

BETRAYED BY THE PERMANENT CAMPAIGN

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2010

word count:994

“Every two years the American politics industry fills the airwaves with the most virulent, scurrilous, wall-to-wall character assassination of nearly every political practitioner in the country - and then declares itself puzzled that America has lost trust in its politicians.”—Charles Krauthammer

Biggest Problem America Faces

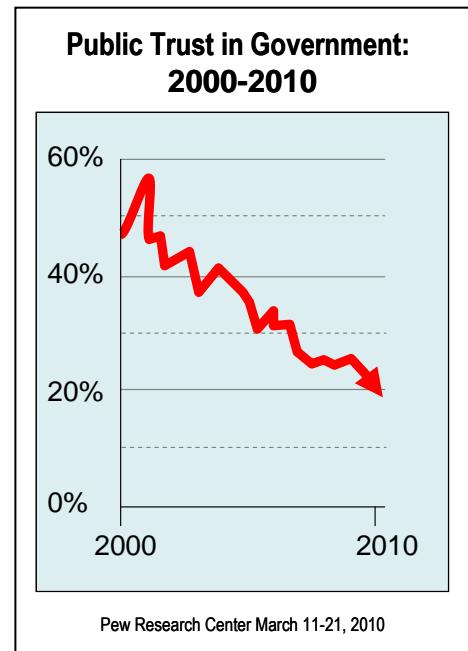
*We face more than a deficit of dollars right now.
We face a deficit of trust – deep and corrosive doubts
about how Washington works that have been growing
for years.*

--State of the Union Address; January 27, 2010

Today we do face a number of crises, but the biggest one is not being addressed; and getting worse every week – the Trust Deficit.

When statistics were first collected at the end of the Eisenhower administration and during the Kennedy administration, nearly 80% of Americans affirmatively answered the question *“Do you trust government just about always or most of the time?”*

Today, four out of five Americans distrust their government – the lowest it’s ever been, and continuing to plummet. Polls show that citizens are disgusted with the performance of Congress and ready to sweep out incumbents. It’s a sorry state of affairs when we trust Congress just a bit more than a used car salesman.



Consequences If We Don't Solve this Problem

Not dealing with this problem has enormous consequences to a democracy. At what point does a democracy become so demoralized that the electorate no longer votes? Or opens the path for a demagogue? Or becomes utterly disgusted, leading to revolt? The Tea Party is the just the tip of the emotional iceberg, and Congress the navigator of the oblivious ship Titanic.

Despite the emotional satisfaction of sweeping out those currently in power, that’s just trading the devil we know, for the devil we don’t know.

Why we have this Problem

During his State of the Union Address, President Obama laid the blame on the traditional culprits, stating:

To close that [trust] credibility gap we must take action ... to end the outsized influence of lobbyists; to do our work openly; and to give our people the government they deserve.

Long on rhetoric, but short on causes or cures.

One big fallacy is that high-minded ethics will cure the trust problem. While ethical standards are essential, they are insufficient alone to produce trust.

The real source of the problem has become so entrenched in recent years it has blended into the fabric of modern politics.

Ugly Campaigns of the Past

The real culprit for the trust deficit lies lurking in how viciously we now conduct our political campaigns.

Vicious campaigning is nothing new in our land. The Presidential elections of 1824 and 1828 between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams are the worst examples of personal attacks and unethical dealings in our history. Demonizing the opponent, sowing fear, uncertainty, doubt, and distrust in the minds of the electorate has been an effective, though messy, method of getting one's candidate elected.

What's different today is that campaigning no longer ends with winning a race. Campaign consultants now rule the roost, providing daily advice to representatives during their tenure in office. Rather than listen to their constituency or their conscience, elected officials keep their ears glued to their campaign advisors who daily blast opponents, real or imagined. Make the other side look bad, block them at every cross-roads, stop them dead in their tracks, bludgeon them on every issue, vilify them to ruin their credibility, blame the other side for all our problems, and on and on.

For example, at a recent fund raiser, Michael Steele, the Republican National Committee Chairman admonished candidates, urging them to "pull out a knife or a club or whatever it is" to "knock a Democrat out." Democrats react to this mentality tit-for-tat. Below-the-belt campaigning has become a permanent priority even while Congress is in session, making it treasonous to cross party lines to work constructively with the other side.

Fear may win elections, but fear is a two-edged sword, because it's the essence of distrust. No sane person trusts those adept at spreading fear through character assassination, bold-faced aggression, manipulation, denial, blaming, and coercion – now the defining qualities of our elected representatives. This is the betrayal by the permanent campaign; it's hijacking our democracy and the rule of representation; it's the core of the trust deficit.

What must be Done to Save our Democracy

Since the State of the Union address, neither party has put forth a proposal to solve the trust deficit. Thus we propose a five point program:

1. *Make trust a campaign issue:*
Trust is the result of people acting with strong values, ethics, honor, and conscience. These are the characteristics of great leaders. Campaigns must

emphasize these qualities in the minds of the electorate.

2. *Put your constituency top-of-mind:*
Running for office means, inherently, that one must put their self interest behind and make primary the “greater good.” People trust those who put the common-wealth ahead of personal wealth and power. If personal gain is primary, you shouldn’t be running for office as a public servant, be a lobbyist instead.
3. *Make Vision, not Viciousness, paramount:*
There was once a time when being a liberal or a conservative meant something; people could distinguish positions and values. Now, it’s oppose anything the other side advocates. The visions of parties need not oppose each other. The adage prevails: *Where there is no vision, everything defaults to politics.*
4. *Bury the Hatchet:*
Ronald Reagan and Tip O’Neil are the perfect example of reconciliation after an election. While very different in political views, after the 1980 election these two powerhouses became work horses, rolling up their sleeves, and focusing their energies on solving the problems of the nation. Their collaboration, despite their differences, created a stronger nation, and built trust in government.
5. *Honor Differences:*
All great leaders understand that *differentials in thinking* are the real source of creativity and innovation. Our founding fathers, while seldom agreeing, were very aware that in their differences lay the well-spring of new insights and solutions. It is by using our varied viewpoints constructively that we will conquer the problems of poverty, the economy, and the environment.
6. *Governance before Politics:*
There’s a time for politics: when the campaign is in full swing. When the vote is counted and the campaign is over, it is time for GOVERNANCE for the people, of the people, and by the people. A political party that defines itself as the “opposition” has no vision, and thus cannot gain the trust of the people.

The future of our democracy is at stake. And time is running out.