

# 1. Trust

What if, one morning, you woke up to find the person sleeping next to you was missing? What if parents rose to find their children gone or children clambered out of bed to find their parents absent? What if half of America simply disappeared?

On one day every four years, this disappearing act happens. Only half of Americans voted in the 1996 and 2000 elections, continuing a slow but steady decline in voting over the past half century. And that's the good news. In midterm elections, three-quarters of eligible voters routinely stay home.

It's easy to paint the millions of missing voters as self-sabotaging losers. It's a lot harder for us to critique an American political system that has itself been failing voters. In *Why Americans Still Don't Vote: And Why Politicians Want It That Way*, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward write:

Americans generally take for granted that ours is the very model of a democracy. Our leaders regularly proclaim the United States to be the world's leading democracy and assert that other nations should measure their progress by the extent to which they develop electoral arrangements that match our own. At the core of this self-congratulation is the belief that the right to vote is firmly established here. But in fact the United States is the only major democratic nation in which the less-well-off, as well as the young and minorities, are substantially underrepresented in the electorate.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, American democracy is highly overrated, not necessarily in its concept but in its execution. We pride ourselves on being a beacon of hope for the world. In reality, there is much we could learn from other democracies—if we want to change.

Piven and Cloward's subtitle says it all: many politicians don't want the system to change. The two-party system, the authors argue, is structured to play a game of "keep away" with voters and potential voters who want reform. Within the past century and a half, those underserved voters have included

women, poor Southern whites, and African-Americans. They were kept out of the system by restrictive and now-illegal methods including the poll tax and literacy tests; by political maneuvers that contained emerging third parties; and by outright voter intimidation. In fact, the authors go so far as to argue “the United States was not a democracy, in the elementary sense of an effective universal suffrage, during the twentieth century.”

Provocative. But even if you accept it—and how could you accept such a heretical statement?—those days have passed, right?

Alright, then: let’s take a look at the 2000 presidential election. According to that year’s U.S. Census, America had 281 million occupants. Not all were eligible to vote. Some were under the age of eighteen. Others were disenfranchised for being felons. Still more were not citizens.

And yet, this left a total voter pool of roughly 200 million. Officially, the 2000 election was decided by 537 votes. That’s the last legal count that tipped Florida into the Republican column, and thus the country into an electoral college, but *not* popular vote, victory for George W. Bush. The 2000 election was marred by error (dimpled, hanging, and pregnant chads), voter intimidation (African-Americans being asked for multiple forms of ID and being purged from voter rolls), media manipulation (the Republican party flew in congressional aides who helped storm the recount office in Dade County, Florida), and a conservative-led Supreme Court’s decision to intervene on behalf of George W. Bush.

Election 2000 was also a prime example of how every vote counts. Those 537 votes were one ten-thousandth of the total votes cast in Florida. They were two hundred-thousandths of the total votes cast in the United States. In visual terms, the votes that decided the presidency were the size of one tiny dot of ink on a billboard. Granted, that 537-vote margin may not have been precise. But it highlights the critical absence of the 76 million eligible voters who stayed away from the polls in 2000.<sup>2</sup>

Americans were already cynical about politics, and the 2000 election didn’t do much to reassure us. In 1966, fully 76 percent of Americans felt they could trust the federal government. That dropped to an all-time low of 21 percent in 1994, and has risen to roughly 40 percent today.<sup>3</sup> According to one 2004 study, most Americans—already cynical—didn’t get any more so after the 2000 election. But some groups are less trusting and more fed up. Independents, who often do not vote because they don’t like either major-party

candidate, are more likely to want new leadership in Washington. And between 2000 and 2004, African-Americans who thought "people like me don't have any say about what the government does" rose from 34 percent to 58 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Let's also be honest here: politics can be as boring as watching paint dry. It seems as if parties, politicians, and even political journalists go out of their way to make the issues seem obscure and your chances of affecting our country's future remote. Most of the time, when the government makes headlines, it's because something is screwed up—a corruption scandal, thousand-dollar toilet seats, or dirty campaigns. In our celebrity-saturated culture, politicians generally look and act extremely un-hip. (Shallow, yes, but it makes a difference.) And political events can be as white as Klan rallies. In my more than ten years as a political reporter, I've often been the youngest and brownest person in the room. Time passes; the faces stay the same. New blood is rare. Many of us have an almost instinctive revulsion when it comes to government. We're so turned off by its trappings that we can't bear to participate.

Good government relies on an implicit contract of trust. Citizens must trust politicians to create stable institutions and right-minded policies. In turn, politicians must trust the leadership (expressed, most of all, via voting) of citizens.

That contract of trust is broken. It didn't happen all at once. In fact, it traces at least as far back as the post-Civil War era called Reconstruction, when both political parties colluded to disenfranchise African-Americans and poor whites. In recent years, citizens have been pushed aside by the growing power of corporate interests in shaping policy. For example, the office of Vice President Dick Cheney is still fighting to keep secret what went on at special closed-door meetings with energy companies, including the failed energy giant Enron. The playing field has changed in the past century and a half but the fundamental issue has not: Americans need to have a citizen's basic trust in their government, a basic belief that, even if they do not always get what they want, their voice matters and can be heard.

The right to vote is something we now take for granted. But for much of our history, women, African-Americans, and other people of color were simply denied the vote. Once enfranchised, African-Americans in particular were barred from voting via new laws and physical threats. As the 2000 election illustrates, voter intimidation is not just a thing of the past.

Just as critical, the rise in the twentieth century of television-driven multimillion dollar presidential campaigns highlighted those campaigns' dependence on big donors. (Check out Charles Lewis's bestselling book, *The Buying of the President, 2004*, for appropriately gory details.) In order to win and keep winning, politicians have to get paid not only by us, the taxpayers who provide their salaries, but by the corporations and rich donors who fund their campaigns.

On a personal level, many Americans no longer expect their government to be accessible. When citizens do reach out to government officials, it's usually on the local level and runs along the lines of, "I have a pothole on my street and it needs to be fixed." There are much larger "potholes" in state and federal policy, but it's often difficult to reach out and get a response. In fact, the White House actually changed the design of [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov) in order to make it more difficult for citizens to email! The best way to reach political leaders has been and still is to form a coalition with like-minded citizens, something we'll discuss later in the book.

Finally, in order to trust that they can shape government, citizens need transparency. We need the ability to be able to see and understand the workings of government so we can make the best possible decisions. That's where the media comes in. Most government publications are written in, well, government-ese. So most of us rely on the news media to inform us about political decisions and events and even to help shape our opinions.

But in recent years, the media has devoted less time to "hard" news like political news. The political news that does make air is often filled with just as much jargon and gobbledegook as any government press release. And the rise of conservative media outlets including Fox News have made all the networks scramble to assess the tone of their reporting. This could have been positive if television media in particular had taken a fresh look at how they serve their audience. But political news has remained an insider sport. Most national political news comes from a handful of reporters and commentators. Their ranks do not come near representing the racial, gender, or even ideological diversity of the American people.

In order to reinvigorate American democracy, we will have to work on rebuilding our trust in government and our ability to shape it. The remainder of this book focuses on examining why this trust has corroded, then

highlights the ways in which innovators are trying to rebuild faith in America's political system.