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Public Opinion in US Democracy

Autobiographical Essay

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I Have (Dis)Trust in the Government

In current scholarly political research, it is established that trust in the government is at an all-time low among the American population. Only about one-quarter of Americans say they can trust the government to do what is right “just about always” (2%) or “most of the time” (22%) (Pew). Political trust acts as a scale for government performance. Though on a natural decline since 1966, this scale fluctuates based on the state of the nation. It is affected by the public in terms of what is significant to them at the time of measurement (i.e., polling). The 9/11 attack, for example, was one of the biggest spikes in the public’s trust in years, with around 60% of people agreeing that they trust the government “all” or “most of the time”. At one end of the spectrum, there is high political trust, where people are satisfied with the alignment of their expectations with the production of government policies. On the other end is that of political cynicism, where people are unsatisfied.

High political trust is associated with a high willingness to succumb to the needs of the government. This especially shows itself in economic situations. One prevalent example is the debate over redistributive policies: when trust is high, Americans are more likely to approve the amount of money needed to keep these programs going. This is especially significant in the conservative lens, as in the conventional wisdom they see the distribution of their tax dollars on such programs to be a sacrifice instead of a self-fulfilling benefit (Erikson 173).

Political cynicism contributes to the population's fervency for change. With such prominent levels of polarization in the country, political cynicists work to dismantle the two-party system. This is done through "quick" fixes, including direct legislation, term limits, and the formation of third parties. While in the past, it has been said that Republicans tend to be political cynicists, this is not necessarily true. High political trust varies in terms of the party holding the executive position (Pew). If a specific party holds the presidency, members of that party will have higher trust than the opposing party.

There is also the fact of social trust, or generalized trust in others around you, from friends, family, and strangers. Democratic nations rely on social trust to ensure that citizens are confident in those they vote for in governmental positions. With the assumption that democracies hold a population that has high social trust, there is a return of confidence for elected leaders who will be less likely to corrupt their privileges (Erikson 175). This allows citizens to work together to influence the government, by forming a leadership that is representative of themselves.

My parents came from the Philippines. They were young when they had me, in their late 20s. When they figured out that I was coming into the picture, they knew that the Philippines paled in comparison to what America could offer me as a citizen. They obtained a US visa and moved to California in 2002. With high governmental trust after 9/11 came the creation of the Department of Homeland Security. There was no reformation of policy like that in the Philippines. To my immigrant parents, the US could not have felt safer. After I was born, they decided to stay past their return date. With my status, they thought that they could eventually get their own citizenship in years' time.

Growing up, I was not aware of the power I held as a US citizen. My family did not have much to begin with: I lived in the basement of my aunt's home in Queens, where my parents and

I shared one bedroom. Despite our situation, and knowing the risks of undocumented immigration, my parents stood firm in the opportunities my citizenship offered to us. Unlike completely undocumented immigrants, we had access to benefits that we needed as a low-income family. The 14th Amendment secured my right to a free, public education. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Benefit was the reason we had food in our fridge. I knew that I had it better here than in the Philippines, where children my age could not have even dreamed of such privileges.

I did not know my parents were undocumented until I was ten years old. My mom told me to never tell anyone about their status, not even my friends or teachers. They could get caught and sent back to the Philippines. There was a lot of pressure on me back then. For a large part of my upbringing, I felt like I could not trust anyone. My relationship with authority was therefore put into question. If I could not trust my teachers, could I trust others in power? My school principal, police officers? Could I trust the law?

The line between my trust and distrust in the government could not have been blurrier. It is easy to get sucked into the image of the perfect democracy, where everyone is treated equitably. As a citizen, I wanted to trust the government in knowing that they can do better and improve the resources that undocumented and mixed-status families have. But as my parents' daughter, I wanted to protect my family. Having grown up with this battle of trust and distrust, it has affected my political efficacy and my relationship with authority. How am I supposed to believe that my voice can affect policy when I know that the people who I care about most are "illegal" under the pretenses of the law? Whose voices are squashed and ignored simply because they do not have the documents that define them as human under the law?

My distrust of the government was deeply rooted in my social distrust of others. Those who have low social trust tend to be unappreciative of democracy, disengaged in politics, and have low confidence in Congress, Supreme Court, and other political institutions. On top of my distrust of my friends, teachers, and neighbors, my negative view of the government was especially affected by my parents in that I had little exposure to government affairs. Since my parents were not from the US or politically educated, I was not exposed to current events outside of school. My parents did not have a car, so I never heard of NPR until high school. My parents could not vote, so I never went to a voting booth or got a “I Voted!” sticker on my t-shirt. Instead, my perception of the government was shaped by my family’s experiences. Looking back to my youth, I understood that there were differences between me and my classmates’ families. None of my friends had to sit for hours at the Human Resources Administration building to recertify their SNAP benefits and have food in their fridge. They did not even know what SNAP was.

My lack of social and government trust in my youth has continued to affect me today in terms of my political efficacy. It was not until I began attending high school in New York City that I became exposed to civic engagement. The friends I made and surrounded myself with at the time were extremely politically engaged. With their help, I learned how to fight back and use my voice by attending walkouts and protests fighting for climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, and gun control. I learned about my rights as a US citizen in AP US Government class. I even pre-registered to vote through the city’s Student Voter Registration Day before I turned 18. Although my trust in the government is still low, I believe that I have grown into a more civically engaged citizen due to the socialization I experienced through these years. Although it is still largely debated, one common stance held in current political research is that peer versus parent influence is issue specific (Erikson 130). While my parents held democratic partisanship, they did hold differing

stances on the issues I would protest for, such as climate change and LGBTQ+ rights due to the differences in our generations' beliefs. I would say that growing up with a strong distrust in others and in authority has benefited me as a way of showing myself that I can let people in. Now that I can vote, I believe that my trust in the government is higher than before, knowing that I can finally have a say in my experiences.

Work Cited

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