*“As for me, I see no such great cause why I should either be fond to live or fear to die. I have had good experience in this world, and I know what it is to be a subject and what to be a sovereign. Good neighbors I have had, and I have met with bad; and in trust I have found treason.”*

In her 1586 speech to Parliament, a speech laced with ambiguities in response to Parliament’s petition to have Mary Queen of Scots put to death, Queen Elizabeth I stalls for time. Elizabeth’s reluctance to endorse Parliament’s request for Mary’s execution may be less a reflection of her concept of justice or love for a distant cousin than fear of subordinating the prerogative of a sister sovereign to the desires of a feisty legislative body.

The history of the episode is fascinating, but it is the last phrase of the quotation that fascinates our salon.

According to *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Tenth Edition, 1998), “Treason is the betrayal of trust.” Several, maybe all of us, would have guessed the same. But then a question arises, “What is trust?” The same dictionary provides an answer, but, I think, a rather unsatisfactory one, “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something.”

The most careful reader might wonder, then, whether the term “assured,” which conveys certainty, is used properly. If certainty is inherent to the term trust, then something is indeed amiss because certainty itself must have been betrayed, and the betrayal of that particular term suggests that certainty hadn’t existed at all in the first place – or if it had, it was improperly constructed, perhaps by a fool. Yet, Elizabeth was no fool. Nor do I think the Merriam Webster staff would have had fools in mind when drafting and propagating its definition.

Another possibility is that the Merriam-Webster gang merely provides us a positive definition, not a normative one. That is, the staff assigns no notion of desirability to the definition of trust. In other words, the “character” to which the definition refers could be heavenly or just as easily sordid. The ability of the “trusted” person could be limitless or very limited; strength could be just as easily described as weakness; and truth could just as easily be nothing more than an adherence to what a person believes to be truth – in her or his own mind. There is no objective truth necessarily, maybe only subjective truth, subject to the experiences and values and perspectives of the judge.

In this respect, one might suggest that, to use the most squalid of examples, Hitler was trustworthy. People could rely upon him. He had some impressive abilities (although admittedly some glaring weaknesses as well), he was a strongman, and he acted in a way that he apparently thought was consistent with truth. Or take a less egregious example. I know a senior officer in the navy who I “trust” to do anything and everything that serves his own selfish purpose. In that sense, I “trust” him at the same time as never wanting my child or anyone’s child to have to serve under him; nor am I happy that the allocation of a portion of the national budget or that the well-being of Marines and sailors are subject to his decision-making.

You may think that I have a cynical approach to the idea of trust, but if I do, so also does the United States legal system. The idea of trust in a legal sense is illustrated at length in *Black’s Law Dictionary*. One of the definitions refers to the noun, trust, as a legal agreement to form a combination of firms or corporations, especially ones that threaten to reduce competition. In fact, the legal system includes a slew of so-called “anti-trust laws.” Clearly, many people do not accept that the term “trust” conveys all that is good.

But, of course, the most common use of the term is one that conveys much that is good. Countless generations of parents have urged countless generations of children to make certain that they “trust” a potential spouse before deciding to walk down the aisle. And, in the business world – the private sector, government, and military – “trust” is generally viewed as either a positive force for good or a necessity attribute for good order and discipline. Some amount of trust is thought to be needed to execute even the most pedestrian of business transactions.

So, we may be able to accept that there exists a spectrum of formulations for what we mean by “trust.” I hope that the readers of this short paper will join me in talking about the definition of trust. Whether or not you feel that you have the corner on the understanding of “trust,” please do share. We, after all, are all friends or colleagues interested in elevating political discourse. So please be assured that you can trust those gathered tonight!

**Modeling for a Robust Understanding of Trust**

I propose for consideration a trust model (on page 3) that I have adapted for our purposes from “An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust,” that three academics provided to the canon of management literature more than two decades ago.[[1]](#footnote-1) As the name of the original model suggests, the authors intended that the model apply to organizations. My adaptation includes a feedback mechanism that was not proposed in the original model, and I apply the model to individuals and collectives of individuals in a political context.

My expectation is not that all participants will accept the model outright; rather, I hope that the model serves to help us to determine a workable definition of trust – one that might help us to speak descriptively and prescriptively about declared candidates for public office or those we wish would declare their intent to run! For our discussion, a political candidate or a potential candidate is called a “trustee” – a person to whom others might want place their trust, while members of the voting public, those wanting to place their trust in others, are referred to as “trustors.”

