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# Falling Faith: How Nixon Created Trump

“The major problem—*one* of the major problems, for there are several—one of the many major problems with governing people is that of whom you get to do it; or rather of who manages to get people to let them do it to them.

To summarize: it is a well-known fact that those people who must *want* to rule people are, ipso facto, those least suited to do it.

To summarize the summary: anyone who is capable of getting themselves made President should on no account be allowed to do the job.

To summarize the summary of the summary: people are a problem.”

~Douglas Adams, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*

### Falling Faith: How Nixon Created Trump

The 2016 election is a unique and unpredictable race, perhaps unprecedented in history. Republican frontrunner Donald Trump, a successful businessman, has never held any political or military office, elected or otherwise. Many people considered it unfathomable that a non-politician could ever be this close to the presidency today, but this status proved to be a key component to Trump's popularity. Americans today dislike politicians and particularly distrust the federal government, and Trump's supporters believe that putting an outsider in charge will fix the country. These anti-government sentiments date back to President Richard Nixon, who resigned from office in 1974 after lying about covering up the break-in at the Watergate Hotel to steal the Democrats' strategies and win in the upcoming election. Richard Nixon's betrayal of the American people caused a growing distrust in government and anti-establishment sentiments towards the presidency, prompting future presidents to run as "Washington outsiders," thus allowing Donald Trump to be a successful presidential candidate today.

Antiestablishmentarianism mainly results from political partisanship, economic failures, and a dissatisfying government. Over the past 40 years, public approval of the federal government has been declining. Today, 19% of Americans trust the government "all or some of the time," while 74% think that public officials do not have the public's interests at heart, and 55% think that anyone else could do a better job.<sup>1</sup> Distrust in government spikes during recessions, stagflation, and other economic struggles.<sup>2</sup> 60% of Americans think that the government needs "major reform."<sup>3</sup> Partisanship affects politics because people trust the

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<sup>1</sup> Elving, Ron. "Poll: 1 In 5 Americans Trusts The Government." *NPR*. National Public Radio, 23 Nov. 2015. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson, Derek. "80 Percent of Americans Don't Trust the Government. Here's Why." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 19 Apr. 2010. Web. 10 Apr. 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Elving

government more when their party is in the White House. For example, in September 2008, 83% of Republicans trusted the executive branch and only 14% of Democrats did, but in 2009, only 26% of Republicans trusted the executive, in contrast to the 95% of Democrats.<sup>4</sup>

These factors contribute to a distrust in the federal government, but this discontent has been brewing over the past few decades, and can be traced back to Watergate. This affair was the first major moment in most people's memories when Americans realized that any position of government—including the presidency—can be inhabited by politicians who will betray the trust of American citizens. When this scandal broke out, the public's confidence in the government was shattered, and every government error since has contributed to this displeasure.

People trusted the government much more before Watergate. While government approval has fluctuated throughout history, the average percent of people who trusted the government between 1958 and 1972 was 64%, and peaked at 77% in 1964.<sup>5</sup> During this period, a few decades after President Franklin Roosevelt ended the Great Depression, the government worked to improve American life. Programs such as President Johnson's Great Society had helped people think that the government could actually solve their problems because they were able to raise the standard of living and put people on their feet. However, trust fell near the end of the decade as people found a credibility gap between the government's optimistic messages about the Vietnam war, and the bleak truths the media revealed; the people demanded that America pull out, but to little avail.

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<sup>4</sup> Newport, Frank. "Americans' Trust in Legislative Branch at Record Low." *Gallup.com*. Gallup, 10 Sept. 2009. Web. 13 Apr. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2015." Pew Research Center for the People and the Press RSS. People Press, 22 Nov. 2015. Web. 28 Mar. 2016.

During the Watergate drama, people lost faith in the presidency. In October 1972, trust in government was at 53%, and by December 1974, it was 36%.<sup>6</sup> Nixon had lost support of most of the country and nearly all of Congress, and was likely to be convicted by the Senate, but he stepped down on August 9, 1974; his resignation speech was viewed by millions of Americans and broadcast by every network until early the next morning.<sup>7</sup> For some, his decision to resign meant that the Constitution had succeeded in taking down a tyrant, but others thought that Nixon had gotten off easy, and that he should have faced the punishment he had deserved.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Nixon left office, and was replaced by Vice-President Gerald Ford.

