

# Introduction

*Henry E. Brady & Kay Lehman Schlozman*

“So when we talk about Skid Row . . . there’s law enforcement agencies that have created a whole lot of trauma. . . .”

— President of Los Angeles Skid Row Neighborhood Council

“We have to have a level of trust just by looking at you [the police], walking, you know, observing you because you got a car, you got a badge, you got a gun.”

— Advocate for Skid Row

“We will get together and do a citizen’s arrest on every single human being that goes against freedom of choice. You cannot mandate, you literally cannot mandate, somebody to wear a mask knowing that mask is killing people. . . . And every single one of you [pointing at Palm Beach County Commissioners] that are obeying the devil’s laws are going to be arrested. And you, doctor, are going to be arrested for crimes against humanity. Every single one of you.”

— Witness at the County Commissioner Workshop on COVID Mask Mandates, Palm Beach County, June 23, 2020

“I voted early and it went well except for . . . can’t really trust the software, Dominion software all over.”

— Participant at the January 6th Demonstration for Trump, Interviewed at the Demonstration<sup>1</sup>

**S**hould we trust major American political, economic, and social institutions when the people associated with those institutions are fallible and even, on occasion, venal or criminal? Do they really operate as trustworthy tribunes of the people? The public is doubtful.

It is well known that trust in American government, especially in Congress and the executive branch, has been declining since the 1960s and 1970s: a period of social ferment, movements for political and social change, an unpopular war, and major government scandal.<sup>2</sup> What is less well known is that the erosion of trust seems now to have spread to many supposedly nonpolitical institutions, including business, journalism, science, police, religion, medicine, and higher education.<sup>3</sup> Concern about the reliability and competence of these institutions is stoked by

news stories— and, more recently, social media attention— reporting malfeasance on Wall Street, errors in the media, fraud and conflicts of interest among scientists, misconduct by police, abuse of children by clergy, conflicting advice from public health experts, and admissions scandals in higher education. Efforts as varied as vaccinating the American public against a raging virus, reforming police departments tainted by racism, validating a presidential election, and addressing climate change have been thwarted by distrust in institutions and experts.

The consequences of lack of trust depend not only on the level of trust and the range of institutions over which it extends but also on the extent to which the fault lines of distrust map onto other political, social, and economic conflicts. In a democracy, political parties function to organize social and economic conflict and make it relevant for politics. The extent to which party competition in the United States involves not just division but distrust has varied across history, but partisan distrust goes back to the nation's founding and the emergence of our first political parties. Jeffersonian Democrats vilified and distrusted "big government" Federalist John Adams when he became president. In turn, the Federalists distrusted Thomas Jefferson once he was in the White House. The culmination of this long history, partisan polarization is currently at its highest point in at least a century.<sup>4</sup>

Partisan polarization over the past half-century has produced significant mutual distrust between the parties. What is perhaps more surprising and more wor-

Central to our concerns in this issue of *Daedalus* are what institutions do and why trust matters for their success.<sup>5</sup> Although we can trace some governing, religious, military, medical, and educational institutions back thousands of years, the modern profusion and rationalization of institutions dates to the nineteenth century with the rise of corporations, universities, hospitals, public education, nonprofit organizations, philanthropy, and the professions in response to urbanization, industrialization, and specialization.<sup>6</sup> Scholars tell us that institutions structure, facilitate, and regulate behavior in particular areas of economic and social interactions, among them business, law, religion, education, journalism, the military, medicine, science, and policing.<sup>7</sup> In higher education, for example, there are formal rules and informal norms that vary across universities and across fields of inquiry that define appropriate ways of interacting with students, disclosure of conflicts of interest in conducting scientific research, treatment of evidence that disconfirms hypotheses, and recognition of the contributions of those who assisted with research. Similarly, policing has standards for the training of police officers, the methods used to patrol a city, rules for interacting with the public and with suspects, guidelines for the use of force, and review boards to examine force incidents. All institutions have special rules and procedures that order and discipline them so that they can provide goods and services to people in acceptable ways.

