomous snakes, and kaleidoscopic birds, one animal holds the key to the future: the humble cow.

Which means that cattle ranchers will play an outsize role in determining whether the Pantanal's dazzling biodiversity will survive the 21st century.

The Pantanal is a spongy basin of grasslands, marsh, and tropical forest where accumulated rainfall can linger for months, seeping slowly into the ground or inching downslope toward the Paraguay River. As the world's largest tropical wetland, it covers 68,000 square miles (176,000 square kilometers)—an area almost 16 times larger than the Everglades—in south-central Brazil, Bolivia, and Paraguay.

The Pew Charitable Trusts is working to advance conservation of this region and the neighboring Gran Chaco dry forest—an even larger area composed of woodlands, savannas, and wetlands that spans Bolivia, Argentina, and Paraguay. Gran Chaco is the continent's second-largest forest behind the Amazon and covers 250,000 square miles (647,500 square kilometers).

The Chaco-Pantanal faces mounting threats from increased development and a rapidly shifting climate, and experts say time is short to implement changes to help preserve this stunning, meditative landscape.

A Pew team recently visited the region, its SUV rattling down the potholed dirt track of the Transpantaneira Highway, south of Poconé, Brazil, where the scenery suggests a massive national park: Curtains of vegetation meld into endless acres of forest, grassland, and the still, glassy waters of the marsh while an array of colorful birds swoop above.

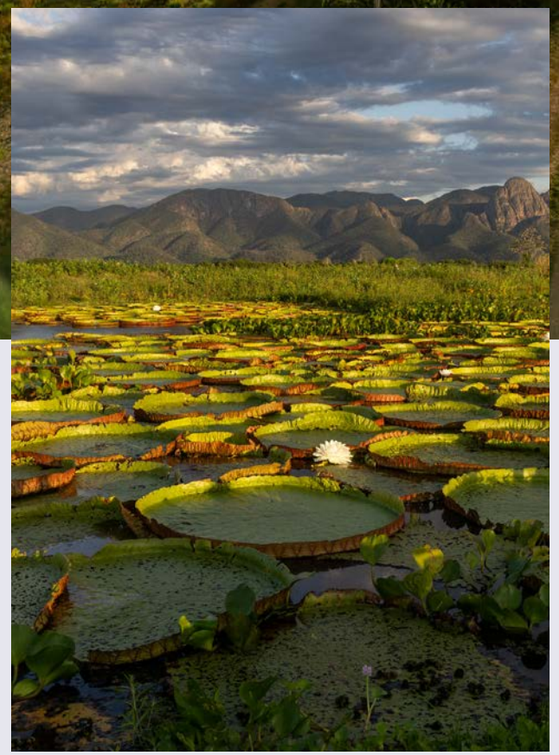
However, this is not a protected area; it's ranchland. Some 90% of the Pantanal is privately owned cattle ranches, which itself is remarkable. Aside from the challenge of transporting livestock into and out of this region, ranchers must navigate a December-through-March rainy season, often marked by intense flooding, and a sometimes more perilous fire season.

Together, the Pantanal and Gran Chaco form a contiguous habitat that's a major source of fresh water for South Americans, a thriving zone of biodiversity, and an immense carbon sink, sequestering huge amounts of carbon dioxide. The abundance and concentration in variety of flora and fauna here—nearly 7,000 plant types and more than 2,100 animal species—rival those of the Amazon.

The Pantanal boasts one of the highest densities of jaguars in Latin America—roughly one per 2,965 acres—and more than 10 million caiman, the largest population in the world.

The Pantanal and Gran Chaco are also home to dozens of Indigenous peoples who faced centuries of

A patrol vehicle rolls through Kaa-Iya del Gran Chaco National Park, in the Gran Chaco dry forest of Bolivia. To help protect this vast park, rangers spend their days checking camera traps, tracking wildlife, and watching for poachers. Previous pages: Ranch hands attend their daily morning meeting at Fazenda Barranco Alto in the Aquidauana region of the Brazilian Pantanal. The property is both a working cattle ranch and ecotourism lodge.



Women in the Kapeatindi community, within the territory of the Charagua Iyambae Guaraní Government in the Gran Chaco dry forest of Bolivia, perform a celebration dance to thank the nearby Parapetí River for providing water and food. At left: In the Brazilian Pantanal, giant water lilies are framed by dramatic ridges.

conflict and displacement before gaining recognition as rightful landowners. In 2017 these groups formed the Indigenous Autonomous Government of the Charagua Iyambae Territory, which is formally recognized by the Bolivian government and has become a leader in regional conservation.

The threats to Chaco-Pantanal add urgency to the need for better conservation: deforestation by illegal settlers in the Gran Chaco and the expansion of industrial agriculture, which inflicts more damage on the natural environment than traditional ranching; poorly planned infrastructure, such as roads cutting through protected areas of intact forest; wildfires; and disruptions to river systems, including dam construction and water diversion projects.

Overhanging all of this is a shifting climate, which is causing drastic fluctuations in rainfall during wet months and soaring temperatures and raging wildfires in the dry season. In fact, the 2019 fire in Gran Chaco was horrific, burning millions of acres and affecting every community and settlement in the region. And fires spanning the Chaco-Pantanal in 2020, 2023, and 2024 left the region reeling, part of a worrisome trend.

On a baking Pantanal morning the Pew team follows a dirt track through dense forest to Fazenda Bela Vista, a 12,000-hectare (29,653-acre) ranch where owner Márcio Granja Souza Vieira and his wife, Rudce Fátima Dorileo, manage 3,000 head of cattle.

Over a breakfast of fresh fruit and grilled meat, Vieira says the ranch has been in operation, with different owners, for 150 years.

Since 2019, Bela Vista has been one of more than 90 ranches in Fazenda Pantaneira Sustentável (Sustainable Pantanal Farms, or FPS), a program that is advancing sustainable cattle ranching throughout the Pantanal in numerous ways, including promoting low-impact grazing, which spreads cattle out across pastures. This is one reason that 80% of the region's native vegetation has survived.

There are other steps that FPS ranchers take to safeguard native wildlife habitat—for example, they don't use chemicals—and they exchange knowledge to strengthen their commitment to conservation while maintaining their livelihoods. By providing technical support, fire prevention strategies, and access to sustainable production chains, the program is emerging as a model for how cattle ranching and ecosystem protection can advance together.

For Vieira, the conservation makes good business sense.

"FPS has been very good for us, both in managing our cattle and our pasture," he says. "We are learning through this program, and it's helping us all."

Like most Pantanal ranchers, Vieira focuses on raising calves, which he then sells to feedlots in Cuiabá, Campo Grande, or Corumbá, where they're fattened up for slaughter.

Within this business model lies a significant issue: The roughly 5,000 jaguars that reside in the Pantanal—one of the highest concentrations on Earth—won't hesitate to take livestock, and young cows are the easiest pickings. In fact, ranchers here typically lose 5% of their herds to jaguar attacks annually.

This has generated controversy in the ranching community: Some ranchers are willing to endure the losses for the sake of biodiversity, while others are inclined to shoot the cats on sight—despite laws protecting them. Like apex predators anywhere, the jaguars in the Chaco-Pantanal help to keep the ecosystem—and populations of their prey—in balance, and here they are also the centerpiece in a burgeoning wildlife tourism industry.

Following the Transpantaneira Highway to Porto Jofre, the Pew group arrives at a collection of tourism outfitters and research centers on the banks of the Cuiabá River and alights at the modest campus of Panthera, a nonprofit devoted to conservation of the world's 40 wild cat species.

At dawn, Panthera conservation scientist Fernando Tortato steers a small motorboat into the currents of the Cuiabá River heading into Encontro Das Águas State Park on a quest to spot jaguars in what has become one of the easiest places in the world to do so. Many of the cats in this region, while fully wild, have become habituated to humans, meaning they've learned not to fear the boats traveling up and down the river or the people on them.

After a couple of false alarms—a jaguar that fishermen had seen on the south bank has since moseyed off—Tortato maneuvers the boat up a small tributary. "There!" he exclaims, siting a jaguar that is preening her head above the surface as she finishes the 150-foot swim across the creek. She pulls herself onto the shore, that iconic gold-and-black fur striking against the lime-green reeds, and moves unhurriedly into the forest.

Tortato says that in the June-to-September high season, 20 or more boats often crowd in for views of a cat, each vessel carrying a half-dozen paying customers. And even when the jaguars are scarce, the Pantanal's other wildlife shines: giant river otters, caimans, capybaras, and capuchin monkeys, along with a dizzying array of bird species.

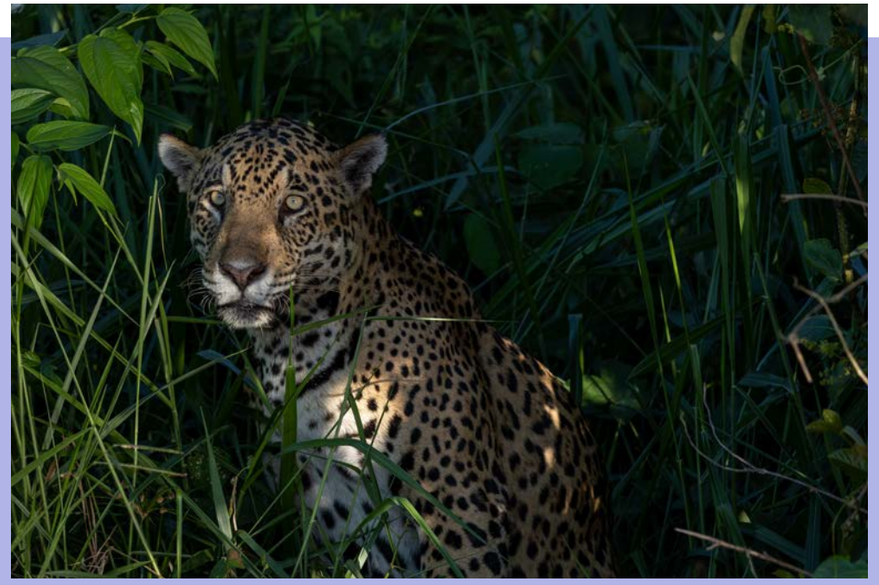
The nature here can seem so grand as to be invincible. But Tortato recounts working in the field in 2020 following a catastrophic fire season.

"The soundscape was silent—no birds, nothing. I'm thinking, 'The Pantanal as we know it is over.' But I was also tracking a jaguar we had rescued and released, and I found an anaconda carcass, one he had killed. And I thought, 'OK, he's assuming his role in the ecosystem again.' That showed me the resilience of the Pantanal. We aren't back to full health, but it's continued to recover."

To the untrained eye, the ecosystem appears to be thriving—a good thing, but even with a full recovery, this park won't save the region's biodiversity: Encontro Das Águas occupies only a sliver of the Pantanal, which is why the main effort is to bring as many ranchers as possible into the conservation community.

In addition to working with ranchers, conservation efforts in the Pantanal must include effectively managing and expanding existing protected areas and designating new ones. Because even though these areas account for only a small slice of the Pantanal now, they provide exceptional wildlife habitat and are therefore key to the health of the broader ecosystem.

Still, the big focus is working with private landowners to improve conservation efforts. "If we lose the ranchers, the parks will mean nothing," says Andre Restel, a researcher with Pontes Pantaneiras, a Brazil-based conservation



A jaguar peers from the brush on the banks of the Cuiabá River near Encontro Das Águas State Park in the Pantanal. This area has one of the highest concentrations of these cats in the world, and as a result is home to a booming wildlife tourism industry. Opposite page: Ranch hands work to corral a bull during a roundup at Fazenda Bela Vista. The ranch is one of a growing number in the Pantanal that voluntarily abide by conservation standards to help preserve the region's abundant wildlife and natural habitat.

coalition. "Now we have 4% of the land area covered by FPS ranches; the goal is to have 15% by 2035."

