

Turning Strangers into Political Friends

BY DANIELLE ALLEN

One study after another has reported declines in U.S. citizens' trust of their government and other institutions of authority since the '60s. Most recently the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center announced that, whereas 53 percent of U.S. citizens in 1964 thought "most people can be trusted," by 2002 only 35 percent of them thought so.

John Hart Ely wrote in *Democracy and Distrust* that the continuance of democracy depends on the meticulous cultivation among citizens of distrust in government. We should all, he argues, be so many jumpy watchdogs. On one level he's right. We citizens should cast a skeptical eye on all claims made by governing officials and hold them accountable for choices good and ill. But intellectual skepticism about policy is perfectly compatible with efforts to encourage citizens' trust of one another, and, more importantly, their trustworthiness in the eyes of others.

Trust in one's fellow citizens consists in the belief, simply, that one is safe with them. This trust can be registered cognitively, as when one believes that a particular fellow citizen is unlikely to take advantage of one's vulnerability; or it can be registered emotionally, as when one feels confidence, or a lack of fear, during a moment of vulnerability before other citizens.

When an election rolls around, citizens will cast a doubting eye on prospective representatives, but they can vote—that is, they participate in public institutions—only if they trust that the effects of the votes of other citizens, combined with their own, will not produce their political oppression. When distrust of one's fellow citizens pervades democratic relations, it paralyzes democracy; it means that citizens no longer think it sensible, or feel secure enough, to place their fates in the hands of democratic strangers. Citizens' distrust not of government but of each other leads the way to democratic disintegration.

When theorists argue that democracies are based on consent, they mean that the entirety of a democracy's legitimate strength and stability derives from the allegiance of citizens. That allegiance endures only so long as citizens trust that their polity does generally further their interests; minorities must actually be able to trust the majorities on whose opinions democratic policies are based. When distrust among electoral minorities endures over time and congeals, such that citizens recognize themselves as constituting a disaffected group, only four outcomes are possible: (a) distrust of the electoral majority will be dissolved and converted into trust; (b) the group will leave the polity; (c) the group will rebel against the polity; or (d) the group will be retained by repressive acts of state force. (When distrust flows in the other direction, and the majority distrusts the minority, there is the possibility that the minority will be expelled or eradicated.) The first eventuality—the conversion of distrust into trust—alone suits democratic practice.

Distrust can be overcome only when citizens manage to find methods of generating mutual benefit despite differences of position, experience and perspective. The discovery of such methods is the central project of democracy. Majority rule is nonsensical as a principle of fairness unless it is conducted in ways that provide minorities with reasons to remain attached to the polity. The central feature of democratic politics is therefore not its broad definition of citizenship or its ultimate dependence on majority rule, but rather its commitment to preserving the allegiance of all citizens, including electoral minorities, despite majority rule.

Would we join a club if we knew that all its policies would go against our own interests? No. Would we join if we knew that every vote would find us in the minority? We might, provided that we trusted that the majority decisions, despite our dissent, would still generally advance our own interests.

The central challenge for democracy is to develop methods for making majority decisions that, despite their partiality, also somehow incorporate the reasonable interests

of those who have voted against those decisions, for otherwise minorities would have no reason to remain members of a democratic polity. Without such methods, popular government cannot become a stable form of political organization.



Fossilized distrust indicates failure at this key democratic task of holding majorities and minorities together. The Southern "civil wars" of the '50s and '60s were contained because rebellious citizens turned their allegiance to the

national majority. Not all cases of fossilized division will erupt in civil war, but all will generate significant economic and psychological costs. People talk about "climates" of trust and distrust because high levels of distrust make life uncomfortable, even difficult, and require extra measures for basic survival, just as climates of excessive heat or cold do. Citizens who try to do business or conduct politics against a backdrop of distrust inevitably expend financial and psychic resources in maintaining protections against those in whom they have no faith. Worse still, in democracies that are marked by settled patterns of distrust, citizens develop modes of political behavior designed to maintain boundaries; such behaviors corrode democratic citizenship from within.

The recent presidential election results on a county-by-county basis were such that we can talk about red and blue counties—small geographic areas where a majority of the population voted the same way. Our habit, however, is to divide the nation into red and blue states. This formulation amplifies our sense of mutual difference and feeds distrust. More importantly—and this is a regular and inevitable side effect of distrust—it blinds us to who and what we really are.