For institutions to be successful, these rules, standards, norms, regulations, training methods, and procedures must be seen as legitimate both by the stakeholders associated with them and by the public at large. Legitimacy can stem from four basic sources, and different institutions rely on different mixes of them.<sup>8</sup> Legitimacy may stem from the political system sharing its authority with an institution—such as the military, police, or a corporation—based upon government’s power of coercion to defend the nation, keep the peace, and to enforce contracts. As long as the institution conforms to the rules established by the government, it draws legitimacy from its relationship to the government in the form of laws or charters. Legitimacy may also come from adherence to professional codes of ethics that are shaped by what is culturally appropriate for each institution, for example, in the practice of medicine, religion, education, and science. It may reside in public opinion about how those in institutions behave, for example, in professional codes of ethics for law, medicine, religion, higher education, and journalism. Finally, it may come from the institutional environment, in, for example, corporations, science, or banks.

To be seen as trustworthy, an institution must be seen as legitimate in at least one, and usually more than one, way. For example, corporations are legitimate if they stay within regulatory frameworks and do not overstep their authorities by becoming monopolies or watering their stock; if they reflect the standard, cul-

turally acceptable practices for a corporation within a particular society by producing products that conform to cultural models and address cultural needs; if they adhere to the ethical and normative standards for businesses not only by eschewing bribery and other illegal practices but also by treating their employees, suppliers, and customers fairly and ethically; and if they produce an economically successful product. Failing on any of these dimensions risks a corporation's legitimacy, and hence its trustworthiness. Universities must also stay within regulatory frameworks and be financially viable, but evaluations of them are based more upon their cultural acceptability as centers of teaching and learning and their professional standards: their adherence to norms of free inquiry, freedom of speech, and seeking truth. Religious institutions must be especially attentive to their cultural legitimacy and their adherence to ethics and norms. Each institution holds or loses legitimacy according to its own weighting and mix of criteria.

Presumably, if an institution is trustworthy, then people are more likely to trust it, have confidence in it, and accept its advice and decisions as legitimate.<sup>9</sup> They expect that it will do the right thing in an uncertain future with respect to weighty matters that range from protecting their health and safety to providing them with information about public issues.

During the last three years, COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and election controversies brought into bold relief the importance of institutions to our health and well-being. Lack of trust in government, medicine, science, police, and election administration has made it difficult to overcome a pandemic, resolve concerns about public safety, and settle issues regarding an election. While the essays in this volume explore these issues in assorted contexts, a central theme is the challenge to institutional legitimacy given the overall decline in the public's trust and the polarization of that trust between Democrats and Republicans— at a time when we most need expertise and institutional capacity to face crises as one nation.

**O**ur confidence in institutions is based upon both what we know about them and upon what we know about how they know what they know. Using insights gained from the field of science and technology studies (STS), Sheila Jasanoff's essay, "The Discontents of Truth & Trust in 21st Century America," examines the relationship between knowledge and society. Her STS framework asserts that "it is not that expert institutions find and purvey truths from some 'outside' that exists independent of society." Hence "standards of epistemic correctness do not stand outside of politics but are configured through the same processes of social authorization as political legitimacy." The same four criteria that legitimate institutions— regulatory, cultural, normative, and pragmatic authority— also legitimate science and all knowledge. Despite the storybook version of science in which a better-performing theory bests an old one, in fact, what

often matters are such preexisting cultural factors as scientific paradigms or even religious beliefs, such normative concerns as the prestige of a researcher or the status of the methods that are used, and even such factors as the relationship of the researcher or research institute to power.

