After the Fact | The State of Trust, Facts, and Democracy

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TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc, host: It's a new year, an election year, by definition a year when voters are going to make some serious decisions. Well, here's a data point for you—the Pew Research Center reports that 59 percent of people in this nation say they have little or no confidence in the wisdom of Americans in making political decisions.

Welcome to After the Fact. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. That 59 percent is our data point for this episode and it comes from a growing body of work from the Pew Research Center on the state of trust, facts, and democracy in the United States and around the globe. The center's president, Mike Dimock, is here to tell us more about what they've learned.

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Dan LeDuc: We have lots to talk about today. But I think maybe the most basic thing to start with is, what is the Pew Research Center? A lot of our listeners are going to see references to the research center's work in the news media and may not really know how it works and what it does.

Mike Dimock, president, Pew Research Center: We do research across the U.S. and around the world. Our focus is on understanding people, what they're thinking, how they're living their lives, where they're moving, what sort of pressures they're facing. And we do it without any agenda.

We don't take policy positions. We don't advocate for any outcomes. We're completely nonpartisan. And our goal is to provide a foundation of information on which people can better understand how to navigate their lives, and by which decision-makers can better have grounded facts on which to make policy or business decisions.

Dan LeDuc: You have a pretty broad range and ambitious agenda of what you look at. But about two years ago, you started looking at trust, facts, and democracy. Boy, talk about ambitious, and foundational. What prompted that emphasis and focus?

Mike Dimock: Well, that's always been in the DNA of the organization. Our founding document describes the need for this kind of information as a plumb line for democracy, to really understand what people are doing and thinking and prioritizing, so that others aren't telling us what we think and feel. But what prompted us to double down on that theme over the last few years are a confluence of forces: increasing partisanship and divisiveness that seems to be creating an inability of government to function on the will of the people, changes in the technology and media environment that seem to be accelerating challenges to citizens becoming informed, and a really long, pervasive period of mistrust in politics and institutions, even creeping into a mistrust of the electoral process itself, that seemed to combine into a point where all of those things we've been tracking for decades seem to be doubly important, in terms of how democracy's functioning.

And I would only add that there's a global perspective to this. None of these are America-specific problems. They are happening and expressing themselves in different ways around the world, whether it's Brexit or Hong Kong or Eastern Europe or Latin America.

Dan LeDuc: But we're seeing these strands also sort of coming together and intertwining, which sort of exacerbates the effects. So how did you get started? What did you want to be sort of the initial piece of this to send out the word like, we're looking at this?

Mike Dimock: Well, a couple of pieces. One was really trying to understand how are citizens navigating a more complicated information environment, and how comfortable do they feel navigating information from misinformation, and how well can they separate factual statements from more opinionated statements. Because our observation has been that, all of that is getting more blended together in the information we're getting. If we're online, facts, opinions, misinformation can all be circling in together. And we, as the consumer, have to curate it ourselves and separate it all out.

And so we did a couple of pieces really focusing on understanding people's news and media environments, how social media is an integral part of how many of us are getting our news and information, and then looking further into how well people could read different statements in the news and really discriminate between which of those were an expression of an opinion or a viewpoint and which of those were an expression of a factual, checkable statement, that could be validated or verified as true or false rather than a matter of opinion. And to be honest, while most of us feel pretty good at our ability to do that, we don't actually do that well, sometimes.

And a lot of it is shaded by our partisan priors. We will look at a statement and assert it's factual in this, if it's an opinion that we agree with. And if it's an opinion and we disagree with it, we'll assert that it's factually incorrect, even if it's just a matter of opinion. And so, there are a lot of ways in which we're trying to be a part of a larger field of study in academia that's looking at

motivated reasoning and how individuals really have difficulty navigating and curating information today.

Dan LeDuc: So, we're looking at trust, facts, democracy. Let's turn to trust. What changes have we seen in Americans' trust in their institutions, be it the media, be it their government, be it each other?

Mike Dimock: Yeah, one of the motivating factors for us was looking at public trust in government. It's one of the longest trends in public opinion in the United States. It goes all the way back to the 1950s. And we've been in a very long period of deep distrust in government, fewer than 20 percent—in our latest survey, 17 percent—saying that they trust the government in Washington to do what's right all or most of the time. When that question was first asked in the '50s, it was 74 percent or 77 percent.

Dan LeDuc: Wow.

Mike Dimock: It was very lopsided the other direction. Now, there's a long history of American politics that you can track, the rise and fall of American trust in our government. But this long, now almost 15-year stretch of deep, deep distrust is something that's really unique. We've never seen it before. And we wanted to sort of get behind it and get to a better understanding of what that means.

Dan LeDuc: Dive into that a little bit. Do Americans distrust the government overall? Or is it more finessed than that?

Mike Dimock: It is more finessed than that. It's actually an interesting story. It's not an ideological turn against government, that we want government to be small or do less. In fact, one of the other long trends in American polling history is, would you prefer a government that's bigger and does more things for people, or a government that's smaller and does fewer things, and Americans have been 50/50 on that for a long time. And that hasn't really moved significantly. So it's not like there's been an ideological turn against government that is what this mistrust is about.