The 1970s had many government gaffes and struggles that disillusioned the American people, and trust in the government plummeted. From then to November 1980, trust in government averaged at 33%, peaking at 36% in October 1976 and was lowest at 27% in March 1980.<sup>9</sup> To start with, the American people had not elected their new president. Nixon had appointed Ford to be his Vice-President in the middle of his administration, so when Nixon stepped down, Ford had become the only person to hold both the presidency and vice-presidency without being elected by the people. This unique situation gave him a shaky start; as he said in his swearing-in speech, "I am acutely aware that you have not elected me as your President by your ballots, and so I ask you to confirm me as your President with your prayers. And I hope that such prayers will also be the first of many."<sup>10</sup> He started off strong enough, but one month later he pardoned Richard Nixon for his crimes against the country, and Ford's approval rating fell

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Kaufman, Dave. "Nixon Resigns in Historic Primetime Farewell." *Variety*. N.p., 9 Aug. 1974. Web. 29 Mar. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Fishman, Kenneth. Telephone interview. 16 Mar. 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Pew

<sup>10</sup> Ford, Gerald. "Gerald R. Ford's Remarks Upon Taking the Oath of Office as President." Swearing-In of Gerald Ford. Washington, D.C. 9 Aug. 1974. *Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library and Museum*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

from 71% to 49%.<sup>11</sup> Ford's pardon made Americans further resent the presidency, and he lost his re-election in 1976 to Jimmy Carter, the former governor of Georgia, who had run as a "Washington outsider" who had not been corrupted by the federal offices people had grown to despise. Since then, every president has campaigned as a someone untouched by Washington. Barack Obama is the first elected president since Johnson to have served in Congress, while everyone else had only been a governor and not served at the federal level in Washington (George H. W. Bush *had* served as Vice President, but he lost re-election).

In the years that followed Ford, the United States suffered economic stagflation, overpriced oil, and, above all, a government that mishandled these situations. The 1973 oil embargo made the price of oil in America (by modern standards) rise from \$10 per barrel to \$40 per barrel in just a few months, and again in 1979, after prices recovered, it jumped from \$40 to \$80.<sup>12</sup> These oil crises led to stagflation that hurt the economy: the average unemployment rate during the 1970s was 6.21%, with a low of 4.9% in 1970, and a high of 8.5% in 1975; the latter half of the decade had unemployment rates of 5.6% or higher.<sup>13</sup> Amidst all of these qualms, the American people felt that their government was either not trying hard enough to solve their problems, or that it was clearly too incompetent to do so. Jimmy Carter addressed this malcontent and "malaise" in his 1979 "Crisis of Confidence" speech, when he expressed, "Our people are losing that faith [in progress], not only in government itself but in the ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy."<sup>14</sup> He continues: "I have

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<sup>11</sup> Perlstein, Rick. "Watergate's Most Lasting Sin: Gerald Ford, Richard Nixon, and the Pardon That Made Us All Cynics." *Saloncom RSS*. Salon, 8 Sept. 2014. Web. 29 Apr. 2016.

<sup>12</sup> "CBC News Indepth: Oil." *CBC News Indepth: Oil*. Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 18 Apr. 2006. Web. 01 May 2016.

<sup>13</sup> "Databases, Tables & Calculators by Subject." *Bureau of Labor Statistics Data*. United States Department of Labor, n.d. Web. 02 May 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Carter, Jimmy. "Crisis of Confidence." 15 July 1979. *PBS*. Web. 27 Mar. 2016.

seen the strength of America in the inexhaustible resources of our people. In the days to come, let us renew that strength in the struggle for an energy secure nation.”<sup>15</sup>

However, Carter’s words of attempted encouragement actually angered the American people: they felt he blamed their American values for the issues at hand, rather than assume the responsibility himself. This dissatisfaction of government management led to Ronald Reagan winning the 1980 election. Reagan considered the government a flawed machine, and encouraged voters to reflect on how badly the past four years had fared for them as workers and citizens.<sup>16</sup> Voters chose Reagan to undo the mess that Carter had created. In his inaugural address, Reagan asserted, “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time, we have been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. But if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?”<sup>17</sup> Reagan’s words reminded the people that America was a country *of* the people, *by* the people, and—most importantly—*for* the people, and inspired them to put power back into their hands and not the government’s, fueling anti-establishment ideals.

