

## Chapter 1

# The Decline of Trust

*The genie released by our encouragement of naked self-interest has eroded our sense of belonging to a community. Every individual pursues the ethos of 'looking out for number one'.<sup>1</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

Trust, unhappily, is not a part of the American, or global, political way of life. In fact, our present national culture—social, economic, even artistic, as well as political, is inhospitable to trust.<sup>2</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts, created and funded a National Commission on Civic Renewal in 1996 to obtain an accurate and balanced portrait of our civic condition and suggest practical steps citizens can take to improve our civic life. The Commission created an Index of National Civic Health (INCH) which measures and combines trends over the past twenty five years in five categories: political participation, political and social trust, associational membership, family integrity and stability, and crime (The National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1998). The Index as a whole showed the overall civic condition of the U.S. has declined markedly since 1974. While the newest measurement announced in 1997 showed an upward movement in civic health, there is still need for significant improvement (Figure 1.1). Two of the components of INCH, trust in the federal government and trust in others, have showed massive declines since 1960 (Figure 1.2).

Professionalism, along with trust, integrity and commitment, is a virtue that seems to be declining in importance in the United States. In his book, *Integrity*, Stephen Carter (1996) states that the people of the United States have a serious problem, they neither mean what they say or say what they mean. Moreover, they do not expect anybody else to mean what they say. Carter says that integrity is like

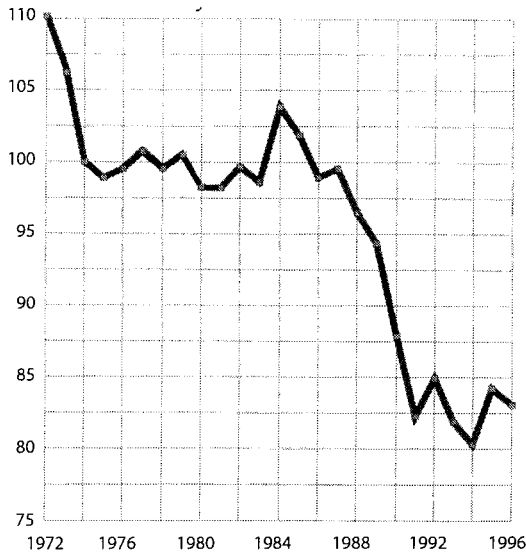


Figure 1.1. The Index of National Civic Health.

Source: The National Commission on Civic Renewal, *The Index of National Civic Health*, University of Maryland, College Park, M.D., 1998, p. 5. Reproduced with permission.

the weather: everybody talks about it but nobody knows what to do about it. Integrity is that stuff we always say we want more of. We want more integrity in our elected representatives, schools, churches, workplaces, healthcare system, in our spouses, children, and friends. Integrity is like good weather; everyone needs the same amount (Carter, 1996).

We read about integrity, or the lack of it, every day in the newspapers. It used to be that the spouses who attended the Congressional Club's annual First Lady's Luncheon came away with their arms full. Every luncher, married to a member or former member of Congress, used to receive a tote bag filled with goodies, such as perfume, earrings, umbrellas, and cosmetics. Then, in the year that followed the change in the ethics laws, according to *Washingtonian Magazine* (Milk, 1994), each of the spouses received a \$25 Thomas Jefferson dessert plate. Since the cost of the luncheon was \$35, this was considered a legitimate party favor. Organizer Lois Breaux said she thought the change was welcome because there had been too many goodies in the bag in previous years, but not all the attendees were as happy. "What am I going to do with one plate?" one wife asked. Breaux said that several attendees solved this problem by lifting additional plates from the tables. Virtue has acquired a bad name, it is the opposite of having fun (Wilson, 1993).

Integrity is the basis of trust (Bennis, 1989). A national survey, conducted in 1995 by the Washington Post, Harvard University, and the Kaiser Family

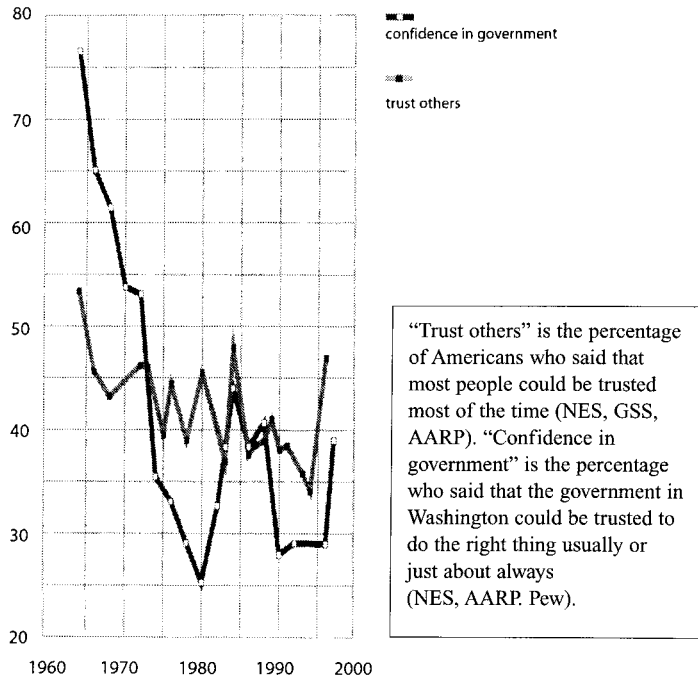


Figure 1.2. INCH Trust Components.

Source: The National Commission on Civic Renewal, *The Index of National Civic Health*, University of Maryland, College Park, M.D., 1998, p. 5. Reproduced with permission.

