

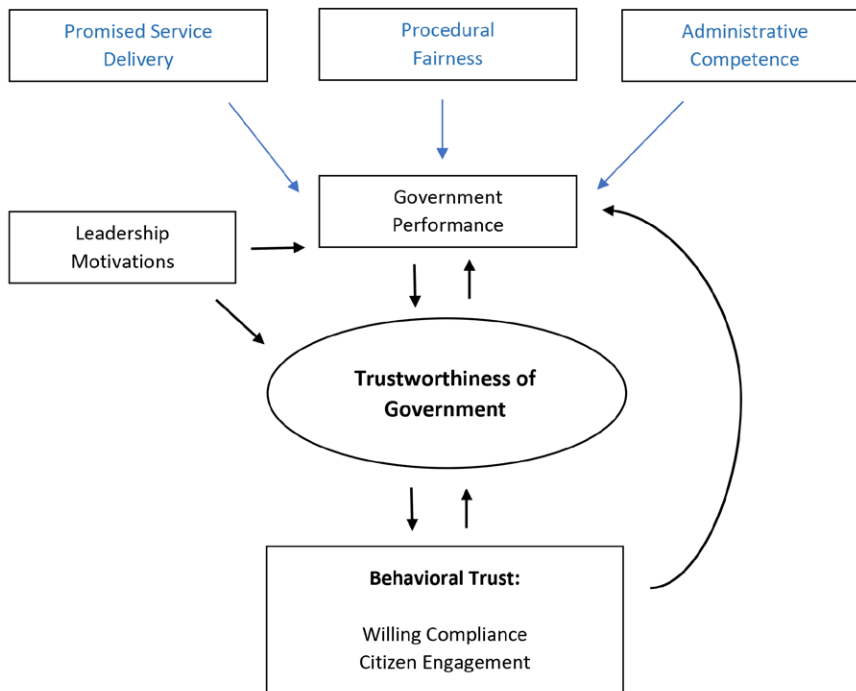
# Trustworthy Government: The Obligations of Government & the Responsibilities of the Governed

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*Establishing trustworthy government is a major problem for contemporary democracies. Without public confidence, government faces considerable noncompliance with its policies, as has been the case with the reaction of some subpopulations to COVID safety requirements. The pressures on government today are numerous. The challenges are complex and the polity diverse. Creating confidence and thus willing compliance requires a demonstrated government competence. It also requires political leadership committed to the collective good and to forging a common identity among multiple subgroups while recognizing their distinctive differences and needs. Citizens are also crucial actors. It is incumbent upon a democratic citizenry that it recognizes its responsibilities to and interdependence with others in the polity as members of an expanded community of fate.*

**I**n well-functioning democracies, a virtuous circle arises.<sup>1</sup> The government is trustworthy, and the citizens recognize it as such and respond with compliance and willing cooperation with its policies and practices.<sup>2</sup> Being a trustworthy government depends on the credibility of the government's commitment to the flourishing of its people. Establishing credibility requires that government uphold its side of its implicit contract with citizens and subjects, that is: the provision of goods and services, fair processes in policy-determination and implementation (given the norms of place and time), and a demonstrable administrative capacity, including the ability to identify and punish free-riders, those who defraud or abuse a government program. Service delivery, procedural fairness, and administrative capabilities are attributes of government performance, but the motivations and ideologies of elected politicians can also affect perceptions, positively or negatively. When citizens perceive government as serving their interests, they consider government trustworthy. As seen in Figure 1, a trustworthy government provokes greater willingness to comply with its demands and a more engaged public, which enables government to provide more of what citizens need, which further enhances both its performance and its trustworthiness.

Figure 1  
Virtuous Circle of Government



Earlier versions of the virtuous circle appeared in Margaret Levi, Audrey Sacks, and Tom R. Tyler, "Conceptualizing Legitimacy, Measuring Legitimizing Beliefs," *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (3) (2009): 354–375; and Margaret Levi and Audrey Sacks, "Legitimizing Beliefs: Concepts and Measures," *Regulation & Governance* 3 (4) (2009): 311–333.

As the following examples illustrate, the legitimacy of government further enhances (or undermines) willing compliance. But legitimacy rests on more than effective governance; it demands popularly acceptable justifications for who holds the reins of power, who the leadership is, and the policies they promote.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as is patently obvious these days, different subgroups of the population can have widely different assessments of the legitimacy of government itself and its actions.

But there is another piece of trustworthy government that requires reemphasis: being trustworthy requires that officials craft policies that reflect the values and interests of their diverse and pluralistic populations. Democratic governments can and should enhance social solidarity among groups within the polity, even those distrustful of each other. Indeed, democracies may further enhance the perception of their trustworthiness by assisting citizens to become aware of their

common project with each other and with the government to ensure the flourishing of its peoples and, better yet, of all peoples and the planet. The obligations between citizens and government are reciprocal, indeed, multilateral.

Some clarifications and addendums are necessary before proceeding. A minor point is the use of the term *government*. Some, including myself at times, use the term *state* to connote the complex of institutions and processes noted here, and reserve *government* for the politicians currently in charge. I follow this common practice in U.S. and comparative political science and the common usage by much of the media and public.

More important, the trustworthiness of government is seldom, if ever, complete. Some agents and agencies of government might meet the standards (or be perceived as meeting the standards) more than others. The World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, for example, reveals how the legal and judicial institutions of states vary, even among those with similar income and regime characteristics. The Scandinavian countries, for example, rank high on almost every dimension, while the United States ranks high on some indicators, but ranks low, relative to its peers, for criminal justice.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this continuum can be discontinuous. Governments, including democratic governments, can fall into a vicious cycle in which they are both untrustworthy and mistrusted. This cycle can but does not necessarily lead to reconstitution of the government.

