

PUBLIC DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT IN AN AGE OF MARKET FAILURES

REBUILDING TRUST IN GOVERNMENT MEANS REBUILDING TRUST IN US

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“[T]rust is probably the moral orientation that most needs to be diffused among the people if republican society is to be maintained.” – Gianfranco Poggi, *Images of Society*

2011 began with a dramatically altered political landscape in which the question of trust in government hung heavy in the air. We have experienced an electoral cycle where anti-government rhetoric was at an all time high and public trust in government at historical lows. But puzzling contradictions roil beneath the surface of the seemingly anti-government moment we are living through. How can it be that dramatic failures in the private sector—from the Wall Street collapse to the BP oil spill—have not highlighted the essential protective and public interest roles of government? How can polls show historically low levels of trust in government AND deep support for many of the actual programs of government? How does an Election Day that saw numerous anti-government, anti-tax zealots swept into office also witness convincing defeats of tax cut proposals in Massachusetts and Colorado, and broad support for tax increases to protect public services in dozens of localities?

Do these contradictions reveal complexities in what “trust in government” actually means, and therefore what “rebuilding trust” entails?

What if the root causes of public distrust in government—and thus the clues to its rebuilding—do not exist in government per se but are more directly related to trust itself, to its fragility in the complex world in which we live, and to the damaging consequences of cynicism in our current political culture?

The notion that trust is a foundational value in a democratic society informs one of the core goals at Demos—to rebuild public trust and support for government and its role. We believe that without a reasonable level of faith and trust in government, our ability as a country to address the whole range of challenges and opportunities of this new century will be hamstrung. We further believe that this task must be taken on directly.

How then do we rebuild trust? And what kind of trust are we trying to restore? For trust is multifaceted; it can be based in practical and functional experiences, but it can also spring from values-based judgments that underpin a kind of trust more akin to “faith.” This latter type of trust is essentially optimistic, it springs from a world view that believes that a fundamental trust in the goodwill of others is essential to a functioning society. Any successful effort to rebuild trust in government must address both of these kinds of trust—trust in the *functions* of public institutions and trust in shared *purposes*—trust in “how” and trust in

“why.” To date, most of our approaches to rebuilding trust have focused on the practical kind—attempting only to fix the “how” of government.

In his paper “[Trust as a Moral Value](#),”¹ Eric Uslaner talks about this kind of practical and strategic trust: “trust is mostly conceived as a “rational” response to behavior by others. This standard account of trust presumes that trust depends on information and experience—call it ‘knowledge-based trust.’ [Thus], the decision to trust another person is essentially strategic.”

This knowledge-based notion of trust—“functional trust” if you will—underpins efforts to rebuild trust in government that focus on governmental competence. Such efforts seek to improve and modernize public programs and services as the avenue for rebuilding confidence in the functions of government and therefore, trust. It is also the motivating factor for many of the governmental transparency and accountability initiatives currently underway.

Make it Work and Trust will Follow

“The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works—whether it helps families find jobs at a decent wage, care they can afford, a retirement that is dignified. Where the answer is yes, we intend to move forward. Where the answer is no, programs will end. And those of us who manage the public’s dollars will be held to account, to spend wisely, reform bad habits, and do our business in the light of day, because only then can we restore the vital trust between a people and their government.”

– President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009

This perspective—articulated well by the incoming president—accepts that much of the current distrust in government stems from people’s lived experiences with government. It suggests that we have a government that is outdated and outmoded and needs to be improved in order to rebuild trust. This approach informed the Clinton/Gore “Reinventing Government” initiative whose mission was to “create a government that works better, costs less, and gets results Americans care about.” It is also at the core of the “[Doing What Works](#)”² project of the Campaign for American Progress, as their website asserts:

Opinion research shows the public does not believe government is capable of effectively and efficiently executing its responsibilities. This mistrust is a significant barrier to advancing policies to address even the most popular goals. For attitudes to change, the public first and foremost will have to see government acting responsibly and working to deliver maximum bang for the buck.

Eric Liu and Nick Hanauer raise similar themes in a recent essay titled “[The ‘More What, Less How’ Government](#)”³ published in the journal *Democracy*:

The current dissatisfaction with government is not a mere perception or marketing problem, as too many on the left still believe. It is a product problem. Government has for too many people become unresponsive, dehumanizing, and inefficient. Only when

¹ <http://www.huss.ex.ac.uk/politics/research/socialcapital/papers/uslaner.pdf>

² http://www.americanprogress.org/projects/doing_what_works/

³ <http://www.democracyjournal.org/article.php?ID=6786>

we improve government itself will our satisfaction with it improve. Unfortunately, the American discourse on government has long been frozen in two dimensions: more vs. less, big vs. small.