In order to develop commonly accepted knowledge, Jasanoff explains, societies develop “civic epistemologies,” which “are the stylized, culturally specific ways in which publics expect the state’s [or an institution’s] expertise, knowledge, and reasoning to be produced, tested, and put to use in decision-making.”<sup>10</sup> Doing so involves meeting three challenges: “ . . . . .” in the world (like

The drop in confidence in political institutions over the past fifty years has been especially pronounced for Congress, significant for the presidency and the executive branch, and more modest but real for the Supreme Court. Less well known are the declines in confidence in nonpolitical institutions. As with the political institutions, the declines have not been uniformly steep. Comparing the period from 1972 to 1979 with the period from 2010 to 2021 shows that average confidence has decreased for fourteen of these nonpolitical institutions, stayed the same for one (science), and increased only for the military. In most cases, the decline proceeded relatively steadily over time. Wall Street, TV news, banks, and the press sustained the most substantial deterioration in confidence—comparable to that for Congress. For public schools, medicine, television, business, and religion, the drop in average confidence was more moderate—comparable in magnitude to those for the presidency and executive branch. The decline in average confidence was even smaller for law, education, and the police—roughly equivalent to that for the Supreme Court. There were still smaller declines for higher education and labor.

In effect, nonpolitical institutions have moved from being trusted quite a lot to being trusted only somewhat. On a four-point scale with responses of “a great deal of confidence,” “quite a lot,” “some,” and “hardly any at all,” in 1972–1979, the American public expressed “quite a lot” of confidence in thirteen nonpolitical institutions. Just three institutions (labor, law, and television) inspired only “some” confidence. By 2010–2021, only six institutions—the military, science, higher education, police, education, and medicine—still enjoyed “quite a lot” of confidence, and ten institutions warranted just “some” confidence. Recent data suggest that Americans probably have only “some” confidence in higher education as well. Thus, Americans have gone from believing that thirteen of sixteen institutions deserved quite a lot of confidence to believing that only five of sixteen merit a lot of confidence, with eleven deserving only some confidence.

sult is largely driven by the substantial increase in confidence among the partisans of the more trusting Republican Party. The changes in trust for the four institutions related to the economy are about the same across the two parties, with little change in trust for labor but significant declines for Wall Street, banks, and business. Finally, confidence among political independents is either lower than that of both Democrats and Republicans or between the levels for the adherents of the two parties. The declines in trust among independents track quite closely those for the entire population.

These data reveal several different patterns of change for nonpolitical institutions. In some cases, changing confidence in a particular institution may be linked to a large-scale event with society-wide consequences; for example, across individuals and groups, a war might affect confidence in the military, or a financial crisis might diminish confidence in banks and Wall Street. In other cases, individual life experiences might have implications for confidence in a particular institution; for example, being the victim of police harassment or the victim of a crime might influence trust in the police. In a quite different pattern, a set of general nonpartisan forces— affecting independents especially strongly— produces an overall decline in trust in almost all nonpolitical institutions. Although different groups, including different party groups, vary in their initial levels of confidence in various nonpolitical institutions, such forces operate more or less uniformly across groups to diminish confidence in institutions. In a still different pattern, there is a partisan interaction. A set of factors leads to a decline in trust among members of one party or the other, depending upon the institution, resulting in polarization in confidence. The forces at work probably interact in complicated ways, and to understand what is going on, we must consider both the multiple forces that have led to a secular decline in trust and those that have led to partisan polarization of trust.

**T**hese changes are worrying, but are these data capturing something real? In her essay “Trustworthy Government: The Obligations of Government

highly correlated with an expressed unwillingness to have kin or friends pursue a career in or marry someone associated with that institution.<sup>14</sup> C. Ross Hatton, Colleen L. Barry, Adam S. Levine, Emma E. McGinty, and Hahrie Han demonstrate that lack of trust in science was related to unwillingness to follow public health guidelines during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that greater trust in local government was associated with willingness to follow local public health dictates. Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway argue that distrust in science is associated with rejection of policies to address climate change. Tracey L. Meares indicates that increasing trust in the police “is a better, more efficient, and lower-cost way to achieve crime reduction and law compliance.” Robert Wuthnow shows that trust in religion is a concomitant of church attendance. Max Margulies and Jessica Blankshain find that a proxy for trust—namely, “warmth toward the military”—is positively correlated with willingness to increase defense spending, to use force abroad, to employ more bellicose military strategies, and to evaluate wars positively. In short, survey data appear to be capturing something that is very real.

