

Political Trustworthiness at the Crossroads: Essential Qualities of Government Trust

Jack Johnson

University of Alabama in Huntsville; jwj0010@uah.edu

Levi and Stoker (2000) define political trustworthiness as a crossroads of two attributes. In their definition, in order to be trustworthy a political entity must have a commitment to act in the interests of the truster, and it must be capable of meeting the interests of the truster. To show commitment to the interests of the truster, the political entity must demonstrate a high level of transparency and there must be an avenue by which commitment can be verified even if it is not constantly verified, otherwise trust will fail. Likewise, in order for the government to be capable of meeting the interests of the truster, it requires ample intelligence on any given situation. If the government is not appropriately informed, once again, trust will fail. In other words, the government must be transparent and informed to be trustworthy. If it lacks either of these qualities, trust in the government will suffer. This paper will examine cases of governmental failings in both areas and show how trust in citizens suffered as a result of these failings. To illustrate failing in transparency, I present examples of vagueness in government in which the government is informed, but it withholds information from the populous, such as the UK's opaque and unclear position on the appropriate Coronavirus response (Smith and Wanless 2020). To illustrate failings in intelligence, I present examples in which the government "[Did] not adequately collect and interpret intelligence information, make sound policy based on the intelligence... and effectively act" such as was the case on September 11th, 2001 (Gentry 2008).

The importance of defining trust and trustworthiness is critical because so long as they are poorly defined, the government cannot effectively take actions to generate trust among its citizens. It would be similar to an archer firing an arrow at a target that is unseen. Perhaps the arrow will land, but only rarely, and never intentionally. However, once proper, concrete criterion of trustworthiness are established, the government becomes capable of making policy decisions to either generate or destroy trust. Perhaps most importantly, a good definition of trustworthiness puts responsibility for a lack of trust in the government squarely upon its own shoulders. An additional reason to critically examine why political trust has suffered in the past is that it has the potential to shed light on mistakes that have occurred either in the area of transparency or information and give insight to politicians as to how to avoid similar mistakes in the future. Furthermore, a good definition of trustworthiness is twofold, because not only does it generate a kind of accountability for politicians, but it also establishes clear expectations that citizens should have of the government. When asking the question “should the states be trusted?” the answer can be quite unclear to many citizens who do not have a good understanding of what qualities make for a trustworthy government. However, by arming the populous with a set of standards to hold political authorities to, they will be better able to assess the government in their area and give an answer to the question of whether or not they should put their trust in the states. These standards must be defined in a way that is practical and grounded in examples in which administrations have failed to meet them, otherwise the whole debate risks devolving into pure theory and philosophy. Thus, examining real world failings in both transparency and intelligence is required to adequately identify solutions and formulate a definition. So long as trustworthiness is defined in a clear and practical way, the government has both an obligation and incentive to pursue it, and the citizens have a right to expect it from the political authorities that govern them.

Failings in Trustworthiness

The most important area of examination to consider when defining trust are the ways in which governments lose the trust of its citizens. According to Levi and Stoker (2000), there are two primary ways in which a government can lose the trust of its citizens: “bad faith or ineptitude”. In other words, a trustworthy government is both committed to the interests of its trusters, and capable of meeting those interests. If citizens have no way of knowing that the government is committed to their interests because of a lack of transparency, then is not incentive for them to put their faith in the government. Likewise, even if the government is committed to the interests of its citizens, if it does not have the information necessary to pursue those interests actively and capably, the citizens will not put their trust in the government. Therefore, in order to determine why political trust fails, it is most effective to examine failings in transparency and failings in intelligence. Of course, it is also necessary to define these two terms in order to adequately identify their presence. A transparent government is one that has avenues by which citizens can verify whether or not their interests are being pursued. Of course, it need not be constantly verified in order to warrant trust, as it could generate trust for a citizen to simply know that they could investigate if they so desire. A state-level example may be a citizen being able to access records of state spending or being able to easily read potential legislature. For transparency to be maximized, these avenues must be accessible and inclusive, with options for many different citizens, such as those with impaired vision. Most importantly, the information available to citizens needs to be clear and understandable, rather than vague. Otherwise, while the information might technically be available, it may still not be useful for the citizen for verifying whether their interests are being pursued. Next, a government with good intelligence is one that has adequate and relevant data for informing policy decisions and other actions, such as military actions. In many cases, intelligence and information may be

used interchangeably. For a government to have a failing in intelligence means that it either lacks the information necessary to guide action, or in some cases that it has neglected to act appropriately according to known intelligence. Thus, with both key terms defined, an examination of failings in both areas can begin.