And because the Pantanal and Gran Chaco are one contiguous habitat, what happens to jaguars in one region could affect biodiversity in the other. At the same time, each biome is distinct.

"When you step into the Chaco, the music changes, the ways of life, the cultural expressions—it's all unique," says Natalia Araujo, a manager with Pew's Chaco-Pantanal conservation project in Bolivia. "This creates an incredible connection between the natural ecosystem and the locals."

In 2019, the Indigenous Autonomous Government of the Charagua district established the 1.27 million-hectare (3.1 million-acre) Ñembi Guasu conservation area, about 255 miles southeast of Santa Cruz. Ñembi Guasu sits among a few national parks—including Kaa-Iya in Bolivia and Defensores del Chaco in Paraguay—to form the largest protected area in the Chaco, at nearly 9 million hectares (22 million acres).

Alejandro Arambiza Segundo directs the Ñembi Guasu protected area, managing a half dozen Indigenous rangers. "My job here is to spread the word [to our communities] about the management plan, what to do and what not to do, so that they don't make any fires, and we don't burn our forest," Arambiza says.

He's referring to illegal settlers who, in their quest for viable ranchland, often use fire to clear vast areas—fires that can rage out of control. This is similar to what has happened with illegal farmers and loggers in the Amazon, and the effects on the ecosystem can be devastating.

To counter this threat, Pew joined with local and international partners to train a firefighting force, made up largely of Indigenous rangers, which the Indigenous Autonomous Government calls the guardians of the forest.

The massive 2019 fire, Arambiza says, trapped animals, incinerated their food, and fouled their water. "All this is lost when there is fire. Fire spreads quickly, and the animals cannot run away. But [our area] was not burned because the guardians of the forest were already trained to face the fires. Our ancestors have been taking care of this area since ancient times."

The Indigenous communities of the Chaco sustain themselves in a variety of ways, including hunting, fishing, and farming and by selling wood carvings and weavings. They practice respect for nature, for example by using mostly deadfall for their woodwork.

An hour-long flight takes the Pew team to the southern reaches of the Pantanal, Aquidauana—a subregion of wetlands, sandy savannas, and dense stands of forest—to see rancher Teresa Bracher, who owns Fazenda Fazendinha.

A pasture is enveloped in dawn mist at Fazenda Fazendinha, a ranch in the Aquidauana region of the Pantanal. The ranch is also home to wild capybaras, caimans, toucans, hyacinth macaws, and other species—all of which thrive here because of conservation actions by ranch owner Teresa Bracher.

Guaraní and Chiquitano Indigenous rangers conduct a wildfire response drill near the community of Roboré, outside the entrance to the Ñembi Guasu Protected Area in Bolivia's Gran Chaco region. Fire is a significant—and increasing—threat in both the Chaco and Pantanal. At right: Camilla Schweizer, owner of Fazenda Barranco Alto, says she is hopeful that conservation could bring the attention and revenue needed to help this flourishing and unique habitat thrive far into the future.

"When I was a girl growing up on my father's farm, I had a dream of one day having my own," says Bracher. "A place where all the animals roamed free in wild nature." Bracher, whose husband ran a bank in Brazil, represents another model of conservation here: leveraging personal wealth to protect substantial chunks of land and support community development.

Bracher owns other ranches in the Pantanal, and Fazendinha is her childhood dream come true. As dawn breaks over the red terracotta roofs and tiled courtyards of the ranch, dozens of cows move like apparitions through the mist. A family of capybaras ambles from a nearby lake and a half-dozen toucans alight in a sprawling neem tree, their bizarre beaks electrified in the morning sun.

Bracher knows that for conservation to work, the people of the Pantanal must see a viable future here, which is why she also founded and directs Acaia Pantanal, a nonprofit dedicated to social and human development in the region. Among other initiatives, the organization built a 60-student boarding school within an hour's drive—a sorely needed service in such a remote region where the ranchers work dawn to dusk, leaving little time to educate their children on their own.

The challenge is similar in the Gran Chaco, where the Indigenous Autonomous Government must show locals—and the national government—that the long-term benefits of a sustainable, well-protected environment far outweigh the potential short-term gain of slash-and-burn settlements.

Fazenda Barranco Alto, an FPS-member ranch and tourist lodge on a bluff above the Rio Negro, near the southern edge of the Pantanal, shows what success can look like here. As dawn breaks over the property, a dozen caballeros (ranch hands) run through yoga poses in a pavilion before setting about their work. An hour later a family from Sao Paulo, on their third vacation to the lodge, heads out for a day of kayaking and horseback riding. And seemingly without pause, owner Camilla Schweizer bustles about, shifting her unflinching enthusiasm from cattle wrangling to small-business management to what she calls "contemplative tourism."

"We find ways for guests to immerse themselves in nature and see what nature has to show us, not the other way around," Schweizer says as two hyacinth macaws swoop above, their blue feathers dazzling.

"I've seen the changes—the droughts and fires—and that's why I give my life for this place today. By joining forces with the ranchers, the government, everybody, we will succeed in protecting it all, but it's a race against time. And we have to run very, very fast."

John Briley is a Trust *staff writer.*

WHERE WILL WE GET THE ENERGY?

Surging demand for power requires upgrades to the nation's electric grid—and governments, utilities, and consumers all must play a part.

By Carol Kaufmann

Solar panels float on a storage pond at a water treatment plant that provides the drinking water in Park City, Utah. The creative solution helps cool the panels and makes them run more efficiently, keeps water from evaporating, and does not use valuable land. It also offsets about 92% of the plant's grid energy use. Ample sunshine—and recent legislation—both help make the state a leader in solar power generation. Like Utah, an increasing number of states have passed laws supporting innovations designed to meet the surging energy demands of the nation. *Jim West/UCG/Universal Images Group via Getty Images*

Jim King and Jayne Cleveland have impeccable timing.

In April 2024, the Weaverville, North Carolina, couple decided to sign up for an energy pilot program called PowerPair from their utility company. Duke Energy was offering customers in their state incentives to install solar panels on their roofs and store the energy generated in a battery in their homes. The couple uses the power but can also get energy from the main grid when needed, like on a sweltering summer day. And Duke can also tap some of the energy stored in the battery, say, when air conditioning isn't as necessary, and compensate the couple with a lower electric bill, or even credits—creating what is known as a virtual power plant from customers like King and Cleveland.

"The process was pretty easy for novices like us," says King, and by August 2024, the couple had panels on their west-facing roof and a 5-by-2-feet vertical battery in their laundry room—and were accumulating, using, and storing clean energy from the sun. They quickly learned what activities used the most power—laundry was a big one, the dryer much more than the washing machine—and that the energy gleaned on sunny days would easily provide the power they needed throughout nights, when their energy consumption lowered.

"The infrastructure is reliable," King says of their town in the metropolitan area of Asheville. "We never had any extended power outages. In our 10-plus years of living here, we've only had a handful—and only for a few minutes. We never had to worry about it."

While the couple never had concerns about power outages in the years before the new battery was installed, they quickly learned about another essential benefit of their new system. Only six weeks after its installation, Hurricane Helene tore through western North Carolina, causing overflowing rivers and mudslides that devasted communities and left most residents without passable roads, communication options—or power.

When King and Cleveland woke up the morning after the Sept. 27 hurricane, they learned that their energy system had switched to stored power and their home was running off the battery.

"We were stuck," Cleveland says. "But we had power." And they continued to have power for three weeks, unlike neighbors who had to wait for the main grid to be repaired.

The nation's electric grid, often called the biggest machine ever built, consists of a vast array of power plants, high-voltage transmission lines that send electricity over long distances, and substations that convert high-voltage power to a lower one so it can be distributed locally. Interconnected throughout the United States and Canada, the grid brings electricity generated from coal or natural gas, solar panels, wind farms, hydroelectric dams, and nuclear reactors to hundreds of millions of users.

As big as it is, it can't keep up. Data centers, AI, increased manufacturing, and everyday citizens are consuming unprecedented amounts of power.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration has forecast that power consumption in the U.S. will reach record levels in 2026.

Policymakers around the nation are embracing innovations that can meet this demand, and The Pew Charitable Trusts' energy modernization project provides research that is guiding those decisions. Some of those new approaches include close-to-consumer alternatives such as the batteries installed in homes and other facilities and products that lie outside the main grid. Others target new technologies that increase the capacity of the existing grid, with at least 10 states passing legislation to evaluate the new methods, often with strong bipartisan backing.

Our consumption of electricity is larger than it has ever been. And it's growing.

"Even in our daily lives, we see energy demand increase," says Yaron Miller of Pew's energy modernization team. "So much to plug in!" he says. "Chargers, battery packs, EVs. If we do nothing, that's a problem for powering businesses. That's a problem for keeping the AC on in the hot summer or the refrigerator running."

In addition to demand, extreme weather events are becoming more common. Hurricanes such as Helene destroy transmission lines and energy facilities. Heat waves demand more air conditioning, while freezing temperatures command more heat. Ice storms snap power lines and lightning zaps transformers. All can result in interruptions in the power flow—and the lights go out.

The new energy technologies in King and Cleveland's North Carolina home are innovative advances called distributed energy resources—or DERs. These small energy generation and storage technologies include solar panels on roofs, batteries, electric vehicles, heat pumps, small wind turbines, and smart thermostats. They can be installed in homes or businesses, generate clean energy, lower energy costs, reduce pollution, and help communities retain power during large power outages.

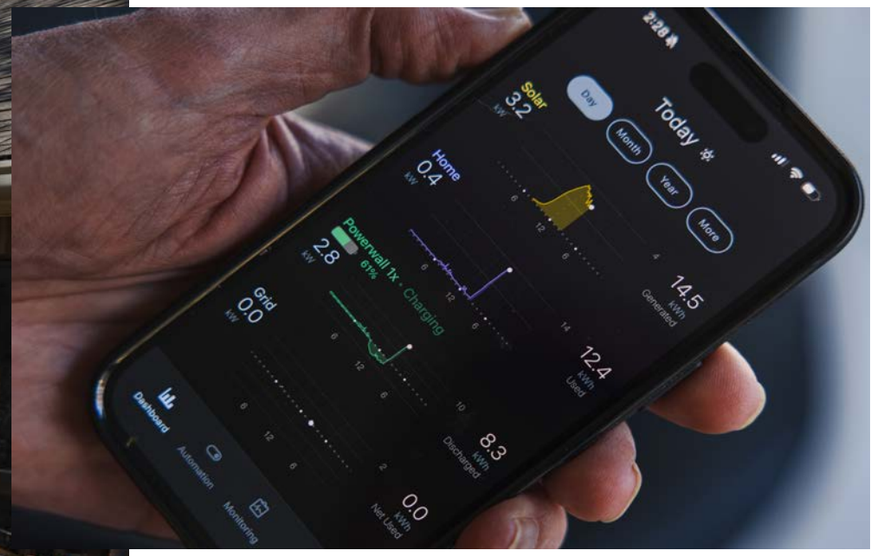
DERs also reduce electric bills. The system King and Cleveland installed cost $40,000 up front, though they received a $9,000 rebate from Duke Energy, King says. But their electric bills are down. "Though it might take a decade to recoup all the cost, we've had electric bills with negative numbers, where Duke Energy owes me," says King.

It's one of the technologies that Pew's team says could have real impact as demand increases.

"DERs benefit the customer, and they benefit the grid," says Maureen Quinlan of Pew's energy modernization team. "There's a great untapped potential here, and we're trying to create an ambitious vision for the nation."

