

The Right Bite

There are five maxims the federal government can follow to regain the public confidence it has lost over the past four decades.

BY WILLIAM A. GALSTON

ONE OF THE PUZZLES OF OUR AGE IS WHY AMERICANS distrust their own government so deeply. Against the inescapable and well-publicized cases of failure by the federal government must be weighed a remarkable half-century record of accomplishment. The federal government has cleaned up our air and water, improved safety in the workplace, spurred immense amounts of scientific and medical research, and underwritten technological innovations, such as the computer and the Internet, that have transformed our society. It has dramatically reduced poverty among the elderly while ensuring their access to medical care. It has expanded both individual freedom and social inclusion—for women, racial and ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities, among others. The list goes on. Yet despite this record, trust in the federal government now stands at the lowest level ever recorded. That is not merely a riddle for academicians. Without the public's confidence it becomes ever more difficult for government to do its job effectively.

We might be tempted to seek an explanation in recent failures, such as an unpopular war, economic crisis, and the monumentally botched response to

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Hurricane Katrina. But the decline began long ago. As recently as the mid-1960s, about 70 percent of Americans reported that they trusted the federal government. That number then dropped steadily, with only modest interruptions, before bottoming out at 21 percent in the early 1990s. The peace and prosperity of the Clinton years brought it back up, but only to about 40 percent—little more than half its post-World War II peak. After another rise early in George W. Bush's first term, it has steadily declined and now stands at 17 percent. We are mired, it seems, in a long cycle of diminished trust, decoupled—at least in part—from government's performance. The question is why.

One possibility is that the two decades after World War II are a misleading baseline. Compared with those of other advanced societies, America's public culture is basically antistatist, skeptical at best about concentrated public power. Government's successful response to the Great Depression and the fascist threat shifted the mainstream, this argument goes, but only temporarily. As memories of crisis faded and a generation reached maturity, public sentiment would inevitably have reverted to its deeply rooted default setting, a process accelerated by the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the "Great Inflation" of the 1970s. As Hugh Heclo, a leading scholar of political institutions, puts it, "We are disposed to distrust institutions. That is the basic



The federal government has been blamed for some high-profile bumbles, but to those on a sinking ship no sight is more welcome than the U.S. Coast Guard.

fact of life we share as modern people. . . . We are compelled to live in a thick tangle of institutions while believing that they do not have our best interests at heart.”

While we cannot dismiss this hypothesis out of hand, we must consider that trust in state and local government remained relatively stable even as trust in the federal government plunged. We cannot explain this divergence as a response to the sheer growth of federal activities: By many measures, state and local governments have expanded at least as fast. Nor can it be said that state and local governments are more honest, less self-dealing, or less corrupt. Hecló himself notes that the most logical consequence of America’s quasi-libertarian tradition is skepticism about the federal government, not the cynicism that prevails today. It is the move from skepticism to outright cynicism that needs explaining.

One possibility is that the news media’s turn from supportive to adversarial during the 1970s exacerbated mistrust by bringing to light mistakes and misdeeds in Washington that would have remained hidden in earlier times. There’s something to this, but the withdrawal of public trust was under way well before Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein broke the Watergate story and made investigative journalism fashionable. The public’s response to events—real or perceived—changed the tone of public life and created an opportunity that journalists alertly filled.

The remaining possibility is that something about the qualitative expansion of federal power—about the additional responsibilities the federal government has taken on and the way in which it discharges them—is the reason for its diminished standing. Here there is much to say.

Since the New Deal, Americans have held the fed-

eral government accountable for the performance of the economy. In the quarter-century after World War II, this expanded responsibility seemed unproblematic: The economy grew steadily, with low inflation, and Americans at every income level experienced rising living standards. Among officials and citizens alike, confidence grew that Keynesian economics offered the tools needed to mute the inevitable downturns and spur non-inflationary growth whose fruits would be widely shared. But at the moment that complacency peaked (Richard M. Nixon famously declared that “we are all Keynesians now”), new developments—slower growth, higher inflation, increasing inequality, and threats to U.S. manufacturing supremacy—challenged government competence and eroded public confidence.

