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Rebuilding Public Trust in Government: Where We've Been, Where We Are, Where We Need to Go

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In November 2008, right after the presidential election, Elaine Kamarck and I published what turned out to be a very unpopular essay, entitled "Change You Can Believe in Needs a Government You Can Trust." We began this way:

> As Barack Obama takes office in 2009, he will confront a paradox. On the one hand, the American people are demanding action in many areas—to improve the economy, to increase access to health care while restraining costs, and to reduce energy costs and our dependence on oil, among others. On the other hand, people are deeply mistrustful of the federal government as an honest and capable agent for achieving these goals. There is nothing new about this ambivalence, but how the next president deals with it may make the difference between success and failure, measured in sustainable public support as well as legislative accomplishment.
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> This reason is this: in our politics, trust is a cause as well as a consequence. While events affect public trust in government, trust shapes the limits of political possibilities. When trust is high, policy makers may reasonably hope to enact and implement federal solutions to our most pressing problems. When trust is low, as it is today, policy makers face more constraints. As leading scholar, Marc Hetherington, puts it, "Most Americans, whether conservative or liberal, do not trust the delivery vehicle for most progressive public policy. Even if people support progressive policy goals, they do not support the policies themselves because they do not believe that government is capable of bringing about desired outcomes." In 1992, for example, public support for some form of national health insurance exceeded any level previously measured. When Bill Clinton took office, however, trust in the federal government had reached an historic low, a fact that contributed to the eventual defeat of his ambitious health care proposal. While it is risky to draw broad inferences from a single instance, however dramatic, it seems reasonable to assume that the people will tend to resist, and perhaps reject, policy proposals that are wildly inconsistent with prevailing levels of trust in government.

We ended our essay by cautioning that 2009 would be more like 1993 than 1933 or 1965, and by recommending that the new administration lead off with a series of modest but essential trust-building measures rather than with large new domestic policy initiatives, which would be politically viable only after public trust had been substantially restored.

The events of the past two years have not changed my mind about any of this. Today, trust in government stands near an historic low, well below where it stood the day Barack Obama was elected. To understand what this means for the future, we need to review briefly the political history of the past half-century.

Trust in Government: A Brief History

In the late 1950s, the federal government that fought the Great Depression, won the Second World War, avoided the anticipated post-war economic slump, built the interstate highway system, and encouraged the growth of a mass middle class could draw upon a huge reservoir of public support. In 1958, 73 percent of the American people reported that they trusted the government in Washington to do what was right “most of the time” or “just about always.” 76 percent of the electorate that gave Lyndon Johnson his 1964 landslide said the same thing. That turned out to be a post-war (and probably an all-time) high. By 1968, trust had declined to 61 percent; by 1972, to 53 percent. Scholars point to Vietnam, assassinations, and racial and cultural conflict as the major contributors to the 23-point drop in the eight years between 1964 and the 1972 Nixon landslide over McGovern.

Then came Watergate, which dealt a shattering blow to public trust. By the midterm election of 1974, it had plunged an additional 17 points, to 36 percent—less than half the peak attained just ten years earlier.

It never fully recovered. In effect, the decade 1964-1974 marked the transition between two distinct phases of the post-war era. In the first, the default setting was public trust in the federal government; in the second, it has been mistrust.

This is not to say that trust has remained constant over the past 36 years. It continued to decline during the Ford-Carter years, bottoming out at 25 percent in 1980. It rose through much of the 1980s, reaching 44 percent the day of the Reagan 1984 landslide. It still stood at 40 percent the day George H. W. Bush defeated Michael Dukakis. Then it slid again, to 29 percent on election day 1992 and a woeful 21 percent in 1994 as Republicans ended the Democrats’ 40-year majority in the House of Representatives.

In the ten years from the 1994 midterms to George W. Bush’s 2004 reelection, trust rebounded. By the end of the Clinton administration, it had more than doubled from its low-point, to 44 percent, identical to the Reagan-era peak, and consistent with the proposition that trust in government often tracks the state of the economy. Consistent with another maxim—that people tend to rally around the government in the face of external threats—it spiked to 56 percent in the year after 9/11 and still stood at 47 percent in November of 2004.

Bush’s second term witnessed another sharp drop in public trust, in part because events did not confirm the central public justification for initiating the Iraq war, and also because the economy entered a deep recession after the near-collapse of the financial system. By election day 2008, it had declined 17 points, to only 30 percent.

Despite the hope that Barack Obama’s victorious campaign had inspired, there is no evidence that it changed the public’s attitude toward the federal government. In June of 2009, when Obama still enjoyed the approval of more than 60 percent of the American people, only 20 percent said they trusted the government, a number that has barely budged ever since.