**W**hat then are the general factors that cause changes in trust for institutions? In his essay “What Does ‘Trust in the Media’ Mean?” Michael Schudson focuses on the centrality of changes in journalism, arguing that declines in trust follow from increasing journalistic skepticism about government easing omoat 52ournrJ 0.079T ott, Oieh, Oiee24 Tw -4.8227c -4.85227Td [(tions? In W)5



cent of Americans used the internet in 2000, half had broadband by 2007, half used social media by 2011, and half had a smartphone by 2013.<sup>15</sup> Although levels of trust began to erode in the 1970s, survey data suggest that, for many institutions, acceleration in the decline in trust and increase in polarization of trust took place at various times between about 1997 and 2020, as the internet became increasingly significant. Watershed events— among them, impeachments, 9/11, the rise of the surveillance state, prolonged wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the Tea Party, Occupy, and Black Lives Matter movements— also affected trust, but each was also in part shaped by the growing importance of the internet.

According to Rainie, the internet matters because “every decision a person makes about who or what to trust is a social calculation” so “there is deep intersection between changes in information and changes in social arrangements.” Consequently, “in the age of social media, the members of users’ personal and professional networks are key conduits of civic information and serve as key commentators on that information.” Perhaps because of the creation of these new and less familiar social networks and the concomitant damage to the media from the internet’s cannibalizing of its advertising, “Americans believe the civic information ecosystem is collapsing” and public confidence in social media is very low. Almost two-thirds of the American people believe that social media has a mostly negative effect on where the country is going, and three-quarters of Americans believe that political partisans do not operate in a shared reality or shared moral universe.

Still, it is worth noting, as our authors observe again and again, that broad expressions of distrust in major institutions get at only part of the truth about trust. As Rainie notes,

The same people who say they do not have confidence in the news media in general can also cite news operations they trust, which is often tied to the partisan composition of news organizations’ audiences. Republicans and conservatives particularly gravitate to Fox News, while Democrats and liberals say they trust multiple sources such as CNN, *Y*, PBS, NPR, and NBC News.

Robert J. Blendon and John M. Benson, meanwhile, tell us that, while Americans distrust medicine, they trust the nurses and doctors with whom they interact. And Charles Stewart III t Jh.1 Tftth as TRoberces  
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litigation. None of these is entirely effective as “insincere confessions [are] staged for media consumption,” investigative committees produce “toothless reports that languish in bureaucratic darkness,” and litigation “drags on for years before inconsequential penalties are levied.”

Meares, in “Trust & Models of Policing,” notes that despite their instrumen-

machinery following the 2020 election than they were in 2016,” Americans were also more polarized than ever before. Using data from 2000 to 2019, Stewart finds that a relatively consistent 20 to 40 percent of Democrats were very confident that “votes nationwide were counted properly” (with upticks after Democratic wins and downticks after Republican wins). In contrast, the share of Republicans who were very confident that votes were being counted properly sank from 60 percent in the aftermath of the contentious 2000 election, in which George W. Bush ultimately prevailed, to less than 20 percent in 2018. Moreover, after Biden’s victory in the 2020 election, while 60 percent of Democrats were very confident that votes had been counted properly, only 10 percent of Republicans shared this view.

The second paradox is that, regardless of party affiliation, voters are about 20 to 30 percentage points more likely to say that their own vote was counted correctly. These results suggest that different dynamics drive these two measures, “one based upon direct experience, and the other mediated by political elites.” We see similar patterns for other institutions in which closeness matters: doctors and nurses who provide medical care are trusted, but not the medical system; local governments are trusted but not the federal government; experience in the military or personal acquaintance with someone in the military increases overall trust in the military.

