

Restore Trust in National Security Institutions

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For some time, trust in U.S. democratic institutions has been declining. Unfortunately, the mishandled response to Covid-19, ongoing racial injustice issues, and disinformation leading to the political insurrection that attempted to overturn the 2020 election results have seemingly worked to verify some individuals' suspicions that the U.S. democratic system is irrevocably broken and either unwilling or incapable of consistently meeting the needs of all Americans. Lack of faith in democratic systems also undermines trust in national security institutions, including intelligence, military, and homeland security entities: institutions that strongly rely on public partnership for successful outcomes but have not always prioritized initiatives specifically aimed at increasing public trust.

There is an immediate need to rebuild and sustain public confidence in democracy and in U.S. national security institutions, and that, in large part, starts by elevating civic education as a national security imperative.

Q1: What are some primary drivers to declining public trust in national security institutions?

A1: First, [many believe](#) that democratic institutions in general are putting partisan or personal considerations above the public interest. National security institutions are not immune from this perception. For example, in recent years, polarized political discourse, including from within the executive branch and Congress, raised questions about whether political considerations influenced how and where these institutions [collected intelligence](#) and when they chose to act on intelligence. Norm-breaking precedents set by our nation's leaders have also raised concerns that security decisions may have been warped or that institutions were [deterred](#) from engaging in the robust interagency coordination needed to protect the nation. [Inconsistent responses and recent security failures](#) have helped fuel variations of this narrative. The undermining of oversight mechanisms in the executive branch and the increase of partisanship in congressional oversight committees have compounded these concerns.

In addition to concerns about politics warping decisionmaking, some in the United States are concerned that our national security institutions are not capable of protecting the public from today's threats. Bad actors are growing more adept at taking advantage of gray-zone tactics—including malicious cyber activity—to undermine trust in and to directly attack democracies like the United States. While our national security community is extremely competent and should be well-positioned to take on these new world challenges, communicating that strength and preparedness is difficult when the threats seem unmanageable and are constantly evolving.

Q2: What role does disinformation play in eroding trust in our national security institutions?

A2: At a basic level, disinformation can undermine trust in any institution. Successful disinformation narratives often incorporate kernels of truth, making misleading and exaggerated claims appear authentic and reliable. These

stories—which often originate domestically and are amplified by foreign adversaries—attempt to paint U.S. institutions as *irrevocably* broken, not just flawed and needing reform, and to further fears that our institutions act on bias or are inept. Considering the ways our institutions rely on public cooperation and participation to maximize security, these intentionally distorted narratives aimed at undermining confidence in national security institutions are very dangerous.

But information operations are not just about the spread of inaccurate information; other types of attacks that highlight vulnerabilities can also enable an information campaign. For instance, the recent SolarWinds hack targeting federal institutions could be, in part, a way to further narratives pushed by the Russian government. The breach not only raised concerns about our government’s competence, but may also enable hack-and-leaks of sensitive materials, or facilitate other operations designed principally to further undermine trust in our national security institutions.

Q3: Why is there an urgent need to increase trust in national security institutions?

A3: Today’s crises require significant trust between the government and the governed, whether in the case of vaccine acceptance, sustaining support for democracy in the wake of an attempted insurrection, or combatting the ongoing political extremism that is leading to domestic terrorism. Government cannot solve these problems without the participation of citizens and the private sector: help that is deterred by distrust. Moreover, as the country struggles to address these crises, the U.S. public is likely to experience a particularly visible government presence in their lives, perhaps even greater than after 9/11. It is vital that the public trust that government institutions are working to benefit everyone.

Q4: Given that trust is usually developed between persons rather than with institutions, what lessons can we learn from other efforts to rebuild trust at scale between the governed and their government?

