

TRUST, ACCOUNTABILITY AND SELF-GOVERNMENT: A SUMMARY OF THE DEMOS-TDS FORUM

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We expect to receive some responses to the six essays already published in the [Demos-TDS online forum](#)¹ on *Restoring Trust in Government*.

But as co-moderator of the forum, I'd like to offer a few preliminary observations on the discussion so far, and what it means for progressives.

Significantly, none of our six essayists doubted there was a serious erosion of American's trust and confidence in our government, or that this condition is threatening to progressive politics and to the ability of the country to address its immediate and long-range challenges. [William Galston](#)² probably most accentuated the immediacy of the problem, arguing that President Obama must tailor his agenda to reflect the loss of public trust in government, and to mitigate it. And while none of our contributors were the least bit naive about the severity and duration of the problem, [Thomas Edsall](#)³ was perhaps most pessimistic in projecting that an extended period of "austerity" could completely erode any sense that government can or should work for the benefit of all citizens, rather than favored political constituencies.

But perhaps the best way to summarize the forum participation so far is to look at the questions we originally proposed:

1. Has the collapse of public trust in government been a cumulative process over a long time, or primarily the result of recent events?

Our essayists generally agree that trust in government has been declining for decades. Galston suggests the drop in trust occurred most dramatically during the Watergate scandal of the 1970s, and has sharpened periodically since then. [Patrick Besette](#)⁴ notes that the phenomenon is international in scope. [David Callahan](#)⁵ emphasizes the impact of highly publicized political scandals since the 1970s.

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?

This is a subject of great concern to our forum contributors. Galston argues that competence, responsiveness, and a third factor, integrity, are all in play. Based on their polling data,

¹ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/03/distrust_of_government_the_pro.php

² http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/03/rebuilding_public_trust_in_gov.php

³ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/03/government_as_a_battleground_i.php

⁴ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/03/public_distrust_of_government.php

⁵ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/03/build_trust_by_fighting_corrup.php

John Halpin and Ruy Teixeira⁶ focus on competence to achieve tangible results as the key to resolving the disconnect between public support for specific government responsibilities and lack of confidence in government to discharge them. Bresette offers an extensive critique of faith in “knowledge-based” approaches to rebuilding trust in government, based on the mixed results of various ‘reinvention” efforts, and insists that a more fundamental public cynicism about the efficacy of collective action needs much greater attention. Edsall focuses on who benefits from government action in a period of austerity, in the belief that both competence and engagement can fail to engender trust in government among those who perceive its beneficiaries as someone else. And **Peter Levine**⁷ argues that relational accountability—the direct experience of citizens in self-government—is more important than the informational accountability that is typically the object of both government reinvention efforts and pro-government “education” initiatives.

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?

This is the main focus of Edsall’s essay, which extensively discusses the current alignment of the electorate on generational and racial/ethnic lines, fostering an atmosphere of fierce and sometimes bitter competition for scarce public resources. Both Levine and Bresette suggest that restoring a sense of government as collective self-government can overcome corrosive divisions. And both Galston and Halpin/Teixeira urge leaders to identify with the broad interests of middle-class voters to build a durable base of support for public-sector activism.

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?

This is the main focus of Callahan’s essay, which calls on progressives to take corruption seriously, to revive interest in campaign finance reform, and to avoid excessive identification with interests (e.g., public-sector unions) perceived as having a stake in large and inefficient government. Halpin and Teixeira place special emphasis on the current perception of government as serving corporate interests at the expense of the public interest.

Beyond addressing these questions, the essayists offer varying degrees of specific recommendations for immediate action. Both Galston and Halpin-Teixeira present a detailed agenda for reducing or counteracting the loss of trust in government. Bresette identifies specific models for “common undertakings,” and also suggests national leadership, beginning with the president, to reduce public cynicism. Callahan’s prescriptions for the appropriate reaction to incidents of corruption, and to perceptions of excessive coziness with interest groups, are highly relevant to current events. Edsall is less optimistic about options for avoiding conflicts over public resources, but is instructively specific in analyzing the emerging fault lines. Like Bresette, Levine points to outstanding examples of citizen participation in public functions and agencies, and encourages their expansion throughout government.

Once reactions (either here or elsewhere) to this forum have been digested, we’ll have another summary to weigh findings and examine outstanding questions for future debate.

⁶ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/03/how_to_restore_confidence_in_g.php

⁷ http://www.thedemocraticstrategist.org/strategist/2011/03/if_you_want_citizens_to_trust.php