IDEAS

We've Been Thinking About America's Trust Collapse All Wrong

Trust isn't something that emerges naturally from a well-functioning society; people have to build it through hard work.

By Jedediah Britton-Purdy

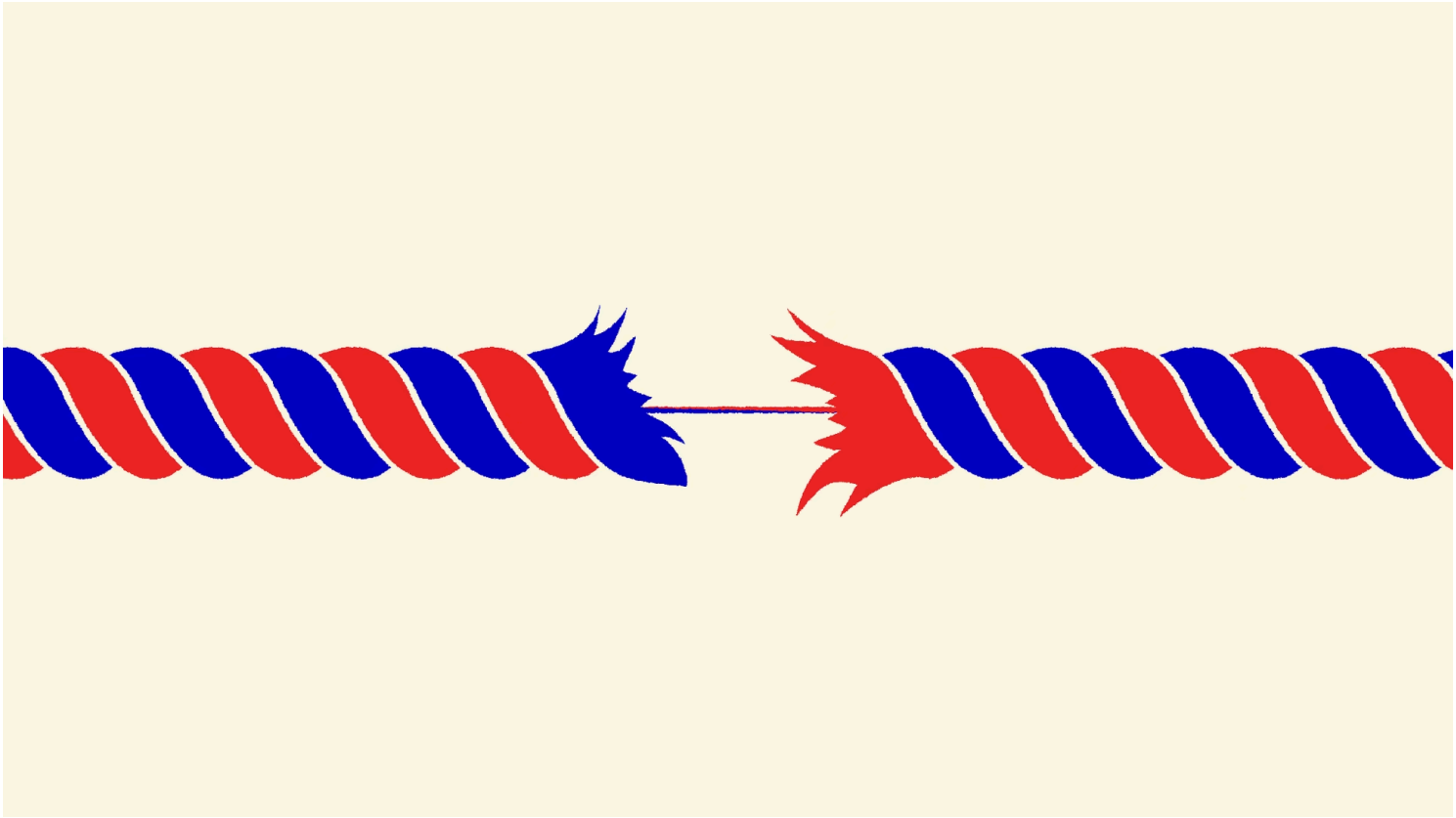
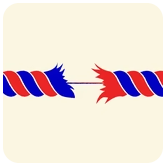


Illustration by The Atlantic. Source: Getty.

JANUARY 8, 2024

SHARE AS GIFT SAVE



Listen

0:00

- 1.0x +

20:06

Produced by ElevenLabs and News Over Audio (Noa) using AI narration. Listen to more stories on the Noa app.

This article was featured in the One Story to Read Today newsletter. Sign up for it here.

Americans don't trust one another, and they don't trust the government. This mistrust is so pervasive that it can feel natural, but it isn't. Profound distrust has risen within my lifetime; it is intensifying, and it threatens to make democracy impossible.