And it's also not a jaundiced view of the government's ability to perform. Most agencies of the government get positive ratings.

Dan LeDuc: Even the IRS?

Mike Dimock: Yeah, even the IRS, is one of the catchy findings there. More people have a positive than negative view of how those agencies are performing and doing their jobs. And in

fact, we asked about 12 different areas of government performance, from things like food safety to education to helping people in poverty. In all 12 areas we asked about, the majority said it was important for the government to take action. And in 11 of those 12, the majority said that the government was doing a pretty good job.

So the performance isn't actually the issue either. So what is it? It's really about the electoral process and the elected officials. Now, Americans have a long history of cynicism, in a way, about elected officials. You can watch "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." This is a classic part of the American psyche. But it has really intensified in this period, the sense that elected officials' sort of moral compass and values are really misaligned. And the crux of that is mistrust and a cynicism, in a way, about the way our electoral process works.

Dan LeDuc: And that would then sort of cut across party lines, people just sort of— it's a pox on all their houses?

Mike Dimock: Exactly. It's one of the few things Democrats and Republicans agree on.

Dan LeDuc: Is that right?

Mike Dimock: Right.

Dan LeDuc: OK, I'm not sure if that's good news or bad news. So what are, again, some of the numbers there? This is directed at members of Congress, this is directed at how we choose them?

Mike Dimock: Right. It's both, right. So members of Congress are seen as beholden to other interests than the public interest, worried more about their own careers than they are about serving the public interest. Again, a lot of those are longstanding concerns, but they've been intensified.

I think what's really turned is the public's confidence in the way we select our officials. One factor in that is the role of money in politics. Now again, that's been around. But the focus on it has really intensified, in the sense that the political process is really dominated by where money's coming from and who's got the most of it. And so they really see that as sort of an element of why they don't feel that the elected officials are really connected to the public's interest.

Dan LeDuc: People have expressed mixed views of trust in our American institutions, so go a little deeper. Where are people putting their trust and where are they not?

Mike Dimock: Sure. Well, if elected officials are at one end of the spectrum of trust—very, very low—that isn't necessarily an across-the-board disregard for all institutions. So some institutions that still receive a lot of public confidence are the military, police officers, and scientists, public school administrators and leaders, religious leaders. Universities are still held in generally high esteem.

The media has shifted downward, public confidence in the media. I think that partly reflects that, quote, "the media" is a much vaguer term than it's ever been.

Dan LeDuc: That includes a lot of things, yeah.

Mike Dimock: But secondarily, it's become the most polarized institution, along partisan lines, today—76 percent of Democrats saying that they feel they can trust what they hear and see in the media, only 30 percent of Republicans saying so. We're seeing greater polarization around many of these institutions. Even things like scientists and the military are more polarized today, with, in the military's case, Republicans more confident, in the scientists' case, Democrats more confident. But in general, still, you have majorities expressing confidence in a number of institutions of politics, as well as many agencies of the federal government itself.

Dan LeDuc: What about how we view each other? We hear that this is the harshest partisan time ever. Is it so?

Mike Dimock: Well, yes. And I think one of the more disturbing trends—and it actually focused our minds on a lot of this research—that we've seen is how confident we are as citizens in our fellow citizens to make informed decisions.

Dan LeDuc: Right, we're sort of all in this together, right? Yeah.

Mike Dimock: And if you really don't think the public is capable of making effective decisions, then you really have a concern about democracy, right? And that's what we've been finding over the last decade or so. In the last survey we did, 59 percent of Americans say they don't feel confident in the wisdom of the American people to make informed decisions in political decision-making, a majority. And that's a new thing.

When we were asking that question in the '90s all the way through 2007, the majority were saying that they did have confidence in the root wisdom of the American people to make decisions about politics. So the share expressing that confidence fell from 64 percent when we first asked it in 1997 to only 34 percent in our most recent studies. So that is sort of troubling, because we don't feel we can trust each other to make good decisions. And then our confidence in the electoral process is really weakened.

Dan LeDuc: Are your questions on that subject very geared to sort of the electorate as a whole, as opposed to sort of, do I believe my neighbor, do I believe another individual? I'm just curious on what people might be thinking when you ask that question.

Mike Dimock: It's a good question, because it could be the aggregate or it could be at an individual level. And I would say it's a little bit of both. And I think there are two factors that are driving that concern about the effectiveness of our electorate, our body politic, let's just say. One is, and you mentioned it, increasing partisan polarization, the sense of distance we feel from people of the other political party today is far, far wider—so the way Democrats view Republicans and Republicans view Democrats. And therefore, we really feel like we have less in common with each other than in past eras.

Another factor of it is a little more individualized, which is, people are really concerned about the implications of a changing information environment on people's ability to be informed. What we were talking about earlier, this idea that there's so much misinformation out there, there's so much blending of opinion and fact, that people really doubt their fellow citizens' capacity to really become informed and not be misled or not be drawn aside. And so we both have concerns about how individuals are navigating information, as well as concerns about this divisiveness in our society and sense of distance from the other side.

