

Trust

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This might shock you, but it's true. America is a nation built on trust: A healthy trust in each other and an equally healthy mistrust of government. The relationship is to be expected. Consider, for a moment the nature of government: any government. All governmental structures inherently tend to be oppressive. Governments are erected for the specific purpose of controlling the citizen and the activities which the citizen undertakes. Oppression is its natural state.

Conversely, the natural state of the citizen is freedom. People don't like being told what to do. The condition is not anything more complicated than the natural instinct to survive. Our Constitution acknowledges the necessity to have a government, and it also acknowledges the need for individual freedom. It was constructed in manner that places the natural instinct of the preservation of freedom in control of the natural tendency of oppression: It puts people in charge. Through the process of elections, people are sent to operate the government. The primary, although often unrecognized, factor in selecting whom to send, is the trust that the voter has in the candidate.

The voter will cast the vote for one of two reasons. The voter either trusts the person he votes for, or he doesn't trust the person he doesn't vote for. Occasionally, both reasons occur, but that is less common. Knowing that ethics can be fleeting, and erode the trust of the voter, the Constitution was structured to refresh the trust that citizens put in the people they sent to control government. Each office is sent back to the voter at a specified time, and the voter is expected to reaffirm the trust or express his mistrust. For a while, the system worked acceptably. The trust in those elected was well deserved, at the time. George Washington went so far as to decline the monarchy that was offered at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. James Madison, as President, was trusted to uphold the Constitution. On March 3rd, 1817, he validated that trust when he vetoed a bill with which he agreed to in concept, but which would have authorized activities not listed in the powers of the Federal Government.

In more recent years, the practice of personal and party politics has done severe damage to our ability to trust, and not just our ability to trust those whom we elect. Our mistrust in government is stronger than ever. Our trust in those elected is no longer housed in personal ethics, but in a letter printed after each one's name. Our trust in the media has flagged. Our trust in each other has separated like oil and water into "our side" and "their side." Most recently, our trust in the very process of elections has been damaged. While politics cannot be eliminated, we can recognize it for what it is; "Politics is not government; politics is the manipulation of government."¹

The challenge before us today is to revitalize the trust. The best way I know of to do that is to become the "informed electorate" that Madison admonished us to be; to become engaged in the governmental process, in order that we may once again be the master of it.

¹ Sebastian Roberts