Introduction

Trust is essential to all democracies. More than any other political system in the world, democracies require that people have faith in the system. They need to believe that their votes are counted properly and actually matter in choosing political representatives. They need to believe that the government is working for their benefit and that all its institutions and leaders are striving to build a better nation. The people need to believe that the leader is competent at making the right decisions based on the available information; that Congress is passing good legislation; that judges are fair and impartial; that regulators are preventing greed and self-interest from destroying society; that our taxes are being put to good use and that they are generally moving towards a better future. If people don’t believe in the system, how can a democracy be expected to thrive?

Definition of Key Terms

Democracy

Democracy, from “demos” which means “common people and “kratos” which means “rule or strength”, is a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.

Media

The means of communication, as radio and television, as well as newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, that reach or influence people widely.
Trust

Trust in institutions is at an all-time low. In 2016, for example, only 32% of Americans said they had a “Great Deal” or “Fair Amount of Trust” in mass media, the lowest level of trust in a long time. Trust is not to be confused with trustworthiness, indeed trust is defined as assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something.

Democratic Erosion

In political science, democratic erosion, also known as democratic backsliding or de-democratization, is a gradual decline in the quality of democracy. This decline is caused by the weakening of political institutions that sustain the democratic system. These essential components of democracy can be threatened in different ways. Thus, the concept of democratic backsliding can take various forms. There exist 3 different forms of democratic erosion: promissory coups, executive aggrandizement, strategic harassment and manipulation during elections.

Transparency

The characteristic of being easy to see through. Transparency in democratic institutions is something that allows civil society to be able to trust and know what the government is doing. Transparency is key to democracy, it is one of the pillars on which democracy stands.

Corruption

Political corruption is the abuse of public power, office, or resources by elected government officials for personal gain, by extortion, soliciting or offering bribes. It can also take the form of office holders maintaining themselves in office by purchasing votes by enacting laws that use taxpayers' money. Evidence suggests that corruption can have political consequences- with citizens being asked for bribes becoming less likely to identify with their country or region.

Background Information

Over the past few decades, three transformations – globalization, democratization, information and communication technologies – have had major impacts on the expectations of citizens and the roles of the state. Democratization and increased access to information led to greater demands on the state to deliver services. Many states around the world have been under tremendous stress to meet the rising expectations of citizens. One consequence of the shortfall in the capacity of governments to provide
adequate economic opportunities, skills, and access to services has been declining citizen trust in government institutions dealing with representation, law and order, and economic management.

Trust and distrust ideally play complementary roles in a democracy. Citizens properly ask their representatives to earn and to keep their trust. They look to the news and other sources of sound information to know when trust is warranted (something that serves to give reliable or formal assurance of something). At the same time, citizens of a democracy need to maintain a general faith in the goodwill of one another and in the capacity of institutions and laws to combat the dangers of corruption to which any government is subject. The reality is far from these ideals. Particular instances of mistrust have accumulated and hardened into a generalized mistrust of the federal government as such. This mistrust is greatest when the most news-covered policies involve domestic issues of welfare, race, and poverty. It is least when foreign issues and national emergencies displace these issues in the news cycle. The single biggest factor contributing to the loss of political trust is the remarkable growth in party hostility.

Within reason, partisanship contributes to democracy, by motivating people to vote and to engage actively in politics. Simply said, those who have favorable views of populist parties and those who support parties that are not currently in power are more dissatisfied.

Aspects that are often characterized as core tenets of democracy, as freedom of speech and fair courts, are important in understanding people’s dissatisfaction. For example, those who say their country protects freedom of expression tend to be less dissatisfied with democracy. Confidence in the fairness of courts is also strongly related to dissatisfaction with democracy. Those who believe the court system in their country treats everyone fairly are less dissatisfied and therefore generate more trust.

Beyond the opinions of these core democratic institutions perceptions of political officials play an important role in shaping people’s views about democratic performance. Those who think elected officials care about what ordinary people think are much less likely to be dissatisfied. While also important, the relationship between corruption and dissatisfaction is not as strong. Nevertheless, in several nations, there is a significant relationship. In Sweden, for instance, those who say most politicians are corrupt are 32 percentage points more dissatisfied than those who do not think this describes their country well.

