

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 52

Article 20

September 2017

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Recommended Citation

Ringenberg, Thomas (2017) "Loss of Trust: How Did We Get Here? How Do We Move Forward?," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 52 , Article 20.

Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol52/iss1/20>



Loss of Trust: How Did We Get Here? How Do We Move Forward?

By Thomas Ringenberg

I study one of the least liked and trusted groups in American society, the U.S. Congress. A June 2016 Gallup poll measuring confidence in key societal institutions put the number of Americans with “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in Congress at 9 percent. This is a 10-point decrease from the already low 19 percent in 2006. Our other national institutions, the (Obama) presidency and the (8 member) Supreme Court fared slightly better with 36% expressing confidence. The full table from the Gallup study is found right.

It is not unusual to see Americans weary of government. The culture of individualism in our democracy is a key feature of our identity. It is perhaps no surprise that 9 in 10 lack confidence in Congress and 2 in 3 lack confidence in the presidency. But what do we make of the 4 in 5 Americans who distrust televi-

sion news and newspapers? What about our justice system? Doctors? Public schools?

In months since President Trump’s election, we have seen alarmists’ responses, and these are understandable. But I don’t want to be an alarmist here, and you should not feel that temptation either. Distressing facts need not be considered existential threats. As individuals committed to Jesuit pedagogy, we must strive to understand as we act to transform, to be “contemplatives in action.” We must consider our place in the structures and institutions of American society. We must also consider the emotions and motivations of those we encounter.

If you are reading this article, I’m sorry to say that you are likely a part of the elite that a number of Americans feel threatened by, distrust, or just simply dislike. The authority of our medical community

on the necessity and safety of vaccines is challenged. The authority of scientists who study genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or global warming is challenged. The wisdom of professors, the usefulness of the liberal arts, and the worth of college education generally are questioned. Our once authoritative media is now derided as “FAKE NEWS” and the “enemy of the American People” by our president. But it is not just politicians, scientists and journalists. In that Gallup poll on Americans’ confidence, organized religion saw a larger drop than newspapers, Congress, and television news.

President Trump, in my opinion, represents the inevitable appeal of a populist candidate in an era of increasingly anti-elitist sentiments. The traditional gatekeepers of knowledge, resources, and power generally are now open to examination themselves. What we (again, sorry to throw the reader under the elite bus) have historically considered wisdom may no longer be sacrosanct for our students and the public at large. The conclusions of the scientific community, the ethics and methods of journalists, the multicultural

foundations of American society, and the necessity of public goods from “Sesame Street” to “Meals on Wheels” are now on trial.

What role do institutions of higher learning have in this environment? If we are to be “Sanctuaries for Truth and Justice” as this issue of *Conversations* asserts, how do we foster rational discourse and a welcoming space?

The values of Ignatian conversation provide a useful guide. In Ignatius’s presupposition, he argues that every good Christian should “be more ready to save his neighbor’s proposition than to condemn it. If he cannot save it, let him inquire how he means it; and if he means it badly, let him correct him with charity.” As we encounter perspectives that we find repulsive, we must seek to understand the appeal of those ideas. When we encounter propositions that are meant badly, we must work to rebut those ideas with empathy. Importantly, Ignatius does not assert that these propositions should be left unchallenged.

We must consider how we challenge ideas, opinions, and the occasional “alternative fact” that are in

opposition to our values of truth and justice. But, the scholarly community and religious institutions are viewed with some of the same skepticism as are the president and Congress. It may be that we are the ones called to justify our propositions, our research, our philosophy, or our worth. Can we respond to these challenges in an Ignatian manner?

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Table: Many Institutions Lost Ground in Last Decade

Percentage with “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the institution:

	June 2006	June 2016	Difference 2006 to 2016
	%	%	pct. pts.
Military	73	73	0
Police	58	56	-2
Church or organized religion	52	41	-11
Medical system	38	39	+1
Presidency	33	36	+3
U.S. Supreme Court	40	36	-4
Public schools	37	30	-7
Banks	49	27	-22
Organized labor	24	23	-1
Criminal justice system	25	23	-2
Television news	31	21	-10
Newspapers	30	20	-10
Big business	18	18	0
Congress	19	9	-10

Gallup poles, June 1-4, 2006, and June 1-5, 2016