Using DERs extensively isn't unprecedented. Belgium receives 8% of its energy supply from DERs. Brazil receives 14%. Australia, which receives nearly 10% from DERs, has a new national program that began July 1 and offers a 30% subsidy on home batteries, and the country

Janye Cleveland and Jim King installed solar panels on their roof and a battery in their basement at their home in North Carolina. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*



An app on King's phone shows how much energy the panels generate and how much the battery uses. This energy system—a virtual power plant—helped them retain electricity for weeks after Hurricane Helene left much of mountainous western North Carolina without power in fall 2024. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

A solar array atop a Gallaudet University building generates clean energy that feeds into the local grid and helps provide electricity for residents and neighboring businesses. It also provides power for much of the campus; in an outage, energy stored in batteries could provide electricity for the whole college. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

has seen a surge of installations: more than 11,500 in the first three weeks. DERs are expected to be the largest source of energy capacity in Australia by 2050.

"Australia's program grew quickly, and it's already seeing the benefits," says Quinlan. "The United States could learn valuable lessons from their example."

Some DERs can be grouped into microgrid systems and, if needed, operate independently from the big grid. Instead of transmitting power over long distances, these independent systems send electricity locally into a small community or facility. Hundreds operate in the United States today, particularly in places that provide an essential service, such as fire stations, hospitals, wastewater treatment plants, and military bases. To work, microgrid locations need space, resources, and a single point of connection with local utilities—like a college campus.

Gallaudet University, the world's premier institution dedicated to the education of deaf and hard of hearing students, is home to one of the first microgrids in Washington, D.C. The school partnered with distributed energy company Scale Microgrids and Urban Ingenuity, an organization that co-develops clean energy projects, to build its own microgrid, which was installed in 2023.

The Gallaudet microgrid can work in tandem with the local utility grid—but if electricity goes out, the entire university could run from the power generated by the DERs that make up the microgrid.

The microgrid is also a smart financial move. The university earns revenue from leasing rooftops for solar arrays to Scale Microgrids. The battery storage system also provides grid stabilizing services to the regional grid operator, PJM, allowing the university to earn revenue from the energy it provides.

Though it required a significant capital investment, the system will soon be a big money saver for the school, says Dave Good, director of Energy, Utilities, and Sustainability at Gallaudet. "It's a very good investment. We expect to save about 40% on our energy bills every year, which is millions of dollars."

The school's microgrid also helps D.C. families reduce energy costs. Through a community solar program, 400 residences subscribe to Gallaudet's solar system and receive a credit on their electricity bills, reducing electricity costs by about 10%.

Gallaudet's investment and commitment to managing a physical plant that serves the community was one necessity. The other was the local utility company, Pepco, making improvements on its grid.

"But the steps are all doable. And they're all scalable," says Bracken Hendricks, CEO of Urban Ingenuity. "We were able to stitch together this very special thing that shows what can be done in many, many other places around the country."

To help policymakers enable more DERs, Pew has formed an advisory council of energy leaders to show how people, localities, and states can be a part of innovative solutions, like the one at Gallaudet.

"Every state in the nation benefits from having disaggregated, dispersed energy resources all around the grid, and not just these great big central stations in the middle of grids," says Pat Wood, who spent much of his career working on what he calls "the big grid" as the former chair of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission and later the Public Utility Commission of Texas. Now, as CEO of Hunt Energy Network and the co-chair of Pew's Distributed Energy Resources Advisory Council, he's much more focused on bringing lessons learned to the little grid.

"The problem is, a lot of the people in the utility industry, and in the government, don't understand what a transformative potential we have just sitting there ready for us," he says. "I'm trying to unlock innovation and risk-taking and an entrepreneurial mindset that is missing in energy."

Power companies are also testing approaches to supplement the grid. In addition to the virtual power plants in homes like King and Cleveland's, Duke Energy in 2023 installed a microgrid with solar and battery storage in Hot Springs, North Carolina, that has enough capacity to power the whole town, which has a population of just over 500. When Hurricane Helene struck, the town's substation washed away, but the microgrid powered the town for six days until a mobile substation took over.

Other Duke microgrids generate electricity in Asheville and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and more are being constructed in Indiana and Florida, mainly in remote areas.

While extensive cloud cover or solar panel storm damage can compromise those facilities, "in the right setting, microgrids are a strong tool in the toolbox of reliability and resiliency solutions," says Logan Stewart from Duke Energy.

As energy experts and policymakers look for ways to increase electricity output, they're also turning to the existing grid itself. New software as well as hardware that is installed right onto power lines is known as advanced transmission technologies, or ATTs, and can allow more energy to be transported more efficiently.

Sensors can be placed on transmission lines that give grid operators real-time information about how much power is being transmitted, which allows them to better estimate how much power they can transmit—and that can increase the amount of power on the grid by 10% to 30%. Another technology is new and improved wires that connect towers that use better materials and have a better design—and transport 50% to 110% more power.

ATTs such as these sensors and wires can be deployed relatively quickly—in two to three years—as opposed to constructing brand new lines, which can take about a decade. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, nationwide use of these technologies could unlock up to 100 gigawatts of additional grid capacity and save consumers $35 billion by reducing bottlenecks that are constraining the grid.

"ATTs make the grid more efficient and able to squeeze more power out of the existing infrastructure," says Pew's Miller. "So if you already have some of the infrastructure built, that's a low-hanging fruit, and a really smart move to get more capacity to connect more projects."

Pew has been working with state policymakers seeking to understand and install ATTs. In the past three years, at least 16 states have passed laws encouraging ATT deployment, including, in 2025, South Carolina, Indiana, Ohio, and Utah, where Governor Spencer Cox (R) signed a bill that requires the state's electric utilities to include in their grid planning an evaluation of the benefits and deployment timelines of ATTs. The new law directs the state's Public Service Commission to encourage the use of ATTs, and if they're shown to be cost effective, approve the utilities' recovery of costs for their investments.

"We're no different from any other place. Our grid is aging, and it hasn't been maintained," says Utah Representative Christine Watkins (R), who sponsored the legislation that passed with overwhelming bipartisan support. "It was a no-brainer," she says.

Indiana also passed similar bipartisan legislation this year with support from utilities, manufacturers, clean energy groups, and advocates for consumers. Utilities will evaluate ATT investments and, if cost effective, the utility commission can approve the recovery of costs for the investment. Indiana officials are particularly motived to find solutions; a backlog of energy projects and storage capacity cannot come on to the existing grid because of capacity constraints.

"Our grid was built 100 years ago and needs upgrading," says state Senator Eric Koch (R), who sponsored the bill. "Now is the opportune time to capture the latest technology. [Using ATTs] is a way to do that, instead of building new transmission lines—and can achieve many economic advantages."

Whether adding ATTs to the existing power lines to transmit more electricity or incorporating distributed energy sources in a community to offset the demand on the main grid and provide additional energy, the new—and readily available—technology provides immediate as well as long-term solutions to modernizing energy transmission in the United States.

Modernization also provides consumers with more options—and a say about the source of their energy.

"I love knowing that I'm not pulling power from anywhere but from the sun," says Cleveland in Weaverville. "I'm sold."

Carol Kaufmann is a Trust *staff writer.*

In Australia's Channel Country, Water Brings Life

Floods transform a vast Outback desert, but challenges remain to conserving this vital ecosystem.

By John Briley

Pelicans, many of which flew from up to 1,000 kilometers (600 miles) away, amass on a lake in Australia's Channel Country. This landlocked, arid region is fed by rain that falls in northern Queensland and crawls downhill at an average grade of 1 centimeter per kilometer. Disrupting this flow could spell ruin for the birds, wildlife, and Outback communities that rely on the water. *Kerry Trapnell*

From the window of a

Cessna, the curving shoreline of a lake dissolves into a maze of channels, each one shuttling liquid gold—water—into the baking heart of the Australian Outback.

I'm on a brief aerial tour with two colleagues from The Pew Charitable Trusts outside the remote cattle-ranching town of Birdsville in southwestern Queensland. We're here to witness a remarkable phenomenon: the natural, slow-motion flooding of a desert. Birdsville is nearly dead center in the Channel Country, named for the rivers, streams, and countless rivulets that snake through the nearly flat landscape.

"They say you can walk ahead of the flood," says Traditional Owner Josh Gorringe, of the Mithaka people, referencing the monsoon rains that travel across the Gulf of Carpentaria from November to March. "The gradient here is about 1 centimeter per kilometer, so I believe it."

Much of that water sets off toward Australia's interior on a weeks-long journey stretching up to 1,500 kilometers (some 900 miles) and fanning out across the area around Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre. This catchment, the Lake Eyre Basin, is one of the world's largest internally draining river systems, feeding three major rivers—the Diamantina, Georgina, and Cooper Creek—that spill into the Channel Country, where they then recharge crucial waterholes and wetland habitats.

These floods can vary greatly—massive in some years and paltry in others—but one thing remains constant: this water is invaluable to the ecosystems, wildlife, and people of the Outback. Among its many benefits, the water draws millions of birds, including herons, egrets, kites, and cranes. White pelicans flock here from Australia's south and east coasts, up to 1,000 kilometers (some 600 miles) away, and the floods sustain wildlife across an area covering one-sixth of the Australian continent.

"In good years, we have the highest concentration of pelicans in the world," says Gorringe, who is general manager of the Mithaka Aboriginal Corporation, which represents Mithaka cultural, social, and economic interests across the region. The three large rivers are perennial and home to thriving fish populations, which the birds can feast on with little fear of the predators and storms that stalk them along the coasts. "The birdlife here is good for tourism, for the land, and for the balance of everything," Gorringe says—one reason the Queensland government recently banned any future oil and gas operations here.

The moisture also enables the region's multibillion-dollar organic cattle industry to thrive.

"This is the most fertile desert in the world," says David Brook, who started OBE Organic—Australia's first organic beef exporter—in the 1990s. Brook, whose forebears settled in Channel Country in the 1800s, is the undisputed cattle king of Birdsville, with 40,000 head of cattle roaming over 8 million acres. And he wants this landscape to remain pure.

"I've been begging the government for years not to allow cotton or other industries into the Channel Country," says Brook, a solid man with graying hair.

Chatting in the garden of his ranch house, Brook explains that industrial activity would bring water diversions that would "shorten the Diamantina by at least 100 kilometers," or about 60 miles, with untold environmental consequences, and would probably threaten his production of organic beef, which sells for significantly more per kilogram than nonorganic meat.

Brook does not use fertilizers or pesticides. But he says his efforts to safeguard the landscape could be for naught if cotton producers, new mines, or other industrial operations moved in nearby, because pesticides and other chemicals could travel on the wind. "These rivers have myriad channels," he says. "We're going to see it all going wrong if the government allows development. So much of this area is still pristine, so now is the time to protect it."

It's a sentiment that has seen the cattle ranching community linking arms with conservationists and the Indigenous Traditional Owners to oppose any expansion of oil and gas operations, mining, or large-scale irrigation within the rivers and flood plains of the Lake Eyre Basin.

"There's nowhere else on Earth like this basin," says Riley Rocco, who directs Pew's conservation efforts in the region. "And if the rivers and wetlands are compromised, we could lose one of Australia's greatest natural assets."

A cautionary tale from the other side of the planet supports this concern: The Aral Sea, in present-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, was once the fourth-largest body of inland water in the world. In the 1950s, it yielded nearly 50,000 tons of fish per year and was akin to a huge version of Lake Eyre, serving as the terminus for rivers that flowed through thousands of square miles of central Asia. But after decades of Soviet government diversion of the rivers that fed the Aral Sea, it withered into a desiccated wasteland.

Over the past three decades, there have been signs that the Channel Country region could meet a similar fate. In 1996, ranchers, conservationists, and scientists united to reject plans for new cotton development in the Cooper Creek catchment. A public campaign led to the creation of the Wild Rivers Act, which enshrined protections to preserve intact rivers. But a subsequent change in government led to the repeal of these protections and opened the door to extractive industries.