Finally, even when a democratic government is relatively trustworthy, there can and should be healthy skepticism about its practices, processes, and policies.<sup>5</sup> The *sine qua non* of a thriving democracy is public questioning, media scrutiny, and protest that hold government accountable or push it to extend what are understood to be its obligations to the people. One responsibility of citizenship in a democracy is to try to make government more responsive to the needs of the populace and better able to meet them.

Let me make this point even crisper. The first task of a trustworthy government is enacting, devising, and implementing policies. The second and equally important task is engagement, creating processes for acquiring informed input from the citizenry and enabling them to participate in solving societal problems.<sup>6</sup> The goal is the flourishing of the people and the planet in terms of well-being but also opportunity and dignity.

In what follows, I expand on my approach to conceptualizing and assessing trustworthy government, then address where democracies seem to be now, and conclude with some thoughts about how to make governments both more democratic and more trustworthy, and in the process, how they might generate an empathetic citizenry that can work together to solve societal problems.

I have long had a problem with research that assesses citizen perceptions of how trustworthy a government is by considering only surveys. Though one of the issues in the early surveys has been mostly corrected over time, it still persists:

generic questions about trust in government may be about the politicians in office rather than about the government in general. Equally as important, “trust” in government, indeed trust in general, is an attitude or belief that can produce inadequate assessment of the other party in the trust relationship and may lead to being conned or worse.<sup>7</sup> Although trust can be an important component of social and even economic interactions, we do not want to rely on trust when dealing with government. Rather, we should be relying on institutional arrangements that ensure government agents act in the interests of the polity and the claimants they are serving.

This concern about the survey data and individual attitudes of trust – and distrust – have led me to focus on behavior: compliance, noncompliance, protests, and so on. Those who believe government is trustworthy will be more likely to engage in behavioral trust, complying with policies without undo coercion or persuasion. Those who do not find the institutions or their agents trustworthy are more likely to protest, refuse to comply, and withdraw support from the elected political actors they hold accountable. However, as the body of my work attests, the assessment of behavioral trust is contextual, requiring deep understanding of the communities engaging in the relevant behavior. Sometimes, for example, protest of a particular practice or policy depends on an assessment that the government is trustworthy in general, but less so regarding a specific policy or practice or in the treatment of a subgroup of the population.

To make this concrete, consider the variation in the willingness of young men in democracies in their response to calls for volunteers during the two world wars and the Vietnam War.<sup>8</sup> The decision was individual but informed by social networks and communities, producing significant differences in both public support and how potential recruits responded. In the United States, even those who had confidence that government was serving them relatively well in general and who supported many of its programs protested the war in Vietnam. Of course, some did this out of self-interest. They did not want to disrupt, let alone risk, their lives, but there were many who were willing to pay a very high price for their convictions. In the twenty-first-century U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we see a very divided public and a decline in support over time.<sup>9</sup>

In Canada, many Francophones questioned the legitimacy of the world wars and of the Canadian government’s insistence they serve in them. From their perspective, the federal government was violating the constitutional justification that conscription could be considered only if Canada was invaded. Anglophone Canadians volunteered in high numbers for the world wars, Francophone Canadians almost not at all. Francophones generally believed the federal Canadian government was untrustworthy, failing to keep its promises of bilingual education and general respect for their language. They also worried – and reasonably so – that they would receive military orders in English, which not all of them comprehended.

Francophone Canadians during both world wars, working-class Australians in World War I, and dissidents throughout history have used avoidance of and outright refusal to serve in the military to proclaim their opposition to specific wars and governments. As political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott has shown, noncompliance is an important “weapon of the weak.” He documents agricultural laborers shirking their work and destroying property in response to landlords’ reductions in the protections of their welfare during the Green Revolution.<sup>10</sup> Disobedience to the law, tax evasion, inoculation resistance, and even refusing to vote can represent active noncompliance. Of course, how to read the meaning of these actions depends on the motivations of the actors. Sometimes noncompliance is simply a reflection of venality, laziness, or ignorance. However, by studying the context in which actions occur and understanding the meanings of the acts to those engaged in them (as conveyed in sermons, novels, proclamations, and social media), qualitative information makes it possible to infer likely motivations and thus analyze hypothesized variations of reasons for noncompliance.

I have elaborated and built on this argument for years. Aware that there are also vicious circles of distrust, it seems important to clarify how building a government that more effectively contributes to the flourishing of its citizens can create a virtuous circle of trustworthy government for those who never experienced one. It still is. However, the current and extreme polarization in the United States, combined with the disparate reactions to vaccinations and masks in the COVID-19 pandemic, raises the question of why the virtuous circle appears to have been broken for so many Americans.

The first answer is that there have been concerted efforts to undermine citizen confidence in and reliance on government. Democratic theory emphasizes the importance of citizen skepticism for a healthy democracy. Keeping government trustworthy requires citizen – and media – scrutiny. There has also been an ongoing debate about the appropriate role of government in the economy and society: Adam Smith was neither the first nor the last to raise this question.<sup>11</sup> However, in the decades before the ascendancy of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and American President Ronald Reagan, the discussion of less government came to rely on a belief of the ineffectiveness as well as the inappropriateness of government in many spheres of society. Ascendent populist parties around the world and Trumpism in the United States have self-consciously “weaponized distrust” of government and indeed of many authorities, including scientific experts and technocrats.<sup>12</sup> Resistance to masks and vaccines is but one of many indicators. When a citizen distrusts government and holds an ideology emphasizing freedom from government restrictions and an electoral steal, the result is more than distrust: it is a delegitimation of government authority.

