

Central European University

How Can Trust in Political Institutions be Restored?

Political Essay

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1. Introduction

Of the many challenges currently facing the United States, perhaps most glaring is the widespread lack of trust in its political institutions. All branches of America's federal government- the Presidency, Supreme Court and Congress- face staggeringly low approval ratings and have no clear path to restoring faith in their processes. The fallout from such pervasive distrust is, among other things, increased polarization and political apathy among citizens, both of which undermine the civil society democracy requires to flourish. Before trying to solve this gargantuan problem, it's crucial to first recognize how we got here. I hope to shed light on a path forward by posing the question, "How can trust in political institutions be restored?"

I'll begin by contextualizing the current situation, summarizing the findings of recent major studies which document trust in government and general personal trust. Then I'll consider commonly attributed causes of distrust and categorize two distinct narratives that attempt to explain their origin. I'll finish by concentrating on the principle of good faith, which I argue underlies any remedies to my initial question. My conclusion mentions the example of gerrymandering and the main roadblocks ahead. The scope of my research considers contemporary United States political institutions and current public sentiment with reference to historical norms dating back to the 1960's.

2. Context

Significant evidence exists positing that American's trust in their political institutions has steadily declined from the 1960s to 2023. In 1958, 73% of Americans trusted the government to "do what is right," but by 2023 only 16% of Americans felt the same way.¹ Studies examining specific institutions fare similarly. In 2023, 49% of Americans had confidence in the Supreme Court, 17% below a historical average² of 66%. 41% had confidence in the Presidency, compared to a historical average of 52%. Even less -32%- said they had confidence in Congress, down 16% from a historical average of 48%.³ Distrust in

¹ Pew Research Center

² compared to Gallup norms from early 1970's

³ Jones

institutions is systemic, indicating that, when compared to historical averages, the current sentiment is not confined to specific institutions or processes.

Ideological differences also play a role in shaping individual trust. Only 8% of Republicans say they trust the government always or most of the time, compared to 25% of Democrats. Obama, Trump and Biden oversaw similar levels of trust during their presidencies⁴, but each of their terms were marked by partisan support from their respective parties.⁵ During Biden's presidency, only 9% of Republicans trust the government to do what's right, whereas under Trump's term, Republican confidence stood at 28%. Similarly, 36% of Democrats expressed trust in the government during Biden's term, in contrast to just 12% during Trump's presidency.⁶ Both parties are deeply skeptical of the political process but Democrats are generally more trusting of government than Republicans.

Personal trust levels are also related to factors such as race, ethnicity, age, education and household income.⁷ In 2023, trust in the government was reported at 13% among White Americans, while Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics registered levels of 21%, 23%, and 23%.⁸ Individuals with a bachelor's degree (29%) or postgraduate degree (33%) demonstrate higher levels of personal trust compared to those with a high school education or less (15%). Individuals earning greater than \$75,000 are less likely to be low trusters (25%) compared to those earning under \$30,000 (45%). And among Gen Z individuals, aged 12 to 26, there's notable trends of distrust, with 17% expressing confidence in the Supreme Court, 13% in the presidency, and 10% in Congress.⁹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, lack of trust in political institutions is connected to a broader atmosphere of distrust within society. Seven in ten Americans believe interpersonal confidence has worsened in the past 20 years, while 49% believe that Americans are not as reliable as they used to be. The perception of others being less reliable is more prevalent among individuals aged 50 and above, those who are Republicans or Republican leaning, individuals without a college degree, residents of rural areas, and those living in households earning less than \$30,000 per year.¹⁰ Conducted in 2018, the below infographic synthesizes the extent of concern regarding lack of trust in contemporary America.

⁴ Pew Research Center

⁵ Halpin et al.