Across a huge swath of central and southern Australia, channels such as these carry rainwater from northern Queensland, up to 1,500 kilometers (900 miles) away, bringing life to the baking desert. The water nourishes a rare ecosystem upon which ranchers and wildlife, including immense flocks of birds, rely. *Kerry Trapnell*

In 2021, the Queensland government granted 11 leases for "unconventional petroleum"—i.e., fracking—across 250,000 hectares (about 600,000 acres) in the Lake Eyre basin, a move that immediately concerned the 17 Aboriginal groups, including the Mithaka, that hold native title rights throughout the basin.

The threat also sparked unified opposition from conservation groups and cattle ranchers who banded with Indigenous communities to seek a reversal of the government decision.

In December 2023, the Queensland government resolved to ban all new oil and gas operations on the basin's rivers and flood plains. It also expanded the ban on open cut mining and large-scale irrigation to cover all rivers in the Queensland portion of the Lake Eyre Basin—an additional 5,100 miles.

"This outcome is the best-case outcome in terms of offering strong protections for the rivers and flood plains while allowing development to occur in less sensitive areas of the Lake Eyre Basin," Rocco says.

Gorringe, who's spent almost all of his life in Channel Country, including as a stockman, feels the same way. Despite his cowboy look—jeans, flannel shirt, work boots, and a cowboy hat—Gorringe knows this land like his paternal ancestors. Even behind the wheel at 80 miles per hour, he rattles off the names of plants blurring past, swerves to miss foot-long bearded dragon lizards sunning in the road, and spies a kangaroo bounding through distant brush.

Gorringe says ranchers need to make sure they don't drain nutrients from the soil, which happens when cattle overgraze—and they must also resist the urge to plant non-native grasses as cattle fodder. Buffel grass, for example—imported in the 1870s from Africa and widely used in the following century—depletes the soil of calcium and phosphorus, crowding out native grasses and changing how wildfires affect the landscape.

The Mithaka people hope to restore large areas of land across the Channel Country basin. This would see sustainable cattle operations, re-introduction of native species, and new cultural tourism and ecotourism, including stargazing—a natural fit in a place that boasts some of the least light pollution on Earth. Gorringe says tourism opportunities could include talks from Mithaka and other Indigenous elders to help teach visitors the value of the region and motivate local community members to be better stewards of their own land.

While there are a lot of hard miles between the Outback and the country's population centers, visitors find this stunning, meditative landscape unique and well worth the journey.

In Birdsville, for example, we met Vicky, who drove 1,400 miles with her dog to escape the cold and rain of Melbourne for a few weeks. "A lot of desert along the way," she reports. "Tough country, but beautiful. I like the open space."

And then there are the annual horse races. The significant tourist attraction is the reason the sign at the

The town of Birdsville (population 110) in southwestern Queensland, Australia, includes a horse track that is home to the annual Birdsville races, which draw thousands of spectators from around the country. The channel adjacent to town is one of innumerable seams that shuttle rainwater from 1,500 kilometers (900 miles) away into the parched desert of the eastern Outback. *Peter Harrison/Getty Images*

Don Rowlands, a senior ranger at Munga-Thirri National Park outside Birdsville in southwestern Queensland, believes the state government should return stewardship of the park and other lands to the Indigenous people who have lived on and managed that territory for 50,000 years.
Adam Ferguson/The New York Times via Redux

Tourists linger on the Big Red Sand Dune west of Birdsville, Australia, at sunset. The dune is popular for the vantage it provides of the surrounding Channel Country landscape, which boasts diverse flora and fauna thanks in large part to annual floods that crawl downslope from hundreds of miles away. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

edge of town reads, "Welcome to Birdsville: Population 115 (+/- 7,000)."

The locals embrace the carnival-like intrusion of the races, including amateur boxing competitions. A pop-up marquee reads "Fred Brophy's Boxing Tent—The Last Boxing Tent Touring Australia," and the rolling desert surrounding town is speckled with tents, camper vans, and RVs. But the real allure of this region is the quiet and solitude that prevail the rest of the year.

"The environment is the bread and the basket for this whole area," Brook says, adding that the land could be viable for ranching for at least the next 2,000 years.

This philosophy is shared by Don Rowlands—a Wangkangurru Yarluyandi elder who thinks in even longer time frames. In Rowlands' vision for the Channel Country, conservation must start with the people who lived on this land for 60,000 years before Europeans arrived.

Rowlands, age 75, is a senior ranger for Munga-Thirri National Park, which begins on the outskirts of Birdsville and extends for 10,000 square kilometers (3,860 square miles) into the Simpson Desert. Rowlands spent most of his life working the cattle stations around Birdsville before taking the ranger job in 1994.

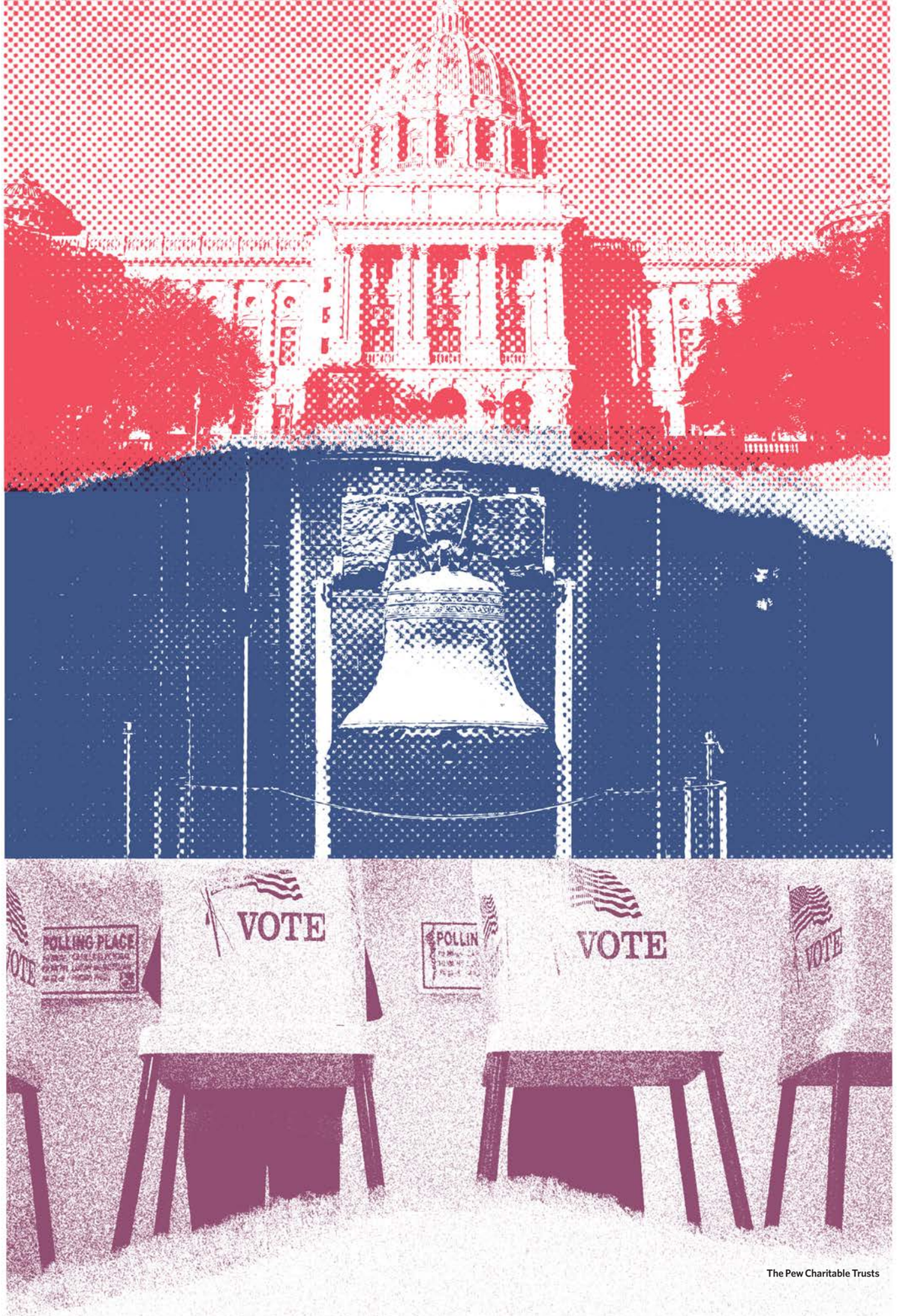
"What they ought to do is give all this land to the Indigenous people, starting yesterday," Rowlands says. "If we got the land, we could fence parts of it off, give it four or five years to rest, and then do tours. If we do that, a lot of native animals would come back."

The ban on future oil and gas projects on the Channel Country's flood plains has been widely welcomed by local communities, Indigenous people, ranchers, scientists, and the wider Australian public. Ensuring that these unique inland rivers remain free flowing has ecological, economic, and cultural effects that go far beyond the braided channels that give the landscape its iconic name.

Managed properly, the Channel Country—an expanse of nearly endless wonder—can serve the needs of flora, fauna, and people alike for millennia yet to come.

"To an outsider, this all must not look like much," says Gorringe. "But there's a lot of life here, and if people take care of it the way they should, it can stay that way for a long time."

John Briley is a Trust *staff writer.*



The Pew Charitable Trusts

Pew's Long Commitment to Strengthening Democracy

BY DANIEL LEDUC

The United States was about half as old as it is today when the entrepreneurial Joseph Newton Pew Sr., seeking a waterfront refinery for his business, Sun Oil, found a location along the Delaware River and opened an office in Philadelphia.

The move would connect the Pew family with the inspiring city that is the birthplace of the nation—and launch an enduring mission to extol, expand, and strengthen the ideals of democracy.

The effort took on new urgency a decade into the company's existence in Philadelphia when the first world war broke out in Europe. The senior Pew had died in 1912 and two of his sons, J. Howard Pew and J.N. Pew Jr., had assumed control of Sun Oil. Like many Americans, they were also casting a wary eye at the U-boats Germany had unleashed on shipping in the Atlantic Ocean.

They responded to the threat by creating a shipyard that would come to be known as Sun Ship, which built tankers and minesweepers throughout the war. That work continued in World War II when Sun Ship produced 40% of all the wartime tankers built, becoming an instrumental part of the "arsenal of democracy" that sustained Europe during the conflict.

But the Pew interest in democracy was far greater than ship building, because J. Howard and J.N. believed that an informed citizenry was essential for a nation to thrive. In between the wars, in 1932, Sun Oil first produced a "Citizen's Handbook" for that year's election that was distributed to the company's employees and the public. The handbook contained basic information on the Republican and Democratic party platforms, biographies of Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt, lists of cabinet officers, and other information—in short, as the cover line said, "What Every Voter Should Know."

As Republicans, the Pew brothers were likely unhappy with the outcome of the election that saw Roosevelt elected to the first of four terms. But the family maintained a deep faith in the wisdom of the American public. In 1946, *Look* magazine invited an array of accomplished business leaders and others to say what first two things they would do if they were president. J.N. Pew's succinct response: "Tell the truth and trust the people."

The belief in the power of the full light of day on subjects of import and the faith in an informed citizenry would soon take root as foundational principles in the organization that the Pew brothers and their two sisters, Mary Ethel Pew and Mabel Pew Myrin, formed in 1948 and that evolved into what is now known as The Pew Charitable Trusts. Informed by their diverse interests, the seven family trusts made substantial gifts in their hometown, ranging from education to health care to the arts.