One consequence of the campaign to reduce the size of government is that it then provides less and less of what many in the population expect of it, thus increasing their reasons to mistrust it. This, of course, is the intended effect: the perpetuation of a non-virtuous circle in which government proves itself untrustworthy by failing to deliver. In the United States, the deterioration of physical infrastructure and public health and safety protections are but two of the many instances in which a reduction in its coffers inhibit government from delivering on its promises.

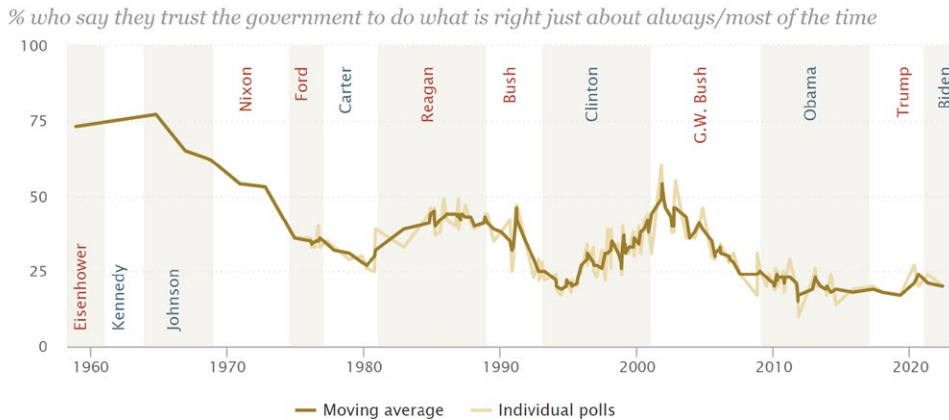
Politicizing government agencies and expertise is another weapon in the arsenal of those trying to undermine trustworthy government. The Food and Drug Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and other agencies once considered above the fray are now mired in it. There are yet other grounds for distrust of government institutions. When government is believed to ignore due process, discriminate, or otherwise violate norms of fairness, this stimulates behavioral distrust.<sup>13</sup> It is thus hardly surprising that we see the emergence of Black Lives Matter and other movements that protest police when they violate rights and threaten lives.

Another reason for popular antagonism toward government is the belief that one is disadvantaged by policy changes (or, sometimes, simply not advantaged). Some even feel government has betrayed them, particularly when they observe others getting ahead while they are falling behind. This perception has led to a politics of resentment throughout the world.<sup>14</sup> It has a distinctive racialized form in the United States, where some White Americans resent what they perceive as special treatment given to people of color, and feel they must protect their privilege in the face of demographic changes that are likely to make them the minority population.<sup>15</sup>

The basis of such resentment lies in the norms that have become prevalent in capitalist democracies: the conviction that individual effort is the motor of mobility, a view of society – and government benefits – as zero-sum, and a belief that those who are doing well earned what they have by patiently waiting in line and following the rules.<sup>16</sup> Each of these perspectives is contestable for the given status quo, and they certainly do not capture what could be. Social interactions, networks, and the public goods provided by government more often are a greater generator of mobility than individual effort. It is possible to grow the pie so that more get pieces. What is on offer as benefits need not be finite.

**A** distorted view of history further contributes to the politics of resentment. Many Americans wear rose-colored glasses when they recount the post-World War II era of prosperity, homeownership, good jobs, and the absence of social conflict. According to the surveys, trust in government was high then, and it has descended, with ups and downs, ever since. Graphs like Figure 2 are common in the literature – and in the essays in this volume.<sup>17</sup>

Figure 2  
Public Trust in Government, 1958 – 2022



Source: Pew Research Center, “Public Trust in Government: 1958–2022,”  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022>.

But there is an alternative story, too often neglected in the public conversation. The graphs do not start until after World War II. If they started in the 1930s, the 1950s might look like a blip. Equally important, the reigning narrative of the 1950s golden age neglects how much those who prospered depended on trustworthy and large-scale government programs to build the highway system and other major infrastructure and subsidize house construction, homeownership, and college educations, among a whole array of other goods and services. The narrative also neglects the fact that there was always an “other America” left out of these programs and benefits.<sup>18</sup> Trust in government, even as measured by surveys, was hardly uniform among the U.S. population. There were racial, class, and generational differences. It is also obvious in the surveys that who is president affects public perceptions. There have always been partisan divides. Although, arguably, they are significantly deeper now than in the 1950s. There has also always been a gap between the respective assessments of local, state, and federal government. People generally feel more confident in the governments closest to them. Recent surveys confirm the persistence of that gap generally in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, as argued above, there are other ways to approach the relationship between citizens and government than a focus on surveys that ask what people think of government in general. These questions evoke answers that can reflect how much the respondents like particular politicians, or how irritated they are by the

federal tax authority or their state's Department of Motor Vehicles. The focus of survey questions should instead be on specific agencies and actors within government.<sup>20</sup> Even better is to consider not just answers to survey questions but actual behaviors in terms of compliance and resistance. Then the investigation can turn to how and why people vary in their perceptions of relatively objective attributes of a trustworthy government, its agents, and agencies.

**T**he COVID pandemic, while a nightmare for all of us, is also a dream opportunity for social scientists trying to tease out such questions as: How does a trustworthy government affect both the course of the disease and the response of the citizens? What are the best mechanisms for informing the public about science and having them believe it? And how can we determine the variation in responses among populations within a given polity, as well as responses of subgroups to different levels of government and different agencies? Experiences with COVID since February 2020 provide a wealth of data within countries and across them, and some first-rate analyses are beginning to emerge from the flood of papers taking advantage of the data.