A4: At the institution level, “rebuilding trust” needs to become a studied and prioritized initiative. The military has done a good job of cultivating strong norms intended to maximize public confidence, and by extension, overall security. For example, in recent months, current and former military leaders have outlined to the U.S. public the norms underlying domestic deployments and the appropriate roles of the military in domestic contexts. On the other hand, organizations like the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have not yet developed similarly strong norms of restraint and transparency, nor is there as robust a legal framework to govern the exercise of law enforcement authority across the department. Given the close collaboration institutions like DHS must have with other federal, state, and private-sector entities, it is imperative that they make concerted efforts to address declining trust.

These initiatives might seem difficult for national security institutions that cannot always be as transparent with the U.S. public, but that makes it all the more important that they work to identify unique ways to directly connect with citizens. This should include helping the media—especially more trusted local media—understand national security issues and convey accurate information to the public.

To support these efforts, other democratic bodies, including Congress, must open up avenues for increased transparency, oversight, and accountability. If citizens cannot have direct access to some national security information, they must trust the oversight by those institutions that do have such access on their behalf.

But to fully grow trust in national security institutions, a whole-of-institution or whole-of-government approach is not sufficient: a concerted whole-of-society plan is essential, and that starts with elevating civic education as a national security imperative.

Q5: What is the role of civic education in building trust in national security institutions?

A5: A recent [CBS poll](#) shows that the U.S. public is currently plagued by heightened levels of fear: fear of the ongoing pandemic, fear of their fellow citizens—especially those that hold different political beliefs than them—and a fear that democracy is threatened. These findings are consistent with other polls assessing the public’s attitudes towards democratic institutions.

Fear often reflects a feeling of helplessness. Many citizens do not believe the government is working on their behalf, and they feel powerless to bring about change. Our adversaries amplify the narrative that the system is irrevocably broken. Civic education can not only teach that there are three branches of government but how those institutions are designed to operate, and how individuals can help hold them accountable to living up to our aspirations. A robust civic education can empower individuals to be more effective agents of change, to be the informed and engaged citizenry upon which a strong democracy depends. This will engender greater trust: not a trust built on complacency or an assumption of good government, but the product of a public that takes seriously that our government is, in the words of the last president to preside during an insurrection, “[of, by, and for the people.](#)” The U.S. public is responsible for the government, not the other way around. To rebuild trust in our government we must first trust in each other and our capacity to hold the government accountable, using constitutional means, to act in the best interests of the country and the people.

Civic education is uniquely able to cultivate this sense of civic duty. From inspiring individuals to lead purposeful careers in national security to giving people the tools to understand and connect with their institutions, civic education is key to inspiring citizens to become more effective partners in maintaining—and thereby trusting—our nation’s security.

Q6: What are concrete steps the Biden administration can take to restore trust in the national security community?

A6: One key step to restoring trust is nominating individuals to leadership that have demonstrated unquestioned integrity when it comes to prioritizing the national interest. These individuals need to consistently commit to making decisions irrespective of political or personal interests. The new administration is off to a commendable start, and it is our hope that they continue to appoint similarly committed, high-caliber individuals for remaining positions.

Second, the Biden administration must move quickly to ensure that all internal accountability and oversight mechanisms are fully staffed with similarly competent and trusted individuals. This includes executive branch general counsels, inspector generals, and other positions overseeing internal accountability.

Third, executive branch agencies [must identify](#) ways to be as transparent as possible with regard to decisionmaking processes and related activities. To support this effort to communicate with the public, the agencies should focus on trusted sources, particularly local media outlets, which surveys consistently show are more trusted than national media.

Fourth, it is imperative that the Biden administration support ongoing initiatives and proposals elevating civic education as a national security imperative. For too long, civics has been deprioritized in favor of other subjects. Today, strong leadership is needed to scale purposeful civics programs. The return on investment is clear—as are the costs of failing to educate and empower people to be effective stewards of democracy.

Finally, the administration should execute on proposals to create a culture of service in the United States, as [recommended](#) by the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service. This would not only support a renewed emphasis on civic education but also help convey that these national security institutions are not some distant and nefarious entities but places filled with dedicated public servants committed to keeping all of us safe.

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