Today, as the nation prepares to celebrate its 250th anniversary, the founders' commitment to the public good animates Pew's nonpartisan approach to research and to following where the data leads when seeking to improve public policy. The faith in an informed citizenry is particularly evident in the mission of Pew's subsidiary, Pew Research Center, which has become a respected source of survey data and analysis on a range of subjects from religion to social attitudes to politics and international affairs.

"The country and the world have changed dramatically since 1948," notes Susan K. Urahn, Pew's president and CEO. "But the organizations that the Pew family brought to life remain dedicated to practical knowledge that inspires action and progress."

Philadelphia is home to Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, icons of the nation's founding that can make democracy seem eternal. But in modern times, like those years following World War II, Pew's founders only had to look to a scarred and rebuilding Europe to see how fragile democracy can be.

In the context of world history, the American experiment was still relatively new in those postwar years, and the nation was rapidly changing: The federalist system divides power between a central government and the states, where government is closest to the people. In that era, the federal government was expanding, and the states were beginning to modernize their own approaches to policymaking and becoming the laboratories of democracy, a moniker that Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis had added to the American lexicon in 1932.

In the early years of its existence, Pew was primarily a grantmaking organization focused on the Philadelphia region. But as the founders, and then their children, nephews, nieces, and grandchildren,

watched the country evolve, researching and informing state policy gradually became a focus.

By the 1990s, Pew's leaders realized that there was no shortage of research on the effectiveness of federal programs, yet few were looking at the state and local level, where some of the most innovative thinking about how to improve government services was being implemented—within the context of balanced budgets.

In 1998, Pew created the Pew Center on the States to focus on innovative state programs. It was an era when the federal government was increasingly shifting responsibility to governors and state legislators. The center provided a platform for research examining state policy and for providing technical assistance to policymakers who were developing, implementing, and evaluating their programs.

One example was an effort to expand prekindergarten education. Pew and its partners worked in nearly 40 states and the District of Columbia to extend these vital educational programs, which are shown to increase high school graduation rates and college attendance. Over the decade of work, enrollment in pre-K increased from 700,000 students to 1.3 million.

As Pew evolved into a public charity that employs staff experts and works directly on projects, it began to have impact in other areas where states sought to develop new programs to help people: a home-visiting campaign to assist new mothers, expanded dental care, and a "results first" partnership with the MacArthur Foundation that helped states evaluate their programs based on cost and benefits when making policy decisions.

A 15-year public safety effort by Pew and its partners looked at recidivism rates and corrections policies that led to 36 states reforming their adult sentencing and corrections systems, saving more than $2 billion collectively.

Work like this allowed states to learn from each other's experiences—and showed the individualism of states and how no one solution fixed all concerns. It also showed the power of data and evidence in policymaking, a hallmark of how Pew conducts all its work.

While each of these projects made significant policy improvements, they collectively played an even more essential role in enhancing public trust in their democratic form of government.

"When the public can see government be more responsive to their needs and provide results that improves their lives and helps their communities thrive, democracy is strengthened," says Kil Huh, Pew's senior vice president overseeing government performance work.

A representative democracy is of course built on fair, free, and secure elections. As part of its state-level focus, Pew has worked to ensure that administrators of election systems throughout the nation have the help and resources they need—and that voters have the information they need to participate and vote.

As digital tools such as smartphones became part of everyday life, Pew teamed up with Google and other companies with strong online presences—including Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn—to provide voters with official information about where to vote and what's on the ballot.

Launched in 2008, the Voting Information Project has become an essential part of the Election Day experience for voters. By 2016, the project's online tools were used more than 123 million times during that year's election cycle. In 2018, Pew turned the project over to the nonpartisan organization Democracy Works, which continues to manage it.

Other Pew efforts promoted passage of national legislation that ensured that Americans living overseas—especially members of the military and their families—could have their voices heard. Their ballots had often been delayed and were left uncounted in elections at home—the Congressional Research Service found that, on average, 28% of military and overseas ballots were rejected or returned in seven states that it surveyed after the 2008 election.

Pew's research recommendations deeply informed the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act passed in 2009 with requirements to mail ballots to voters at least 45 days before federal elections.

Still other Pew election work helped states to improve the accuracy of their voter rolls by sharing information about people who move and change addresses or die or otherwise become ineligible to vote. The bipartisan system known as the Electronic Registration Information Center has helped to reduce election costs and increase efficiencies.

Experts on the administration of elections in the U.S. note that the system is sound—more than 10,000 jurisdictions accommodate over 160 million voters at polling places throughout the nation. There is no single access point or election office that can be hacked, and 95% of voters cast a ballot on a system with a verifiable paper trail.

Yet episodes such as the COVID-19 pandemic can create challenges. The pandemic brought last-minute changes to election policies and practices without time to educate the public. At a time of political divisiveness in the nation that helped stoke mistrust among many people in the 2020 election.

In 2022, Pew with philanthropic partners created the Election Trust Initiative. The grantmaking effort develops and supports America's election administration systems and helps local and state officials operate secure, transparent, accurate, and convenient elections.

"Restoring the trust that has been lost by a large number of Americans is essential for all of us," says Michael Caudell-Feagan, Pew's executive vice president and chief program officer who oversees the initiative. "Our democracy rests on trust that our votes count."

Pew continues to take on challenges that can prevent communities from thriving by focusing on government efficiency and responsiveness to citizens' evolving concerns. For example, the organization's current research, analysis, and technical assistance encourage policies that allow more people to save for retirement and increase the supply of affordable homes. Other projects have helped to change policies to allow more people to receive care for substance use disorders and have opened court systems to ensure that those being sued for debt collection have an equal playing field.

And as states' roles in land and water conservation have expanded, Pew has worked to see that watersheds that supply drinking water are protected and that specialized bridges and culverts are constructed to guide migratory wildlife away from traffic, reducing collisions that kill millions of animals and hundreds of drivers each year.

Many of these concerns have emerged as the nation has grown, and as they are addressed, new challenges inevitably will arise. At first, they may seem intractable—but they're not. Experience shows how to meet them. Pew's nonpartisan approach supplies the data and facts to provide a language that disparate voices can use to talk to each other and focus on a problem and its solutions. For no problem is solved unless the people make their will known and their representatives respond in kind.

Inherent in this is the country's built-in optimism even in divided times such as these. We need only to look to our less than perfect history as well as our astonishing national successes to know that Americans can come together and find common cause. This is the essence of democracy, a process as much as a goal, and central to the pursuit of happiness—and the seeking of a more perfect union.

Daniel LeDuc is the former editor of Trust.

The Pew Charitable Trusts

Toward a More Perfect, and Continuing, Conversation

The Pew Charitable Trusts

BY CAROL KAUFMANN

Two hundred and fifty years later, the American Revolution is as relevant as ever.

The values and the ideas discussed, debated, argued over, and ultimately written down in the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution as 13 North American colonies broke from British rule in the 18th century remain essential to how we think about government today. Five prominent historians and filmmakers reflected on the war's epic impact in a wide-ranging conversation at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia in September that then aired as a national PBS special supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts in November.

Though the Revolution began with disagreements over taxes and land rights with the British, filmmaker Ken Burns told the audience, it evolved into a much larger argument about natural rights. "Underneath the relatively simplistic stories of disagreement is an amazing transformation. Everyone before the Revolution is essentially a subject. The people in the United States are now citizens with all of the responsibilities inherent in that," he said. "And that's a really good story."

It's a story that Burns, along with co-directors Sarah Botstein and David Schmidt, brought to life in "The American Revolution," a six-part PBS documentary, also supported by Pew, which premiered in November on PBS.

The country's people were crucial to making the government work. The founders believed that the republic would fall if citizens had not "mastered their passions and governed themselves by reason," Melody Barnes, executive director of the University of Virginia's Karsh Institute of Democracy, said at the Philadelphia event.

The founding of the country also offers a hopeful vision now in politically polarized times, said Botstein. "To go back and understand how divided and different opinions people had, including the founders, and how they, over the course of a decade, came together to create this extremely interesting, important, and new kind of nation that we all have a great stake in and a lot to fight for," she said.

The founders not only had spirited and fundamental disagreements—such as the famous conflicts between states' rights proponent Thomas Jefferson and Federalist Alexander Hamilton—over how the nation's government should be formed, they anticipated and provided for it. "The expectation was that people in power would seek to maximize their power," Yuval Levin, director of social, cultural, and constitutional studies at the American Enterprise Institute, told the audience. "But because they were set against each other, the system as a whole might be kept in some balance. That balance is dynamic. The branches are meant to fight each other. There's intended to be conflict constantly in the system."

And the founders knew that conflict was necessary. Jefferson, in fact, kept a bust of his greatest rival, Hamilton, at his home, Monticello, after Hamilton had died because he viewed him not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as a respected opponent to engage and debate, said Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO of the National Constitution Center. "That's the spirit that we've got to recover today … this recognition that we are here to engage each other, that truth can only emerge from the battle of ideas together."

In the past, when presidents sought to keep their authority, Levin said, Congress pushed back. "And the question for us in the 21st century is whether that can happen now. Because a president who wants more power would not have surprised the founders," he said. "A Congress that doesn't seem to want power would have very much surprised the founders. And I think in this moment, when all we're seeing in our politics is a constant set of titanic struggles between the executive and judiciary, we should keep our eye on the dog that isn't barking, on the institution that is absent from these thoughts."

Ultimately, the creation of the American system of government was a combination of compromise and audacity. Neither states' rights advocates nor those who believed in a strong central government formed a clear majority. Therefore, they compromised, saying "yes" to both and ended up building a "very, very complicated system that only works in practice, it doesn't work in theory," said Levin. "And it's given our system this ability to shift its weight without losing its balance that I think has been very, very important to its durability."

And worth remembering. Studying the American Revolution is particularly important now, Burns said, because "it's possible for us to reinvigorate the sense of purpose that we have had. … In this complicated story I think is the beginning of our salvation, of our recalibrating where we want to go, what our North Star might be."

Carol Kaufmann is a Trust *staff writer.*

'The American Revolution' and the Story of Democracy

Ken Burns on his latest film—and how he hopes it 'reinvigorates a spirit of what makes us unique in the history of the world.'

Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images

Over the past half-century, Ken Burns has become America's storyteller. His documentaries provide a history of the nation through biographies, sports, music, and other subjects. His most recent film, "The American Revolution," which was supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, premiered in November on PBS. He spoke about it with Pew recently in his barn office in New Hampshire.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Your most recent film is "The American Revolution." Is the Revolution the beginning of democracy in the U.S.?

It is—in a kind of backdoor way. We presume that the Revolution was intended to create a democracy. Democracy is an unintended consequence of the Revolution. The fight was an attempt to redress grievances about taxes and representation that the colonists in North America had against Britain, as we were taught in grade school. But to win the war, the

patriot side had to ask not just wealthy men of property, farmers, and shopkeepers at the heart of the rebellion, but just regular folks—men, women, Native American, free, and enslaved—to join the cause. The clash came to be about the noblest aspirations of humankind.

As the nation celebrates its 250th anniversary, the Revolution feels like our oldest story. Is it over or is it ongoing?

We end our film with the words of Benjamin Rush, the Philadelphia physician and founding father, who said the American war was over but the American Revolution is ongoing. If you look at our most sacred documents, we say "pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence. We say "a more perfect union." We are a nation in the process of becoming.

What's great is that gave Americans a sense of process from the beginning that, as the old saying goes, it's not about the end, it's about the journey. We have built into our DNA a sense of the process of getting better, of trying to perfect ourselves, to be in the pursuit of happiness, which is not the acquisition of stuff but of lifelong learning and self-improvement.

This new thing that we were creating was not just a nation, but the idea of a citizen. Everybody before the Revolution had been a subject to a monarchy. Now they—we—were citizens, and that means huge responsibilities.

You keep a sign in your editing room that says, "It's complicated." What were the complications in telling the story of the Revolution?