None of this is to say that, given current levels of distrust, the end of the world is at hand. The United States is nowhere near an internal apocalypse. Rather, we are at a historical point where we have the time and the confidence of our successes to reorient our political practices in order to strengthen and prolong the democratic experiment. The framers of the U.S. Constitution devised institutions that went a long way toward avoiding the problem of radical distrust within a citizenry, but because the democratic project was so unprecedented, they were unable to identify those practices that might serve to actively dissolve distrust. That task has been reserved for us.

I do not argue for an institutional solution to distrust, but instead for new forms of citizenship that, when coupled with pre-existing liberal institutions, can encourage trust between citizens. To begin with, all citizens must see themselves as founders of the social institutions (churches, schools, universities, businesses and bureaucracies) with which they interact regularly. If a citizen sees the institutions of which he or she is already a part as a medium in which to exemplify the citizenship of trust-building, institutional reform will already be underway.

I do not argue that we should all just be friends, nor do I argue that each of us should seek some human commonality that binds us even to strangers, and base our relationships to them on that. Friendship is not an emotion, but a practice: a set of hard-won, complicated habits used to bridge differences of personality, experience and aspiration. Friendship is not easy, nor is democracy. Friendship begins in the recognition that friends have a shared life—not a "common" nor an identical life—only one with common events, climates, built-environments, fixations of the imagination and social structures. Each friend will view all these phenomena differently, but they are not the less shared for that.

The same is true of democracy. The inhabitants of a polity have a shared life in which each citizen and noncitizen has an individual perspective on a set of phenomena relevant to all. When considered at the political rather than the private level, it becomes apparent that these shared elements are made out of the combination of all our interactions with each other. We are all always awash in each other's lives, and for most of us that shared life, recorded as history, will be the only artifact we leave behind.

Political friendship begins from this recognition about what we share with the people who live around us and in the same polity. It moves from this recognition of a shared horizon of experience not to a blind trust in one's fellow citizens but rather to a second recognition that a core citizenly responsibility is to prove oneself trustworthy to fellow citizens.

The best way to begin winning this trust is to ignore the old warning, "Don't talk to strangers!" That is a lesson for four-year-olds. Eyes that drop to the ground when they bump up against a stranger's gaze belong to those still in their political minority. Couldn't we devise an education that, rather than teaching citizens not to talk to strangers, instead teaches them how to interact with them self-confidently?

Most of us take positive pleasure from living among strangers. They are, more often than not, a source of wonder to us, and wonder is (as Aristotle put it) the beginning of philosophy. Strangers help feed the human desire to learn. Nonetheless, strangers also raise fears that are sometimes justified; security is and always will be a real political issue. How should we handle it?

These days our instinct is to vote for more police or secret police, yet experience suggests that strengthened penal regimes destroy trust where it already exists. Any city-dweller knows that streets are safer the more they are occupied by ordinary folk, and in recent years urban planners, in order to encourage us out of our houses and back to interaction, have designed benches, fountains, lighting systems, maps and well-marked pathways, making spaces both inviting and easy to leave.

What is true of urban planners applies also to all democratic citizens. If we rely too heavily on police oversight to shape our public spaces, we fail at our jobs. We will have acquired modes of citizenship appropriate to a police state, and so will have undermined the very ideas of public space, and also of democracy. Like urban planners, citizens too have a panoply of instruments, other than policing, available for creating a public life worthy of a democracy. How can we now find modes for interacting with strangers that simultaneously enhance security and improve the quality of our interactions?

First, small steps can be taken to help achieve a basic sense of physical safety. An urban planner builds exit routes into public space, so an ordinary citizen can move through her world with heightened attentiveness

to which spaces are safe enough for talking to strangers. An urban planner tries to build watchful eyes into the background of urban space, so an ordinary citizen can develop greater sensitivity to who is where around him and to whether there are enough trustworthy eyes nearby to provide a safe opportunity for conversation with a stranger. One needs to display to strangers, as much as possible, that one is willing to give them the benefit of the doubt, and one must present oneself, too, as worthy of earning the benefit of their doubt. Democratic trust depends on public displays of an egalitarian, well-intentioned spirit.