At roughly the same time, the elite consensus on fundamentals was breaking down. Liberals and conservatives parted ways on economics and foreign policy, and the duopoly that had kept most racial and cultural issues off the federal government’s agenda gave way to national action and contestation. When combined with government’s expanded reach, rancorous and prolonged disputes among elites further weakened public confidence.

Some have argued that starting with the civil rights and voting rights legislation of the mid-1960s, the federal government’s efforts to advance racial equality led to a withdrawal of trust among white Americans. The facts do not support this view. Whites and blacks expressed trust in the federal government at equal (and high) rates until 1968, after which trust declined more rapidly among blacks than among whites for a number of years before measures for the two groups converged again in the late 1970s. It may well be the case, however, that public controversy over government’s role in race relations exacerbated the decline across the board.

In civil rights and many other areas, expanding government bypassed the tiered constraints of the federal system and established direct links between Washington and localities, or with the people themselves. The federal government not only created new conflicts with mayors and governors but also assumed responsibilities that

often exceeded its ability to act effectively. Although the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 aimed to reduce inequalities between rich and poor districts, the federal government provided less than 10 percent of total funding for the nation’s public schools and had limited authority, at most, to alter local school practices. A gap between promise and performance was inevitable. All too often, the federal government used legislative authorizations to proclaim expansive good intentions while proving unable or unwilling to back up those intentions with commensurate resources.

During the New Deal, a new kind of governance had arisen, as Congress increasingly set only general goals in legislation, leaving it to government agencies to give form and substance to national policies through regulations and other administrative tools. The presidencies of Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon expanded this strategy into a host of new areas, from workplace safety and racial equity to environmental regulation. While yielding some real accomplishments, the new “administrative state,” as political scientists called it, produced unintended harmful consequences. As former Harvard president Derek Bok has argued, federal agencies tended to develop regulations without adequately consulting the people they affected, generating charges that elites and “faceless bureaucrats” were running roughshod over democracy. Litigation surged, slowing the translation of purposes into policy. As agencies with overlapping jurisdictions issued conflicting directives, compliance costs rose. And many citizens experienced regulations—for example, limiting construction on their property to preserve wetlands—as invasions of what they had long considered their personal rights and liberties.

This was but one instance of a more general problem: As government activities ramified through society, interactions between citizens and the federal government multiplied. All too often, in areas ranging from drivers’ licenses and home improvement permits to voter registration, government was slow moving, unresponsive, and maddeningly hard to navigate. Interaction often bred dissatisfaction. As the private sector deployed new technologies to improve customer service, government suffered by comparison.

Even at its best, however, government could not

hope to be as flexible as the private sector at its best can be. In the first place, the exercise of public power requires public authorization, direct or indirect, a process that is bound to be more cumbersome than everyday corporate decision-making. Second, government is committed to norms of procedural fairness that tug against efficiency. This fact reflects Americans' historic aversion to concentrated power as well as a more recent mistrust of unchecked administrative discretion. Public infrastructure projects, for example, now must run a gauntlet of public meetings, environmental impact statements, and multilayered policy reviews that can last for a decade—longer than the entire New Deal era. Unless citizens are prepared to relax their guard, they will have to accept a government that moves more slowly than the private sector in making decisions; implementing, reviewing, and adjusting those decisions; and firing incompetent or redundant employees.

Many of the federal government's new responsibilities strained against the limits of its effectiveness. The key issue, however, turned out to be qualitative, not quantitative. For example, though large and increasingly costly, Social Security proved relatively straightforward to administer: Government collected payroll taxes at a flat rate, kept records of contributions, and made payments to retirees based on a clear formula that left little room for bureaucratic discretion. Every month, the Social Security Administration, with only 62,000 employees, efficiently dispenses billions of dollars in benefits to 55 million Americans. To the extent that it involved more than writing checks, winning the Johnson-era "war on poverty" turned out to be far more difficult. And it proved impossible to honor the new commitment to eliminate racial segregation in public education; residential mobility defeated efforts of bureaucrats and courts to establish and maintain racially balanced jurisdictions.