You don't want to sanitize the war and you don't want to overdramatize the violence of it. You just need to say, this is what happened. And we're always finding stuff that makes for a truer story as we research our films.

Wynton Marsalis said to us in our jazz series that sometimes a thing and the opposite of that thing are true at the same time. We understand that in our own lives and relationships, but we don't extend that to our politics or our media, where everything's a one or a zero, everything's binary. And we know that nothing in life is binary. So, if you tell a complicated story, you're actually inviting people to come in and say, "I recognize it."

I hope this film is an opportunity to put the "us" back in the U.S., to say it doesn't always have to be binary. I'm right, you're wrong. It's possible for us to have something we share in common. I've made films for the last 50 years about the U.S. but I've also made films about that lowercase, two-letter plural pronoun—us. All of the intimacy of us and we and our and all of the majesty and complexity and contradiction of us. It's a privilege and a magnificent space to negotiate and be able to work in.

The Revolution was complicated to be sure, but it was also about some big, broad ideas.

They are the most important thing. I think the American Revolution is the most important event since the birth of Christ. It's certainly the most consequential revolution in history, the thing that inspires more than two centuries of other revolutions.

Everybody up to that point had been a subject of a kingdom. And now there were people clinging to former colonies along the eastern seaboard of North America who were citizens. And universal human rights are still compelling. The most important words in our history are, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

In order to be free, to be a citizen, you have to know facts and not opinions, and to know truths and not suppositions. And that's complicated and hard to do. Everybody succumbs to that, including myself. So that's our job and I think telling stories is a good way to say, "Look, we're all in this together."

There is a lot of division in the nation today, but according to Pew Research Center, Americans seem to agree on one thing: About three-fourths of us say this country used to be a good example of democracy but isn't anymore. Where are we in our history?

Actually, there's not a period in this country when we've not been divided in some way. I think this sense of the possibilities of us ebbs and wanes and, right now, it's low. And I hope this film reinvigorates a spirit of what makes us unique in the history of the world, and to not make those choices that make us become like most every other country in the world.

What would you say to young people about the nation's path forward and their role in it?

Each generation has to take the messages and the stories and the examples of the American Revolution and internalize them to understand them, to come to terms with them, and then to try to manifest them, and most importantly, hand it down to their posterity.

That's the American obligation, that we have this huge burden of citizenship, which means we constantly have to be learning more, not just about our history, but about what it means to be a citizen and then learn how to pass that down. We cannot just simply devolve into our tribal camps, into our arguments, instead of our understandings, and into our conspiracies instead of our facts. We have to actually manifest facts and understand them and then pass them on.

Listen to a conversation with Ken Burns on Pew's podcast at pew.org/afterthefact.

The Future of News

With an informed citizenry essential to an effective democracy, the Pew-Knight Initiative is researching how Americans get their news amid upheaval in journalism and divided political times.

BY TOM INFIELD

New York City subway riders turn to their smartphones. News in the digital age has never been so widely available, leaving people "overwhelmed," according to Pew Research Center president Michael Dimock. "You can't even control your news diet because it is always hitting you." *Robert Nickelsberg/Getty Images*

Thomas Jefferson, who believed that the survival of American democracy depended on the free flow of news, once famously said, "Were if left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

Today, as the United States approaches the 250th anniversary of the Jeffersonian declaration that led to independence, the traditional newspaper has dramatically declined in influence.

But news itself in a digital age has never been so widely available. It comes at us in torrents and from all directions, whether we're looking for it or not—on our social media feeds, in phone messages and spam email, in pop-up ads on websites, and on the TV monitors in the dentist's waiting room or the car repair shop. The information tidal wave can leave us confused by what and whom to trust.

"People can feel overwhelmed," says Michael Dimock, president of Pew Research Center. "You can't even control your news diet because it is always hitting you. I think it can add to the sense of frustration and exhaustion that people express in our surveys."

Pew Research Center, in partnership with Knight Foundation, launched a five-year project in 2024 to look at how the changing news environment is affecting democracy and society in the 21st century. The partnership supports research on how Americans absorb civic information, form beliefs and identities, and engage in their communities.

The Pew-Knight Initiative is looking into an array of issues pertaining to news consumption, including where Americans get their news (from almost everywhere), whom they consider to be journalists (not just media professionals), and how the news makes them feel (often informed and angry).

The Pew Charitable Trusts and Knight are funding the work. The Center uses a mix of research methods across the portfolio, and Knight uses the information to promote civic dialogue, especially in cities and towns that have had Knight newspapers.

"What's special about this partnership is how it pairs Pew Research Center's rigorous research with Knight's expertise in supporting the news and information organizations communities rely on," says Kyla Elhelo, the foundation's director for information and society.

"We see our role as translating that work and getting insights into the hands of news practitioners and the public to inform their decision-making."

The work, Elhelo says, is "putting facts on what we sense and feel"—that light-speed changes in technology have produced disruptions in the media ecosystem that Americans are only beginning to understand.

One initiative report that has attracted attention in (yes) the news media looks at the growing impact of news influencers—defined by the Center as individuals who regularly post about current events and civic issues on social media and who have at least 100,000 followers on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and/or YouTube.

"About 1 in 5 Americans—including a much higher share of adults under 30 (38%)—say they regularly get news from influencers on social media," the most recent data finds.

This includes about an equal share of Republicans and Democrats—21% and 22%, respectively, including those who lean to each party—but not many adults age 65 or older (just 8%). When people who get news from news influencers on social media are asked why they do this, about half (54%) say a major reason is that influencers help them understand current events and civic issues.

Pew sampled 500 news influencers from a review of more than 28,000 social media accounts for the in-depth study. Slightly more of them are right-leaning than left-leaning (27% versus 21%), and a solid majority (63%) are men. The group includes journalists at news organizations who regularly post online personally. It also includes many influencers—in fact, about three-quarters of the total—who have never worked in a newsroom and may or may not have regular, direct access to news events or newsmakers. Those without a news industry affiliation, the Center's analysis found, are more likely to express their political orientation.

"News organizations used to be the main source of news, but that has shifted," says Katerina Eva Matsa, Pew Research Center's director of news and information research. "The large majority of news influencers we studied had no background in news organizations."

Some people would say that President Donald Trump acts as a news influencer for many Americans. In a Center survey, 2% of adults named him as the first influencer who came to mind.

"They see him as an individual who is on social media a lot and who discusses the news, and they get informed by him," Matsa says.

The initiative also is examining who now decides what is news and what isn't. Traditionally, that determination rested with editors. If a story led the CBS Evening News or was on page one of *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, it was news.

But news organizations have lost their dominance in deciding what qualifies as news in an era when "defining news has become a personal, and personalized, experience," one of the Pew-Knight studies concludes.

"In the digital age, the power to define news has largely shifted from media gatekeepers to the general public," the report states.

Most Americans say that, when deciding whether something counts as news, major factors are whether information is factual (85%), up to date (78%), important to society (72%), and unbiased (68%).

"In the digital age, the power to define news has largely shifted from media gatekeepers to the general public."

"'Hard news' stories about politics and war continue to be what people most clearly think of as news," the report says.

People make clear distinctions between news and entertainment. Titillating as they may be, stories about celebrities and their lives are considered news by only a fraction of adults—17%. Sports information (scores, trades, injuries) is more widely considered news—by about half of people (55%).

And then there's the question of trust.

A September 2025 survey shows that 56% of Americans retain at least some trust in national news organizations, but that share has fallen by 20 points since Pew Research Center first asked the question in 2016.

The partisan divide has grown. Less than half of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents (44%) cite trust in national news organizations. Democrats remain more trustful, but their trust has fallen, too.

The September survey showed that 69% of Democrats and Democratic leaners hold a lot or some trust in national news organizations. That was lowest since the Center began asking the question and had dropped from 81% in March 2025.

Young Americans see little difference in the trustworthiness of national news outlets and what they hear from social media. "They are trusting news and information from social media at about the same rate as news from national news organizations," Matsa says. "That is a big shift we are seeing."

The research shows that people generally trust local news organizations more readily than national ones.

The share of adults who retain a lot or some trust in local news organizations remains high (70%), but it has declined from 82% in 2016.

With the breakdown of the print advertising economic model that long sustained newspapers, most local papers have had to cut back on staffing, which inevitably has reduced content. Comparatively, local TV news has remained strong—financially sustained by political advertising every election season.

However, Dimock notes, the long-standing emphasis on crime in local TV news—"If it bleeds, it leads," as the cliche goes—has helped give Americans an exaggerated impression of crime levels in their communities.

Another Pew-Knight report, using data from a March survey, shows that news consumption can bring out striking emotions.

Researchers asked survey respondents to indicate how often news consumption makes them feel certain emotions. Among those who follow the news most closely, 46% said it frequently makes them angry. Other prominent emotions they cited were "sad," "scared," and "confused."

And among those who don't follow the news closely, 38% say it frequently makes them feel anger. Elhelo says she finds this telling. It suggests that whether people are glued 24-7 to the news or are putting their head in the sand, the noise and the heat are stressful.

Americans seem to have given up on figuring out what to trust. They are turning to news sites that align with their political points of view. More and more, Americans of different leanings are absorbing different sets of facts.

"More people are saying now that they want to choose sources that they agree with because they believe the news they are getting elsewhere is biased," Matsa says. "They think, 'Well, since there is bias, I am just going to go to the news that confirms my identity or my own views.'"

Dimock, asked if this alarmed him, replies: "Alarm is a fair word, yeah."

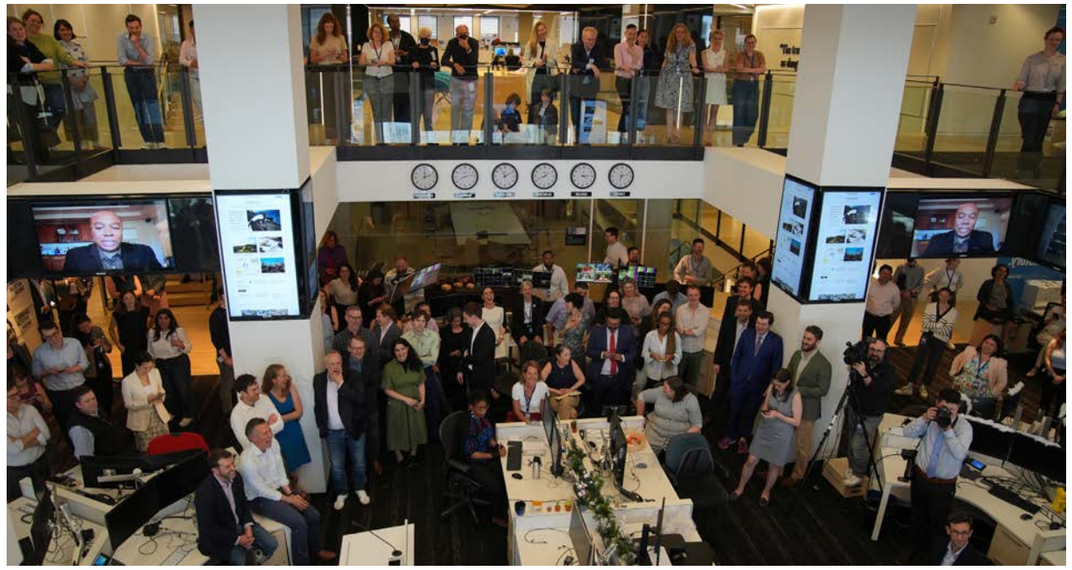
The phenomenon—different news for different people—is not wholly unique to today, Dimock points out. Many Americans live in cities that have—or have had—a newspaper called "The Republican" or "The Democrat." Talk radio has long been extremely partisan.

But the sharp divide today in what Americans are seeing and hearing about their country does not bode well for addressing the nation's problems, Dimock says.

