



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on July 25, 2019

Disunited States of Distrust: Americans Cynical, Says Study — Especially About Gov

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Much has been written in recent years about America's declining faith in God. But a recent Pew Research Center study indicates that this has been accompanied by declining faith, or trust, in other citizens and our institutions in general — with government being among the least trusted of all.

As Pew [writes](#), "Two-thirds of adults think other Americans have little or no confidence in the federal government. Majorities believe the public's confidence in the U.S. government and in each other is shrinking, and most believe a shortage of trust in government and in other citizens makes it harder to solve some of the nation's key problems."

Moreover, "About two-thirds (69%) of Americans say the federal government intentionally withholds important information from the public that it could safely release, and 61% say the news media intentionally ignores stories that are important to the public," Pew later writes. Of course, this perspective just reflects reality.

Don't think that any lack of confidence in the feds will lead to greater support for a government "which governs least," however. As Pew also [informs](#), some Americans "worry the government is doing too much, others say too little, and others mention the government doing the wrong things or nothing at all." Clearly, Americans' confusion matches their confidence deficit.

The *New York Times* provides a good summary of the study findings, [writing](#):

Broadly speaking, about a fifth of adults displayed "consistently trustful attitudes," roughly a third expressed consistently wary views, and the rest were somewhere in between. The researchers found that levels of personal trust were associated with race and ethnicity, age, education and household income. The share of white respondents who showed high levels of trust (27 percent), for instance, was twice as high as the share of black (13 percent) and Hispanic (12 percent) respondents combined.

In general, those who were more likely to be "high trusters" were older, more educated and had higher household incomes than "low trusters."

"Americans who might feel disadvantaged are less likely to express generalized trust in other people," the report said.

The generational gap in trust that emerged was especially striking. Almost half of young adults between the age of 18 and 29 fell into the low trust category. The same was true about only one-fifth of respondents 65 and older.

Over all, the Pew study found that three-quarters of Americans thought confidence in the federal government was slipping, and 64 percent said the same about trust in each other.

Aside from what's already mentioned, the study's main findings are (all quotation's Pew's):



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- “More than eight-in-ten Americans (84%) believe it is possible to improve the level of confidence people have in the government.”
- Unsurprisingly, the high trusters are much more likely than the low ones to expect good citizenship and moral behavior from their fellow Americans.
- Democrats and their sympathizers are more likely than Republicans and their sympathizers to believe trust is a problem (projection?).
- “On a scale of national issues, trust-related issues are not near the top of the ‘very big’ problems Americans see. But people often link distrust to the major problems that worry them.”

Of course, the real issue is that it isn’t just a matter of to trust or not to trust, but of knowing whom to trust. A healthy skepticism is one thing. *Cynicism*, the belief that all people act out of selfish motives, is quite another. I [expounded on this](#) in 2013:

A certain very erudite and always entertaining social critic remarked recently that he always thought the worst of people. He went on to say — perhaps, at most, half jokingly — that he was always right about them, too. He then revealed that he actually had been very trusting as a boy, that he believed everyone and often got taken advantage of. He certainly doesn’t get taken advantage of much now, I’m sure. But what he doesn’t know is that in one significant way he hasn’t changed at all.

The man’s admission of his boyhood as a doormat didn’t surprise me, for gullibility and cynicism are two sides of the same coin. They are both a function of naiveté, which can be defined as ignorance about reality. The gullible person proceeds as if everyone is good and trustworthy, whereas the cynic proceeds as if everyone is essentially bad and untrustworthy. But reality is quite different: there are, practically speaking, “good” people and “bad” people, the well-meaning and the self-serving. And possessing discernment enables one to distinguish between the two groups. Yet the gullible person trusts people even when he shouldn’t and the cynic fails to trust them even when he should.

The transition from gullible babe in the woods to steadfast cynic is easy to understand. The budding cynic, lacking in what some today called “emotional I.Q.,” is unable to draw the aforementioned distinctions among people; they all look the same to him. But being essentially good — and, as people will do, supposing that others operate as he does — he assumes that virtually everyone can be trusted. Then, of course, it isn’t long before the wrong person betrays his trust — and it happens again and again and again (this is especially problematic since con artists, generally possessed of great feel for man’s nature, will sense his gullibility and target him specifically). Not wanting to be burned again, the babe then switches modes and ceases to trust, but not just those unworthy of it. For he still can’t distinguish between the good and bad; people still all look the same to him, so the untrustworthy who scarred him now just seem like a representative sample of man. Thus does he assume that all people are basically self-serving and often mercenary.

Of course, the babe no doubt also knew people who didn’t betray him. Just as it’s usually only bad news that makes headlines, however, it’s his personal bad news that captures the headlines in his mind. Besides, cynicism becomes a survival tactic: since he never knows who would plunge that knife into his back, he finds it safer to never turn it on anyone. And so just as the caterpillar becomes a butterfly, the babe becomes the cynic, seemingly a very different creature but actually still the same one.



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Tragically, when enough people become those undiscerning cynics is when they're more likely to elect the worst of leaders. After all, while we should choose the virtuous, voters won't even look for such people if they think the virtuous can't exist.

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