In any kind of regime, it is important to evoke as much willing compliance as possible, even when compliance is legally required.<sup>21</sup> In a democracy, behavioral consent is foundational to the system and thus even more critical to achieve. And it appears, as I expected, that rates of voluntary compliance with government recommendations for social distancing, mask wearing, business and school closures, and vaccinations reflect the perceived trustworthiness of government and its agencies.<sup>22</sup> The more a subset of the population has confidence in a government agent or agency, the higher the behavioral consent will be, and the lower the level of resistance to mandates, *ceteris paribus*.

There are, of course, always complicating factors. Conformism can sometimes do much of the work, but, as we know from simple perception as well as from historical cases, different groups develop different social norms. In the United States today, party identifications determine, and are determined by, different sets of norms. There is a partisan difference in confidence in the information provided and in the federal government, and there is also a partisan divide in behavioral responses. Republican voters are less trusting but also often less informed, and Republican governors are less likely to impose stringent rules on their constituents.<sup>23</sup> Other subgroups, particularly those who are less educated and less well-off, are also less likely to comply, but trust is only part of the reason. As a British study reveals, those less able to afford compliance are, not surprisingly, less likely to comply, and as the U.S. data show, some people hesitate to get vaccinated out of fear of losing work time and, thus, pay.<sup>24</sup>

The source and content of the message also matter: They can resonate with the social norms of the group, or not; and alleviate the group's reasons for dis-



trusting government, or not. Some of the most compelling work on this question comes from studies of the mobilization of religious practices in the control of smallpox and Ebola. For example, in her study of the variation to the uptake of the smallpox vaccine in China and India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, political scientist Prerna Singh uncovered profound distrust of anything that came from the colonizers. However, China employed messengers – and messages – that resonated with its culture, thus essentially ending smallpox. India did not effectively eradicate the disease until the 1970s, when local religious leaders joined the effort.<sup>25</sup> In these studies of earlier vaccines, as well as in the present case, it is becoming very clear that community engagement in how to handle public health mandates and recommendations is an important component of securing willing compliance.<sup>26</sup>

COVID vaccination uptake in the United States is the story of an objectively trustworthy federal government facing disbelief and distrust in its messaging by at least some of the population. A recent study reveals that vaccine-hesitant Republicans are likely to take positive cues from Republican elites, but to harden their opposition to cues from Democratic elites.<sup>27</sup> One cross-country analysis suggests that when the government leader's policies are put in terms of the harms noncompliance would cause, trust in the leader decreases. Framing the policies in terms of benefits enhances trust in the leader.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, compliance increases when the message comes from more trusted local sources, be they municipal governments, religious leaders, pharmacists, or one's own doctors.<sup>29</sup>

Some of the most interesting observations appear in the COVID States Projects series, one of which examines decisions about vaccination and masking among the U.S. population. Using online surveys that include both open-ended and close-ended questions, the authors found that 67 percent of the respondents were vaccinated, 15 percent were unvaccinated but “willing,” and 18 percent were both unvaccinated and “resistant.”<sup>30</sup> Focusing on the unvaccinated, they found that the major reasons had largely to do with perceptions of risk, often reflecting lack of good communication more than misinformation. Also significant, though not nearly to the same degree, was distrust of various institutions, agencies, and actors who were critical to the creation and delivery of the vaccine. These results get further confirmation in a later study in the series, in which the authors analyze groups who choose not to wear masks.<sup>31</sup> This report also confirms the argument that the messenger matters. Indeed, the data shown in Figure 3 suggest that there may not be a widespread distrust in science per se, but a lack of confidence, particularly (but not only) among the unvaccinated, in agencies and agents of governments interpreting and applying science.<sup>32</sup>

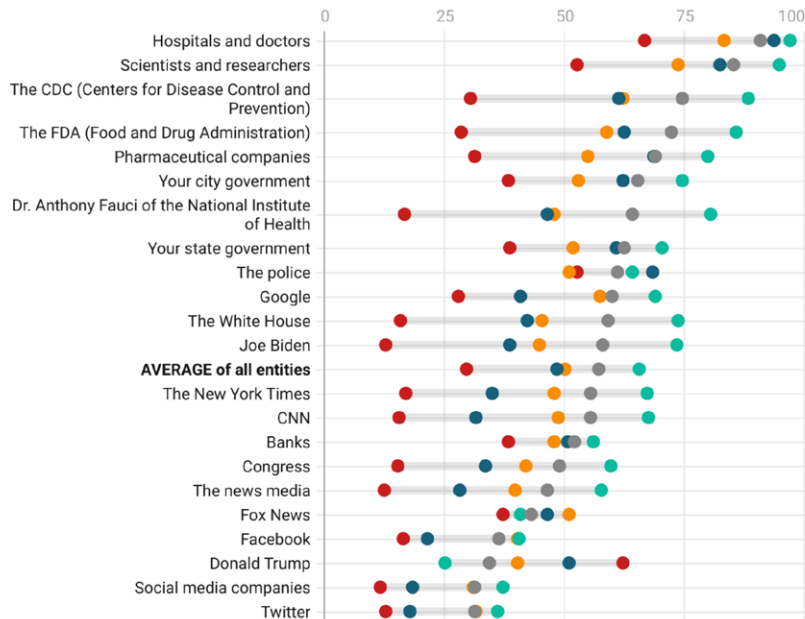
When democratic governments move toward mandating vaccinations and lockdowns, the question becomes whether the public reacts positively or negatively to legal requirements. Mandating vaccinations could crowd out voluntary com-