"I don't think most people believe we are in a post-truth era," he says. "I think there is still true information out there. But people are extremely skeptical of an institutionally driven information system—government, educational institutions, media institutions."

The work of the Pew-Knight Initiative is trying to sort out the massive disruptions in news, even while they are still happening.

Tom Infield is a longtime Philadelphia journalist and frequent contributor to Trust.



Journalists gather in The Washington Post newsroom, where reporters used to focus on a newspaper produced once a day. But in the digital age, print is less essential and news is poured into social media all day long. *Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post via Getty Images*

As the U.S. Approaches Its 250th Birthday, There Is Broad Dissatisfaction With Democracy

The nation stands out among international surveys of democracy for critical views of leaders and institutions.

BY RICHARD WIKE

Since its founding, the United States has often been referred to as a "grand experiment" in democracy, but as the nation approaches its 250th birthday, many Americans think the experiment is going badly: In a spring 2025 Pew Research Center poll, 62% were dissatisfied with the way democracy is working.

This sense of democratic frustration is hardly unique to the U.S. Research organizations such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House, International IDEA, and V-Dem consistently say that the world is in an era of democratic decline—or sometimes, democratic backsliding, erosion, or recession—as polarization grows and crucial democratic norms weaken.

The Center's international surveys find that people around the globe still largely believe in democratic values, but they are critical of their leaders and institutions. Most see elected officials as out of touch, and many say there is no political party that truly represents their views. And all of these frustrations are exacerbated by economic anxieties and deep cultural fissures driven by rapid social upheaval.

But even in this moment of shaken global confidence in democracy, the U.S. stands out in some unfortunately negative ways. For example, in a 2023 survey of 24 nations, 83% of Americans said elected officials do not care what people like them think, making the U.S. one of only five countries where 80% or more held this view.

The U.S. also belongs to a group of high-income nations where people want political reform but are pessimistic about the prospects for it. The Center surveyed 25 countries in 2025, and in seven of them, including the U.S., roughly half or more of the public said that the political system needs significant change *and* that they are not confident the system can change. These seven nations are all high-income countries where dissatisfaction with democracy tends to run high, and, on a variety of measures, faith in politicians often runs low.

The U.S. stands out in other ways as well, including views about the impact of technology on politics and society. In 2022 and 2023, we asked people in a mix of high- and middle-income nations whether social media has been more of a good thing or bad thing for democracy in their country. A majority of Americans (64%) said the latter, the most negative assessment among the 27 nations polled. Similarly, the Center's 2025 survey showed that Americans are more concerned about the increased use of artificial intelligence in daily life than most other nations polled.

And worryingly, the U.S. is often an outlier in our surveys for its high levels of social disconnection and division. Although a majority of Americans (66%) in 2023 said they feel close to other people in the country, that was among the lowest percentages of the 24 nations polled. And Americans had the second-lowest percentage on a similar question about feeling close to people in their community.

Americans were more likely than any of the 17 high-income publics surveyed in 2021 to say that there are strong conflicts in their country between people with different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

And the U.S. is regularly at or near the top of the list when it comes to partisan and ideological divisions. Nearly 9 in 10 Americans (88%) in 2022 said there are strong conflicts in the country between people who support different political parties—second only to South Korea among the 19 countries polled.

On issue after issue, the gap between right and left is especially wide in the U.S. This is true on social as well as economic issues. And the U.S. has exceptionally large ideological divisions on questions about international politics, including opinions about climate change, terrorism, and the United Nations.

Americans are particularly divided on a question that is designed to explore overarching orientations toward change and tradition. When asked in 2022 if the U.S. will be better off in the future if it sticks with its traditions and way of life or if it is open to changing them, 91% of liberals said we are better off if we embrace change, compared with just 28% of conservatives—by far the largest ideological gap among the 19 countries in the study.

As many scholars and writers have documented, divisions between Democrats and Republicans in the U.S. have intensified over time as the two parties have evolved from relatively heterogenous coalitions of different interests into relatively like-minded groups of partisans. Ideological, racial, religious, and other identities have coalesced in ways that can make it feel like the country is increasingly becoming opposing camps that see two very different Americas. And politics increasingly feels like a zero-sum competition between these camps.

So, after 250 years, is the experiment out of steam, or are new and better ways of doing democracy still possible?

Americans have some ideas for achieving the latter. In 2023, we asked people in the U.S. and 23 other nations to describe in their own words what would help improve the way democracy is working. Americans had a lot to say. Two sets of ideas topped the list.

First—and this was true in many other countries as well—people expressed a desire for new and better political leaders who are more responsive, competent, and honest, among other characteristics. We know from other questions we've asked that many people believe having leaders with different backgrounds and experiences would improve policies. For some, that means more women, young people, labor union members, and people from underprivileged backgrounds. Others want to elect more businesspeople and religious leaders.

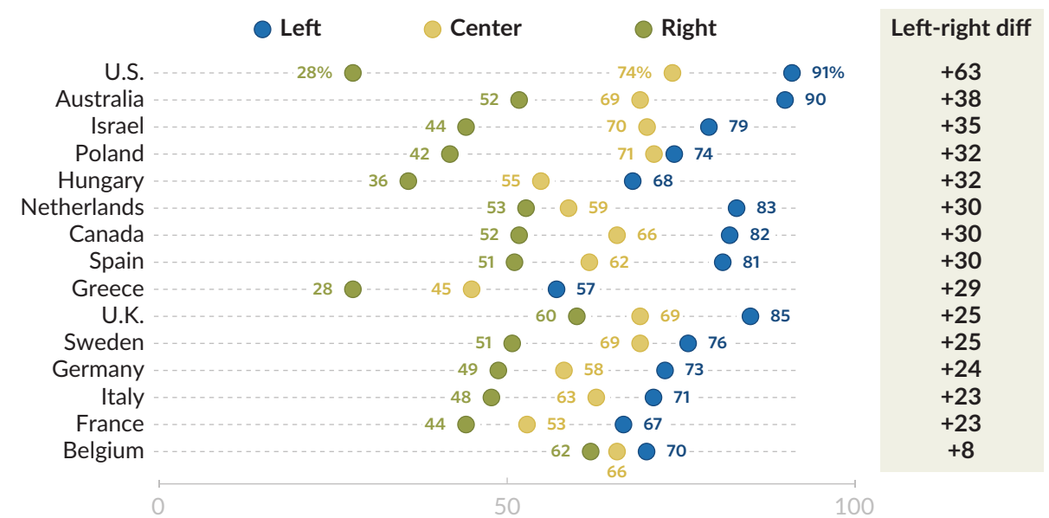
Second, the U.S. was the only country surveyed where government reform was the most frequently mentioned idea (it was tied with getting new political leaders). Our polling has found broad support for specific reforms, such as term limits for Congress, age limits for federal elected officials and Supreme Court justices, and abolishment of the Electoral College. Many express a desire to curb the power of special interests and to reduce the role of money in politics.

But to achieve the reforms they want, Americans will have to regain confidence in their collective capacity for change. They will need to create a shared sense of purpose and new unifying forms of American identity that allow them to transcend divisions and trust one another long enough to pursue a healthier democracy. Over the past 250 years, the nation's very imperfect representative democracy has often found the capacity to meet its challenges, becoming, at least at times, more democratic and representative. Today, many Americans would say it's time to discover that capacity once more.

Richard Wike directs global attitudes research at Pew Research Center.

Those on the ideological left tend to be most likely to embrace change

% of adults who say their country will be better off in the future if it is ***open to changes*** *regarding its traditions and way of life, among those on the ...*



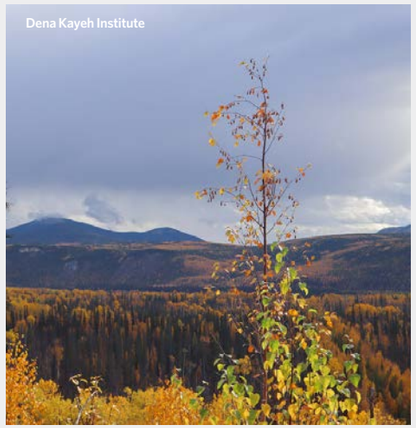
Note: Only statistically significant differences shown. In the U.S., ideology is defined as conservative (right), moderate (center) and liberal (left).

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

The Pew Charitable Trusts applies a rigorous, analytical approach to **improve public policy**, **inform the public**, and **invigorate civic life**, as these recent accomplishments illustrate.

IMPROVING PUBLIC POLICY

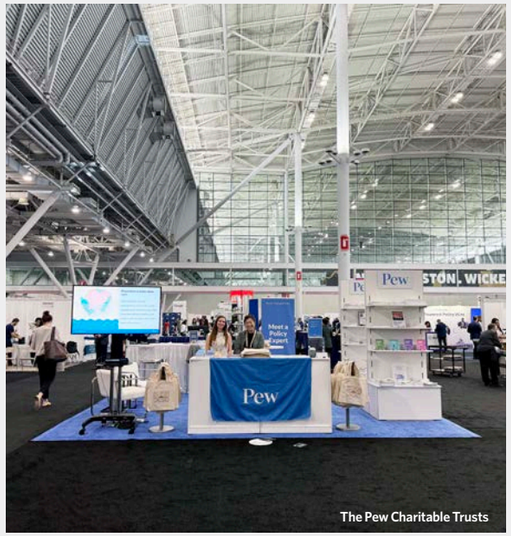


British Columbia and First Nations begin conservation planning across 40 million acres

In early June, the Canadian province of British Columbia and five First Nations—the Tahltan, Taku River Tlingit, Kaska Dena, Gitanyow, and Nisga'a—began land use planning across a 40-million-acre region, including identification of Indigenous-led conservation areas. The Kaska Dena are advancing one of the largest Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas in the country, a 10-million-acre site called Dene K'éh Kusān. The effort also includes a one-year pause on new mining-tenure registrations over approximately one-third of the planning area. Completion of the plans and associated Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas will contribute significantly to Pew's efforts to help to secure protections for 45 million to 60 million acres of boreal lands by 2028.

Pew provides fiscal research to national gathering of state legislators

In August, Pew state fiscal experts presented research at the National Conference of State Legislatures Legislative Summit in Boston. In a session on transportation infrastructure strategies, the experts shared findings from two recent reports—"State and Local Governments Face $105 Billion in Deferred Maintenance for Roads and Bridges" and "States Fall Short of Funding Needed to Keep Roads and Bridges in Good Repair"—that look at past shortfalls in maintaining and repairing state and local roadways, as well as states' own projected gaps for funding key roads and bridges. In another session, the experts presented analyses on disaster funding—including Pew's recently published recommendations, "How States Can Build Disaster-Ready Budgets"—and highlighted states that are making thoughtful, forward-looking investments to reduce their future risk.



The Pew Charitable Trusts

INFORMING THE PUBLIC

Income shapes the aging experience for older Americans

With the birthrate declining, life expectancy increasing, and a growing number of Baby Boomers in their 60s and 70s, the U.S. population is aging rapidly. A Pew Research Center survey of 8,750 adults released in November found that income plays an important role in how older Americans experience aging. Among adults 65 and older, 61% in the upper income group say they are aging extremely or very well, compared with 51% in the middle group and 39% in the lower group. The survey found that most older adults feel positive about their emotional and social lives. Seven in 10 say they have people they can rely on for support most or all of the time, and 66% feel optimistic about their lives. Four in 10 participate in civic or social groups such as neighborhood associations, religious organizations, sports leagues, or book clubs, and 35% believe their contributions to society are highly valued.

