

A second explanation might be called the Smith-Barney explanation (from their slogan, “we make money the old-fashioned way—we earn it!”): government is distrusted because it has *earned* the citizenry’s distrust. Vietnam and civil disorders, Watergate, stagflation and the Ayatollah, \$200 billion deficits and Iran-contra, Whitewater, Lewinsky—the list is long and implicates both parties. Political scientists have argued about whether the trust items reflect evaluations of the regime, or only particular office-holders, with at least some evidence for the latter.¹⁴ Surely government incompetence and malfeasance has something to do with the decline in trust, but, unfortunately, how much is impossible to say, given that we cannot measure such variables in any temporally comparable way.

Some observers think a third explanation is relevant either by itself or as a supplement to the first two. By objective standards American politics is no worse today than in earlier eras, but people may perceive it as worse because of increasingly cynical media that are relentlessly negative in their coverage of politics. Setting aside the first century and a half of American history, that claim seems to be true for the previous two generations or so.¹⁵ And it is at least suggestive that surveys regularly show people to be far more positive about their local schools, local environment, local race relations, and so forth than about their national counterparts, where their impressions must be based heavily on unrepresentative reports in the mass media.¹⁶

Quite likely each of the preceding explanations contributes to the decline in trust in government. But I propose still another hypothesis that is not inconsistent with the preceding ones: the rise of participatory democracy has contributed to the decline in trust. There are two components to this hypothesis—that participatory democracy has advanced, and that this advance has turned Americans off. The first claim is easy to document; the second requires a bit more explanation.

The Rise of Participatory Democracy

No one would claim that the United States today has anything approaching the kind of politics advocated by prominent participatory

14. Citrin (1974).

15. Sabato (1991).

16. See the data reported in “My Town, The Nation,” *Public Perspective* (July/August 1992): pp. 94–96.