Figure 3

Trust in Handling the Coronavirus Pandemic by Vaccination Status and Mask Use

**Percent of people who said "A lot" or "some" in response to the following question:**  
*How much do you trust the following people and organizations to do the right thing to best handle the current coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?*

● Full sample ● Not vaccinated, not wearing masks ● Not vaccinated, wearing masks ● Vaccinated, not wearing masks ● Vaccinated, wearing masks



National sample, N = 21079, Time period: 08/26/2021-09/27/2021

Source: Anjuli Shere, Kristin Lunz Trujillo, Alexi Quintana, et al., “The COVID States Project #67: Who Are the Masked Unvaccinated and the Unmasked Vaccinated?” The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public’s Policy Preferences across States, October 15, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/4cr7a>.

pliance among many who would otherwise be willing to get vaccinated.<sup>33</sup> However, the most recent evidence suggests that, at least in the United States, a mandate can enhance vaccine uptake by those who were hesitant rather than resistant.<sup>34</sup>

Cross-national and cross-regional data reveal that the objective effectiveness and capacity of government positively correlate with compliance with COVID requirements.<sup>35</sup> However, effectiveness is but should not be the only basis for trustworthiness. There is also procedural fairness and, as I will argue and as the evidence on COVID reveals, engagement of various communities. So, there is a lot left to learn from the pandemic experience.

There is also a lot we have learned: most importantly, perhaps, how different subpopulations need distinctive messages from authorities they find credible and who listen to requests and concerns expressed by the subgroup members.

Democracies fail to be perceived as trustworthy by some of their crucial publics when there is inadequate institutional attention to the many groups that constitute those democracies. Yes, most democracies guarantee minority rights and recognize the varied demands of multiple races, ethnicities, and creeds. But how we recognize those demands comes up against the standard of universalism, a defining quality of rule of law and of liberal democracies. Democratic polities still hold high the value of treating all citizens the same, *ceteris paribus*. The vote count, the law, and many bureaucratic regulations are based on universalistic principles, even if not always implemented universalistically. Yet, in considering something like social distancing, perhaps rules need to be better tailored to varying contexts. Rural populations are not the same as urban, and poor people have different problems than the rich. Many public policies do indeed tailor policies and implementation to the needs and norms of particular constituencies, but with COVID – as in many other cases – the starting point lacked nuance. Universalism is not the same as uniform treatment.

The introduction of the principle of impartial government was a corrective to the corruption and favoritism that long pervaded American democracy.<sup>36</sup> In the nineteenth and even much of the twentieth centuries, nearly all high-income capitalist democracies suffered from significant corruption and discriminatory practices that infused their courts, legislatures, executives, and bureaucracies, among other institutions.<sup>37</sup> Although the low-scale and petty corruption of political machines has been virtually obliterated (versus bribes by big companies or campaign contributors, let alone the “big lie”), discriminatory practices still persist. However, the corrective introduced new problems that themselves now require correction: impartial bureaucratic and technocratic decision-making and implementation became an excuse for indifference and a way to ignore difference.

Indeed, many bureaucratic agencies appear to interpret universalistic principles as one-size-fits-all. As a member of the Societal Expert Advisory Network of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, I was struck in some of our earlier meetings by how many of the public health experts believed a single top-down communication by experts would work generally.<sup>38</sup> As policymakers and experts soon realized – and as this essay documents – different publics need distinctly different messages and messengers.<sup>39</sup>

But the recognition that universalism does not always require uniform policy also increases already existing tensions in the creation and maintenance of trustworthy government. Whether in the form of affirmative action or school choice or lockdown exceptions, distinctions may introduce new bases for mistrust by those who feel the programs create inequities. And a process that permits engage-

ment by affected communities may lead to reductions in effectiveness in some domains in order to respect community norms. For example, the outsourcing of certain welfare and education functions to nonprofits and religious institutions in the United States made some groups happier and perhaps even better off, but it increased disparities and lowered standards of service overall.<sup>40</sup>

The research as well as our recent experience with COVID produce yet another finding or, perhaps, a reminder. When a policy depends on the most up-to-date science, military intelligence, or other expertise, too much trust of experts can lead to tragic mistakes – à la the war in Iraq or the deadline for the withdrawal from Afghanistan – and too little trust can lead to populations resisting what might save their lives – à la vaccines for COVID. As with so much of life, we need to find the balance.

William H. Smyth, a California engineer, invented the word *technocracy* in 1919 to describe “the rule of the people made effective through the agency of their servants, the scientists and engineers.”<sup>41</sup> Inspired by Edward Bellamy, Thorstein Veblen, and others who were eager to design a better world and government, as well as by the ideas of the scientific management school of Fredrick Taylor, there developed a belief that reliance on experts would lead to socially optimal outcomes.<sup>42</sup> But that logic followed from three fundamental and mistaken assumptions that persist today. The first is that individuals, albeit rational in many ways, always make decisions based on the best evidence and strategy for their personal self-interest. The second is that experts can adequately forecast problems, despite the complexity of both the world and the problems. The third is that understanding of issues in one domain is necessarily transferable to another.