⁶ Babington

⁷ Pew Research Center

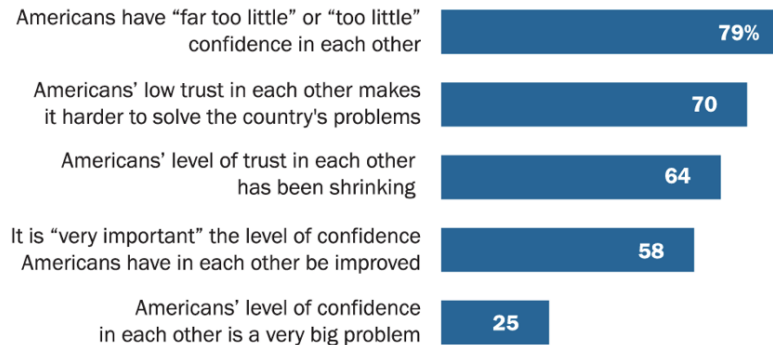
⁸ Pew Research Center

⁹ Hrynowski and Marken

¹⁰ Rainie, Lee, et al.

Americans are worried about the declining level of trust citizens have in each other

% of U.S. adults who believe ...



Note: Respondents who gave other answers or no answer are not shown.
Source: Survey conducted Nov. 27-Dec. 10, 2018.
“Trust and Distrust in America”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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Finally, most Americans believe the current lack of public confidence in government is justified. Just 24% say the federal government deserves more public confidence compared to 75% who express the opposite.¹² Only 4% of U.S. adults say the political system is working “extremely” or “very well” and 63% have “not too much” or “no confidence at all” in political institutions going forward.¹³

3. Two Narratives

Causes of America’s societal distrust are frequently debated and can generally be categorized into two distinct prisms. The first narrative states that the federal government’s dismal performance has led to the current widespread distrust of its institutions. The second narrative is that, because of actions outside the sphere of governance, people have stopped trusting the government to solve its problems, and the government’s inefficacy became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Clearly these narratives are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive, but their distinct original premises are consequential when considering possible remedies.

In the first narrative, fault lies squarely with the government. Perceived government policy failures are why citizens have such a low opinion of the government. Policy failures can be recognized overtime, like America’s military expenditures in Afghanistan or Iraq. At the outset these interventions were viewed favorably, but now these are widely seen as mistakes.¹⁴ Richard Nixon’s ‘War on Drugs’ approach is also regarded in a similar light.¹⁵ Other occasions, such as decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic, can affect opinions within a shorter timeframe; perception of the federal COVID-19

¹¹ Rainie, Lee, et al.

¹² Rainie et al.

¹³ Konig

¹⁴ Doherty and Kiley

¹⁵ Franklin

response is directly correlated with one's trust in government.¹⁶ Similarly, the Supreme Court faced a decline in confidence after their reversal of *Roe v. Wade*¹⁷ and, separately, with the disclosure of multiple justices' ethical misconduct.¹⁸ These instances can support the argument that government missteps bear responsibility for the current lack of public confidence in its institutions.

Alternatively, the second narrative designates private actors responsible for current societal distrust. 'Private actors' represent specific individuals and organizations such as media corporations who are not actively governing. Left-leaning individuals declare figures such as Tucker Carlson and Alex Jones, or corporations like Fox News and X (formerly Twitter), responsible for promoting misinformation which erodes trust in the government. Many on the right claim that mainstream media organizations such as CNN or the New York Times promote 'fake news' with left-leaning biases. Both judgments share the common thread that bad actors in society are seeking to deceive and misinform citizens for partisan political gain. In this perspective, government inefficacy is the inevitable conclusion of misinformed citizens supporting candidates who do not represent their best interests.

These narratives attributing blame to the government or private actors are rarely held independently and are frequently intertwined. Indeed, they are likely related similar to a 'chicken-or-the egg' phenomena. But the primacy one places on either narrative matters. If one believes that distrust is mainly due to government wrongdoings, the path forward places emphasis on improving government processes through, among other things, accountability and transparency. Conversely, if one declares private actors responsible for the current distrust, remedies will likely focus on improving civil society and educating individuals, rather than altering government processes. With this foundation in mind, we can examine the good-faith approach, which I consider necessary in the attempt to restore institutional trust.

4. The Good-Faith Approach

First, both aforementioned narratives must be held equally when addressing how best to increase trust in political institutions. Partly because one can also never be certain which narrative –the chicken or the egg- should be given primacy. In reality, the responsibility for the current systemic distrust does not rest solely in government errors or private actors, but both. Neither government processes nor individual and organizational actions occur in a vacuum, so any plausible remedies to increase trust must consider possible first and second-order consequences.