There is much to support this “knowledge-based” approach to rebuilding trust in government. Our own investigations point to the essential need to reconnect Americans to the actual work of government—the systems and structures that underpin the functioning of our communities and our quality of life. Perhaps a focus on competency and modernization is necessary. But it is worth reflecting on what this approach to trust-building does *not* address; and, with the Reinventing Government initiative as an example, whether it actually can improve trust in government.

Rebuilding trust in government through improving competency is focused on answering “how” questions—how does government function and how can it be improved. It leaves hanging in the air the “why” questions. Why government at all? Why is any particular public sector activity uniquely “public” in purpose and responsibility? These are value-based questions that ask us to consider the fundamental mission of government and its embodiment of our collective goals, objectives and even aspirations. It is hard to answer “how” and “what” questions about government if you have not answered the “why” questions as well.

For example, achieving all of the major reforms and public investments that are proposed by Liu and Hanauer, as well as those outlined in the Doing What Works initiative, will require significant political and popular support. It is difficult to see how these can be accomplished without engaging Americans in a conversation about the value and purpose of government as the grounds upon which public will and trust can—or should—be reconstructed. Where will public will for such changes come from?

Are there lessons for a “knowledge-based” approach to trust-building from the Reinventing Government initiative? Yes, and they are not all that encouraging. As Donald Kettl wrote in his 1998 Brookings report *Reinventing Government: A Fifth Year Report Card*: despite its “important and lasting accomplishments... [t]he campaign had difficulty in penetrating the public’s confidence and rebuilding trust in government (grade: C).”

There is certainly more to explore here, but despite all of the initiative’s good work to weed out old practices and to reform and restructure public agencies, it did not dramatically alter the dominant “public” narrative about government. In fact, it could be argued that it inadvertently reinforced the story of waste and inefficiency that it sought to correct. The media’s attention to the efforts of the initiative—and thus the public’s attention—focused on all the most egregious examples of wasteful spending that were being uncovered—from outrageously overpriced ashtrays, toilet seats and hammers to overlapping and duplicative governmental agencies and processes. All of the headlines were about how much waste had been uncovered and how much money would be saved—thus begging the question, “if you found that much waste so readily, how much more must there be?”

“Knowledge-based” trust building may be important, but it will not succeed alone. In part this is because it still externalizes the problem: government is still the “other,” something “out there” that must be fixed in order for us to trust it. The deeper trust deficit we face is in a shared belief —faith, if you will—in the very notion of government as an embodiment of shared purpose—in “us”, in each other.

Trust and Cynicism

In America we tend to peg our decades-long decline in trust in government to events along our particular social and political timeline. We mark the first major trust decline in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate. We point to the upward swing of Reagan's "Morning in America" and the return downward with Iran-Contra. We note the low points that accompanied Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America," the high points after 9/11, and the steep downhill slide to the recent elections.

Like many of our self-observations we treat this "trust in government" problem as uniquely American. But recent surveys show that trust in government has been declining in all advanced democracies. In a sixteen nation study published in 2005—*The Social Transformation of Trust in Government*⁴ Russell Dalton observes "that cynicism is spreading to nearly all advanced industrial democracies" and that it has created a new dynamic where "negative news about government reinforces" cynical impressions and "positive news about government is discounted." Dalton suggests that these patterns are linked to changing—and even heightened—expectations of government that are accompanied "by less deference to authority, more assertive styles of action", and higher standards for the democratic process.

Dalton also questions the efficacy of typical approaches to rebuilding trust. He is critical of popular efforts to "reform the institutions of democratic governance" as the means to renew trust in government, suggesting that such efforts will not succeed because the fundamental expectations of government have shifted. This "new civic culture" that he describes is marked by an increasingly skeptical public that is "doubtful about the institutions of representative democracy, and willing to challenge political elites." Rebuilding trust then is a deeper undertaking; one that challenges us to address the underlying cultural shifts we are experiencing.

If these are the social and cultural trends we face, what then are the implications for rebuilding trust in government? And if cynicism is a common trait of the new "civic culture," what is the antidote?

This question brings us back to the nature of trust itself. In the paper mentioned above—"Trust as a Moral Value"—Uslaner goes on to contrast "knowledge-based" trust with what he calls "moralistic trust."

[M]oralistic trust is faith in people we don't know and it does not depend upon our life experiences. It is this type of trust that binds us to others. Trusting people are more likely to volunteer their time, to give to charity, to be tolerant of others, and to support policies that both promote economic growth (open markets) and that provide support for the less fortunate. Countries with more trusters have better functioning government, more redistributive policies, more open markets, and less corruption.

Moralistic trust is a value that rests on an optimistic view of the world and one's ability to control it. Moralistic trust is predicated upon a view that the world is a benevolent place with good people... that things are going to get better, and that you are the master of your own fate.