The disarray and polarization in so many democratic polities serve as a wake-up call that a democratic government has a responsibility not only to enact policies but to enhance social solidarity among the citizens, even those distrustful of each other. The experience of COVID in the United States is an example of how *not* to do this. One would have hoped that COVID would bring the polity together, the way wars and natural disasters often do. It had the reverse effect, amplifying preexisting divisions and perhaps creating new ones. This effect was, in part, because sharp partisan divides fueled mistrust of the political leadership, whether President Trump or President Biden. But there is no question that the Trump administration fumbled the initial response and undermined the credibility of its own agencies that had been designed to be apolitical. Trump illustrates the case of elected politicians not only mistrusting the government apparatus but ensuring their constituents did as well.

**I**f properly designed and managed according to norms of fairness, the best governments meet their obligations while assisting citizens to define and meet theirs. Governments can do this through a set of participatory democratic in-

stitutional arrangements that enable people to gain, elicit, and challenge information, and thus develop realistic beliefs about the world and their own ability to act in it. Such a government elicits an expanded and inclusive community of fate whose members are willing to make sacrifices on behalf of those with whom they believe their destinies, and their descendants' destinies, are entwined, even distant strangers who can never directly reciprocate.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, there will be disagreements and conflicts, but these can be civil and lead to compromises that make everyone better off.

To build an expanded and inclusive community of fate requires adequate recognition and incorporation of diversity in its myriad forms.<sup>44</sup> In practice, that means developing empathy for those who seem different. Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild's application of the metaphor of standing in line patiently waiting might be appropriate to a world of limited resources and relative stability. But as COVID and climate change both make clear, the better analogy may be that we are all confronting natural disasters that could hit us at any moment, but each of our communities faces different threats (floods, droughts, disease, hurricanes, earthquakes) with variable impacts. While we all know for sure that something will affect us sooner or later, we have no certainty about exactly where and when and to what degree. Each of these disasters requires remedial resources beyond either individual or local capacities; we are interdependent. All of us must be ready both to protect ourselves and to help those who are directly in harm's way with our own contributions.

But as COVID and natural disasters reveal, such efforts will not be enough. Our responsibility as citizens of a democracy requires us to engage in establishing a government capable of effective and fair intervention, a competent and trustworthy government that has built the infrastructure, physical and social, that allows us to respond rapidly and to good effect. Democratic citizenship carries the additional responsibility of holding the government accountable, ensuring it will be there to do its part for the common weal. We must reestablish the virtuous cycle of government and our belief in its trustworthiness.

If there is one takeaway from the overview of efforts to evoke citizen compliance in a democracy, it is that one size does not fit all. There are multiple reasons for the lack of behavioral consent with recommendations and mandates. We are only relearning the lesson that in highly pluralistic and democratic societies, trustworthy institutions must be built upon the variety of contexts and understandings that constitute the populace. There is not one public, but many. Respecting differences while building the capacities of people to engage productively with each other and with government can transform mistrust of each other and our institutions into trust – or at least tolerance.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of the virtuous circle appeared in Margaret Levi, Audrey Sacks, and Tom R. Tyler, "Conceptualizing Legitimacy, Measuring Legitimizing Beliefs," *American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (3) (2009): 354–375, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764209338797>; and Margaret Levi and Audrey Sacks, "Legitimizing Beliefs: Concepts and Measures," *Regulation & Governance* 3 (4) (2009): 311–333, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5991.2009.01066.x>.
- <sup>2</sup> Autocracies may also try to evoke willing compliance, of course. It lowers transaction costs of enforcement by reducing the need for coercion. However, democracies are built on concepts of citizen consent. Although what *consent* means in theory and in practice is subject to continuing debate, it is nonetheless a fundamental basis of democracy.
- <sup>3</sup> Margaret Levi, "Trustworthy Government, Legitimizing Beliefs," in *NOMOS* 61 (2019): 362–384, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26786321>.
- <sup>4</sup> World Justice Project, "World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2021," <https://worldjusticeproject.org/our-work/research-and-data/wjp-rule-law-index-2021> (accessed September 15, 2022). For details on the ranking of the criminal justice system in the United States, see Factor 8 of the "World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2021," <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/country/2021/United%20States/Criminal%20Justice>.
- <sup>5</sup> For example, Pippa Norris, *In Praise of Skepticism: Trust but Verify* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).
- <sup>6</sup> I thank Roy Bahat for helping me to formulate the issues in this way.
- <sup>7</sup> Karen Cook, Russell Hardin, and Margaret Levi, *Cooperation Without Trust?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005).