Many readers will say, "Of course I don't trust the candidate who tried to steal the last election, or the party that supports him!" And they would be right to do so. Election denialism, political violence, and a willingness to resort to anticonstitutional measures to take or hold power are all acute threats to democracy, and they are concentrated in Donald Trump's Republican Party.

But there are also chronic threats to democracy. They are not limited to one party, let alone one leader. They affect us all, and they make the acute threats more dangerous

and harder to overcome.

To have any hope of rebuilding democratic trust, we will need two things that have been neglected for decades in American life. One is civic virtue—serious and respectful engagement in the hard work of living with disagreement and difference. The other is a radical commitment to building a social world where trust comes more readily.

The past half century has brought a collapse in Americans' trust in one another and their government. In 1972, more than 45 percent of Americans said that most people are trustworthy. Since 2006, the number has been barely more than 30 percent. Young respondents are particularly mistrustful: In 2019, 73 percent of those under 30 agreed that "most of the time, people just look out for themselves," and almost as many said, "Most people would take advantage of you if they got the chance."

Eliot Cohen: When leaders fail

Trust in government has taken an even greater hit. In 1964, 77 percent of Americans trusted the federal government to do the right thing most or all of the time. In 2022, that number was 22 percent, and it has been languishing in that neighborhood since 2010. In 1973, amid riots, domestic terrorism, the Watergate scandal, and clashes over the Vietnam War, majorities trusted Congress, the presidency, and the Supreme Court. Majorities (in many cases substantial ones) mistrust all of those institutions now. Trust in newspapers and public schools has traveled the same trajectory.

Put these trends together, and Americans are saying that being governed by other Americans is intolerable. Why would you submit to institutions you don't trust, run by people you don't trust? Why would you trust any institution run by people who would take advantage of you if they had the chance? As the 2020 presidential election approached, about 90 percent of each candidate's supporters said that if the other guy won, he would do lasting damage to the country. Turnout in 2020 was the highest

since 1900, but the motive was fear more than hope—total mobilization to keep the other side out of power.

All-pervading mistrust fosters overheated politics, in which everything is at stake but little is accomplished, because so much of the effort is defensive. It also encourages constitutional crisis: If the other side is morally unacceptable and dangerous, supporting extreme efforts to keep it out of power becomes more plausible. The collapse of trust encourages, even if it does not ensure, a collapse of democracy.

Democracy places a unique demand on trust. The usual measures of trust, which ask whether we trust other people and institutions to do the right thing, assume a morally static world: We know the right thing to do, and the question is whether a neighbor, stranger, or public official will do it. But democracy matters most, and is most difficult, when citizens decide to change course morally. The New Deal, the Voting Rights and Civil Rights Acts, the revolution in environmental laws in the 1970s—they all succeeded as far as they did because they were democratic choices to live by different values. That kind of progress means putting our futures in one another's hands.

Destabilizing levels of mistrust feel natural, even morally required, because the world has fractured. As everyone now

more or less understands, people get their news from different places, with different facts (or "facts") and very different moral narratives—crises at the border or concerning the climate, threats from woke universities or from the resurgent extreme right.

Investors Have Been Making the Same Mistake for 300 Years

THOMAS LEVENSON

Companies Want Remote Workers in All States but 1

SAAHIL DESAI

The Con Man Who Became a True-Crime Writer

RACHEL MONROE

Here we get a deeper picture of trust, one that is in some ways even more disturbing. Despite what the statistics about "declining trust" suggest, there is no on–off binary in which we either do or don't trust. Trust is not like running, or drinking coffee, so that you could say, "I am not trusting today." It is like breathing. The question is not whether you trust, but where.

Only through trust can anyone ever know much of anything. Almost all of what anyone treats as knowledge is not part of their own experience, but the upshot of a social process—reporting, teaching, research, gossip—that they have decided to trust. I don't personally know that Antarctica exists, that my vaccine works, or how many votes were cast for each candidate in 2020, and except for Antarctica, which requires only a long journey at great expense to verify, those facts are basically impossible for me to observe. When I say I know them, I mean I trust the way they came to me. I trust those who told me, and I trust how they learned what they say they know.

Kimberly Wehle: The Colorado Supreme Court decision is true originalism

This point, that most knowledge is indirect and social, might have seemed a philosopher's conceit just a few decades ago. Yes, René Descartes pointed out that our lives might be illusions woven by an evil demon, and David Hume observed that just because bread tastes good today, that's no guarantee it won't poison you tomorrow. (Both examples have pretty clear applications to vaccine conspiracy theories.) But so what? The sun rose every day, the trains ran on time, and Walter Cronkite came on at 6:30.