**H**ow and why does partisanship affect trust? It is easy to see why partisanship would be related to trust in government in the American system, in which the American presidency—the most visible symbol of the government—combines the role of head of state with partisan policy-maker, but it is harder to see why it should be associated with trust in nonpolitical institutions. One possible link is through partisan political campaigns to discredit them.

In “From Anti-Government to Anti-Science: Why Conservatives Have Turned Against Science,” Oreskes and Conway argue that probusiness conservatives have done just that for science because scientific findings about the negative impact of business practices on the environment and on public health threaten to limit business activity. Oreskes and Conway chart the progression of this effort. First, conservatives made the case that free enterprise was one of the foundations of American government, that economic freedom undergirded political freedom, and that governmental intervention in business undermined economic freedom. Ronald Reagan encapsulated this argument in his inaugural address in 1981, asserting that “Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem.” He later incorporated into press conferences such quips as “I think you all know that I’ve always felt the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m

itself. Third, the partisan divide over science was reinforced by the growing partisan divide in religious identity:

As the Republican Party has become identified with conservative religiosity— in particular, evangelical Protestantism— religious and political skepticism of science have become mutually constitutive and self-reinforcing. Meanwhile, individuals who are comfortable with secularism, and thus secular science, concentrate in the Democratic Party.

For Oreskes and Conway, the distrust in science is a spillover from conservative distrust and dislike of government.

Stewart also sees a concerted effort by Republican elites, especially Donald Trump, to discredit election administration by claiming that malevolent bureaucracies (“the deep state”) stole the 2020 election from Trump. In “American Trust in Science & Institutions in the Time of COVID-19,” Hatton and his coauthors find a decline in trust in science during the pandemic as many Republican leaders questioned the advice of experts. “With respect to differences in party affiliation, we find that Republicans reported consistent declines in their trust in science during the pandemic, while Democrats and independents remained relatively stable.” They find that “trust in local elected officials and local and state health departments has remained more immune from politics than other information sources.” Finally, Levi notes that the “ascendant populist parties around the world and Trumpism in the United States have self-consciously ‘weaponized distrust’ of government and indeed of many authorities, including scientific experts and technocrats.”

A different explanation for polarization is that the leaders of these “nonpolitical” institutions may actually be more partisan than in the past. A 2019 survey discussed by Brady and Kent found that respondents attached distinctive partisan and ideological perspectives to the people associated with many “nonpolitical” institutions. Highly religious people, police, bankers, and military generals are seen as typically Republicans, and college professors, journalists, labor union members, public school teachers, and scientists are viewed as Democrats. Only doctors and lawyers are considered to be, on average, neither Republicans nor Democrats. In follow-up work, Kent has found some evidence that at least some of the perceptions may be right. Since 1980, some professions have become more partisan in their political contributions in the same ways found on the surveys.<sup>17</sup> Yet even if there is substance behind these perceptions, we really do not know about how the public has come to these perceptions and why the partisanship of institutional leaders seems to matter so much in the formation of judgments about institutions.

We need a much better understanding of the forces that have precipitated the decline in trust and polarization in confidence. One approach is to look at the separate histories of the various institutions over the past fifty years. These histories have, no doubt, been part of the story. However, the overall erosion of trust

## *Introduction*

across multiple institutions and the partisan polarization of trust in most institutions suggest that we should look more widely for major social trends that have shaped these outcomes. Three such developments with broad social consequences immediately suggest themselves. One is the increase in economic inequality in America, which has been implicated in the decline of social trust between people, which, in turn, is related to other forms of trust.

done when half the population distrusts it? On the other hand, polarization suggests that the institution itself might need to rethink how it does its work.

