

Trust: Meaning, Model and Politics

In her 1586 speech to Parliament, a speech laced with ambiguities, including an ambiguous response to Parliament's petition to have Mary Queen of Scots put to death, Queen Elizabeth stalls for time.

As for me, I see no such great cause why I should either be fond to live or fear to die. I have had good experience in this world, and I know what it is to be a subject and what to be a sovereign. Good neighbors I have had, and I have met with bad; and in trust, I have found treason.

Elizabeth's reluctance to endorse Parliament's request for Mary's execution may be less a reflection of her concept of justice or love for a distant cousin than fear of subordinating the prerogative of a sister sovereign to the desires of a feisty legislative body. The history of the episode is interesting, but it is the last phrase in her speech that fascinates us now.

According to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Tenth Edition), treason is "the betrayal of trust." Fair enough, but then a question arises, "What is trust?" The same dictionary provides an answer: "assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something."

A careful reading of the definition raises a question, however, whether the term "assured," the very idea of assuredness, which conveys certainty, is used properly. If certainty is inherent to the term trust, then something is indeed amiss because certainty itself must have been betrayed, and the betrayal of that particular term suggests that certainty hadn't truly existed at all in the first place – or if it had, it was improperly placed, perhaps by a fool. Yet, by most historical accounts, Elizabeth I was nobody's fool.

Maybe Merriam-Webster merely provides us with a positive definition, not a normative one. That is, the dictionary assigns no presumption of desirability to the definition of trust. In other words, the "character" to which the definition refers could be heavenly or just as easily sordid. The ability of the trusted person could be limitless or very limited; the strength could be substantial or not; the truth could be universally shared or just as easily be nothing more than an adherence to what a person believes to be the truth – in her or his own mind. There is no

objective truth necessarily, maybe only subjective truth, subject to the experience and values and perspectives of the trustee.

In this respect, one might suggest that, to use the most squalid of examples, Hitler was trustworthy. People could rely upon him. He had some impressive abilities (although admittedly some glaring weaknesses as well); he seemed to personify strength; and he acted in a way that he and others apparently thought was consistent with the truth. Or to take a less egregious example, I know a very senior officer in the navy whom I “trust” to do anything and everything that serves his own selfish purpose. In that sense, I “trust” him at the same time as not wanting my child or anyone else’s child to have to serve under him, nor am I happy that a portion of the national security budget or that the well-being of Marines and sailors are subject to his decision-making. Another example is less serious but nonetheless also helpful in understanding the inadequacy of the Merriam-Webster definition. I had a team mate on my youth hockey team who was the worst player on the squad. His father was the coach. And despite having few skills, the coach’s son received lots of playing time. We, his teammates, could “trust” him to lose the game for us. He was genuinely a bad hockey player, but still, according to Merriam-Webster, we might have “trusted” him.

Trust might not, then, always convey a comforting ideal or imply a favorable outcome. The ambivalence carries through to law. Black’s law dictionary defines the noun form of trust as (I synopsized.) a legal agreement to form a combination of firms or corporations, especially ones that threaten to reduce competition. Limiting competition is generally thought to be antithetical to the welfare of the larger society, so it follows that trusts can be “trusted” to work against societal welfare which is, presumably, the reasons that the legal system includes a slew of so-called “anti-trust laws.” Clearly, many people do not accept that the term “trust” implies or conveys all that is good.

But, of course, the most common use of the term is one that conveys much that is good. Countless generations of parents have urged generations of love-struck children to make certain that they “trust” a potential spouse before deciding to walk down the aisle. And in the business world, whether the private or public sector, “trust” is generally viewed as either a positive force for good or a necessary attribute for good order and discipline. Some amount of trust is thought

to be needed even to execute the most pedestrian of business transactions. And, of course, many believe that trust underscores the ability to lead and manage a complex organization such as a country.

So, we might be able to accept that there exists a spectrum of formulations for what we mean by “trust.” I hope that the readers of this short paper will join me in talking about the definition of trust. Whether or not you feel that you have a unique or sophisticated understanding of the term, please do share. We gather as friends interested in elevating political discourse, so please be assured that you can trust those with whom we are gathered!

I offer a trust model in the next section of this essay which, I hope, might help us to determine a workable definition of trust – one that might help us to speak descriptively or prescriptively about politics in American today or maybe even about those running for political office or those we wish would run for political office.