Finally, on a global scale, promoting trust in democratic institutions, is something that each country must do single-handedly. Each country must invest time to ensure that no politicians in the government is corrupt, that the elections are done through suffrage and without bribes. The only way to promote trust is to ensure the citizens that the government respect all norms that the democratic system implies.
United States of America

Only a third of Americans now trust their government “to do what is right”—a decline of 14 percentage points from last year, according to a new report by the communications marketing firm Edelman. Forty-two percent trust the media, relative to 47 percent a year ago. Trust in business and non-governmental organizations, while somewhat higher than trust in government and the media, decreased by 10 and nine percentage points, respectively. Indeed American citizens, do not trust the democratic institutions. Some believe it is linked to the Presidency of Donald Trump.

United Kingdom

Ever since the start of Brexit, the United Kingdom has recorded the biggest drop of trust in government institutions ever. The citizens of Britain voted for Brexit and have now seen many postponements and referendums declined. The United Kingdom is indeed ranked very low on the “Trust in Government graph”.

Figure 1: “Trust in government in selected countries in 2017”, Edelman, StatistaCharts.
China

Trust among people in China dipped to a record low with less than half of respondents to a recent survey feeling that "most can't be trusted". Since the issue with Hong Kong, we can observe that trust between the government and the citizens of the country, in its entirety, has reached an all time low. However, before this issue China was the country with the highest ranking in government trust. On the other hand, the rise of civil society in China today can only show that China is moving towards a once again more righteous democratic institution.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)

The DPRK is continuously cast as a villain in international politics. The “hermit kingdom” is painted as tyrannical, repressive, and dynastic. Indeed, this country that has always had issues concerning democracy and extremism is a country where state transparency should be imposed. There is nearly no freedom in this country, it is represented as last in the World Press Freedom Index in 2018.

Poland

Since the election of the Law and Justice Party Poland has seen an increase in critics on freedom of press and more. Indeed, the transparency of the state since 2015 has only been decreasing. Poland is an example of a country where democracy was strong and is now moving towards complete annihilation. The trust towards the government has in fact vastly decreased and could lead to democratic erosion.

Russia

According to a survey by the independent pollster Levada Center said, trust in Russia's government has plummeted by almost half in the past year . Only 26 percent of respondents said that they trusted Russia's government, down from 45 percent in 2015, the Interfax news agency reported. Russian President Vladimir Putin remains the country's most trusted leader, but even he was hit by falling levels of confidence. Seventy-four percent of respondents said that they had faith in Putin's work— a drop from the 80 percent polled 12 months ago. Corruption scandals in Russia's Investigative Committee may have also hit the public opinion hard.

India

India continues to be among the top three nations where trust in government remains high despite a small slip since last year. Indeed the government has seen a decrease of 9% in trust since last year. India is a country where trust is being promoted on a daily basis through transparency, media and presence of NGOs.
Possible Solutions

Many solutions are possible to promote trust in democratic institutions, however there are some that may work more than others. Therefore, only the ones that will be the most effective and allow democracies to be strengthened as fast as possible will be put forth.

First of all, the reason why there is not trust in democratic institutions is because of the lack of transparency between the government and the citizens. Ways to combat this would be as Michael Georg Link, Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) said “Governments need to continue to strengthen the rule of law and promote human rights in order to bolster trust in democratic systems”. Indeed, the key to countering this decline of trust is building greater confidence that those same institutions work to represent the interest and protect the human rights of all those who elected them. Generating support and participation in the democratic process depends on people’s confidence that that democratic institution works transparently for their security and make their lives better. Therefore, by strengthening the participation of the citizens and making them have a bigger say in the decision making of the country could be an answer.

Other solutions could be, promoting civil society and its importance in democracy. Governments who are corrupt or do not respect the norms of democracy should be overthrown. That is why civil society is important in every country, to keep the balance between government action and societal decision. Indeed, if the democratic institutions allow cooperation between the government and civil society, these two could create a solid bond, and therefore prevent democratic erosion.

However, fighting corruption is something linked to democracy through the politicians. If the politicians in the institution are corrupt this affects the democratic system as a whole and could lead to democratic erosion. Indeed fighting corruption is important to assure that the citizens trust the government.

Finally, promoting trust in democratic institutions is something that should be done to allow everyone to thrive in the same environment. It is for the government to be more transparent and listen to civil society. It can be promoted by showing the advantages that it has such as solidifying the democracy in its entirety and much more.

Bibliography


Appendix or Appendices
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