⁴ http://www.socsci.uci.edu/~rdalton/archive/int_soc05a.pdf

In this concept of trust, public purpose and public trust are combined. This is the kind of trust that “most needs to be diffused among the people if republican society is to be maintained,” as sociologist Gianfranco Poggi put it in the epigraph to this essay. As deeply challenging as it might seem, this is the kind of trust—a “trust in shared purposes”—that we need to rebuild. It calls upon us to be optimistic and aspirational in our defense of government—to articulate what can be, and should be, not only “what is not.” Rebuilding this type of trust requires us to recognize that optimism and cynicism about government do not easily co-exist.

Doug Amy, who publishes the website [Government is Good](http://www.governmentisgood.com)⁵, puts the challenge before us:

In today’s world, what is daring is to *not* be so cynical about politics and government—to believe that working through government can actually make the world a better place. This is the truly risky stance to take. It opens you up to disappointment, and makes you vulnerable to the ridicule by your friends.

In the end, coming to the defense of government is not as quixotic as it might first appear. Many Americans have come to realize how unfair and damaging the attacks on government have become—they are tired of their firefighters being laid off and their public schools not having enough textbooks. And most people know, on some level, that government is playing a very positive role in their lives—they just need to be reminded. There is actually a receptive audience out there for those who have the gumption to stand up and defend the importance of government. So next time someone is bad-mouthing government for no good reason, you should stick up for it. Go ahead—dare to be uncynical.

The Task Ahead

Trust in government can only be restored if we pay as much attention to rebuilding a “trust in shared purposes” as to the “functional” sort of trust—to answering “why” as well as “how.” We must find ways to counterbalance civic cynicism with pragmatic optimism. For trust in government is linked to trust in each other: to finding shared goals and objectives, to identifying common purposes and promoting the belief that problems can be addressed and opportunities created—together. These are the foundations of a government “of, by and for” the people.

Some cultural observers note that finding “shared purposes” and “common undertakings” these days is a difficult proposition. They note that previous civic-minded generations had shared experiences—the Depression, a World War—and shared participation in common undertakings—unions, associational memberships, etc.—that reinforced notions of interdependence and common purpose. But today we face shared challenges of a scale we have not experienced in generations—a deeply wounded world economy, planetary climate change and global interdependence, to name a few. And we have new and rapidly developing tools of social engagement whose implications we are just coming to fully understand. The challenge before us is to engage our fellow Americans in new ways and old ways, to find the loose strands of common purpose and draw them together.

⁵ <http://www.governmentisgood.com>

As idealistic as such an undertaking might seem, it is supported by our five years of research and field work. In the region around Eau Claire, Wisconsin, local leaders, advocates and public servants have banded together in an “Alliance for Strong Communities”.⁶ Using some of our recommendations they are consciously and deliberately working to reset the relationship between citizens and their government. In Colorado and Massachusetts, anti-government, anti-tax forces were dealt setbacks in November by concerted and organized efforts to help the public understand how short-sighted tax cut proposals would undermine the quality of life in their states. And in North Carolina an ongoing coalition called Together NC has effectively engaged in the state’s budgetary debates by articulating “why” government matters to all North Carolinians and their shared future. Through these experiences and many others around the country we have found that a central element to rebuilding trust in government is to reconnect people to the unique mission and purpose of our public systems and structures. By answering the “why” question first—why are the programs, policies and services we care about essential to our shared well-being—we are able to tap into latent but powerful beliefs in public purposes and the common good.

This is not to dismiss the need to improve government or to hold it accountable when it does not live up to its public responsibilities. But such efforts must be informed by the overarching need to rebuild trust in the very notion of government itself. When we seek to improve government it is not merely to fix something that is broken but to bring it consistently closer to its fundamental mission; and when we must critique government we should do so in ways that call it to live up to public values and purposes.

For those who do believe that government at its best is indeed an embodiment of us at our best the central task is clear. If we are to rebuild trust in government we must rebuild trust in each other and in our “common undertaking.” We must articulate what such a “common undertaking” looks like in this new century and the unique role that our public systems and structures will have to play in its achievement.

The good news is that “common undertakings” surround us. All across our country people work every day to improve their communities and their government. Thousands of dedicated individuals give their time to school boards, library committees, town meetings, community safety organizations, and other civic-minded efforts. They engage in advocacy efforts to change state policies and programs; and they run for elected office themselves. Even in this cynical age the spirit of self-governance is alive and it is connected to a deep sense of the possible, to a trust in shared purposes and in one another—just the sort of trust we need.

⁶ <http://cityofeauclairemanger.blogspot.com/2010/10/alliance-for-strong-communities.html>