

CAN GOVERNMENTS EARN OUR TRUST?

Donald F. Kettl

"This short book is incredibly important. Trust is central to good governance and to promoting equality the world over, yet it is a commodity in short supply. With impressive concision and clarity, Kettl lays out the enduring problem of declining trust in government and offers encouraging arguments for its potential resurgence in democratic political systems."

Marc J. Hetherington, Vanderbilt University

"In an era where the word 'trust' is often used without definition, thought, or sincerity, Kettl's work is a breath of fresh air and a strong contribution to our thinking about trust in government."

Rosemary O'Leary, University of Kansas

Some analysts have called distrust the biggest governmental crisis of our time. It is unquestionably a huge problem, undermining confidence in our elected institutions, shrinking social capital, slowing innovation, and raising existential questions for democratic government itself.

What's behind the rising distrust in democracies around the world and can we do anything about it? In this lively essay, Donald F. Kettl, a leading scholar of public policy and management, investigates the deep historical roots of distrust in government and explores its effects on the social contract between citizens and their elected representatives. Most importantly, the book examines the strategies that governments today can follow to earn back our trust, so that the officials we elect can govern more effectively on our behalf.

Donald F. Kettl is professor and former dean in the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland.

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Can Governments Earn Our Trust?

Acknowledgments

An author wrestling with a puzzle as complex and long-lasting as trust in government requires a great deal of help. The basic issues go back a very long way; newer problems spill out daily. Pulling them all together into a single, short book is a daunting task. I want to thank Polity's editor, Louise Knight, who first inspired me to tackle this topic. Her insights into the things most worth doing were truly invaluable, and her enthusiastic support along the way has been inspiring. Nekane Tanaka Galdos, assistant editor at Polity, provided wonderful support at every step on the way. I'm also deeply appreciative of Leigh Mueller, whose keen skill as a copy-editor unquestionably made the book sharper and clearer.

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The Puzzle of Trust

The rising tide of distrust in government is surely one of the biggest challenges facing the world's democracies in the twenty-first century. The center of the problem is the United States, where trust in public institutions has dropped precipitously since the 1960s. In fact, according to public opinion surveys, Congress is less popular than head lice, cockroaches, traffic jams, and colonoscopies. But the problem is not just an American one. Edelman, a major global research firm, has surveyed 28 countries – and found that more than half of the public in more than half of the countries distrust their governments. The US, in fact, is about in the middle. Major democracies like Germany, Britain, Sweden, and Japan rank even lower.¹

Can Governments Earn Our Trust?

Distrust in government often seems a largely US-centered problem, but its reach stretches much farther. Moreover, although distrust in government often seems a relatively recent problem, we will see in this book that it is an eternal, universal, and inescapable problem, not bound by time or place. At the same time, however, distrust is bad and getting worse. It is spreading, fueled by shock waves of populism. And it poses large, important challenges to the world's major democracies that demand attention.

That, in turn, frames the basic puzzle for this book. If distrust is inevitable but getting worse, if it has deep roots in the US but is spilling into other countries as well, is there anything that we – especially the officials we elect to lead us – can do about it? Can they *earn our trust*?

The basic patterns are clear. In the 28 nations that Edelman surveys, citizens trust nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) more than businesses, businesses more than the media, and the media more than government (see figure 1.1). Since government is the one institution whose leaders we collectively choose, and the one institution we count on to work on behalf of all of us, the rising tide of distrust is especially worrisome. Can we take action, by all of us for all of us?

The Puzzle of Trust

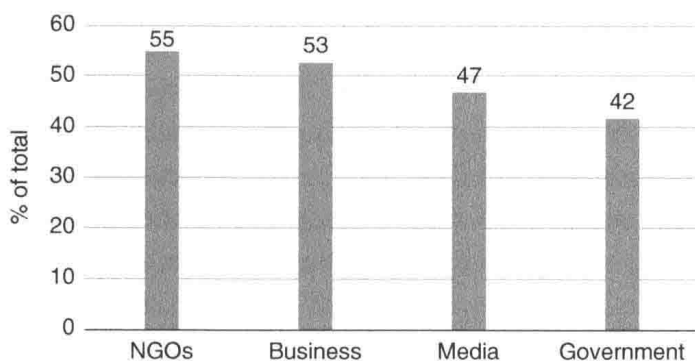


Figure 1.1 Trust in institutions

Source: 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer, “Executive Summary” (2016), www.edelman.com/insights/intellectual-property/2016-edelman-trust-barometer/executive-summary.

If distrust splinters our capacity to work together, the prospects for the survival of democracy are bleak.

But this book does not have a gloomy conclusion. The prospects for earning trust are, in fact, quite good – if we have the wits to discover and use the strategies that will help us to do so. After exploring how we got into this fix, we will examine how democratic government can in fact earn trust – and, in the process, at least modestly help to restore our confidence in its ability to govern us.

Can Governments Earn Our Trust?

Trends in trust

“Trust” is a deceptively complex phenomenon, so definitions are important. In the political setting, trust occurs when citizens look at how their governments operate and conclude that their political leaders will keep their promises in a just, honest, and efficient way.²

But trust operates in two dimensions. *Social trust* describes the relationships among individuals, leading them to have confidence in their interactions with each other and, therefore, to cooperate in seeking common ground. Social trust thus supports governmental institutions, because individuals who trust each other are more likely to trust the decisions their governments make on their behalf. *Political trust* reflects the direct relationship between citizens and their governments. Trust in political institutions is a reflection of the confidence that individuals have that government does what they want and expect. The two dimensions of trust, of course, are closely related. But it is the erosion of political trust that is most worrisome for democratic institutions. Social trust captures the complicated relationships between individuals and