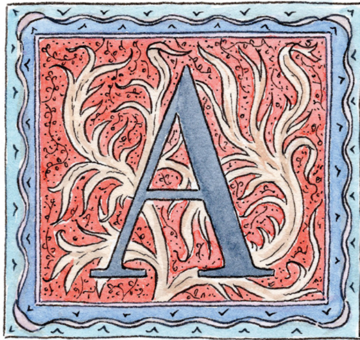
YUVAL LEVIN

The Trust Trap

Greater public faith in elite institutions requires evidence of restraint, not just of competence



MERICANS don't have much confidence in their leaders, authority figures, and major institutions. Decades of survey research describe an accelerating mistrust on almost every front. From organized religion and major corporations to journalism, the medical system, banks, and universities, we have become deeply skeptical of established power centers. And that collapse of trust has been especially acute when it comes to the institutions of government.

The results are on display in a culture drenched in divisive cynicism and conspiracy theorizing and too often incapable of concerted action. Few of us are happy with this state of affairs, but we see no obvious way out of it. Is it even possible to recover lost trust in authority figures? Can we consider anyone to be properly in charge of anything, or are we doomed to be forever led around in angry circles

by a succession of online blowhards of different partisan flavors?

Such questions can help clarify the character of the challenge we face. It is a crisis of elite legitimacy. That means more than just public doubts about whether leaders deserve to lead. It's also that those leaders often can't quite justify their places, even to themselves.

Elite legitimacy is an inherent problem in any free society. We believe in equality, so how do we explain why some people have more power and privilege than others? What justifies their positions and their claims over us?

In 1970, in what may well have been the best of his many landmark essays, Irving Kristol took up this peculiar challenge of legitimacy. "The results of the political process and of the exercise of individual freedom — the distribution of power, privilege, and property — must also be seen as in some profound sense expressive of the values that govern the lives of individuals," Kristol wrote. If elites hold power or privilege for reasons that most of their fellow citizens don't consider adequate, the entire society will lose respect for the rules by which it says it lives.

Not many would enjoy living in such a society. It would feel not only unequal but also unfree. "People feel free when they subscribe to a prevailing social philosophy; they feel unfree when the prevailing social philosophy is unpersuasive; and the existence of constitutions or laws or judiciaries have precious little to do with these basic feelings," Kristol concluded. The principles according to which our elites exercise power must somehow be, as he put it, persuasive.

So how do our own elites now justify their status and that of the institutions they lead? Implicitly, without ever quite articulating it, they tend to fall upon a mix of technocratic credentials and

progressive high-mindedness. This broadly describes the self-image of the unusually cohesive elite class that now runs most of our major institutions. Its members (at least most of them) earned their places by demonstrating a peculiar sort of merit — through admission to a selective university, followed by various honors, certifications, rites of passage, jobs, and stamps of approval that signify competence.

This is a cold and almost clinical standard of worth, but the nagging guilty feeling that it may not be a sufficient rationale for status and authority is then allayed by a kind of secondhand atonement — a ritual acknowledgement of the sins of others that played a part in creating today's conditions of inequality. This might entail, for instance, naming the privilege that results from the inegalitarianism of prior generations or naming the Native American tribes that once occupied the lands we now possess.

The bizarre intensity with which such rituals are enforced sometimes feels like the working out of an authoritarian instinct, but it is at least as much a function of the depth of the guilt they are meant to placate. And if, after all that proof of formal qualifications and moral purity, the public is still skeptical of elites, then their skepticism is presumed to result from the failure of ordinary people to value rational competence, or from their bigotry or small mindedness. What else could explain it?

Technocratic prowess is not the craziest imaginable principle of legitimacy. Some portion of the public's mistrust of elites actually begins from an acceptance of that standard, and merely finds our leaders wanting in light of it. Surely one key reason why Americans' confidence in institutions has collapsed in this century has been some prominent failures of competence — of the foreign-policy establishment after 9/11, the economic-policy establishment in the financial crisis, the public-health bureaucracy in the pandemic, and so on.

And yet, it would be strange to argue that today's frustrated pop-

ulists just want their leaders to be more effective technocrats. Better management might well have better kept the lid on the anger that now boils over in every Western society, but that anger is plainly rooted in a more profound suspicion.

Simply put, the technocratic case for elite legitimacy is not persuasive because it does not describe a society worthy of the name. It makes our leaders accountable to generic performance standards, rather than to an ethos shared in common with the broader public. Indeed, it often renders them contemptuous of the broader public.

What troubles many Americans who find themselves frustrated with our institutions has less to do with doubts about competence than with suspicions of motives. Populist conspiracy theories don't allege that elites are feckless — in fact, they often assume the people in power are much more capable than they really are. But they take those people to be radically self-indulgent at the very least, and to have their own and not the public's best interests at heart.

Populist publics are more worried that contemporary elites are unrestrained than that they are incompetent. The problem is not with who gets into our elite universities, but with the fact that too little is demanded of them once they do. It isn't that Americans don't respect the credentials of their leaders but that they think those leaders look down on the public and are unconstrained by a meaningful code of conduct.

If this is an important source of the public's frustration, then our leaders face a dangerous kind of trap: Their attempts to overcome public doubts by demonstrating technocratic prowess or progressive high-mindedness can only reinforce the sense that they are unaccountable.

