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Can Governments Earn Our Trust by Donald F. Kettl

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The 2016 election of Donald J. Trump reflects an ongoing erosion of confidence in American governing institutions. Today, conspiracy theories involving the deep state, widespread election fraud, and justice department abuses are emanating from the highest office in the land. However, the crisis in confidence is not uniquely American. In Great Britain, voters unexpectedly voted to leave the European Union. In Turkey and the Philippines, fledgling autocrats are weaponizing citizen frustration with government ineffectiveness to chip away at democratic institutions. These governing shocks are not entirely surprising. As Donald F. Kettl details in his short new book, large percentages of Americans, as well as citizens of other liberal democracies, do not trust their government.

The title to Kettl's book is a loaded question: *Can governments earn our trust?* That Americans generally do not currently trust their government is implied from the start. Of course, exactly what it means to trust your government is a vague and contested concept. In his first chapter, Kettl unpacks the complexity of trust through a series of propositions explaining that high levels of generalized distrust in any society can undermine the legitimacy of its governing institutions. Perhaps most apt is Kettl's (2017) description of trust as both a dependent and independent variable, "a force that shapes expectations and that is a product of past experiences" (p. 41). Kettl is careful in describing the positive role distrust plays in democracies, particularly how it fuels citizen demands for accountability and transparency. Further, he explains how levels of trust in government are generally cyclical. The problem today, Kettl argues, is that the expansion of government power and resulting rise of citizen distrust has put us in a down cycle from which we are struggling to emerge.

It is necessary, Kettl argues, that governments take action to earn back citizen trust. The prescriptions are fairly obvious but nonetheless insightful. One, governments must be proactively transparent. Too often transparency is reduced to a bureaucratic checklist; further, a change of mindset within a government in which transparency is a practiced value is necessary to earn trust. Two, governments must meet citizen performance expectations. This means

finding out what shapes citizen expectations, identifying where flaws lie, and empowering front-line bureaucrats to meet those expectations.

Less obvious and more interesting is Kettl's discussion of the barriers to earning back citizen trust. At the top of his list is a rising populism that thrives off of citizen anger with their government. When politicians run against Washington, they are both stoking and benefiting from citizen frustration with a government. Next is the rise of proxies in the delivery of public services. The growing number of government services provided by nongovernmental agencies places a structural barrier in the form of a middleman between the citizen receiving services and the actual government entity providing them. Most challenging is the issue of what Kettl calls "pros," which refers to professionals. The problem of pros is rooted in the growing distrust of technocrats among politicians and the public at-large.

Kettl concludes with the hopeful declaration that trust is not static, meaning existing challenges can be overcome, and general trust in our governing institutions can be reclaimed. That said, he acknowledges that his suggestions for improved front-line government performance and transparency face an uphill implementation battle due to the previously discussed barriers.

Kettl is at his weakest when presenting data in the early pages of the book. Though there is nothing wrong or inaccurate about the data, his is not a data-driven argument. As Bob Dylan sang, "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows." The election of a president as unique as Donald J. Trump, as well as his then advisor Steve Bannon's initial shot across the bow regarding the need to deconstruct our administrative institutions, is more than enough to illustrate the trust crisis in the United States. Those of us working in and studying government are particularly aware that something is awry.

It would have been easy to dismiss declining trust as a political problem, or a result of citizens not understanding what government does, or simple ignorance among the fringes of the electorate. Kettl, to his credit, does not take the easy way out. He engages with the problem as it exists rather than searching for a simple explanation that lets public administrators off the hook. To put it another way, though it is important to understand why trust is declining, the fact that people do not trust their government is the practical problem scholars and practitioners must address.

But there are solutions, and this is where Kettl is at his strongest. He shares an anecdote about the steps some states have taken to improve the customer experience at the DMV. Simple things like having customers take a number rather than stand in line, or providing more self-service options, have had a positive impact on citizen perceptions of their government. In my own city of Oshkosh, our department administers an annual citizen satisfaction survey. In past years it was mailed, putting the onus on citizens to actively participate to get their voices heard. This year, my colleague proactively went out into the community to ensure the full diversity of residents was represented in the results.

It is small steps like these that can increase trust and engagement at a micro-level. Though it is tempting to search for large sweeping solutions to our trust deficit such as new transparency laws, regulatory answers to fake news, or even changes in political leadership, none of these large-scale approaches can get at the root of the problem. Rather, it is the sum of the small steps taken at the point of service-delivery across governing contexts that can restore faith in democratic governing institutions. Or, as Kettl concludes, "Retail strategies might work only at the margins of what otherwise are powerful wholesale forces, but the strategies are real" (p. 120).

Overall Kettl's thoughtful book is well worth the minimal time investment required and is relevant to both practitioners and academics alike. Practitioners can apply Kettl's recommendations regarding how to earn back trust and come to terms with the rational (even if at times illogical) roots of public distrust of experts. Academics should heed Kettl's lessons by understanding that even the most rigorous and applicable research will not be useful if the public does not trust the message or the messenger. For both practitioners and academics, knowing the solution to vexing problems is not enough. Both need to practice humility, patience, and awareness of the customers of government when studying and implementing government services. Though trust is an amorphous concept, it is nonetheless essential for legitimacy in government. The disruptions of the past two years reflect both the fragility of our institutions and the difficulty governments face in adapting to rapidly changing citizen expectations. Simply, growing distrust is as much a cultural problem as a practical one. Reaffirming commitment to meeting citizen expectations for performance and transparency, as Kettl states, is a necessary step to overcoming the growing culture of distrust.

Disclosure Statement

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Author Biography

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