

## What to Think about Trust?

By

Daniel E. White May 20, 2024

“What to think about trust and politics is (mostly) wrong.” So read the title of a featured article in the February 26, 2024 issue of the *Christian Science Monitor* by Marshall Ingwerson. The article begins with a description of an election year in “one of the world’s richest and most advanced nations, high in political freedom and with a relatively democratic spread of incomes.”

The quote refers to Finland in 2023. It also describes the United States in 1960.

Data from 1960 show that 75% of Americans “said they trusted the national government to do the right thing at least most of the time.” In 2023, that percentage was 16%. Ingwerson notes “Americans’ trust is low across the board, but it is two to three times **lower** among those whose favored political party does not occupy the White House.”

People of a Certain Age, the time between 1960 and 2023 corresponds with the time most of us came of age politically, and people roughly in our age cohort assumed responsibility for government. I am reminded of the cartoon caption “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

In trying to understand the decline in trust in government, Ingwerson identifies four things that are not happening, based on polling information.

1. “Low political trust is not about President Biden” or even former President Trump. **Two-thirds of the decline in trust happened during the Johnson-Nixon-Ford-Carter administrations.**

2. “To a striking degree, partisan division in the United States is not about anything.” Samara Klar, a political scientist at the University of Arizona noted, “Democrats and Republicans overlap more than ever on issues [like abortion rights, immigration, high prices, etc.]. But they’re more hostile to the other party.”

3. “Support for political violence is not really as high as Americans think.” A 2023 survey found that “23% agreed that patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save the country. However, a survey conducted in 1997 by the Pew Research Center concluded that 27% said that violence could be justified.” Dig further, as did Sean Westwood, director of the Polarization Research Center at Dartmouth in a 2022 study. Westwood contended, on the basis of the data from that research, that actual support for violence was overstated by a factor of 6. He wrote that the actual level of support is more like 2.9%.

4. “Americans don’t have an accurate picture of people in the other party.” There are more polarizing politicians these days, willing to say more extreme things. Why? Because saying them attracts attention and seldom costs them their next election. Klar wrote, “Most Democrats and most Republicans are ideologically moderate. They are more concerned about the price of groceries, gas and rent than inflamed by culture wars.” The political wisdom of the Clinton years—“It’s the economy, stupid”—might still be the case.

Note: to accept any of the information above and form a more a more balanced view of trust in government these days, one must trust Ingwerson’s data and its sources. Therein lies a challenge: how does one determine whom to trust?

Fanning the flames of distrust has worked politically recently for several political figures. In 1960, no serious person referred to “alternative facts.” Media then called out those who lied. These days, media in its many manifestations are often complicit in amplifying heat because conflict attracts followers, viewers, readers; conflict sells well.

Isn’t it interesting that the precipitous decline in trust in government occurred before social media, though, before the 24/7 cable news cycle had taken hold, during a time when there were still icons of information on a few widely viewed networks, people Americans had traditionally trusted?

Perhaps, we have never completely recovered from three significant political assassinations, the Tet Offensive, the resignation of a Vice President because he had committed crimes, the resignation of a President because he had covered up crimes, the frenzied evacuation of Saigon, the taking of hostages in Iran and subsequent failed attempt to rescue them. These events would erode trust.

All governments make mistakes. Perhaps we forget that government is made up of people who strive to do “the right thing at least most of the time.” Why should government be any less fallible than people?

Our personal encounters with the government unfold just fine. Judy and I receive Social Security checks every month. Much of our basic medical expense is paid for by Medicare. We file our federal income tax forms every year and get refund checks. We have confidence in the safety of the meat we eat, the planes in which we fly (recent mishaps notwithstanding), and the quality of the interstate highway system we enjoy on vacations. It matters to us that our national defense is strong enough for the US to be a deterrent to countries that might mean us harm. These encourage trust.

Most of the people we know, Republicans and Democrats are, as Professor Klar suggested, ideologically moderate. We believe her contention that Democrats and Republicans overlap more than ever on major issues.

There are others like us in these respects. There are myriad examples of people at the local and regional level figuring out ways to solve problems where one’s political party does not matter. These are blocks on which trust in government can move back toward the 1960 level.

Who’s willing to trust first?

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