Dan LeDuc: We talked a little bit about the actual ability of Americans to discern fact and opinion. But what about what they think of the current media environment? What do they think of what they read on social media? Do they believe it? Is it considered credible to them? Because for many, that is a big source of their news these days.

Mike Dimock: It is. It's a growing source of news. More people get news on mobile devices than even on laptops. That's how far we've gone. It's not just a matter even of computers anymore. And what that means is, news and information is not only blended in the news category, opinion and news is sort of mixed together, but it's all mixed together with everything else we're learning about our families and about our neighborhoods. It's just all kind of blended together. And we're curating and sorting it out at an individual level.

People, while they're getting more news and information that way, they do express a skepticism about it. If you ask people, "can you really believe everything you see on social media," they say, "no, of course not." So they do approach the information that they're getting in that environment with a certain amount of skepticism. And that's maybe a good thing, healthy skepticism.

What actually is somewhat concerning is, it may actually be more cynical than it needs to be. So we found that 51 percent of us say that we often come across information that's not fully

accurate online. I see that and I go, “OK, that’s actually probably fair.” Because things move fast. You may see information that hasn’t been fully vetted. The internet is a mix of —

Dan LeDuc: Yeah, there’s credible sources. There’s people who are just throwing stuff out there.

Mike Dimock: Right. And sometimes it takes a while for the truth to emerge. But 32 percent say they’re often coming across information that is completely made up. So people are feeling like they’re exposed to completely misleading misinformation on a regular basis. A majority of us are saying that’s happening to us at least sometimes, with 32 percent saying it’s happening often.

Now, there are a lot of people who have looked at the volume of information circulating in social media and other places. I don’t think any of them peg the volume of misinformation as that high. So at that point, I think healthy skepticism almost is turning into a cynicism about the quality of information that we’re exposed to. And more importantly, while we feel fairly confident that I, as an individual, can sort that out, we don’t feel that confident that our fellow citizens can sort that out. We think other people are easily misled and can get confused by that. And if you think the prevalence of misinformation is that high, and you doubt your fellow citizens’ ability to navigate that, your confidence in the electoral process is really, really undercut.

Dan LeDuc: Because of course, we want people to sort of be able to discern the false stuff that just gets out there. But if this cynicism gets so high, they’re also going to reject the factual stuff that’s out there, the stuff that we all need to agree upon in a democratic society.

Mike Dimock: Right. And since there is no centralized source of authority of that information, everybody is curating it on their own more and more, that becomes even more of a challenge.

Dan LeDuc: You asked a lot of specific questions, but are there other ways to get people to express their views?

Mike Dimock: I’ve been talking about this topic for a number of years. So this year we asked more of an open-ended question. We said, “look, all in all, do you think public confidence in the political process can be improved or not?” And 84 percent said, yes, we think this can be improved. So I thought, OK, there’s something good.

So then we said, “well, how?” And we just left it open-ended, and we let people express their view of what could be done to this. I have to say, the answers didn’t consolidate around some

simple fix. People's responses covered a whole lot of different topics and themes. But I think they centered around a couple, in particular.

One, I think there is, in a way, more public willingness to really consider reforms in the political process than maybe there have been in the past, whether it's changes in the electoral process or changes in government, how our government is structured. We haven't had a constitutional reform in America for decades. But we're hearing more of the public willing to really rethink some principles.

And another thing that people really expressed to us is, they recognize that the only way to get past this partisan divide is to start to talk to each other again, whether it's at an individual level. When we asked people, what would help rebuild our public trust, our trust in each other, one of the more common answers is, we need to talk to each other more.

Dan LeDuc: A big topic that we've been talking about, and your agenda is not over. Where do you go next to try to expand on these three big points?

Mike Dimock: Yeah. Well, it is an election year coming up. And that really brings a lot of these issues to a head. And so we've got a couple projects going on in the U.S. related to the election. One is called "Pathways to Election News," where we're really looking deeply at people's information environments. We're really getting a deep rostering of how we're getting news and information about the election.

And then we'll be looking at individuals and re-interviewing them, occasionally, over the course of the election to understand what's rising in their attention. What are they paying more and less attention to? What do they see as priorities? What are they believing, in terms of news and information, and how much that's being shaped by the information environment they're in.

I think another area for us though is to continue to think about it through a global lens. So we're doing a really deep project right now in the U.S. and the U.K. to try to understand how people's identities, partisan identities, national identities, are interplaying and shaping the way they look at politics and the way they look at their societies and their futures. And we'll be doing one of our largest global studies this year in 50 countries, really looking at how people see their country's role in global affairs.

Dan LeDuc: Mike Dimock is president of the Pew Research Center. Thank you.

Mike Dimock: Thank you very much.

[Music plays.]

Dan LeDuc Our thanks to Mike Dimock and the Pew Research Center. If you are interested in learning more, visit pewtrusts.org/afterthefact, to read the center's reports and survey results. And if you're interested in nonpartisan, data-driven conversations this election year, subscribe where you get your podcasts.

For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.

Female voice: "After the Fact" is produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts.