INSIGHT ARTICLE NO. 5 · GOVERNANCE

Creating High-Trust Institutions

Trust is earned by institutional behavior, and it can be rebuilt the same way it was lost: through performance, transparency, and accountability, never through communications strategy.

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In 1958, when the University of Michigan first asked Americans whether they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right, 73 percent said yes, just about always or most of the time. The number peaked at 77 percent in 1964. As of September 2025, it stands at 17 percent, among the lowest readings in nearly seven decades of measurement.[1] Three generations of Americans have now grown up inside the decline, and the decline has become the background assumption of civic life: the government is presumed untrustworthy the way weather is presumed, as a condition rather than a judgment.

It is a judgment. That is the argument of this article, and everything follows from it. The long polling arc records the public grading institutional behavior over time, which means the arc can move in the other direction by the same mechanism it moved in this one. Trust is earned by performance, transparency, and accountability, and it is rebuilt by exactly those three, in that order. What cannot rebuild it is the thing institutions reach for first, which is communications strategy.

Reading the arc honestly

The descent has structure. The fall from the 1964 peak tracks a specific sequence of institutional behavior: a war whose official account diverged from its reality, a presidency that resigned in scandal, and the decades of episodic confirmation that followed. The brief recoveries are equally instructive. Trust climbed during the strong-performance years of the late 1990s and spiked after September 11, 2001, then surrendered the gains as performance and candor disappointed again.[1] The pattern reads the same in both directions: the public extends trust when institutions visibly perform and visibly answer for themselves, and withdraws it when they do not. Nothing in the arc suggests the public stopped being willing to trust. Everything in it suggests the public kept score.

The institutions that kept theirs

The same public that gives Washington 17 percent gives other institutions majorities. In Gallup's 2025 accounting, small business commands the confidence of 70 percent of Americans and the military 62 percent, and one of those two has held the top of the confidence rankings every year since 1989. Congress sits near 10.[2] The comparison is diagnostic, because the high-trust institutions share a behavioral signature rather than a sector. The citizen's experience of a small business is direct, performance-based, and accountable to the point of brutality: the shop that fails him loses him, and both parties know it. The military pairs visible competence with visible accountability, an institution that investigates its own failures, relieves its own commanders, and subordinates itself to civilian authority as a matter of founding doctrine. High-trust institutions are the ones the citizen can watch perform and watch answer. Low-trust institutions perform out of sight and answer, when they answer, in press releases.

> *Institutions live on moral capital accumulated across generations, and any single generation can spend it.*

Compounding, in both directions

Trust behaves like a balance: earned in small deposits over years, spent in large withdrawals in an afternoon, and compounding either way. A government the citizen does not trust cannot lead, because every act it takes is priced at a discount. Its assurances require verification, its programs meet preemptive resistance, its reforms are suspected of concealed motives, and every interaction turns adversarial, which raises the cost of everything government does, which further degrades the performance on which trust depends. The spiral runs downward on its own. Reversing it requires deliberate deposits, sustained past the point where anyone believes them, which is precisely why performance and accountability are the only instruments that work: they are the only signals expensive enough to be credible from an institution the public has learned to discount.

The founders assumed all of this, and built for it. The Constitution's separation of powers is an architecture of earned trust, a structural confession that men are not angels and that public confidence should rest on checks rather than character. Ambition counters ambition so that the citizen need not rely on anyone's virtue. Edmund Burke supplied the complementary insight: institutions live on moral capital accumulated across generations, and any single generation can spend it.[3] Together they define the conservative account of institutional trust. It is inherited, it is spendable, and the rule of law applied to the government itself, the state answering for its conduct under the same law it administers, is the root deposit from which all the others grow.

The objection worth engaging

The strongest objection to this account holds that trust in government is no longer about government at all. In an era of partisan sorting, the objection runs, the trust number mostly measures whose party holds power; polarized media guarantee that half the country hears every institutional act narrated as villainy; and therefore performance is beside the point, because no performance can penetrate the filter. The evidence for the objection is real: partisans' expressed trust does swing with control of the White House, and the swings have grown.[1] But two facts break the objection's conclusion. First, the partisan swings oscillate around a collapsed baseline; if partisanship were the whole story, trust would rotate between halves of the country rather than declining for everyone, and it has declined for everyone. Second, the military and small business hold majority confidence across party lines, inside the same media environment, through the same polarized decades.[2] The filter exists, and institutional behavior demonstrably penetrates it. What cannot penetrate it is messaging, which is the objection's accidental gift: it proves that the communications-strategy theory of trust is bankrupt, and leaves behavior as the only channel still open.

What earning looks like

The prescription follows from the diagnosis, and it is behavioral at every point. Perform, visibly: the citizen's trust in the whole is assembled from his encounters with the parts, the claim processed on time, the permit issued in weeks rather than seasons, and no institutional reputation survives a bad counter forever. Expose the score: publish performance honestly, including the failures, because an institution caught grading itself generously has spent more trust than the bad number would have cost. Answer for failure: identifiable officials, real consequences, and corrections announced as plainly as achievements, on the military's model rather than the press office's. These are the deposits. They are slow, they are compounding, and they are the only currency the account accepts. An institution that wants to be trusted has one path, which is to become trustworthy and be seen becoming it. The seventeen percent is a judgment. Judgments can be appealed, but only with evidence.

NOTES

1. Pew Research Center, Public Trust in Government: 1958-2025 (Dec. 4, 2025), compiling the National Election Studies, Gallup, and Pew trend: 73 percent in 1958, 77 percent in 1964, 17 percent in September 2025, with partisan trust tracking control of the presidency.
2. Gallup, Confidence in Institutions (June 2025 survey): small business 70 percent, the military 62 percent, science 61 percent, Congress approximately 10 percent; small business or the military has led the rankings each year since 1989.
3. The Federalist No. 51 (James Madison) (1788); Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790).

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