The model clarifies that the trustee can build trust with trustors only if indeed (s)he has – as personal attributes – the factors of trustworthiness: ability, benevolence and integrity. The definitions of each term are not universally accepted, so this paper proposes the following. Ability refers to competence and willingness of the trustee to assert that competence. Benevolence, reasonably translated to mean charitableness towards others, implies that the trustee’s values are essentially aligned with the trustors’ values or maybe, more to the point, to the values that reflect the ideals of the United States. Integrity means that the candidate is honest and is consistent in thought, purpose and action.



Having the desired traits, however, is not enough. A candidate who personifies the attributes or factors of trustworthiness will not be trusted unless (s)he is rightly perceived as embodying those attributes or factors. The perceptions, in turn, are shaped by outcomes – results people observe of a trustor either benefitting from or suffering from having trusted a trustee. Thus, a political campaign will need to make extensive use of past examples where the trustee exhibited her or his ability, benevolence and integrity to benefit trustors.

As the model also shows, no matter how robust the campaign or how well the trustee herself or himself is able to communicate her or his trustworthiness, (s)he is unlikely to be trusted if the voting public harbors a very low propensity to trust. Here again, the way to increase trustors’ propensity to trust is through generating and publicizing favorable outcomes. Trustors’ propensity will increase as they witness successful outcomes that result from providing whatever initial degree of trust they might afford a candidate.

Overcoming the low propensity to trust in government or in anyone having been in government or in anyone campaigning to govern represents an enormous challenge for two reasons. First, delivering outcomes takes time; people’s impatience may get in the way. To counter that problem, a political candidate may need to identify matters for which (s)he can deliver a couple of quick victories if elected – even if those victories are rather modest. The second problem may be more difficult to resolve. The second problem is cultural.

Americans’ propensity to trust is at rock bottom. *The Economist* magazine reports that polls indicate that the government is the least trusted institution.[[2]](#footnote-2) Cynicism reigns, and public office holders have themselves added to the cynicism that breeds distrust. We need only consider the words from the early 1980s that pronounced “government is the problem.” That statement fertilized the idea that continues to cultivate criticism today. We now often witness candidates for political office belittling the very institutions they endeavor to join. [[3]](#footnote-3)

Finally, the model also includes the notion of risk. The idea of risk – or being vulnerable – gives context to the model since neither trustworthiness nor any of the personal attributes or factors would be important if the trustor had nothing to lose. In other words, if there is no vulnerability, no risk involved in a relationship, the trustor has no reason to care whether a trustee is indeed worthy of trust. More starkly, the trustor would have no need to trust anyone. The model and the concepts it conveys just wouldn’t matter.

Existential or future risk also presents the candidate a possibility of illustrating her or his trustworthiness. A candidate who can communicate risk in a way that the plurality or majority of Americans understand – in a realistic, not sensational way – might have a great advantage in an election. Doing so exhibits ability because a realistic articulation illustrates an analytical grasp of the nature and magnitude of conditions. Avoiding sensationalism also illustrates integrity, as the American people tend to, over time, recognize fact from fiction. They recognize and appreciate unvarnished truth. A relevant articulation of risk also implies benevolence since the candidate would, by definition, need to articulate the nature of the risk in terms of how the risks imperil citizens’ values – and the hopes, dreams, or aspirations that stem from them.

Finally, Mayer, Davis and Schoorman propose a definition of trust that might serve as a fundamental point for us to absorb and to mull around for discussion. They say that trust is…

*“… the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other party will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.”*

Questions that spring forth might include…

1. Is the definition of trust that Mayer, Davis and Schoorman represent an improvement over the Webster dictionary definition (offered on page one of this essay)?
2. Do you trust the newly elected political figures?
3. Are the Democratic candidates for local or state wide offices for 2017 trustworthy?
4. Does the trust model herein help to determine and articulate whether you might trust a particular candidate?
5. Might there be any cultural changes we can make to enhance people’s propensity to trust Democrats?
6. Could a candidate benefit from using this model as a mechanism to shape her or his campaign?
1. “An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust,: Roger Mayer, James H. Davis, and F. David Schoorman, *The Academy of Management* Review, Vol 20, No. 3 (Jul., 1995), pp. 709-734 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The Economist’s “The World”* in 2016, pg. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is interesting to note that Washington, Madison and Franklin, each of whom harbored doubts as to the viability of the “American experiment” and each of whom despised any number of their fellow founding fathers, took care to avoiding voicing doubts in public. Nor did they publically belittle opposition candidates or policies, as they believed doing so would breed cynicism – the death knell of a republic. Feely is researching this matter as there is some uncertainty as to which three Founding Fathers for the description (e.g. Perhaps Jefferson, rather than Madison, is one of the three.). The sentiment, however, is factual. Our political ancestors understood the danger of criticism and cynicism as dangers to the republic. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)