



TRUST & GOVERNMENT

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Is trust necessary for a functioning society? Do people have to trust one another to work together? How important is it that we trust the governing entities and organizations—courts, legislatures, executives and their enforcement arms—that structure and constrain how we go about our daily lives? If you're thinking "well, yeah, trust is key," you're not alone. But, in fact, we actually are better off if we don't trust each other. Before I get into why, let me first attempt to pin down what trust is.



For starters, "trust" can imply different expectations. I can trust someone because I believe that they will do what they say, but I also can trust that they will behave in predictable ways even if I would prefer that they behaved differently. I can trust a narcissist to behave as if no one else's needs or desires matter. I can confidently trust that toddlers will put things in their mouths that do not belong there. I can trust that certain people, in particular those I love and who love me, will at least try not to harm me. I can even, naively you might say, trust agents of the government to have some notion—their notion, probably not mine—of society's best interest in mind when they make policy. For present

purposes, let's say we "trust" agents whom we believe want to make us better off.

Trust or trustworthiness, then, is not a characteristic but rather a product of belief. And any belief that agents will act in our interests is based in our ability to reward them if they do or punish them if they don't. In a non-governmental example, 11th-century Maghribi traders leveraged their outsider status to build tight networks that allowed them to trade throughout the Mediterranean. Basically, members of the group would act as agents for each other; as no trader would take on an agent who had broken trust with another, information that would be widely shared within the Maghribi community, acting as a bad agent meant abandoning future employment opportunities. That ability and willingness to punish bad agents meant that the Maghribis could cultivate a collective reputation for dependability, which consequently made them sought-after trading partners (Greif 2006).

Consider a simple political system made up of citizens, legislators, and an executive branch. Under what circumstances should citizens trust politicians? In order for citizens to believe—and therefore trust—that government policy as implemented will reflect their wants, there has to be some connection between citizen wants and policy outcomes. This might occasionally be achieved by chance or, more consistently but less plausibly, by a wise and

benevolent ruler able somehow to discern what society wants. Or it can be baked into the system via a process that creates the linkage.

For such a process to work, there must first be a way to learn what society wants. This is problematic for many reasons, most importantly because what any group wants will depend on how, when, and by whom group preference is measured. Even starting with a single set of voters and candidates, for instance, there are good reasons to believe that different electoral systems, such as single-member district plurality, ranked choice, or some form of proportional rule, would yield different outcomes. Moreover, the choices offered to society depend on who gets to propose the alternatives, and in pretty much any case that matters, anything that some legislative or societal majority likes can be beaten by something else that some other majority prefers. That said, any means of discerning what people want is more informative and provides for better linkage than no means. Typical means of communicating collective preferences include elections, opinion surveys, legislative (and campaign) debates, demonstrations, and strikes. It is worth noting, finally, that repressive regimes suffer the opposite problem—where people fear the consequences of expressing opposition to government, rulers can have exaggerated beliefs about the depths of their support.

The second necessary condition is that collective preferences must influence legislation. In democracies, we count on incumbents' desire for reelection to make them pay attention to what we want. Evidence shows, as theory predicts, that politicians who are not worried about reelection (whether because they are retiring, term-limited, or in a safe district) or other repercussions from ignoring societal wants behave differently and more self-interestedly than those who anticipate credible electoral competition. (We are accustomed to believe that we cannot trust politicians, though evidence from around the world suggests that politicians and their parties try hard to carry out their promises. That they often do not succeed is more plausibly a consequence of political decision-making processes than politicians' lack of scruples.)



Functioning links between collective preferences and policy making only matter if the executive branch is constrained to follow the dictates of the legislature in transforming policy into outcomes. The usual solution, dating at least to 17th-century developments in Crown-Parliament relations in Britain (Cox 2016; North and Weingast 1989), is to separate the purse from the sword: the executive branch implements and enforces, but only when the legislative branch is willing to provide funding. This arrangement, reflected in U.S. “checks and balances,” means that the less the executive and legislative branches have in common the more each must restrain its more extreme impulses if it wants to get anything done at all.

Not all checks are alike. The U.S. Constitution builds checks into the process formally, with the several steps a

bill must pass to become a law controlled by different agents representing different constituencies. The process protects the status quo and those who benefit from it. In parliamentary systems, by contrast, formal checks are fewer but political considerations are more immediate: the ability of legislators to replace the executive (sometimes leading to new elections) means that leaders are well-advised to ensure that no majority finds itself wanting a change in leadership; and in multi-party systems, coalition parties can check each other because they all are needed to pass legislation. The differences go deeper, though. In presidential systems, with fixed terms in office and multiple veto powers, politicians can claim credit for blocking legislation in order to protect their constituents from their political antagonists. Exercising the veto is part of the job. In

parliamentary systems, by contrast, the job of government—and parliament—is to make policy; officeholders who refuse to pass bills risk bringing down the government and possibly having to face voters who might want new laws and who almost certainly don't appreciate having to go to the polls too often. There is in parliamentary systems thus a stronger tendency toward active government than in the U.S. In either case, what we might call trust comes from the ability to keep bad things from happening. That is, we can expect that outcomes will be at least tolerable precisely when we or agents we believe represent our interests can block new initiatives; and that happens only when we don't trust either our agents or those whom we want them to check.

Trust is a slippery concept. We trust other people most when we believe

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that they would pay a cost for breaking our trust. But that means we have to be able, and willing, to impose costs, which implies that trust is not really in play. Contracts are binding because they are legally enforceable. Campaign promises are meaningful because politicians seek reelection. Courts are seen as fair because we think that judges don't like to be overturned on appeal and so write measured opinions. If anything, we trust processes that provide for rewards and punishments, not people. And if any of those consequences breaks down—e.g., if contract enforcement or the appeals process is predictably biased, or if reelection is independent from behavior in office—then trust evaporates, at least for anyone on the losing side. ■

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