More generally, rethinking the operation of an institution might be necessary whenever major groups in society distrust it. Nowhere is this clearer than in the deep distrust felt for the police by African Americans, and the persistently large gap between Whites and African Americans in trust in the police. As Meares and also Wu and coauthors point out, perhaps the problem is the wrong model of policing and the wrong standard for legitimating the police. “If the primary reason for public confidence in police was their effectiveness at crime-fighting,” Meares explains, “we would expect [given decreases in crime in the past thirty years] confidence to rise during that time rather than to remain flat. Moreover, we would expect that the group who received the most benefits of crime-fighting, Black adults, would register increasing ratings of confidence even accounting for low base rates.” The problem, our authors argue, is designing policing only with regulatory and pragmatic legitimacy in mind, while neglecting cultural and normative legitimacy. Effective policing requires attention to justice and fairness. Consequently, polarization of trust is a problem that requires a better understanding of how to legitimate an institution.

**W**hat can be done to restore trust? These essays propose several general strategies for ameliorating distrust. Jasanoff suggests that experts and institutions must get beyond trying to justify science, medicine, or policing based upon regulatory authority. They must get better at cultivating civic epistemologies—ways of justifying advice—that “give voice to diverse standpoints, aggregate disparate opinions to produce a measure of objectivity, and find persuasive ways to bridge the gaps between available and ideal states of knowledge.” Right now, one critical arena for improvement is criminal justice policy. Meares makes several suggestions for restoring trust in the police: better training in procedural justice; establishment of civilian boards with authority not only to review police actions but also to make policy; and the elimination of the legacy of institutional racism that underlies ill-defined vagrancy and loitering laws.

Levi as well as Oreskes and Conway propose that we need a “progovernment” narrative that convincingly explains how governments can solve problems and improve citizens’ lives—a point that is implicit in Stewart’s argument. Republican distrust of election administration demonstrates how hard that will be. That our election system, by and large, performs well and is worthy of trust is not sufficient to produce trust in those who see government as the problem and who listen to leaders who harp on that theme. Criticism of government has become a cultural meme that does not require evidence. Getting beyond the neoliberal perspective that minimizes government and enshrines market solutions requires inventing new and more acceptable ways to think about the social welfare state model. It

also requires ensuring that government can actually solve problems by modernizing and improving its performance. That is a formidable agenda.

Meares, Wu and coauthors, and others emphasize the importance of a social justice perspective in public administration to engender trust among marginalized groups. Modern public administration is already pursuing a more inclusive and justice-oriented path, but such efforts are in their infancy. On his first day in office, President Biden signed Executive Order 13985, “Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government,” which, with the Office of Management and Budget’s report on assessing equity, marked it as one of the federal government’s performance goals.<sup>21</sup>

There are also more specific suggestions. Blendon and Benson make recommendations for the field of public health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became apparent that the public knew very little about what public health officials do, and the media coverage of their actions did not match that of doctors and nurses in hospitals. As with all governmental activity, there needs to be more visibility for what government does and how it solves problems, but short of creating a hit television show with a public health officer as its protagonist, it is not clear how to do this. Blendon and Benson also suggest that there should be more separation of public health from partisan politics, but this must be done carefully. In many cases during the pandemic, public health officials could invoke sweeping emergency powers without political consultation, a strategy that, based upon Jasanoff’s analysis and recent work on failures of governance during the pandemic, may not succeed.<sup>22</sup> Ensuring that those who speak on behalf of science represent both parties might be useful, but it would require the development of new networks linking scientists with public health. Hatton and coauthors add another useful idea: because local governments are more trusted than the states or national government, public health outreach should involve local elected and appointed officials.

Certainly, the internet has exacerbated the problem of trust by creating so many diverse sources of information without mechanisms for assessing their accuracy or dependability. Rainie proposes a series of steps for creating trust in the internet. These include giving people more control of their data, changing “social media algorithms to downplay anger and divisive discourse,” finding ways to promote “accuracy, diverse perspectives, and pathways to agreement,” embracing more transparency by formal news operations and social media, reviving journalism—especially local papers—and creating new programs for digital and civic literacy. Finding a way to cope with the internet is another major project for our time.