That complacency was the privilege of an invisible consensus, in which most people's trust was, so to speak, facing in the same direction. Those who believe Trump's stolen-election fables or anti-vax theories are not refusing to trust: They are trusting some other mix of reporting, research, teaching, and gossip. The polls showing collapsing trust in "newspapers" or "television news" don't really show a decline in trust; they show a fragmentation, trust displaced. But from the perspective of a democracy that relies on a common set of facts, acute fragmentation might as well be a collapse.

Some—probably a lot—of the fracture comes from social media and, before it, the rise of partisan cable and talk radio. (There is inevitably a lot of conjecture in saying what causes what in huge, interwoven changes. Let me know if you find a large and fiercely divided democracy *without* social media to serve as a control in this experiment.) Some of the fracture comes from social segregation: Liberals live in liberal neighborhoods, conservatives among conservatives, and education, which sorts people into workplaces, now closely tracks politics. I have worked on construction crews and university faculties, and (although my construction experience is getting out-of-date), there is a good deal less political variation in either workplace today than when I started. In addition, some of the fracture appears to be internal to politics: As

the other side seems more alarming, partisans react by lining up their own opinions—about Ukraine, vaccination, immigration, whether universities are good or bad—on the side of angels.

Other, more tectonic shifts are also under way. Social trust may take some support from a kind of *world trust*, a gut-level belief that things hold together and make good-enough sense, and that the past is a workable guide to the future. Our world trust is shaken. Consider the climate emergency. In 1946, in the aftermath of a desperate and devastating war, looking at a future shadowed by totalitarianism, George Orwell wrote about the pleasures of watching toads in April: "Spring is still spring. The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it." If only. Next year, spring may be summer, and summer may be fire season not just in Oregon, but in New York and Washington, D.C.

And is "Thoughts on the Common Toad" really a George Orwell essay from 1946, or did I ask ChatGPT to produce a vernal eulogy in the style of George Orwell? As it happens, it is real. But both our physical, ecological, climatic world and our communicative world of words and images are now uncertain, shifting, shimmering uncannily between what is solid and reliable and what is ontological and epistemic

quicksand. Never mind whether you can trust what other people will do. Can you trust them to *be* other people at all?

So democracy today needs people to build a trust that can survive punishing conditions. It's no good to pine for the pre-internet world (which had plenty of problems), let alone the pre-climate-change world. And, just as tricky, what we need is not *more* trust exactly, but *healthier* trust, which, somewhat paradoxically, includes skepticism—skepticism toward those who haven't earned our trust. Trust and skepticism, if not cynicism, are two sides of a delicate balance. The goal is not some kind of harmonious community, but for citizens of an intensely diverse country to be able to coexist in a time when our problems need political solutions; not to love one another, but to get along enough to wrestle with climate change, immigration, public safety, child care, budget deficits, war—together.

What are steps toward healthier trust? Americans need ways to see one another more charitably and also to see politics more clearly. Every partisan knows the sense of threat that today's political environment can trigger—seeing a car with a bumper sticker from the other side cut in front of you in traffic, stopping for gas somewhere you suspect everyone is on the hostile team, feeling your way through a first conversation with a dozen political trip wires. Ironically, it is impossible to practice politics if we reduce one another to our partisan identities. We need to practice nondefensively meeting serious disagreement—and proceeding to the rest of the human being.

Russell Berman: Political accountability isn't dead yet

If we need to see one another more charitably, we also need to see politics a little more cynically, as an inoculation against a deeper despair. To practice politics maturely means accepting that our everyday moral judgments will not guide us in politics as surely as they do in person. A lot of political anathema takes the form of hating hypocrisy: Democrats say one thing but do another, and so do Republicans. Hating hypocrisy is natural, and in everyday life it may be a good guide to judging whom we should treat warily. But in politics, a gap between rhetoric and action is endemic, and

because we can't do without politics, we must learn to tolerate some of what will feel like hypocrisy. Politics isn't amoral—quite the opposite—but its morality is more complex than the interpersonal kind that is everyone's first ethical language. If we look for hypocrisy in politics, we will always find it, so treating it as fatal means death to political trust.

Another distinction between personal and political trust that we need to learn involves living with sharp moral disagreement. In our own lives, we may refuse to

mean in our family. (I don't mean that this is necessarily the right approach, and we may lose something when we cut ourselves off from challenge in this way, but the decision is an intelligible one.) But politics is *about* coexistence with disagreement around issues as fundamental as these, such as abortion. If we treat moral disagreement as proof of moral badness and as a reason, effectively, to cut off civic as well as personal relationships, then politics is done. Politics is a relationship we cannot escape, for better or worse. We can poison it, though, and confusing it with personal relationships that we *can* refuse or leave is one way of poisoning it.

