



## How the Visibility of Policies Affects Citizen Trust and Distrust of Government

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Many pundits and political analysts point to pervasive cynicism in the U.S. electorate to explain Donald Trump's 2016 victory. Indeed, only 18% of Americans said they trusted the government in 2017, as compared to the 80% who reported trusting the government in the 1960s. According to this logic, distrust served as a politically *mobilizing* force, and Trump's campaign used skepticism about government to turn out voters with the "drain the swamp" slogan.

The idea that distrust is a mobilizing force is contradicted by developments in Ferguson, Missouri, in the aftermath of the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown. As the highly publicized clash between protestors and Ferguson police played out, commentators pointed out that officials in this majority black community are mostly whites. The mismatch was attributed to low turnout among Ferguson's black voters – a symptom of the black community's distrust of government. In this instance, distrust is seen as a politically *demobilizing* force.

Can distrust in government be both a politically mobilizing and demobilizing force? More important, what is the relationship between people's trust in government and their willingness to participate in the political process? My research shows that the political impact of distrust depends on the parts of government to which people attach their distrust.

### Where People See Government in Their Lives

I conducted fifty-eight in-depth interviews, and found that while Americans across all racial groups distrust government, they connect this distrust to different parts of government. Due to changes in public policies over the last fifty years, the parts of government that are visible in people's lives depends on race.

For example, the last five decades have seen a growth in tax breaks that disproportionately benefit white Americans. These include programs like the Home Mortgage Interest Deduction, which gives American homeowners roughly \$70 billion via tax breaks on money put towards interest payments for home loans. Importantly, these tax breaks are invisible in their connection to government because the assistance is hidden within the tax code, rather than coming in as a check from the state. In this way, public benefits that disproportionately favor whites have grown less visible over the last fifty years.

At the same time, government aid perceived as primarily benefiting people of color has become more visible. Since the 1970s, welfare and safety net programs have been hot-button political issues. In my research, white interviewees asked about the impact of government in their life rarely described benefits they receive from the government, but instead described how "their" tax money funds welfare programs, which they felt benefitted other racial groups.

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During this same era, people of color have seen a decline of the Civil Rights Movement and high-profile civil rights legislation. Later, the War on Crime encouraged more aggressive policing and higher rates of incarceration in communities of color. As government became a less visible defender of civil rights, it became a more visible enforcer of the criminal justice penalties. My interviewees of color frequently answered questions about the role of government in their life by telling stories about the police.

Because welfare and the criminal justice system have become the most visible manifestations of government in the lives of whites and people of color, respectively, these policy changes also created divergent anchor points for Americans' distrust of government. Statistical analysis using a nationally representative survey from 2016 illuminates this variation. Distrust of government is associated with feelings about welfare among whites but not among people of color. In contrast, among whites, levels of trust in government are not linked with opinions about the police, while these sets of attitudes are closely linked for people of color.

Distrust focused on different areas of government has varied political ramifications. Among whites, distrust of government often stems from the belief that government's primary purpose is to collect their tax money and spend it on programs that only benefit others. Statistical analysis also shows that the most distrustful whites are the most politically active. For them, distrust is mobilizing. It spurs them to use the political process to regain control over tax funds.

By contrast, among people of color, the least trusting are least likely to vote or take part in any political activity. Their distrust is rooted in a sense that "government is scary," as one interviewee put it. For many people of color, the government is most visible in the criminal justice system, and coming into contact with that system is dangerous. It follows, as they see it, that the best way to cope with government is to avoid contact altogether – and their preference for avoidance often spills over into withdrawal from participation in the political process.

## Changing Government Visibility to Promote Political Equality

The contrasting roots of distrust of government among different groups of Americans help explain why cynicism born of distrust could simultaneously mobilize the (mostly) white voters who elected Donald Trump, while at the same discouraging black residents of Ferguson and elsewhere from going to the polls. To correct the political inequality created by this dynamic, policy should alter the way government presents itself to its citizens.

First, relatively invisible benefits that primarily go to white Americans, such as the Home Mortgage Interest Deduction, should no longer be delivered via the tax code, but instead should be delivered as payments visibly tied to government. This change might help white Americans gain a more accurate understanding of how they benefit from government – and perhaps lead them to appreciate other public policies as well.

Second, criminal justice reform should make the police both less visible and more humane in communities of color. Such changes in criminal justice in minority communities could increase trust in government and encourage citizens of color to participate more fully in what they might come to perceive as a just and equitable democracy.

Read more in Aaron Rosenthal, Sarah K. Bruch, and Joe Soss. "**Unequal Positions: A Relational Approach to Racial Inequality Trends in the U.S. States, 1940-2010**," *Social Science History* 43, no. 1 (2019): 159-184. <https://scholars.org>  
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