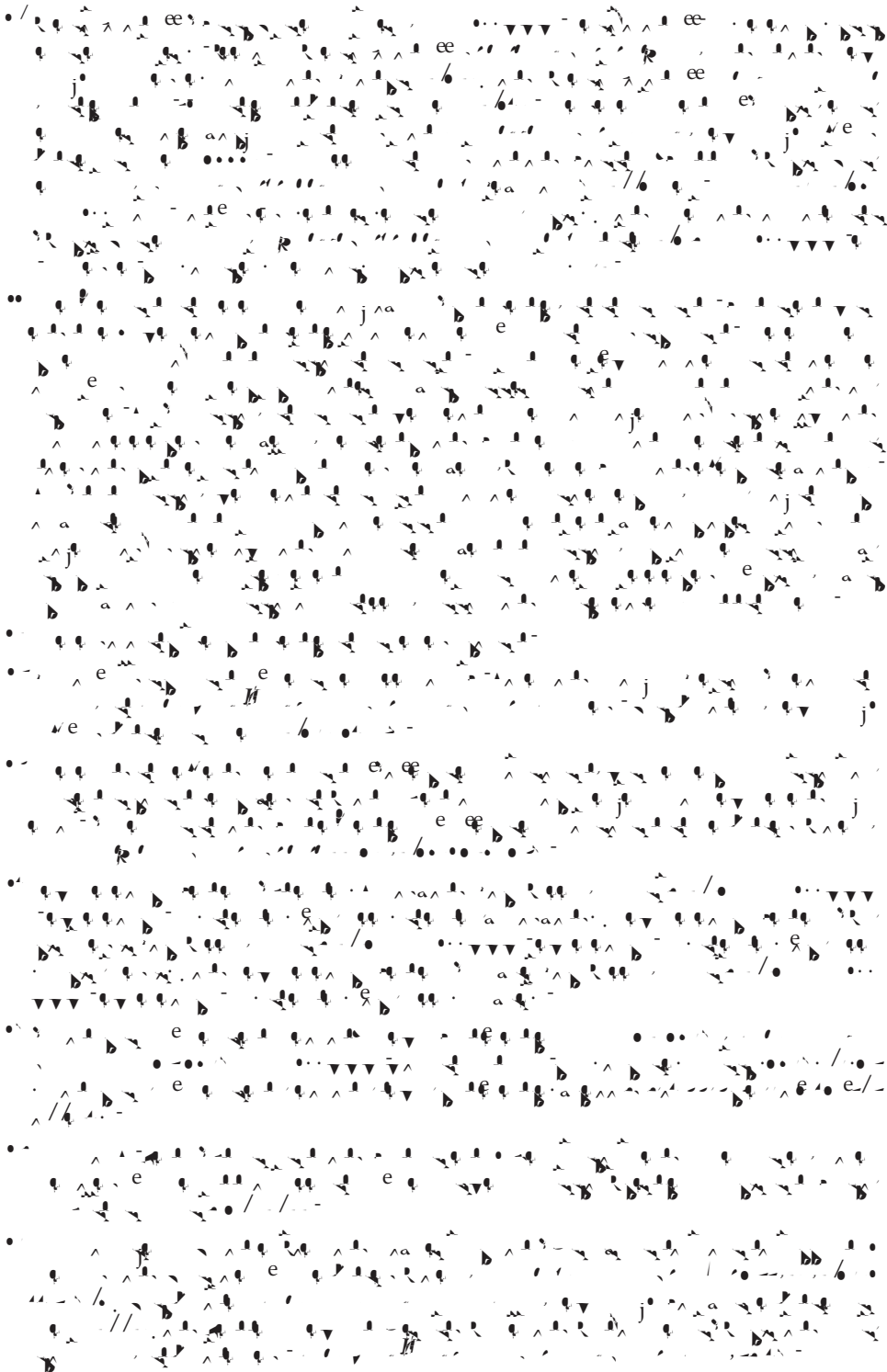
**C**an we restore trust? The agenda presented in this volume is daunting: develop new civic epistemologies, rethink how institutions (such as police) operate, reframe the role of government, improve the performance of government, and clean up the internet. As Rainie reminds us in his essay, our

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*Introduction*





*Introduction*