There are also structural ways to make trust less elusive. We should seek policies that make life feel less shifty and treacherous. One step would be a flat ban on AI-generated content and other such technology in advertising and sales. A sweeping

moratorium on commercial uses of AI, or even AI development, would be more dramatic and, although harder to achieve, maybe more effective. Let's not go into Descartes' nightmare, updated as the Matrix, just because some code writers think they can build it and venture capitalists think they can use it to sell us things.

We can also change the rules of daily life in more old-fashioned ways. Take the workplace. Where do young people get the sense that others will take advantage of you if they can? Partly online no doubt, but also in their life—not least at work, where many of us spend the best hours of our best years. It isn't mysterious, really, that a very mistrustful generation is also the one pushing to unionize workplaces. And those organizing efforts also involve trust, in the form of solidarity among workers. The level of trust that it took for 8,700 Ford workers in Louisville to walk out of the Kentucky Truck plant on October 11, 2023, hours after a phone call from United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain, gives the lie to any facile idea that Americans are incapable of trust. In those efforts, workers risk their job together on little more than a promise of solidarity. They have to trust one another and their elected leaders intensely. And they want to hold their bosses accountable, which is to say, make them more worthy of a healthy trust. We should recognize that having more control and responsibility—feeling more like democratic citizens—at work is part of rebuilding trust, and that some kinds of conflict, including strikes, can build valuable interpersonal trust and contribute to making institutions more trustworthy.

The workplace is a microcosm of an economy where workers and many middle-class families have seen stagnation and increasing insecurity for 50 years, and fewer parents are optimistic about their children's prospects. Economic stress is an important reason that Trump might win reelection. Beyond 2024, it's also a lesson that the country is set up to benefit other people who don't care about you. Countries with lower levels of economic inequality tend to have higher levels of social trust, and individuals with less money tend to be less trusting. Rebuilding a middle-class economy is a way to buttress democratic trust.

Policy can also connect people across lines of ideological mistrust. Moves in federal and state government to hire workers without college degrees press back a little against the occupational and educational segregation that foster partisan bubbles. Colleges and universities can put people with very different perspectives into the same dormitories and classrooms, which may mean thinking about economic and regional diversity and conducting affirmative outreach to communities that have lost trust in higher education. And that old idealistic favorite, universal national service, is still worth trying to achieve. Nothing builds trust more successfully than doing important work with people who might otherwise be worrisome strangers.

David A. Graham: America's peace wave

Each of us can also develop practices to modulate our own balance of trust and skepticism, and gently push others to do the same. Every setting is different—family, religious community, volunteering, the workplace. My job is teaching, and although a liberal is not supposed to say this, too much of what happens in the classroom assumes that everyone there has the same broadly progressive politics, and that only a fool or a jerk would disagree. This is not just a failure to welcome those who don't agree into the conversation, all but guaranteeing that they silently dig in to whatever they already believe. It also lets down students who think of themselves as progressives, who lose the tempering of inconvenient facts, countervailing arguments, the sheer social weight of disagreement, which requires the civic and political work of argument. No one's faith, lived experience, or personal "truth" is exempt from the burdens of conversation. At its best, sustained conversation wins converts in both

directions and, more important, may transform moral horror at someone disagreeing with you into trust that people who disagree can also listen, reflect, and do things together.

Cultivating strong mistrust is a way of giving up on others, a kind of quiet quitting for civic life. I wonder whether we appreciate what we are at risk of giving up. It is unusual to live in a time and place peaceful enough to lead a stable life, free enough that people can set the direction of their future together. Being born into this, none of us did anything to deserve it. But we do get to decide what to do with it. Politically engaged people feel deeply the things that are wrong with the country, and they are right. But anger and reproach are most effective when they come along with a very different set of feelings: gratitude for a country where it remains possible to do better and a sense of responsibility to build up that decent and democratic potential wherever we find it.

We need to shake off the idea that democracy should come naturally. This is a superstition of the enlightened, and it serves us very badly in a time of democratic crisis. As perceptive observers have always understood, democracy is extremely demanding. It requires the qualities of mind and character that sustain a healthy and balanced political trust, such as the willingness to listen to others and to doubt one's own side. It also requires the commitment to build a world of citizens, not just consumers or spectators or even protesters, but people who expect to exercise power

and responsibility together. We will need to take control of our own future before it becomes a present we cannot stand to trust.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jedediah Britton-Purdy

Jedediah Britton-Purdy is a professor at Duke Law School. His books include *After Nature* and *This Land Is Our Land*, and, most recently, *Two Cheers for Politics: Why Democracy Is Flawed, Frightening—and Our Best Hope*.

More Stories
The Constitutional Flaw That's Killing American Democracy
The Concession to Climate Change I Will Not Make