- <sup>8</sup> This example is drawn from Margaret Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- <sup>9</sup> On Iraq, see “Public Attitudes Toward the War in Iraq: 2003–2008,” Pew Research Center, March 19, 2008, <https://www.pewresearch.org/2008/03/19/public-attitudes-toward-the-war-in-iraq-20032008>. On Afghanistan, see Anna Shortridge, “The U.S. War in Afghanistan Twenty Years On: Public Opinion Then and Now,” *The Water’s Edge* (blog), Council on Foreign Relations, October 7, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/us-war-afghanistan-twenty-years-public-opinion-then-and-now>.
- <sup>10</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985).
- <sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this debate, see Federica Carugati and Margaret Levi, *A Moral Political Economy: Present, Past, and Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
- <sup>12</sup> There are numerous accounts, popular and scholarly, revealing how some members of the Republican Party and various antigovernment groups have deliberately worked to undermine confidence in government by “weaponizing distrust.” See, for example, Amy Fried and Douglas B. Harris, *At War with Government: How Conservatives Weaponized Distrust from Goldwater to Trump* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021). Others document delegitimation, which involves instilling the belief that government is not worthy of support. See, for example, Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum, *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019). On growing distrust in scientific authorities, see Andrew Jewett, “How Americans Came to Distrust Science,” *Boston Review*, December 8, 2020, <https://bostonreview.net/science-nature/andrew-jewett-how-americans-came-distrust-science>.
- <sup>13</sup> Tom R. Tyler, *Why People Obey the Law* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990); Tom R. Tyler and Yuen J. Huo, *Trust in the Law: Encouraging Public Cooperation with the Police and Courts* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002); Ernst Fehr and Klaus M. Schmidt, “A Theory of Fairness, Competition, and Cooperation,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114 (3) (1999): 817–868, <https://doi.org/10.1162/003355399556151>; Ernst Fehr and Klaus M. Schmidt, “The Economics of Fairness, Reciprocity and Altruism—Experimental Evidence and New Theories,” in *Handbook of the Economics of Giving, Altruism, and Reciprocity*, Volume 1, ed. Serge-Christophe Kolm and Jean Mercier Ythier (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2006); and Samuel Bowles, *The Moral Economy: Why Good Incentives Are No Substitute for Good Citizens* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016).
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016); and Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018).
- <sup>15</sup> Heather C. McGhee, *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* (New York: One World, 2021); Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can’t Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013); and Kojii Takahashi and Hakeem Jefferson, “When the Powerful Feel Voiceless: White Identity and Feelings of Racial Voicelessness,” PsyArXiv Preprints, February 4, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/ry97q>.
- <sup>16</sup> The zero-sum viewpoint is well argued and documented by McGhee, *The Sum of Us*. The metaphor about following rules was popularized by Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers*

*in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

- <sup>17</sup> For an analysis and comprehensive reading of the surveys on trust in government, especially in the United States, see Jack Citrin and Laura Stoker, “Political Trust in a Cynical Age,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (1) (2018): 49–70, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050316-092550>.
- <sup>18</sup> See Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1962); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold Story of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006); and Chloe N. Thurston, *At the Boundaries of Homeownership: Credit, Discrimination, and the American State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- <sup>19</sup> John O’Leary, Sushumna Agarwal, and Angela Welle, “Improving Trust in State and Local Government: Insights from Data,” *Deloitte Insights*, September 21, 2021, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/trust-in-state-local-government.html>.
- <sup>20</sup> Citrin and Stoker, “Political Trust in a Cynical Age;” Bo Rothstein, *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); and Margaret Levi and Laura Stoker, “Political Trust and Trustworthiness,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (1) (2000): 457–507, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475>.
- <sup>21</sup> Margaret Levi, *Of Rule and Revenue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
- <sup>22</sup> See, for example, Pauline Jones, Anil Menon, Allen Hicken, and Laura S. Rozek, “Global Adoption of Personal and Social Mitigation Behaviors during COVID-19: The Role of Trust and Confidence,” *PLOS ONE* 16 (9) (2021): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256159>.
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, Guy Grossman, Soojong Kim, Jonah M. Rexer, and Harsha Thirumurthy, “Political Partisanship Influences Behavioral Responses to Governors’ Recommendations for COVID-19 Prevention in the United States,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117 (39) (2020): 24144–24153, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2007835117>; and Christopher Adolph, Kenya Amano, Bree Bang-Jensen, et al., “Pandemic Politics: Timing State-Level Social Distancing Responses to COVID-19,” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 46 (2) (2021): 211–233, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03616878-8802162>.
- <sup>24</sup> In the United Kingdom: Christina Atchison, Leigh Robert Bowman, Charlotte Vrinten, et al., “Early Perceptions and Behavioural Responses during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Survey of UK Adults,” *BMJ Open* 11 (1) (2021): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-043577>. And in the United States: Ata Uslu, David Lazer, Roy Perils, et al., “The COVID States Project #63: The Decision to Not Get Vaccinated, from the Perspective of the Unvaccinated,” The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public’s Policy Preferences across States, September 16, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/fazup>.
- <sup>25</sup> Prerna Singh, “State, Society, and Vaccines,” filmed July 2021 at The Long Now Foundation for “Seminars about Long-Term Thinking,” San Francisco, video, <https://longnow.org/seminars/02021/jul/27/state-society-and-vaccines>. At the end of this webcast, Singh talks with Dr. Larry Brilliant, who worked with religious communities in India to help finally eradicate smallpox in India in the twentieth century. Larry Brilliant, *Sometimes Brilliant: The Impossible Adventure of a Spiritual Seeker and Visionary Physician*



