

Earth to Democrats: Opportunity is Knocking

By Peter Montague (pm8525@gmail.com); draft of July 6, 2020

Why do Americans distrust their government?

In 1964, during President Lyndon Johnson's first term, 77% of Americans said they trusted government to do what is right "just about always" or "most of the time." Asked the same question in 2019, only 17% of Americans said they trusted their government. What changed?

In 1980, Ronald Reagan told us that "government is not the solution to our problem; government *is* the problem." Then Reagan's anti-tax sidekick, Grover Norquist, suggested we shrink government so small we could "drown it in a bathtub." The strategy caught on and the power elite began to bash government relentlessly. By 1996, even a leading Democrat like Bill Clinton would say "The era of big government *is over*."

Of course, the era of big government was *never over*. "Small-government" conservatives never shrank government. They simply turned its mighty power to their own advantage. They cut taxes for the rich, which made the rich richer. The theory was, as the rich got richer, their wealth would "trickle down" to the little people. In practice, it *didn't work out* that way. As the rich got richer, the middle class got a *smaller slice of the pie* and the poor *have gone hungry*.

Cutting taxes did something else: it reduced government revenue. Then came the argument, "To balance the budget, we've got to stop helping the undeserving poor – the "strapping young buck" supposedly buying prime rib with food stamps and those "*welfare queens*" supposedly driving Cadillacs. (The *racial dog whistle* has been a centerpiece of "small government" dogma *since the 1950s*.)

Next the power elite pushed for corporations to *take over government functions* such as public schools, water and wastewater treatment, prisons, even *social security*, and *the military*. So we entered *the era of privatization* – public assets worth hundreds of billions of dollars were handed over to private owners for pennies, another "small government" gift to the already-rich.

In the halls of power, the "small government" crowd pressed for new laws to allow capital to move freely everywhere in the world. To enable it, these "free-

market, small-government” advocates built the largest bureaucracy the world has ever known, all to **prevent elected governments** from imposing standards or restrictions on corporate behavior. Free movement of capital allowed corporations to send some of their operations overseas. Once jobs started moving abroad (or to Mexico), the corporate elite had a new baseball bat to beat their workers into submission. Workers lost bargaining power. Wages **stagnated** at 1974 levels. The corporate elite could keep more of the profits for themselves and **they did**.

So “small government” was never mainly about shrinking government. It was mainly about harnessing big government to make new rules to give corporate elites new leverage over their workers, customers, and communities – to help the already-rich get richer.

While some parts of government were harnessed to help the rich, other parts were allowed to shrivel – the parts intended to help ordinary people thrive. The budgets for health departments **were cut**. Job retraining programs **were cut**. Public transit – which carries ordinary people to where the jobs are – **was neglected**.

But now comes the reckoning. In the midst of a global pandemic, we all suddenly see that government has been **missing in action** when it was needed most. At this writing, the virus has killed about 90,000 Americans, up to 90% of whom might have been saved by **timely public health action**.

So this is why Americans distrust their government. The American people know what they want, and they’re not getting it from government. What they want is a government that works for ordinary people. **Large majorities** still believe government should play a “major role” in keeping everyone safe, healthy, educated, and able to pursue happiness.

Even before the pandemic, a smashing 89% of Americans said public health **plays an important role** in their community. In December 2017, 87% **told the Pew Research Center** that government should have a “major role” in “ensuring safe food and medicine.” And three-quarters favored a “major role” for government in protecting the environment (76%), “maintaining infrastructure” (75%), and strengthening the economy (75%). Fully two-thirds said the government should have a “major role” in “ensuring access to quality education” (68%), “setting standards for the workplace” (65%), “helping people get out of poverty” (67%) and “ensuring access to health care” (69%).

A political party that promised to do these things could win elections. And a political party that actually *did* these things, could retain its popularity and power far into the future. Earth to Democrats: opportunity is knocking. It's time to answer.