Failings in Transparency

Historically, the issue of transparency has been a “thorn in the side” of politicians, according to Berliner (2014). He continues on to discuss the fact that laws such as the 2000 Freedom of Information Act have been a convenient and effective means by which journalists can regularly dig into the actions of politicians and unearth scandals. These Freedom of Information (FOI) laws are established in order to give citizens the ability to obtain records and information from the government, without the political entity having the capability of refusing. In the United States, this sort of law was passed in 1966, and in the United Kingdom one was passed in the year 2000. In spite of this, there are still many instances of the government having an apparent lack of transparency. While technically it is possible for citizens to request information freely, in some cases, this information is either too legalistic for the average reader to comprehend, or it is otherwise too vague for any real meaning to be extracted from it. Take for example the United Kingdom’s response to inquiries surround COVID-19 response. The UK made several claims throughout the early stages of the pandemic to being well informed and made assurances that they were following the science. However, as a result of sporadic and vague messaging, social distancing protocols were not followed appropriately in much of the country for a duration of the pandemic (Smith and Wanless 2020). Only once their messaging became more focused and less vague did political trust rise and did citizens of the UK begin following distancing and stay at

home orders effectively. A survey published in April of 2020 found that while many (62%) of those surveyed thought that the government acted too slowly, there was enormous support (89%) for the current measures being used to combat the pandemic (Ipsos MORI 2020). Thus, while information regarding the government's position on COVID 19 was available prior to this, it became necessary for the government's stance on Coronavirus response to become much more clearly defined in order to achieve the goal of transparency. Once this goal was met, trust in the government promptly swelled in response.

Failings in Intelligence

While it should be noted that there have been relatively few major intelligence failures in the history of the United States, many of those that have occurred have been utterly ground shaking. Events such as Pearl Harbor or 9/11 have greatly shifted the world of US politics, and furthermore the perspective of US citizens on the government. In these situations, a lack of sufficient intelligence, or simply negligence of existing intelligence led to some of the most course-altering days in US history. In his apology to the families of those who died in 9/11, former White House counterterrorism coordinator Richard Clarke was quoted as saying, "Your government failed you, those entrusted with protecting you failed you, and I failed you" (Barrett 2010). If there was ever a line to destroy trust in the competency of the government to meet the interests of its citizens, it is hard to imagine that it would be any other than this one. The Pew Research Center (2020) indicates that in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, political trust increased dramatically. However, it also must be acknowledged that these effects manifested only in the short term. By the end of 2004, trust in the government had dropped from 54% to 35%, and has continued to trend downward, sitting at just 20% as of 2020. One theory suggests that this was a result of the American people

rallying around the president with support, and yet another proposes the idea that this was a result of a shift in focus from domestic concerns such as health care towards foreign policy (Chanley 2002). Research conducted by Chanley concludes that in fact, it is a combination of these two theories. Both an increased focus on foreign affairs as well as perceptions that the president is doing a good job contribute to an increase in trust, or in other words, a decrease in cynicism. However, as public opinion on the worthwhileness of conflict in the middle east changed, that same cynicism set back in. As of 2019, 62% of US citizens believe that the wars in the Middle East were not worth fighting (Igielnik and Parker 2019). Therefore, while Americans in 2001 felt that the government knew what they were doing when they went to war, most Americans today feel that the government's actions were a mistake. As more Americans have come to believe that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were based on misinformation rather than good intelligence about the outcomes of the wars, the once optimistic perspectives have given way to cynicism and distrust.

Conclusion

At present, most Americans are very cynical about the government for a variety of reasons. As Americans face the pandemic, many are unsure that the government has either the commitment to their interests, or the capability of meeting their needs in the first place. However, by looking to the past and elucidating the ways in which governments have failed to be trustworthy, America has the potential to turn the trend around and be trustworthy. As the government's trustworthiness grows, trust will naturally follow suit. Important directions to go for future research would be to examine the actions that individual states have taken to be more transparent and more informed. For example, Texas is conducting a data collection initiative in order to improve the affordability of postsecondary education, showing their commitment to meeting the needs of the people who

live there through the acquisition of better intelligence (Prescott, Michelau, and Lane 2016). By examining these issues at a smaller scale, a much broader picture of trust across the US can be painted. Researchers should look at each state as a laboratory, each with its own way of achieving higher goals of transparency and intelligence to meet the needs of the people who rely on it.

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