Trust in Electoral Politics

In electoral politics, candidates’ campaign literature often refers to the candidate being “trustworthy,” someone whose leadership the voting public can trust. The claims make use of the presumption that the term trust conveys something good. The model I present also assumes that trust is indeed good.

The model I present is my adaptation of “An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust,” originally provided by Roger Mayer, James H. Davis, and F. David Schoorman, three academics I admire. The original model applied to organizations; the authors were careful to explain that the model does not apply to person-to-person relationships. Yet my own research suggests that the model can help to explain the role that trust plays in underscoring personal relationships, or how the lack of trust might destroy personal relationships. And with the few tweaks I have made, I believe the model can illuminate our understanding of our attitudes towards political candidates or why we might or might not favor prospective candidates.

The authors of the model do not define trust in a traditional way; rather, they explain a condition that suggests when trust is present, when it is existential. Trust exists, they say, when there is a willingness of a party (which could be a single individual, a voter, for example) to be vulnerable

to the actions of another party (the trusted agent, in our case, a candidate for political office) based on the expectation that the trusted agent will perform a particular action or sets of actions and in doing so produce an outcome that is favorable to the voter, the trusting party, irrespective of the ability of the trusting party to monitor or control the candidate or political office holder, the trusted agent.

To comprehend the model presented below, I suggest starting by looking at the far left hand side of the model and follow the model in a clockwise direction. The first terms to consider are what I call the “factors of trustworthiness,” the essential attributes for an individual to be worthy of trust in a political context.

First, competence to perform the functions that are inherent to the office to which the candidate wishes to accede is essential to a candidate being legitimately considered trustworthy. Second, integrity, meaning that the candidate is honest and consistent in thought, purpose and action is also necessary for a candidate to be considered trustworthy. Third, shared values means that the values of the candidate and the voter are, if not identical, similar and aligned enough to form solidarity between the candidate and the voter. A candidate can only be considered trustworthy with respect to the specific functions that she or he is supposed to perform in office in as much as she or he is perceived to be competent, to have integrity and to share values with the voter. All these attributes, these three factors – sometimes referred to as antecedents to trust – must be present.

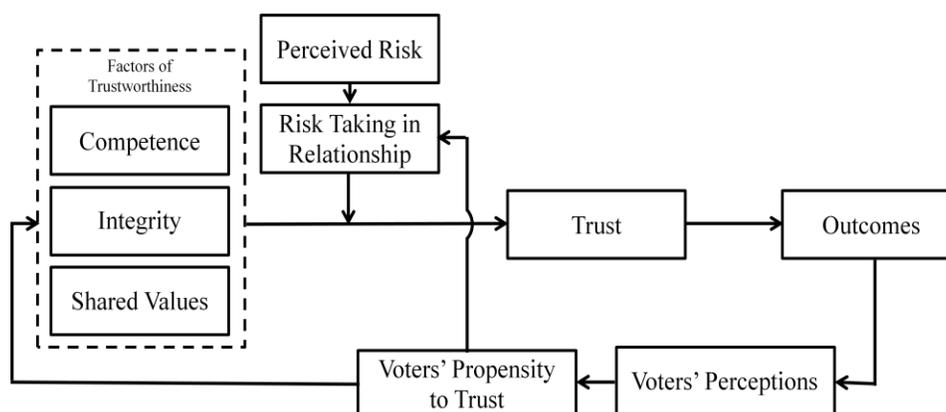
The degree of the candidate’s trustworthiness informs the “Perceived Risk,” as interpreted by each voter who, in turn, determines whether the candidate merits “Risk Taking in the Relationship.” Introducing the notion of risk, whether the risk is actual or perceived, acknowledges that trust is given meaning only if the prospective voter feels vulnerable, which is to say that she or he has something to lose, something at risk. Perhaps most of us can agree that claiming to “trust” someone is meaningless when we have no dog in the fight, nothing to possibly lose and thus no possibility to be vulnerable to the actions of the object of our proclaimed trust.

If a voter takes the risk, in other words, if a voter votes for the candidate, she or he displays “Trust” in the candidate. After all, by voting for the candidate to accede to office, the voter

exhibits a willingness to make herself or himself vulnerable to the candidate. Trust is existential just as Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman explained.

Assuming that the candidate accedes to political office, the voter will observe and interpret, in other words, perceive the outcomes of the office holder's incumbency: the office holder's behavior, policy positions, successes and failures and generally, the adherence or divergence from the promises the office holder made as a candidate. The "Voter's Perceptions," formed upon observing the outcomes will color that "Voter's Propensity to Trust" in the future which, in turn, will affect future voting behavior in two ways.

