

IF YOU WANT CITIZENS TO TRUST GOVERNMENT, EMPOWER THEM TO GOVERN

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Americans' distrust of government is deep and poses a fundamental obstacle to progressive reform. According to the [CBS/New York Times poll](#)¹ conducted in Feb. 2010, just six percent of Americans believed that the stimulus bill that had been enacted almost one year before had created *any* jobs so far. And according to a 2009 [Gallup poll](#)², Americans believed that 50 cents of each dollar of federal spending was wasted.

Distrust of government has old roots in American history, but attitudes toward government were much more favorable in the mid-twentieth century, when progressive politics were ascendant. The reasons for today's profound distrust probably include deliberate anti-government propaganda that echoes around the conservative chambers of an increasingly polarized news and entertainment media—plus lame responses from liberal leaders.

But when only six percent of Americans trust the government to have created any jobs by spending almost one trillion of their dollars, the problem is much deeper than Fox News or the communications strategy of the White House. The underlying relationship between people and their government is fundamentally broken.

I don't believe that communicating the virtues of government or educating citizens about the public sector can raise trust much, because the pro-government case is too difficult to make in a crowded media environment, and the message is too vulnerable to scandals. Also, if the government actually fails to address our most serious problems—which I fear is the case—people will not be convinced that it works.

I am equally skeptical about improving accountability in the way that the Clinton and Obama administrations have tried. They hope that by disclosing information about the government's performance, they will expose and remedy actual failures and thereby increase people's confidence in public institutions.

The evidence that transparency improves performance and trust is mixed, at best. Besides, most people do not want *informational* accountability; they want *relational* accountability. For example, they do not want to know the test scores, teacher salaries, and graduation rates at their local high school; they want to know the principal and have confidence in her values.

In focus groups that Doble Research Associates conducted for the Kettering Foundation in 2001, parents were highly resistant to the idea that tests would be useful ways to hold school

¹ http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/pdf/poll_Obama_Congress_021110.pdf

² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/122951/americans-uncle-sam-wastes-50-cents-dollar.aspx>

accountable. For one thing, they wanted to hold other parties accountable for education, starting with themselves. A Baltimore woman explained, “When I think about accountability, I think about parents taking responsibility for supervising their children’s learning and staying in touch with teachers.” This respondent not only wanted to broaden responsibility but also saw it in terms of two-way communication.

Many participants wanted to know whether schools, parents, and students had the right values. They doubted that data would answer that question. One Atlanta woman summed it up: “What we’ve got to do is develop a stronger sense of community between the schools and families in the community.”

I believe that schools and other public institutions would work better if they enlisted more of the energies, ideas, and values of ordinary citizens and trusted them to make consequential collective decisions. Elinor Ostrom won the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for a career of work showing that laypeople can do an excellent job of managing public institutions. She has also found that decentralized, participatory bodies can produce better outcomes than either centralized, expert-led bureaucracies or markets, even though participatory bodies often overlap, duplicate efforts, and reinvent one another’s wheels.

Ostrom argues that we have moved in the opposite direction, consolidating school districts, replacing elected boards with appointed experts, relying on standardized tests and measures, and otherwise reducing opportunities for laypeople to work together in public—all in a foolish quest for efficiency.

Decentralized, participatory efforts work well because the problems that really concern us—such the dropout rate of about one third, rampant crime, deindustrialization, and the profligate waste of natural resources—are “wicked problems.”³ They involve complex, rapidly changing, interconnected systems that are virtually impossible to predict or to shape from the outside. They also involve conflicting values and interests, so that the very definition of success is contested, and people’s motives are part of the problem.

In general, “wicked problems” are best addressed by decentralizing control and empowering mixed groups of people, including those most affected. There are no expert solutions. Markets decentralize decision-making, but they cannot address genuine *public* problems such as deep inequality and environmental degradation. Governments can redistribute resources and regulate behavior but cannot solve “wicked problems” without the local knowledge and energies that citizens provide.