What's Going On? Some Analytical Points

As pollsters and political scientists have noted, public trust tends to move in tandem with developments in the economy and with the public mood. Other things equal, robust economic growth and declining unemployment boosts trust, as it did in the final six years of both the Reagan and Clinton administrations. And when the percentage of Americans who think the country is on the "wrong track" declines, trust typically increases. Even at the peak of the Reagan and Clinton-era economic expansions, however, trust never came close to regaining the highs registered in the 1960s; Vietnam, Watergate, and other events of the dismal 1965-1974 period have had an enduring effect on the bond between citizens and their government.

There is also a relationship between trust and partisanship. Republicans are more likely to trust government when they control some or all of it, and likewise for Democrats. During the two most recent presidencies, this partisan effect has intensified, especially among Republicans.

We have also learned that trust is more comprehensive than targeted. Yes, there are liberals who trust government but not corporations and conservatives who are just the opposite. But more typically, individuals who trust government also trust other institutions, and those who mistrust government similarly extend that sentiment more widely.

And finally, mistrust of government is not confined to our national institutions. Unlike some previous periods in which public regard for state and local government remained high even as trust in the national government tumbled, all levels of the federal system are now in the same boat. In 1997, 50 percent of Americans thought that the national government was having a positive impact on their lives, versus only 38 percent today. But the decline has been even greater for state government (62 percent positive then, 42 percent now) and local government (from 64 to 51 percent). Yes, it is still true that the closer government is to the people, the more highly regarded it tends to be. But all have suffered sharp declines in public esteem.

Beyond these four important correlations, a more systematic approach offers additional insight into the nature and dynamics of public trust in government officials and institutions.

Trust has three key dimensions. To trust, we must believe that individuals and institutions have the *competence* to deliver the results they have undertaken to produce. We must also believe that they have *integrity*—that they mean what they say and that their promises are sincere. Competence without integrity is not enough to maintain trust, as Richard Nixon discovered. Nor is integrity without competence, as Jimmy Carter learned.

In some cases, violations of integrity are straightforward—for example, Lyndon Johnson's pre-election assurances that he wasn't going to send America's young men to do the job that the young men of South Vietnam should be doing. In other cases it's subtler, as when

Bill Clinton, who had campaigned as a "new kind of Democrat," stumbled into an early controversy over gays in the military that sent a different message. And often it's not clear whether the failure is one of integrity or competence. Some believe that the

Bush administration knew—but misrepresented--the truth about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, while others believe that the intelligence community's lack of competence in interpreting the evidence led the administration to erroneous but sincerely held conclusions.

The public's evaluation of both competence and integrity are shaped to some degree by its perception of government as steward of public institutions and public funds. Fifty years ago, less than half the people thought that government wastes a lot of taxpayers' money. By the election of 2008, 72 percent thought it did. According to an April 2010 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 70 percent of the people think that the federal government is wasteful and inefficient, and 74 percent believe it does just a fair or poor job of running its programs.

The third key determinant of trust in government is responsiveness. If people feel that the government is listening to them and working on the problems they think are most important, trust tends to rise. In recent decades, the public has come to view the federal government as much less responsive to their needs and preferences than it should be.

In 1964, for example, 64 percent of Americans thought the government was being run "for the benefit of all the people" compared to only 29 percent who thought it was being run by and on behalf of "a few big interest." Ten years later, those percentages were reversed: only 25 percent said it was operating for the benefit of all, versus 66 percent for the big interests. And with some ups and downs, that is about how sentiment has divided ever since. On the day Obama was elected, 69 percent thought that government was run for the big interests, a belief that assistance to struggling banks and financial institutions did nothing to dispel. In April of 2010, substantial majorities felt that government was doing too little to aid average Americans and that the middle class was being neglected.

In a similar vein, Americans are less and less convinced that they have a say in what the government does. Fifty years ago, 72 percent believed they did; by the time of Obama's election, only 40 percent still thought so. Fifty years ago, 73 percent believed that public officials care what they people think; as people went to the polls in 2008, only 23 percent expressed similar confidence. There has even been a significant decline in the percentage of Americans who believe that elections make the government pay attention to what the people think. These would be troubling signs for any system of government. For a representative democracy, they signal serious public disaffection.

President Obama ran into difficulties along all three dimensions of trust. His key campaign promise—to reduce partisan polarization and rancor in Washington—didn't bear fruit during the 111th Congress, and the percentage of Americans who see him as at least partly responsible for this state of affairs rose sharply since the early days of his presidency. (By the November 2010 election, about as many Americans viewed him as governing in a partisan manner as they do the two parties in Congress.) This has been especially damaging because the increasing partisan polarization of recent decades has contributed to public mistrust. The American people liked what they heard from candidate Obama about changing Washington. His inability as president to make that happen came as a real disappointment that exerted continuing pressure on public trust in the federal government.