Citizens' enlarged expectations make matters worse. Government is now called upon to exercise a degree of

foresight—about the performance of the economy, the future costs of present commitments, the behavior of adversaries, and much else—that exceeds its competence (indeed, anyone's competence). Contingency and risk are built into social life. Beyond a certain point, the effort to increase security becomes futile, even self-defeating.

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Nor is it possible wholly to avoid administrative error, a fact that legislators and the news media often overlook. When officials fear that they will be pilloried for isolated mistakes, they will manage defensively, impairing government innovation and effectiveness. Although the cost of excessive caution is harder to measure than that of recklessness, it is no less real. After a period in which home loan standards were relaxed to an absurd degree, we are in danger of lurching to the other extreme, making mortgages inaccessible to all but gold-plated borrowers. We would do well to remember the old maxim that a loan officer who never makes a bad loan is a bad loan officer, and adapt it to government: An administrator who never makes a mistake is probably too cautious.

So what is to be done? There is no manual for improving government's performance, let alone the public's assessment of it. But heeding a few simple (at least simple to state) maxims would make matters better over time.

The first is to focus on the basics. The people expect the national government to keep the economy on an even keel, exercise a measure of foresight, win the wars it decides to wage, and deal effectively with disasters. In recent years, government has done poorly in all these areas. The new administration and Congress must do better.

Second, federal officials in every branch of government must be more conscious of the need to align their promises with the limits of feasible performance. While we can reasonably hope to move our transportation system away from fossil fuels during the next generation, “energy independence” is beyond reach. The constant use of that phrase does nothing to reduce public cynicism.

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Third, leaders must be more honest about the costs as well as benefits of the measures they support. In the debate over how to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, for example, many elected officials prefer a “cap-and-trade” strategy rather than a carbon tax because they think the public would rebel against a new tax. But most specialists agree that a cap-and-trade system would drive up consumers’ costs just as much as the tax, albeit indirectly, and might also invite corruption in the distribution of pollution quotas. The deliberate attempt to obscure the link between a policy decision and its consequences will exacerbate mistrust without improving performance.

Fourth, pay attention to institutional design. After the end of the Cold War, Washington reduced the effectiveness of our public diplomacy by abolishing the independent U.S. Information Agency and folding its functions into the State Department, where its old mission of promoting American ideas and values conflicted with Foggy Bottom’s culture of conflict avoidance and diplomacy. Incorporating the Federal Emergency Management Agency into the new, behemoth Department of Homeland Security contributed to the federal government’s disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina. Conversely, as the United States imports increasing quantities of food from countries around the world, the failure

to establish a single, unified agency to oversee food safety has been steadily increasing risks, some of which are already becoming realities. High-profile consternation over the adulteration of Chinese-manufactured powdered milk is a warning sign that we should not ignore.

Fifth, as Elaine Kamarck, the director of the National Performance Review during the Clinton administration, has argued, policies should be designed with effective implementation firmly in mind: Pick the right means to each end. For any particular initiative, policymakers can choose to use reformed bureaucracies, networks, or market mechanisms to accomplish their goals. For some purposes, moving

away from public institutions to contracts with the private sector or nonprofit institutions may work best. (This is one of the principal arguments in favor of President George W. Bush’s faith-based initiative, which President Barack Obama has pledged to continue.) For others—environmental regulation and health insurance are frequently cited examples—it may make sense to use public power to create market mechanisms. In every case, however, employing public power and resources requires effective mechanisms of oversight and accountability. “Contracting out” will not achieve its intended purpose if contract recipients misappropriate funds or do shoddy work, and public confidence will be further weakened.

Public policies cannot succeed in democracies without sustainable public support. In order to restore public confidence in government, policymakers must stop the vicious circle in which mistrust breeds inaction and thus exacerbates mistrust. We need to set in motion a virtuous circle of reform. That means adopting measures that make people’s lives better, step by step, without violating their intuitive sense of how much government should try to do and how it should go about doing it. ■