

## **DISTRUST OF GOVERNMENT: THE PROGRESSIVE CHALLENGE**

*This introductory essay for a new Demos-TDS forum is by the forum co-editors, Demos Senior Fellow Lew Daly and TDS Managing Editor Ed Kilgore.*

In the wake of the 2010 election and in the midst of current battles over the size, cost and purpose of government, it's increasingly obvious that erosion of Americans' trust in government has become a tangible political asset for conservatives and a source of great frustration for progressives. It's ironic, of course, that Republican mismanagement during the Bush administration and a financial and economic crisis brought on by lax regulation has helped produced this atmosphere. But this reaction did not emerge from a vacuum, and distrust of government has a long pedigree in American politics and society.

And indeed, even as progressives battle unprecedented attacks on the legacy of the New Deal and the Great Society and vigorously debate strategy and tactics, there's a growing hunger for a deeper understanding of distrust of government and its origins, and of possible paths for restoring sufficient public confidence to sustain future progressive policy initiatives.

That is why the prominent progressive intellectual center Demos and The Democratic Strategist are holding an online forum on this critical topic, drawing on diverse and distinguished voices from various corners of the progressive landscape.

Discussion of this topic is widespread but much of the debate up until now has focused (understandably) on analyzing the revival of harshly anti-government attitudes in the conservative movement and the Republican Party, as dramatized by the advent of the self-described Tea Party Movement, and less on the extent and the underlying causes of the decline in public trust, and on strategies for addressing and if possible reversing it.

The basic trend lines are stark enough: Forty years ago, nearly 80% of the public trusted government to do the right thing nearly always or most of the time. By the spring of 2010, only 22% of Americans said they trusted government, the lowest level since 1994 (when the Democrats were swept from power in the House for the first time in 40 years), and lower than in the Watergate era

Earlier periods of extreme public distrust were driven by a mixture of public scandal (Watergate; the Keating Five and the House bank scandal; etc.) and economic stress (stagflation and energy shocks; the early 90s recession). Along similar lines, the circumstances behind today's public distrust have been described as a "perfect storm" of public and private failure, aggravated by new factors such as intensifying political polarization and more powerful right-wing media.

It is not an exaggeration to say that public distrust of government, and the increasing political polarization caused by a libertarian Republicanism that plays well to this basic distrust, poses a fundamental threat to the future of our country. For any significant progressive legislation to pass in the future, the process will have to convince a

substantial segment of the now reflexively oppositional electorate that there is a new, more honest system in place that will make the consideration, passage and implementation of legislation more genuinely reflect what “the people” really want. President Obama alluded to this in his post-election press conference when he suggested that a major failing of the health care reform effort was that it ignored popular distrust and dislike of the “process.” His statement implicitly recognized that no new major legislation could be passed until this basic problem is overcome.

No one living outside the conservative media cocoon and the Republican Party’s energized but small base can fail to see that solving the collective problems we have—from unemployment and the lack of good paying jobs, to educational decline, to global warming, to the public debt—will require strong and active government and quite possibly much higher levels of public revenue. Thus, assessing and understanding the causes and dynamics of public distrust in government, and finding remedies for this problem in our politics and public debates, are important challenges requiring much more attention from analysts over the next two critical election cycles and beyond. Demos and TDS have organized this forum to launch a new critical dialogue on this problem.

**There are several key questions that we hoped forum participants would help answer:**

1. *Has the collapse of public trust in government been a cumulative process over a long time, or primarily the result of recent events?*
2. *Is the source of distrust in government its perceived incompetence to achieve generally supported public goals, or its failure to engage effectively with citizens in setting priorities and pursuing them?*
3. *Are we experiencing class, generational or racial/ethnic divides over the role of government in which Americans are being pitted against each other in a zero-sum competition for public resources?*
4. *Should progressives focus on the perception or reality of special-interest control of government, incidents of public corruption, and the ongoing scandal of campaign financing, to improve public trust in government and the political process?*

**While we hope this forum will eventually engage an array of thinkers and writers, we will publish as a first and foundational round essay from the following distinguished progressives:**

**William Galston** will write about the immediate challenge of meeting the crisis of public confidence in government created by the 2010 elections and the fiscal battles already underway in Washington.

**John Halpin** and **Ruy Teixeira** will discuss their public research findings on distrust in government, and a possible agenda for restoring faith in the competence and public-spiritedness of public institutions.

**Patrick Bresette** will examine different types of “distrust in government,” and the different agendas they demand.

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**David Callahan** will focus on how to increase faith in the integrity of government, with particular emphasis on the need for progressives to take seriously allegations of corruption and special-interest influence.

**Thomas Edsall** will look at the effects of economic and fiscal austerity, and the likelihood of partisan polarization around the division of public resources.

**Peter Levine** will discuss direct citizen participation in government as a critical element in restoring faith in public institutions.

We will publish these essays serially, and will continue the forum as long as it takes to accommodate reactions, comment, and discussion.

Finally, as a separate companion piece to these essays, The Democratic Strategist is also releasing a special “TDS Strategy Memo” by Andrew Levison that presents a “common sense populist” communications strategy for overcoming public distrust of government. (A PDF version of the Strategy Memo is available [here](#))