INVIGORATING CIVIC LIFE

Helping Philadelphia reduce barriers to opioid use disorder treatment

The opioid overdose crisis continues to have a big impact in Philadelphia, which has one of the highest rates of overdose deaths in the country. But access to high-quality, evidence-based treatment remains a challenge for many who seek it. In June, Pew and the University of Pennsylvania's Leonard Davis Institute of Health Economics hosted a program titled "Improving Low-Barrier Access to Opioid Use Disorder Treatment in Philadelphia." The session brought together policymakers, public health researchers, and treatment providers to share research and on-the-ground experiences about the practical barriers that people face in accessing buprenorphine, one of three Food and Drug Administration-approved medications for opioid use disorder, and remaining in care after they start treatment.

Prescription medication that treats opioid addiction is kept in a safe at Prevention Point Philadelphia, a nonprofit that offers medical and social services. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

Gaby Bonilla/The Pew Charitable Trusts

5 FACTS: HOW THE WORLD'S POPULATION IS EXPECTED TO CHANGE BY 2100

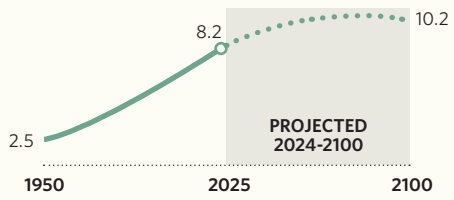
Here are five facts about how the world's population is projected to change by the end of the century, based on Pew Research Center analysis of the United Nations' World Population Prospects. (The latest data is from 2023, so the numbers for 2024 and beyond are projections.)

#1

Although the world's population more than tripled in the last 75 years, the U.N. expects it to grow by only about 1.9 billion between now and 2100 (from some 8.2 billion to 10.2 billion).

The world's population is projected to peak before the end of the century

World population, in billions

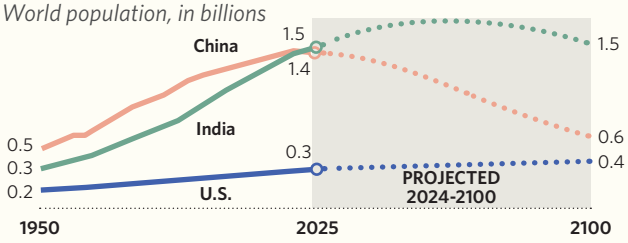


#2

The world's three most populous countries are expected to have different trajectories over the century: India is projected to peak at 1.7 billion people and then decline to 1.5 billion by 2100. China's population is expected to drop to 633 million. The U.S. is expected to grow slowly and steadily to 421 million.

By 2100, China's population is projected to shrink by more than half

World population, in billions



#3

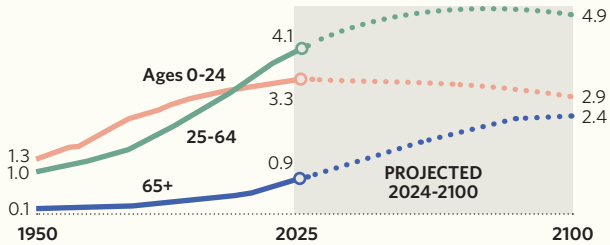
Five countries are expected to contribute to more than 60% of the world's population growth by 2100: the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Tanzania. Among the 10 countries projected to contribute most to global population growth, the U.S. is the only one located outside of Africa and Asia. Still, the U.S. is expected to fall from the world's third-most populous country today to the sixth-most populous by 2100.

#4

The world's population is expected to get older. The world's median age is projected to rise to 42 by 2100, up from 31 today and 22 in 1950.

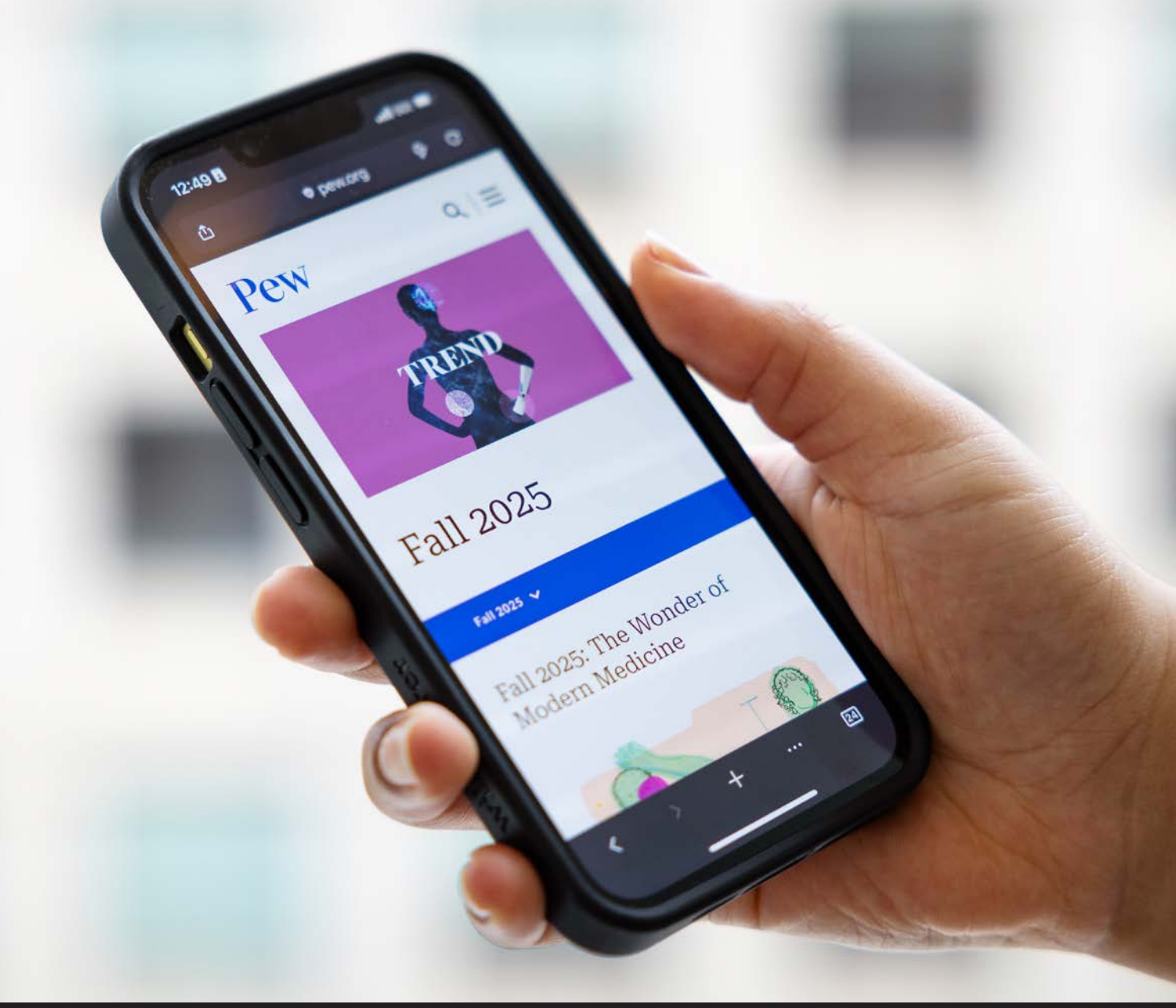
By 2100, there will be about 2.4 billion adults worldwide ages 65 and older

World population by age groups, in billions



#5

Africa is the world's youngest region and is projected to stay that way by the end of the century. The median age in Africa is 19, which is expected to rise to 35 by 2100. Europe is the oldest region, with a median age of 43.



The Magic of Medical Innovation

Artificial intelligence is on the cusp of transforming care, technology is fast-forwarding robotic surgery and computer-aided prosthetics, chemotherapy refinements are reducing the treatments' debilitating effects on patients. Read about these wonders of medicine and more in the latest issue of *Trend*.

Find it at pew.org/trend.

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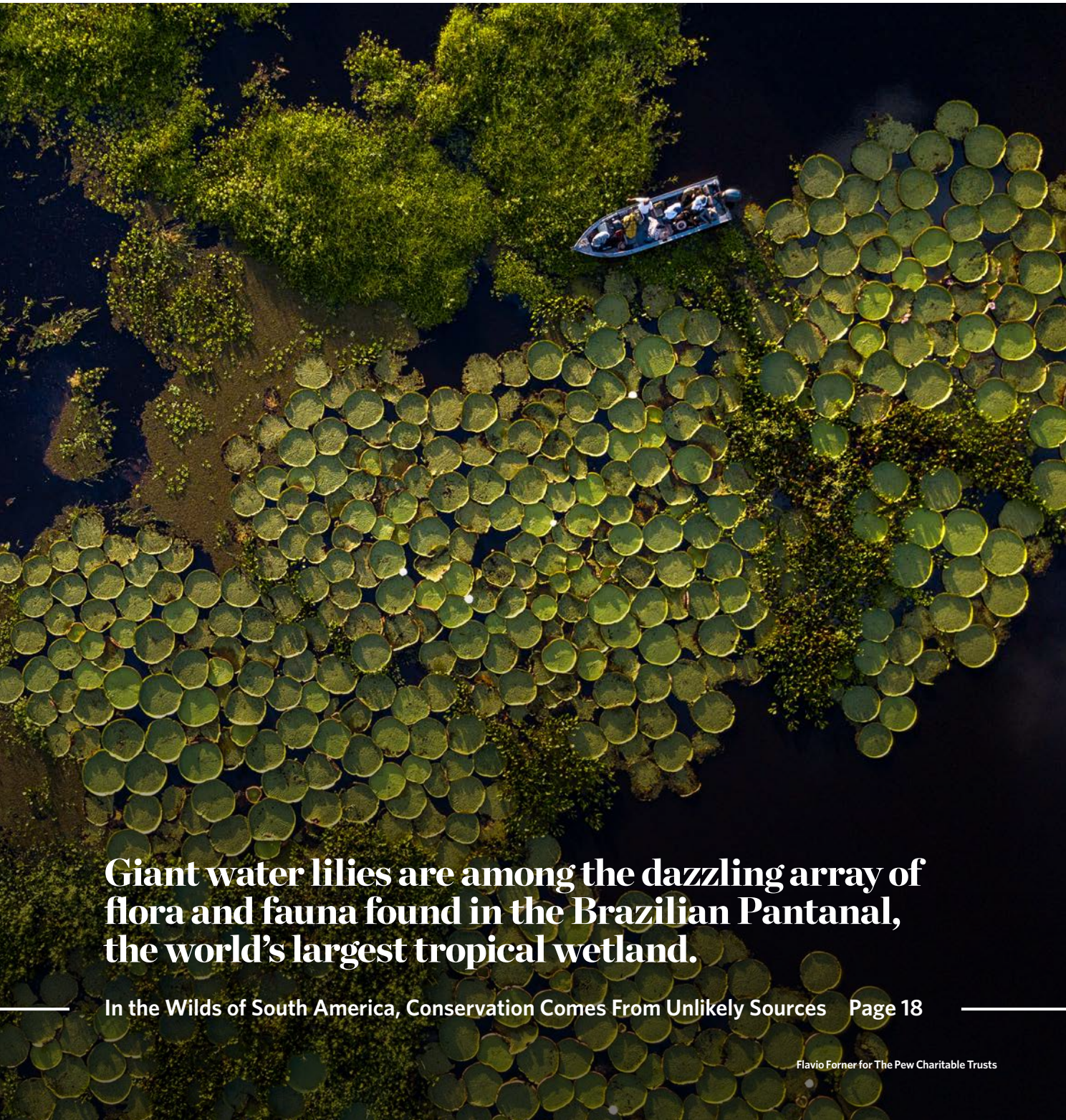

Giant water lilies are among the dazzling array of flora and fauna found in the Brazilian Pantanal, the world's largest tropical wetland.

In the Wilds of South America, Conservation Comes From Unlikely Sources Page 18

Flavio Forner for The Pew Charitable Trusts