- Who Helped Conquer the Worst Disease in History* (New York: Harper One, 2016). In the same vein, one of the most important ways in reducing the Ebola outbreak in West Africa was finding an anthropological approach, rather than a disease-centered one, so people could bury their dead and not get sick. Sharon Abramowitz, "Epidemics (Especially Ebola)," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 46 (1) (2017): 421–445, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102116-041616>.
- <sup>26</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Strategies for Building Confidence in the COVID-19 Vaccines* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.17226/26068>. See also John H. Tibbets, "How to Convince People to Accept a COVID-19 Vaccine," *Knowable Magazine*, March 31, 2021, <https://knowablemagazine.org/article/health-disease/2021/how-to-convince-people-to-accept-covid19-vaccine>.
- <sup>27</sup> Sophia L. Pink, James Chu, James N. Druckman, et al., "Elite Party Cues Increase Vaccination Intentions among Republicans," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 (32) (2021): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2106559118>.
- <sup>28</sup> Jim A. C. Everett, Clara Colombatto, Edmond Awad, et al., "Moral Dilemmas and Trust in Leaders during a Global Health Crisis," *Nature Human Behaviour* 5 (8) (2021): 1074–1088, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01156-y>.
- <sup>29</sup> This compliance holds in the United States. See, for example, James Chu, Sophia L. Pink, and Robb Willer, "Religious Identity Cues Increase Vaccination Intentions and Trust in Medical Experts among American Christians," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 (49) (2021): 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2106481118>. It also seems to be the case in Japan. Yasue Fukuda, Shuji Ando, and Koji Fukuda, "Knowledge and Preventive Actions toward COVID-19, Vaccination Intent, and Health Literacy among Educators in Japan: An Online Survey," *PLOS ONE* 16 (9) (2021): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0257552>.
- <sup>30</sup> Uslu et al., "The COVID States Project #63."
- <sup>31</sup> Anjali Shere, Kristin Lunz Trujillo, Alexi Quintana, et al., "The COVID States Project #67: Who Are the Masked Unvaccinated and the Unmasked Vaccinated?" The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences across States, October 15, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/4cr7a>.
- <sup>32</sup> Some research shows that confidence in science and scientists was a major driving force behind compliance with nonpharmaceutical interventions in 2020. Yann Algan, Daniel Cohen, Eva Davoine, et al., "Trust in Scientists in Times of Pandemic: Panel Evidence from 12 Countries," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 (40) (2021): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2108576118>. Others find that trust in science and scientists tends to be the dominant attitude, but can vary considerably given understanding of the scientific process. Jon Agle and Yunyu Xiao, "Misinformation about COVID-19: Evidence for Differential Latent Profiles and a Strong Association with Trust in Science," *BMC Public Health* 21 (1) (2021): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-10103-x>.
- <sup>33</sup> Katrin Schmelz and Samuel Bowles, "Overcoming COVID-19 Vaccination Resistance When Alternative Policies Affect the Dynamics of Conformism, Social Norms, and Crowding Out," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118 (25) (2021): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2104912118>; and Katrin Schmelz, "Enforcement May Crowd Out Voluntary Support for COVID-19 Policies, Especially Where Trust in Government Is Weak and in a Liberal Society," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*

- 118 (1) (2021): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2016385118>. My own research on military service suggests a mandate in the form of conscription can increase both compliance and resistance in various forms. Levi, *Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism*.
- <sup>34</sup> Zeynep Tufekci, “The Unvaccinated May Not Be Who You Think,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/15/opinion/covid-vaccines-unvaccinated.html>.
- <sup>35</sup> Thomas Hale, Noam Angrist, Andrew J. Hale, et al., “Government Responses and COVID-19 Deaths: Global Evidence across Multiple Pandemic Waves,” *PLOS ONE* 16 (7) (2021): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0253116>.
- <sup>36</sup> Max Weber put forward the standard of dispassionate bureaucrats; they are to act *sine ira et studio*. See his chapter “Bureaucracy,” in Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster, 1968). For an account of the rise and importance of impartial government, see Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- <sup>37</sup> Should documentation be needed, the literature is rich and cross-national. See, for example, Mariano-Florentino Cuéllar, Margaret Levi, and Barry Weingast, “Twentieth-Century America as a Developing Country: Conflict, Institutions, and the Evolution of Public Law,” *Harvard Journal on Legislation* 57 (1) (2020): 25–65, [https://harvardjole.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2020/05/M.F-Cuellar-M.-Levi-B.-Weingast\\_America-as-a-Developing-Country.pdf](https://harvardjole.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2020/05/M.F-Cuellar-M.-Levi-B.-Weingast_America-as-a-Developing-Country.pdf); Ben Ansell and David Samuels, *Inequality and Democratization: An Elite-Competition Approach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Eric Schickler, *Racial Realignment: The Transformation of American Liberalism, 1932 – 1965* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016); Bo Rothstein, *Just Institutions Matter: The Moral and Political Logic of the Universal Welfare State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and Rothstein, *The Quality of Government*.
- <sup>38</sup> “About: Societal Experts Action Network,” National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, <https://www.nationalacademies.org/our-work/societal-experts-action-network> (accessed September 16, 2022).
- <sup>39</sup> Emily K. Brunson, Alison Bутtenheim, Saad Omer, and Sandra Crouse Quinn, *Strategies for Building Confidence in the COVID-19 Vaccines* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.17226/26068>.
- <sup>40</sup> Steven Rathgeb Smith and Michael Lipsky, *Nonprofits for Hire: The Welfare State in the Age of Contracting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
- <sup>41</sup> Barry Jones, *Sleepers, Wake! Technology and the Future of Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 214.
- <sup>42</sup> E. Glen Weyl, “Why I Am Not a Technocrat,” RxC Media (blog), RadicalxChange, August 19, 2019, <https://www.radicalxchange.org/media/blog/2019-08-19-bv61r6>.
- <sup>43</sup> See Margaret Levi, “An Expanded Community of Fate,” *Noema*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.noemamag.com/an-expanded-community-of-fate>; and John S. Ahlquist and Margaret Levi, *In the Interest of Others: Organizations and Social Activism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).
- <sup>44</sup> See, for example, Danielle S. Allen and Rohini Somanathan, ed., *Difference without Domination: Pursuing Justice in Diverse Democracies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press,

2020); Maureen A. Craig, J. M. Rucker, and Jennifer A. Richeson, “The Pitfalls and Promise of Increasing Racial Diversity: Threat, Contact, and Race Relations in the 21st Century,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 27 (3) (2018): 188–193; Jennifer A. Richeson, “The Paradox of Diversity,” Mamie Phipps Clark & Kenneth B. Clark Distinguished Lecture, Columbia University, New York, April 17, 2019; and Scott E. Page, *Diversity and Complexity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011). There is considerable work in this area, and these sources represent but the tip of a large iceberg.