The Proposed Model of Trust



First, the voter who perceived that her or his trust has been betrayed in the past is likely to hesitate to accept that future candidates are trustworthy, even if the candidate exhibits impressive credentials regarding competence, integrity and shared values. An optimistic outcome of the hesitance includes the possibility that the voter might scrutinize candidates more assiduously in the future. The less sanguine outcome includes the possibility that the aggrieved voter gives up on voting altogether, a behavior that clearly damages the republic. If, to the contrary, a voter perceives that her or his trust has been rewarded, that voter is likely to be altogether more willing to accept candidates as trustworthy – even with a very small degree of candidate scrutiny, which is not altogether a good condition for a healthy republic, although it is quite possible that the lower effort involved in judging candidates might compel more people to vote which, all else equal, is good for a republic.

Second, the perception the voter has as a result of having trusted a candidate and then suffering or benefitting from the outcomes of the candidate acceding to office will influence whether or not the voter will be willing to take risks in the future - quite aside from the degree of trustworthiness that the voter might interpret the candidate presents. It is not altogether difficult to understand that a voter who perceives she or he has been burned by accepting risk, in other words, by trusting a candidate or candidates in the past, might shrink from risk taking in the future. Alternatively, the voter whom perceives that her or his risk taking in the past has been rewarded is likely to be more willing to take risks in the future, perhaps even reckless risks.

Implications and Questions

The model presented can help us to determine a working definition of trust in the political context. We might ask whether or not the three attributes, the three factors of trustworthiness are indeed all required for a voter to legitimately or correctly trust a candidate. If the answer is no, then how would reasonable people determine whether a candidate, or anyone for that matter, is trustworthy? Might the three attributes presented not be enough?

Another question that might arise as we try to define trust in the political context revolves around how we might be able to measure or otherwise assess a candidate's competency, integrity and values. Are debates really all that helpful? The problem becomes more acute when the candidate has no political record or has a record of achievement in endeavors that are fundamentally different from the field of politics. Does a successful business executive's track record suggest competency in executing the business of being a public servant?

All the while, when discussing definitions, we need to be sticklers for precise meanings of terminology. Early in the essay when I presented Hitler, or the senior naval officer or the less-than-talented youth hockey player as examples of people whom were "trusted," it is important to recognize that irony laced the usage of the term. In the cases of the naval officer, a more accurate description for him would be "selfish," perhaps "narcissistic." The young hockey player, or perhaps his father-coach, was at the very least "predictable" or "selfish." Neither was trustworthy, at least with respect to the applicable activities; and so neither the personnel who were in the senior officer's command nor the young hockey player's teammates could have legitimately or correctly trusted the protagonists.

Of course, there are political figures whom are trustworthy, women and men of great competence and admirable integrity whose values are aligned with the large majority of their constituency and maybe even a large majority of all Americans. And yet these political figures have difficulty in the current political climate, perhaps because the degree of cynicism erases any proclivity that voters might otherwise be inclined to trust someone who is “political.”

As recently as 2016, *The Economist* magazine reported that polls indicate that the government is the least trusted institution in the United States. The propensity to trust was at rock bottom, and it probably hasn't gotten better since then. And yet the problem has been building for quite a long time. We need only consider the words from the early 1980s when Ronald Reagan pronounced that “government is the problem.” I was a midshipman at the Naval Academy when I heard that speech, and I was livid that a candidate for the presidency was cultivating cynicism – and I was, by definition, part of the government at the time. That statement fertilized the idea that continues to be cultivated today. In 2016, as *The Economist* went to press, the two American presidential candidates seemed to compete to belittle the efficacy of the very entity they proposed to lead.

An important question, then, arises. How important, how determinant is the cynicism that underscores political discourse in the United States? It would seem to me possible that the cynicism that is rife in the United States might actually preclude good leaders from running for political office and certainly dampen the likelihood that the good people who do run will be provided a fair chance to shine. Another important question to contemplate regards what we might do to countervail cynicism.

It is interesting to note that Washington, Madison and Franklin, each of whom harbored doubts as to the viability of the “American experiment” and each of whom despised any number of their fellow founding fathers, took care to avoiding voicing doubts in public. Nor did they publically belittle opposition candidates or policies, as they believed doing so would breed cynicism – the death knell of a republic and the disintegration of the hopes, dreams, and aspirations dependent upon it.