Since the election, the president moved on several fronts to reduce polarization—striking a tax compromise with the Republicans, moving to improve relations with the business community, appointing veterans of the Clinton administration to senior positions, and delivering a well-received plea for civility in the wake of the Tucson shootings. Increasing numbers of Americans came to see him as a moderate, and his approval ratings rose. It remains to be seen whether these changes can be sustained and, if so, the extent to which they will spill over into increased trust.

The president has fared no better along the dimension of competence. Fairly or unfairly, since the New Deal, the president and the institutions of national policy have been held responsible for the performance of the economy. The percentage of Americans who see the stimulus package as effective has declined markedly since the spring of 2009. It may well be that things would have been even worse without it. Still, the failure of the president's economic plan to spur robust growth or reduce unemployment significantly from its peak has increased public doubts about his competence and that of the federal government. (It didn't help that the administration early on made predictions about the impact of the stimulus plan that turned out to be wildly optimistic.)

Whatever its merits as long-term public policy, the Obama administration's push for comprehensive health reform weakened its reputation for responsiveness. The American people regarded the economy and jobs as by far the most urgent public problem, and the administration was unable to convince them that health reform was linked directly enough to this core concern. As both the public debate and the legislative process ground on and a majority of the people remained opposed, the administration eventually had to choose between bucking public opinion, deepening concerns about their responsiveness, or backing down, which would have intensified doubts about their competence. While Obama's decision to push on to the finish line averted the backlash the Clinton administration faced in the fall of 1994 after the failure of its health care proposal, it did nothing to assuage the sentiments of those voters (including many independents) who believed the administration shouldn't had gone down that road at all. Given this Hobson's choice, it is hardly surprising that the passage of the health care legislation did nothing to boost public trust in government.

The continuing unpopularity of health reform is symptomatic of a deeper problem: a majority of Americans have come to believe that government has grown too large and takes on too much. In the summer of 2008, Americans were evenly divided between those favoring a bigger government providing more services versus a smaller government offering less. But starting with the financial bailout in the fall of 2008 and continuing through the stimulus, rescue of the auto companies, and the health care debate, the public has turned against the expansion of government. By January 2010, an ABC/Washington Post survey found that 58 percent now favored a more limited government, while only 38 percent disagreed. A Pew Center survey completed in April yielded similar results.

Another way of probing this issue points in the same direction. In March of 2007, according to an NBC/Wall Street Journal survey, 52 percent of Americans thought that government should do more to solve problems and meet the people's needs. By June 2010, a USA Today/ Gallup poll found that only 39 percent still agreed with this proposition, while 53 percent now believed that government was trying to do too much.

As scholars and visitors have long observed, the anti-statist tradition is more powerful in the United States than in other advanced democracies. Except in times of war or national emergency, the burden of proof rests with those advocating a more active public sector. It speaks volumes that even during the deepest financial and economic crisis since the Great Depression, leaders have had a hard time persuading the public that a large government response is necessary. The mismatch between public policy and public sentiment shaped the 2010 midterm elections and brought to Washington a new Republican House majority determined to attack federal spending and reverse the policies that it sees as moving the United States toward the European social model. It remains to be seen whether the people will respond as favorably to specific spending cuts as they do generic invocations of the need for smaller government. Post-election surveys indicate that they will not.

What Is To Be Done? A 2011-12 Agenda

The art of democratic governance is forging the maximum feasible convergence between what wise policy demands and what the people will endorse. In the second two years of the Obama presidency, there will be only two alternatives—total gridlock or a new agenda. Fortunately, an agenda exists that meets the test of sound democratic governance. Its elements are these:

- A serious turn toward long-term fiscal restraint, timed and phased in so as not to undermine the fragile economic recovery;
- A moratorium on new proposals not directly linked to growth and jobs;
- A focus on middle-class jobs and opportunities, in part through the market-based investments in long-term infrastructure development that Obama urged during his campaign;
- A fleshed-out plan to promote the president's goal of doubling exports within five years;
- Intensified attention to government reform and innovation—a shift that yielded both substantive and political dividends during the second two years of the Clinton-Gore administration; and
- Serious, sustained efforts to negotiate with the new Republican majority in the House and expanded Republican contingent in the Senate.

There is no guarantee that such an effort would bear fruit, of course. Pessimists argue that polarization is even more pronounced today than it was fifteen years ago and that the aroused right wing of the Republican Party would punish anyone who tried to compromise with a Democratic-controlled White House.

These skeptics may turn out to be right. Nonetheless, it's important for the president to try. And history offers some grounds for hope. After November 1994, House Republicans led by Newt Gingrich tried to run the country from Capitol Hill. They badly overplayed their hand, however, and President Clinton was able to rally the people to his cause. By early 1996, Republican leaders were forced to come to the table, and the next two years yielded legislative accomplishments that substantial portions of both parties supported.

Even if history doesn't repeat itself, the American people would respond favorably to a president who proved willing to listen to their plea for a less polarized, more solutions-oriented agenda. A strategy to promote the national interest by rebuilding public trust would prove to be good politics as well.