Treating public resentment as evidence of willful ignorance, and thereby effectively equating yourself with neutral, elevated expertise, is ultimately a way to avoid accountability. When the National Institutes of Health's Anthony Fauci said a few years ago that his critics were "really criticizing science, because I represent science," he ended up justifying his angriest critics, not answering them. When disgraced former Harvard president Claudine Gay insisted earlier this year that criticism of her amounted to a racist smear, she was proving herself unworthy of the public's confidence.

Treating public resentment as evidence of prejudice or backwardness — and equating yourself with social progress — substitutes narrow partisanship for a broadly persuasive case for legitimacy. Even when it is well intentioned, as it surely is a lot of the time, this attitude radiates contempt. When elite institutions — from universities to corporations to major newspapers and federal agencies — use their cachet and leverage to advance political and cultural agendas unrelated to their missions, they don't justify their privileged positions. Instead, they only provide evidence for the claims of the cynics. They offer a critique of our society as a defense of their high status in it, which can't help but be unpersuasive to most people.

In effect, the public's mistrust of elites has more to do with character than competence — and with a sense that the ambitions of the leaders of important institutions aren't being harnessed in the service of others. That mistrust points to a set of institutional failures. Effective institutions form and shape the people in them into agents of others, whose purpose and integrity are functions of the institution's aims — be it civic, religious, commercial, educational, cultural, political, or communal.

Trust in experts and elites is the result of some perception of this kind of formative restraint even more than of a recognition of their ability or competence. We know there are things a decent accountant,

physician, journalist, or religious leader would never do. We have faith in them at least as much because of what we believe they wouldn't do as because of what we think they're good at. They act in accordance with a discernible code that defines them as professionals, and that's a crucial part of why we entrust them with influence over parts of our lives. When they violate that code, we lose our trust in them — even if they're otherwise still very capable.

Such a code of elite responsibility, writ large, is a key missing ingredient in our contemporary public life. We don't just mistrust our elites because they can't do what they claim, but also because it seems there is nothing they wouldn't do. It turns out that democratic publics prefer evidence of responsible restraint and accountability to evidence of technocratic prowess.

None of that is to excuse the tenor of much of today's populism — or of the often right-leaning counter-elites who seek to lead populist voters by indulging their most reckless excesses. The sour mix of self-pity and self-righteousness that defines that populism, its raging refusal to take ownership of any problem or to seek accommodation of any sort, and its cynicism that so smoothly blends into the most astonishing gullibility amount to a grand civic failure too. A democratic public has responsibilities at least as great as those of its leaders. But in a crisis of legitimacy, elite obligations are more urgent.

For our leaders to be more trusted, they must be more trustworthy. (If they were, fewer people would be drawn to populist demagogues.) Demonstrating such an ethos will require a recommitment to distinct institutional obligations. It will mean grasping their particular roles and doing their actual jobs.

That requires comprehending that a university, a newspaper, a corporation, and a national legislature (to take a few prominent examples) are different institutions, with different purposes that demand different kinds of responsibility — they are not all just interchange-

able platforms for cultural-political performance art. Each one comes with its own mode of integrity, which creates an opportunity to prove its legitimacy and that of the people who populate it. Each one provides a way to transform oneself into an agent of the interests of one's fellow citizens in a particular way, and so to demonstrate competence while also offering persuasive evidence that the leader holds his or her position and status for good reason.

Many of our most profoundly vexed public controversies, in America and around the modern democratic world, involve conflicts between different sets of unrestrained elites. Think of former president Donald Trump and an assortment of prosecutors competing to see who can more thoroughly shatter the norms that guard public power against reckless politicization. Or think of an Israeli government and supreme court setting undiluted parliamentary power against unfettered judicial fiat. Such confrontations can only produce and perpetuate public cynicism.

The opposite of cynicism is not blind faith but earnest confidence, and achieving that requires the channeling of personal ambition through an institutional code in the service of some shared good. That is what today's elites too often fail to show the public.

Seeing that hardly proves we can restore the trust we've lost. In fact, it suggests that restoration is the wrong way to think about the challenges we face. Waiting around for the return of mid-20th-century levels of trust won't do any good. The extraordinary (at times excessive) confidence that Americans had in their society's core institutions and leaders in the halcyon 1950s and '60s was built on a foundation of tremendous common sacrifice, particularly wartime sacrifice. You would not have found such trust in our cul-

ture before the middle decades of the last century, and we should not expect to find it now. Nostalgia for the childhood years of the oldest Baby Boomers (who somehow still define our self-conception) is not a reliable guide for the future.

Rather, grasping the nature of our legitimacy crisis can help us see what each of us could do, and what our leaders could do, to build a distinctly 21st-century mode of trust through greater humility, restraint, and an ethic of service. This wouldn't require superhuman feats of virtue on the part of American elites. But it would require stronger institutions, a greater commitment to the distinct aims and character of each, and a greater willingness for leaders to be shaped by the aspirations of these institutions rather than their own.

By allowing ourselves to be formed by the ethos of an institution that matters to us, each of us can play some role in building up the kind of trust we all sense is sorely lacking now, and so in more persuasively justifying the legitimacy of the institutions we are part of. By approaching little moments of decision with the question "Given my role here, how should I behave?" we can take small steps toward a culture of greater confidence.

That doesn't amount to a panacea for a healthier society. But it offers each of us something more to do than just complaining and vaguely hoping for better days. It suggests that what stands in the way of greater faith in our society and leaders is a shortage of responsibility across the board, and we can all work on that. ✴