Through interaction, even as strangers, citizens draw each other into networks of mutual responsibility. Engage a stranger in conversation as a political friend and, if one gets a like return, one has gained a pair of watchful eyes to increase the safety of the space one occupies. Engage a stranger in conversation across a racial, ethnic or class divide and one gets not only an extra pair of eyes but also an ability to see and understand parts of the world that are to oneself invisible.

Real knowledge of what's outside one's garden cures fear, but only by talking to strangers can we come by such knowledge. A direct approach to curing one's fear of strangers would be to try especially hard to engage in conversation with those strangers who come from worlds and places one fears.

I am no stranger to frightening personal attacks but have found ways of increasing my sense of security as I move about public spaces to such a degree that strangers are now for me a remarkable source of pleasure, and not fear. This personal self-confidence is one of the great rewards of claiming one's political majority by talking to strangers.

A political self-confidence is the other great reward of understanding that citizens have powers to affect their world that extend beyond their ability to dial 911. The cultivation of an ethos of political friendship depends on citizens' recognition of these powers, and their commitment to employ them, rather than police, to shape their environments.

As political candidates know, each interaction with a stranger plants the seeds of a

transformation, and therefore each of us already has far more political power within our grasp than we realize. All democratic citizens, even nonvoters, are already more engaged in politics than they realize.

The bills of federal and state legislatures are not the only laws that structure life. A host of publicly binding decisions—some written, others customary—arise from public institutions like schools, churches, media outlets and businesses to set the terms of our cohabitation. Political representation occurs not merely when Congress-folk gather. I recently heard a flight attendant ask "those lucky people in first class" to put away their footrests. Anyone who offers citizens narratives of who they are, how their political world works, and what its structuring principles are acts as a representative, and such representation is carried out not only in schools, churches and businesses, but also in newspapers, movie theaters and even airplanes. Our participation in assorted institutions, like our choices about what to read and watch and how to speak about ourselves, shapes our political world. Insofar as a commitment to political friendship might change our institutional choices and our communal narratives, it would also transform our politics.

Whether any one citizen who makes political friendship an individual habit will noticeably affect our political world depends entirely on that citizen's ability to imagine ways of extending her impact beyond her particular interactions with other citizens. When a citizen wishes to cultivate this new form of citizenship throughout the polity she is obliged to confront institutions once again. Institutions are ossified versions of particular patterns of human interaction, and they inevitably extend the reach and force of the cultural norms around which they are shaped. A shift in how people interact will inevitably also transform their institutions, just as when the snail changes direction, its shell turns too.

But the cultivation of new cultural habits is not the only way to reorient institutions. We can also reconfigure them through intentional policy. An institution constituted to amplify the effect of one set of norms in the world can be reconstituted so as to amplify another set of norms.

A citizen who wishes to extend the reach of her own practice of political friendship will have to engage with the institutions in which she participates. Do they act like political friends? If not, what might bring them closer to that ideal? All citizens who desire to live in a democracy that has slipped the shackles of domination and acquiescence must embody their idea of what a free people should be. This means pushing the institutions that one inhabits to embody this norm too, for they are extensions of our selves, as is the shell to the snail.

"Unless we continually explore the network of complex relationships which bind us together," as Ralph Ellison put it, "we [will] continue being the victims of various inadequate conceptions of ourselves, both as individuals and as citizens of a nation of diverse people." The adoption of the aspirations and techniques of political friendship by any of us, even individually, would have ramifying effects. And, happily, liberalism allows us to extend political friendship beyond local to national contexts. Wherever we move throughout our polity, we have opportunities to engage strangers in political friendship because strong institutional protections of rights free us to take risks on interactions that we could not otherwise afford.

The final test of whether we have managed to cultivate political friendship in our own communities is not how we treat the residents immediately around us, but whether a stranger to our neighborhood, any stranger also willing to act like a political friend, including strangers from beyond the nation's borders, could land there and flourish with us.

My utopia stands as a proposal to democratic citizens generally to develop their capacities for political imagination, particularly with reference to the strangers in their lives. The long-term ability of this democracy to convert distrust to trust is the reward.

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