In his eight years as President, Reagan instituted tax plans and other reforms with the hope of stimulating job growth and helping the economy. Instead, unemployment ranged from 9.7% (1982) to 5.5% (1988), averaging at 7.48% and steadily declining after 1983.<sup>18</sup> Liberals

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Reagan, Ronald. "Reagan's Closing Statement." Jimmy Carter-Ronald Reagan Presidential Debate. Cleveland. 28 Oct. 1980. *Reagan Library*. Web. 2 May 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Reagan, Ronald. "Ronald Reagan's Inaugural Address." Ronald Reagan's Inauguration. Washington, D.C. 20 Jan. 1981. *The Avalon Project*. Web. 2 May 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics

found Ronald Reagan to be an inept president who did not know what he was doing. Reagan's administration also suffered through a number of scandals, such as the Iran Contra affair. As the affair went on, citizens felt that they had not received the truth. Confidence in Reagan had started to recover by August 1987, shortly before Reagan apologized for what had happened, deeming it a blunder rather than taking responsibility himself.<sup>19</sup> Trust in government during Reagan's administration ranged between 39% and 45%, with an average of 42% in his final two years.<sup>20</sup>

President Bill Clinton's administration saw then-historic lows, which did not help restore faith. Trust during his administration ranged from 19% in 1994 to 42% in 2000, with an average of 29% over the eight years; this number steadily rose from the beginning of his tenure to the end, with some fluctuation throughout.<sup>21</sup> The Clinton Presidency was rife with scandals, such as the Whitewater controversy and the infamous Monica Lewinsky affair, which involved Clinton being impeached for lying under oath. However, the Lewinsky scandal does not appear to have significantly affected people's trust in the presidency. Research by political scientist Arthur H. Miller indicates that most Americans considered his actions immoral, but were able to "differentiate a private act from a public concern."<sup>22</sup> The affair, rather than hurting people's trust in the government, may have weakened the President's ability to work effectively in his final years, which might have fed anti-establishment sentiment. Nevertheless, the vast majority of

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<sup>19</sup> Wines, Michael. "President Apologizes for Iran-Contra Role : Says He Needs No Protection From Truth." *Los Angeles Times* 13 Aug. 1987: n. pag. *LA Times*. Web. 4 May 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Pew

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Miller, Arthur H. "Sex, Politics, and Public Opinion: What Political Scientists Really Learned From the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal." Diss. U of Iowa, 1999. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 32.4 (1999): 721-29. *Iowa Research Online*. Web. 30 Mar. 2016. 728

people who thought that Clinton should leave office because of his affair were Republicans, and probably wanted that anyway, as partisanship is often a cause for antiestablishmentarianism.<sup>23</sup>

Trust in government abruptly surged in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In January 2001, trust was at 44%, but it reached 54% in October 2001, the first time since Watergate that trust was higher than 50%.<sup>24</sup> In this time of tragedy, people turned to the government for strength and support, because “Trauma and war bring out communal solidarity and remind people of why we have government.”<sup>25</sup> However, that approval quickly declined, as George Bush led the country to war in Iraq and expanded federal powers of the government in his counterterrorism measures, much to many Americans’ dismay. The end of Bush’s presidency was also met with economic struggles. During the 2007 recession, unemployment rose from 4.6% in 2007 to 9.6% in 2010.<sup>26</sup> These hard times left many Americans dissatisfied with the efforts of the government. Trust in government fell during Bush’s presidency, ending at 25% with an average of 36%.<sup>27</sup>

In the past decade, a handful of grassroots movements have fought the growing and failing government, including the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street, which mainly ran between 2009 and 2013. The Tea Party emerged at the end of the last decade to push for lowered taxes and reduced federal spending. The Tea Party supported the elections of many victors during the 2010 and 2012 Congressional elections, including Ted Cruz, who beat the Lieutenant Governor for the nomination by fourteen points.<sup>28</sup> Cruz had never held elected office, but with his

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid 723

<sup>24</sup> Pew

<sup>25</sup> Stille, Alexander. "Suddenly, Americans Trust Uncle Sam." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 03 Nov. 2001. Web. 11 Apr. 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics

<sup>27</sup> Pew

<sup>28</sup> Huey-Burns, Caitlin. "Tea Party-Backed Cruz Wins Texas GOP Senate Race." *Tea Party-Backed Cruz Wins Texas GOP Senate Race*. Real Clear Politics, 1 Aug. 2012. Web. 05 May 2016.



anti-establishment ideals and fiscal conservatism, he was able to win over the state. Cruz's victory energized the Tea Party to work harder in more states and replace other establishment politicians.<sup>29</sup>