Foundation, found that America is becoming a nation of suspicious strangers, and it is this mistrust of each other that is a major reason Americans have lost confidence in the federal government and virtually every other major institution (Brossard, 1996).<sup>3</sup> Each succeeding generation that has come of age since the 1950's has been more distrusting of human nature. Today, nearly two in three Americans believe that most people can't be trusted; half say most people would cheat others if they had a chance, and half say that most people are looking out for themselves (also referred to as the "ethic of personal advantage").<sup>4</sup> The survey found that those who distrusted other people were significantly less likely than others to be registered to vote or to have voted in the last two national elections. Many Americans are out of touch with who their political leaders are, they don't know their names, and are uninformed, misinformed, or disinterested in national affairs. A third of all Americans think Congress has passed healthcare reform legislation already, or aren't sure (Brossard, 1996). The most recent General Social Survey, conducted periodically since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (Davis & Smith, 2000), found that most differences in attitudes between the younger generation, aged 18

to 24, and older people have narrowed over the past 30 years, but the younger generation is becoming more distrustful of society than were their counterparts in previous decades. Among the current younger generation, only 20.5 percent read a daily newspaper, compared with 47 percent in 1973; 14 percent attend church weekly, compared with 21.2 percent in 1973; 77.4 percent report a religious affiliation, compared with 86.9 percent in 1973; 27.1 percent report having voted for president, compared with 46.9 percent in 1973; and 48.2 percent report identifying with a political party, compared with 57.3 percent in 1973.

A study of the decline of social capital in American youth from 1976 to 1995 showed that mistrust among today's youth is highly correlated with value change, specifically a greater preoccupation with material things and an erosion of the values of traditional institutions (Rahn & Transue, 1998). The authors point out that preoccupation with material things erodes trust in other people.

Drawing upon recent data from the Roper Social and Political Trends and DDB Needham Life Style surveys that report in detail on Americans' changing behavior over the past 25 years, Robert Putnam (2000), in his book *Bowling Alone*,<sup>5</sup> shows how Americans have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and social structures. Putnam found that our shrinking access to social capital, that is, the reward of communal activity and community sharing, is a threat to our civic and personal health. Social capital is a strong predictor of the quality of life and life satisfaction in a society and, according to Putnam, we have become a nation of users rather than builders of social capital.<sup>6</sup>

Raoul Naroll (1983), a cultural anthropologist, has studied the family and community connections, or "moralnets", that tie people together in different cultures. According to Naroll, strong moralnets are built by deep social ties, emotional warmth between members of the community, social and economic support for those who have difficult times, and various cultural symbols and traditions that make a society cohesive. When moralnets are weak, there is more crime, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, domestic violence and mental illness. Moralnets are similar to the term social capital used by Putnam to describe a trend toward decreased social trust in America. Singer (1995) fears that in the United States today, the social fabric of society has decayed to the extent that it has passed the point of no return. He says that obsession with the self has been the characteristic psychological error of the generations of the seventies and eighties. The error consists in seeking answers to problems by focusing on the self. He suggests that unless there is a significant movement toward reducing the dominance of materialistic self-interest and reinstating the idea of living an ethical life, the world will remain a tough place in which to live. Charles Handy (1994) sees decreased trust as an unintended consequence of our organization society.

"One unintended consequence of the organization society was to remove from many of us the need to belong to anywhere other than our workplace. As a result, when we leave

it we have nothing. We also substituted the homogeneous communities, which our work provided, for the mixed communities of the old neighborhoods. We replaced the community of place with the community of common interest. When you do that, there is no longer any need to think of sacrificing anything for your new neighbor because you neighbor is in the same position.”<sup>7</sup>

When trust begins to erode in a society, fear, alienation, loneliness and hostility take its place (Gibb, 1978). And it appears that we have become a society that no longer values caring. Certainly, the exodus of women into the workforce have made traditional caretakers less available, but our focus on individualism has fostered a climate of independent, freely choosing individuals who don’t care about others individually or collectively (Glenn, 2000).

Fukuyama (1995) examines a wide range of national cultures (Japan, China, Korea, Germany, France, and the United States) in order to find the hidden principles that make a good and prosperous society. Economic life is pervaded by culture and depends on moral bonds of social trust. This is the unspoken, unwritten bond between fellow citizens that facilitates transactions, empowers individual creativity, and justifies collective action. In the global struggle for economic dominance, cultural differences will be a key determinant of national success. The social capital represented by trust will be as important as physical capital. Like Tocqueville, Fukuyama believes a state can only be powerful if it is in a relationship of trust with its citizens (Hall, 1992).

Fukuyama states, “It is no accident that the United States, Japan, and Germany were the first countries to develop large, modern, rationally organized, professionally managed corporations. Each of these cultures had certain characteristics that allowed business organizations to move beyond the family rather rapidly and to create a variety of new, voluntary social groups that were not based on kinship. They were able to do so because in each of these societies there was a high degree of trust between individuals who were not related to one another, and hence a solid basis for social capital.”<sup>8</sup>

The causes of the growth of American individualism at the expense of community are numerous, but not new.<sup>9</sup> Rights-based individualism is deeply embedded in American political theory and constitutional law. The consequences of the restructuring of the American economy—mergers, downsizing, loss of low-skilled jobs, the expansion of the welfare state, electronic technology, and the evolution of a culture of “rights”—have all contributed to a climate of low trust. Howard (2001) says that there was a massive redefinition of freedom in the 1960’s as a rejection of all authority. The rhetoric of modern justice is individual rights, but its foundation is avoidance of authority. Avoiding authority provides opportunities for reducing personal bias and prejudice, but carries a high risk. “The spirit of distrust of authority... can be used against the trustworthy too. An equal opportunity weapon, it can be invoked by the misguided, the mendacious, and the malevolent, as well as the mistreated” (Kagan, 1991, p. 375). What matters is not



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