Second, the idea of restoring trust is so basic that the grounding remedy must be equally basic. Before considering actual -likely quite complex- processes to improve trust, we must recognize an underlying principle which serves as our guiding light. The main idea is that those with power –in government or otherwise- must act in good faith. In legal terms, good faith is the "honest intent to act without taking an unfair advantage over another person." For the movers and shakers in a socio-political

¹⁶ Reid et al.

¹⁷ AP-NORC

¹⁸ Buchanan

context, this means acting sincerely, honestly, and placing society's interest over one's own. As Rousseau put, "it is solely on the basis of this common interest that every society should be governed."

While many acknowledge the ideality of the good-faith approach, they simultaneously observe the impractical nature of requiring those in power to alter their strategic philosophy. Why would one who achieved success with self-serving, cynical tendencies be inclined to change their ways? Another critic will question the outcome of one acting in good faith while another does not. Wouldn't acting in good faith only serve the interests of those choosing not to, because they could easily exploit the sincerity of the other? Perhaps most troubling is the notion that one cannot objectively ensure who truly acts in good faith, so there can never be empirical evidence defending this proposition's necessity.

Overcoming these criticisms requires a few clarifications. First, acting in good faith is neither esoteric nor implausible, as we already have ethical standards for politicians and leaders which are currently in place. For instance, societal norms which expect those in public service to refrain from engaging in corruption and bribery. Second, determining when one acts in good faith is not a matter of arbitrary judgment. There is a unifying set of values and attitudes which defines good-faith behavior, namely, that we act with honesty with the expectation that the other will as well. Of course, a healthy democracy requires some level of skepticism towards the individuals in its processes. Distrust in itself is not destructive for democracy, but institutionalized distrust –the rejection of the entire system- cripples the political processes required for good governance.

While it may be politically savvy to act in *bad* faith¹⁹, that doesn't make it right. Moreover, it only hurts society in the long run. The myopic perspective which discards good faith forgoes building social capital in exchange for immediate individual success. The flourishing of this behavior is exactly what has led to the pervasive lack of public confidence in our political institutions and in general. Current distrust is rampant because humans can see through those who act insincerely. We lose trust in those who have attempted to deceive us. In setting out to trick others, we only trick ourselves down the road. It's simple: winning a political battle is trivial compared to ensuring the legitimacy of our processes. While requiring that we act in good faith may be difficult, the alternatives are far worse.

5. Conclusion

Looking forward, there are avenues to increase the transparency and accountability of government processes and improve trust in our political institutions. One example: current widespread gerrymandering -the manipulation of electoral districts- prioritizes partisan success over democratic representation. This behavior guarantees electoral outcomes by establishing non-competitive districts, effectively eliminating debate of candidate selection from general elections and confining it to hyper-partisan primaries. Gerrymandered districts strengthen the bad-faith politics which inspires the political

¹⁹ with the intent to deceive

cynicism now embedded in society. Non-partisan redistricting campaigns²⁰ exemplify citizens' attempts to shape their politics with integrity, rather than giving in to cynical political processes.

The biggest roadblocks to good-faith efforts like ending gerrymandering are the 10-foot-tall boogeymen in the room: private actors- lobbyists, big-money donors, special interests' groups, media corporations, etc. They use their capital and reach to influence politics in their favor, habituating politicians to prioritize their financial backers over constituents. The unequal distribution of capital which distorts the climate of political expression is clearly not done in good faith. The problem is that actors in both parties use the same tactics. The influence of capital is embedded in our institutions, and there is no simple way to combat such powerful players in the political process. Our institutions have been stained by the influence of cash and we now have the herculean task of trying to clean up the mess. The good-faith goal of reducing the financial influence on politics is currently blocked by those who use money to skew politics.

This backdrop requires returning to my original premise: if we hope to restore trust in our processes, a return to basic values is imperative. We cannot calculate the individual political costs and benefits of restoring trust in our institutions. Operating in good faith means setting aside immediate personal gains in the pursuit of societal benefit. Finally, the bleakness of our current systemic distrust cannot justify political apathy, but the opposite- it must be the inspiration which demands improving the processes of our political institutions. Our current cynicism can only be overcome with optimism for how much better things can be in the future.

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