Occupy Wall Street, meanwhile, protested income inequality and the influence of money in politics. Protesters were concerned with the fact that the one percent richest Americans collectively hold 43% of the nation's wealth, and the top five percent holds 72% of the total wealth.<sup>30</sup> The average annual income of the "99%" is \$51,000, while the average annual income of the "1%" is \$717,000, while the net income of the 1% is \$8.4 million—70 times as much as the lower classes.<sup>31</sup> Protesters believed that this disparity was the result of a rigged capitalistic system that makes social mobility unfairly difficult, and that lower classes should have better opportunities than they do. Along with income inequality, people protested the rich's political influence. The 2010 Supreme Court ruling *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* effectively allowed those who are wealthy enough to pay for advertisements that benefit candidates, who then may provide favors for these people. A 2014 study by Princeton scholars found that policies preferred by "economic elites" and interest groups were significantly more likely to be adopted than policies preferred by citizens.<sup>32</sup> In other words, those who are supposed to be represented are not being represented. Representatives are supposed to be loyal to their constituents, not the wealthy, and by breaking this trust, politicians lose the support of citizens.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Dunn, Alan. "Average America vs the One Percent." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 21 Mar. 2012. Web. 05 May 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Gilens, Martin, and Benjamin I. Page. *Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens*. Princeton Scholars, 2014. Web. 5 May 2016. 573

This information explains why the government frustrates older adults, but teenagers and young adults have a slightly different excuse. Millennials did not grow up during most of these scandals, but they grew up with the results. For their whole lives, politics has been an abysmal reality show, full of name-calling, unproductive bickering, and the occasional government shutdown. They have grown up in an era where politics looks so negative that root canals, Genghis Khan, and Nickelback are held in higher esteem than Congress.<sup>33</sup> To Millennials, America has seemingly been at war with itself over petty issues. Politicians constantly complain about the various groups in America threatening the country, while the media—particularly shows like *The Daily Show*, widely watched by young adults—then report on how ludicrous and hypocritical these claims (and politicians) are.<sup>34</sup> Young adults see politicians as people who care more about winning a job than doing it, ignore the concerns and needs of citizens, and are liars who cannot get anything done.<sup>35</sup> Right now, the Democratic frontrunner is a woman with a reputation of flip-flopping on issues to appease voters and who has been under a federal investigation, which does not inspire a feeling of integrity in politics. In short, it is not that today's youth distrusts the government. They simply hate politics. Watching political scandals has not shaped their viewpoints, but living in the fallout has given them a solely depressing perspective.

Regardless of where their discontent comes from, the vast majority of Americans are done with their dysfunctional government. It has consistently proven to be inefficient and incapable of the duties it has. Every president has promised to reel back the inefficient “big

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<sup>33</sup> Lawless, Jennifer L., and Richard L. Fox. *Running From Office: Why Young Americans Are Turned Off to Politics*. New York City: Oxford UP, 2015. Print. 12

<sup>34</sup> “Scorn in the USA”. Perf. Jon Stewart. *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Comedy Central, 18 Oct. 2011. Web. 5 May 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Lawless 1-3

government,” and each has failed. Many people believe that ‘politics as usual’ does not work, and the country is on the wrong track.

Enter Donald Trump. In his candidacy announcement speech, he reminded citizens of the failures that the government has caused, adding, “Well you need somebody because politicians are all talk, no action. Nothing’s going to get done. They will not bring us, believe me, to the promised land. They will not.”<sup>36</sup> Trump speaks his mind without political repercussions because he has not been touched by Washington, and this resonates with voters who agree with what he says. Like Reagan had in 1980, Trump has pointed out how the government has hurt the citizens, and encourages them that they need an outsider to fix Washington. People have grown to view the establishment as an entity that works against their best interests, so they have turned to candidates outside of the establishment, namely Trump, as well as Ben Carson, Bernie Sanders, and Carly Fiorina. Trump has always been a popular candidate, pulling into the lead in the middle of the summer, steadily climbing well above the other candidates, reaching double-digit leads, and finally becoming the only member of the race in May.<sup>37</sup> By not following the status quo and separating himself from the flaws of past politicians, Trump made himself a highly successful candidate in this election cycle.

Richard Nixon’s actions not only made the American people distrust *him*. They lost faith in the presidency and government as a whole institution. In the 42 years since the Watergate scandal, people have viewed the government as a bane on American life, causing more problems than it has solved. Americans have become frustrated, disillusioned, and angered by their

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<sup>36</sup> Trump, Donald J. "Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential Announcement." Trump Tower, New York City. 16 June 2015. *New York Daily News*. Web. 5 May 2016.

<sup>37</sup> "2016 Republican Presidential Nomination." *RealClearPolitics - Election 2016 - 2016 Republican Presidential Nomination*. Real Clear Politics, n.d. Web. 05 May 2016.

incompetent government, and no longer trust it the way they had before. This distrust has run so deep, America is now close to electing someone without political or military experience to hold the highest office in the country, because an outsider in politics has now become preferable to the establishment. Richard Nixon destroyed and altered the status quo of politics and government.

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