



Distrust in Government as a Political Weapon

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Americans have far less trust in government than they did decades ago, when social scientists started asking whether people “trust the federal government to do what is right” always or most of the time. Now, as in the past, substantial majorities approve many specific things government does – like provide Social Security and education. But general labels like “government” or “regulation” evoke little trust, much lower than in the 1950s and 1960s. When pollsters ask about parts of government, Congress does especially poorly. As of 2012, polls show that only 10-12% of Americans trust our national legislature.

Most analysts presume that declining faith in government grows out of other underlying trends. Maybe coverage of politics by the media is responsible, or the fraying of connections among citizens, or political scandals, or the mounting economic struggles of the middle class. All may contribute, but we need to recognize that distrust in government is *actively promoted* by actors seeking political advantage. Both liberals and conservatives have used distrust as a weapon. But in recent times, promoting distrust has become a continuous crusade for U.S. conservatives.

How Stoking Distrust Furthers Political Goals

Public opinion is a political resource that can be used strategically. If actors can shift public opinion – or perceptions of public attitudes – they can achieve several kinds of advantages.

- **Organizational strength and focus:** To survive and thrive, groups need a message and rationale. Declarations of distrust in government, focused on especially disliked politicians and policies, can be used to raise money and rally supporters.
- **Winning elections:** Negative assessments and fears about the economy and government arouse citizens to vote, so candidates and out-parties often beat the drums of distrust.
- **Stoking disdain for institutions:** During as well as between elections, cultivating public disdain toward an agency or branch controlled by the other party can be very useful.
- **Achieving or blocking policy changes:** Promoting distrust can undermine support for policies favored by rivals. Even if people think a given function is proper, doubts can be raised about whether government can do it effectively or in a legitimate fashion. Such messages can resonate on either side. In general, conservatives feel uncomfortable about regulation of businesses, social service provision, and efforts to promote minority rights or redistribute economic resources, while liberals may distrust national security efforts or government measures to regulate sexual choices.

Distrust as a Strategic Weapon for Republicans

In recent decades, the promotion of distrust in government has moved from occasional political opportunism to a concerted long-term strategy pursued by conservatives and the Republican Party. The 1994 elections were pivotal. For forty years, Democrats had controlled the House of Representatives and often both chambers of Congress. Democratic President Clinton held office in 1994 and was in favor of tax and health reforms hated by conservatives.

Republicans went to war against Clinton’s reforms and aimed to oust Democratic Congressional majorities. Insurgent Republican leader Newt Gingrich created a unified political team that distributed to Republican candidates a list of words derisive of Democratic officials and their views. The sixty-four words and phrases included “corrupt,” “red tape,” “patronage,” “pathetic,” “sick,” “abuse of power,” “machine,” “bosses,” and “destructive.” President Clinton and his favored reforms were also bashed in language meant to invoke broad distrust in government. For example, Clinton’s health reform was derided as “socialized medicine” and a “big government” takeover. If reform passed, conservatives claimed, “Gestapo-like” tactics would be used by

“health care bureaucrats.”

In 1994, Republican anti-government warriors especially focused on Congress itself, charging that Democrats were running an “imperial” body, corrupt and out of touch with ordinary Americans. Focusing on earmarks and perks – and going after individual Democratic leaders such as Jim Wright – Republicans sought to delegitimize the institution of Congress itself.

In what became known as the “Republican Revolution,” Republicans in 1994 won fifty- four seats in the House of Representatives and eight in the Senate, swinging control in both chambers. Because fierce anti-government rhetoric appeared to have a significant impact on the vote, pundits on both sides of the partisan divide concluded that bashing government could be a potent political weapon. Especially for Republicans, promoting distrust in government became a long-term strategy, useful not only for opposing Democrats, but also for blocking taxes, business regulations, and proposed environmental and health reforms.

The Consequences of Government-Bashing

Years after the GOP triumph in 1994, efforts to stoke distrust still yield political benefits. The Tea Party got attention by deriding President Obama as a “Nazi” and proclaiming his health reform to be “unconstitutional.” Congressional Republicans bashing “tyrannical” steps by elected Democrats have produced DC gridlock. They encouraged conservative voters to turn out in the 2010 midterm elections, while discouraging others. Democrats as well as Republicans regularly campaign for office by claiming to be “outsiders” determined to “clean up Washington DC.”

Studies show that talk by leaders affects what regular citizens think. Efforts to encourage distrust have almost certainly helped to sour faith in U.S. democracy. Yet the nation needs effective government to address many pressing problems. And when Republicans take office, they need a measure of trust to govern, just as Democrats do. Perhaps the time has come to limit the rhetoric and make visible things public servants do well – or might do well – for all of us.

Read more in “How and Why Conservative Politicians and Interest Groups Promoted Public Anger” (with Douglas Harris), in *What is It about Government That Americans Dislike?*, edited by John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (Cambridge University Press, 2001).