We do have local, participatory, publicly subsidized institutions that address wicked problems. For example:

- In 2005, there were 4,600 community development corporations⁴ (CDCs) in the United States, employing nearly 200,000 people, building about 86,000 residential units annually, and managing commercial property and spawning other enterprises. CDCs have diverse, active, local boards, frequently elected.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem

⁴ <http://community-wealth.org/strategies/panel/cdcs/index.html>

- Thanks to the 2010 health care reform, the number of Federally Qualified Health Centers (FGHCs) **should rise to 15,000**⁵. These entities receive favorable Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement rates and other federal supports to serve needy communities. They must be nonprofit organizations or public entities, and they must have boards of which more than half are current clients who demographically represent the population they serve.
- For decades, the Environmental Protection Agency has been funding and training local coalitions to manage complex and fragile ecosystems such as watersheds. **Community Action for a Renewed Environment**⁶ (CARE) is the key EPA program.
- YouthBuild USA has enrolled almost 100,000 young Americans, mostly without high school diplomas when they entered and many with gang affiliations and criminal records. YouthBuild participants construct housing and also play a leading role in running the program, making strategic decisions and even hiring staff. The effects on the young people's well-being are striking.

To increase trust in government, I would expand these programs and others like them. The Obama Administration deserves credit for enlarging some of the youth service programs and the Federally Qualified Health Centers but has decreased the role of citizens in environmental and education policy by favoring centralized regulatory reforms. So there is much room for improvement

I wish I could prove that Americans would trust their government more if it engaged them in these ways. Some polls find that people want a bigger role (see **this survey**⁷ and **this one**⁸), but one can always doubt whether responses to hypothetical questions are meaningful. Instead, I would cite the following circumstantial evidence.

First, trust in government has fallen as the government has become more remote and less engaging. Meanwhile, we have lost large voluntary associations that once connected people to the government by enlisting them in active discussions and public work at the local level while also representing their opinions in Washington. Labor unions, political parties, and big fraternal and ethnic associations have all lost members.

Second, when policies have strengthened the role of citizens, Americans have responded enthusiastically. For example, despite the mixed effects of charter schools on students' test scores and graduation rates, parents of charter school students are strikingly satisfied—because, I believe, they have a voice in the schools' governance.

Finally, Barack Obama clearly struck a chord with his call for citizens to play a larger role. Announcing his presidential candidacy, Senator Barack Obama said, "This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose, and realizing that few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change."

Ten months later, as he campaigned to win the Iowa Caucuses, Senator Obama said, "I won't just ask for your vote as a candidate; I will ask for your service and your active

⁵ <http://sandersonsenate.gov/newsroom/news/?id=c4b756c9-56ba-4258-a30a-628b7beee80c>

⁶ <http://www.epa.gov/care/>

⁷ <http://web.hks.harvard.edu/publications/workingpapers/citation.aspx?PubId=6772>

⁸ <http://ncoc.net/index.php?tray=content&tid=top5&cid=263>

citizenship when I am President of the United States. This will not be a call issued in one speech or program; this will be a cause of my presidency.”

But after the election, empowering citizens vanished as a major theme. Even the President’s rhetoric subtly shifted from civic empowerment to his own personal leadership—from “we” to “I.” Seeking the nomination in Iowa, Barack Obama had said, “I hold no illusions that one man or woman can do this alone.” More than two years later, responding to the Massachusetts Senate election, he said:

So long as I have some breath in me, so long as I have the privilege of serving as your President, I will not stop fighting for you. I will take my lumps, but I won’t stop fighting to bring back jobs here. (Applause.) I won’t stop fighting for an economy where hard work is rewarded. I won’t stop fighting to make sure there’s accountability in our financial system. (Applause.) I’m not going to stop fighting until we have jobs for everybody.

Given the basically broken relationship between people and their government, most people will not trust Barack Obama to solve deep crises for them. But they will respond if he and other leaders give them opportunities to solve our problems together. That is the path to restored faith in government.