

TRUST IN POLITICS: THE CASE OF BARACK OBAMA RE-ELECTED

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Amidst of different crises on the global scale - political crisis (conflicts between political parties, 'color' or 'spring' revolutions for regime change), economic crisis (credit crunch, low growth), security crisis (disputes over territorial sovereignty, shortage of oil) - one thing that can still keep those crises under control, or at least prevent them from slipping into the worst, is *trust*. It is believed that all crises have solutions to be tackled. This is true in every situation, including the American presidential election in the late November 2012. This article attempts to explore the *trust capital* in politics through the case of Barack Obama re-elected.

Trust in Politics

Trust is not a novel concept in political theory. Nevertheless, there is no accurate definition of what it is. This is because trust is "a feeling, I can't describe it" (Solomon and Flores, 2003:1). Trust is dynamic rather than static, more or less depending on subjective personal satisfaction (Nidam, (NoY):5). More than four decades ago,

the American political scientist Robert Putnam commented on what he called "*social capital*", which included trust, social norms and values in his research on democracy in Italy (Putnam, 1993). Trust has been theoretically and practically recognized as an important factor contributing to democratic governance development (Hardin, 1998, Gershtenson, 2007, Tyler, 1998). Trust can be seen on two dimensions: institutional and personal. Trust in institution is a significant indication of efficient and effective performance, transparency and accountability of those who are considered as "servants" – public officials – to their "masters" – the people or voters. Cynthia Horne referred to arguments made by some scholars that trust in government, trust in public institutions, trust in social institutions, and interpersonal trust or social trust essentially contribute to democratization

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(Horne, 2013, Kornai and Rose-Ackerman, 2004, Kornai et al., 2004, Putnam, 2000). Horne concluded that a lack of trust in these realms is an impediment to democratic consolidation and economic development (Horne, 2013: 2). Horne's conclusion is similar to what Francis Fukuyama noted that trust is the core factor in economic activities of the social life, a pervasive cultural characteristic for a nation's well-being (Fukuyama, 1995: 7).

Theoretically, the state-citizen relationship should be seen an asymmetric one. The state with powerful instruments and institutions can impose rules and laws that citizens have to follow. Nevertheless, in a democratic society where a government hypothetically is assumed to be "of the people, by the people and for the people", citizens can place pressure on public institutions through their elected representatives or social networks to change public laws and policies that they do not satisfy with. Citizens even directly alternate the laws by "sacking" a government and replace it with another (HoChiMinh, 2000) by electoral votes or the people's power movements as happened in the Philippines, some former Soviet republics, and Arab countries recently. Hence, if the government in a democracy wishes the citizens to follow its laws, then it is very crucial that the government has to make the citizens believe that the laws are broadly consulted, reflecting the opinions of all social stakeholders and utmost benefiting constituents. There is

no doubt that the government must also cast its trust in the citizens because a state cannot come into being and exit without relying on the people. Hoàng Ngũ Phúc (1713-1776), a post-Le dynasty mandarin in Vietnam, described trust of the government in its people and trust of the people in the government through poetic scripts as follows:

"Nước lấy dân làm gốc; nước bình yên, nước hãy để dân yên"

*Dân lấy nước làm lòng; khi nhiều sự dân ra gánh vác"*¹

Or

"The government relies on the people; the country in peace, the government has a duty to make people live in peace,

When the people trust the government, they shoulder the burden with the government if troubles occur"

Trust in a reciprocal relationship between the government and its citizens as such is arguably not merely a fundamental characteristic of social capital as defined by Robert Putnam (1993: 170), but rather it is a capital – the trust capital.

Trust capital is a resource extracted to maintain and consolidate democratic governance. A decline of social trust likely leads to political and social instability and conflict. This is synonymous with democratic deficit as

¹ Cited in a speech by Dương Trung Quốc read in a parliamentary session in June 2012, published on the online Dat Viet newspaper, at: <http://baodatviet.vn/Home/chinhtrixahoi/Nuoc-nha-gap-nhieu-su-dan-con-giup-Nha-nuoc/20126/215923.datviet> (accessed 20 August 2012)

empirically shown in post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe in their transition to liberal democracies (Horne, 2013). Wall-Street Occupy movements should be seen a resulting decline of trust of the people in poor financial governance of governments, who could not prevent oligarchs from manipulating the financial markets. Thus, while trust is a factor contributing to democratization, the level of democratization is a measure of trust capital.

Trust in political leaders is also a drive for development and a contribution to maintaining social stability. One can easily realize the result of this, for example, through reactions of financial or stock markets. Investors when a politician is said to be or has been elected as prime minister or president of an administration are more confident to pour their money in the market. This is because the public believes that the politician is capable to change the status quo for the better. However, this prompt positive reaction does not necessarily mean what the elected political leader is going to do afterward is completely good. Many candidates could not keep their promises after the election. Consequently, they were voted out in the next election. The increase or decline of trust in political leaders should be seen as a common phenomenon in democracies. Political theorists more often ask the question: can political leaders create social trust? As Horne interpreted (2013: 2) Fukuyama's speech (2007), trust can be created. How can

political leaders create public trust in government and in them? Margaret Levi noted that a political leader wanting to create public trust needs to present such qualities, among others, as consistency in action records and credible commitments (Levi, 1998: 86).

In a campaign speech to his supporters in Ohio, Barack Obama emphasized trust as the most important and serious matter in the American presidential election in 2012 (Obama, 2012). Obama's emphasis on trust was radically significant when American society had been in crisis of trust, which was shown in the decline of participation of Americans in social networks, decrease of interpersonal trust, and social distrust in the legal system when the level of crime and civil litigations has continued to increase, and distrust of concentrated economic power (Fukuyama, 1995: 269-321). Was Obama's win in the 2012 presidential election the champion of trust?

Obama's win and trust capital

One can say at the outset that Barack Obama won the election for his second term because American voters trusted in his track record in the last four years.

Before the election, many observers thought that it would be hard for President Obama to defeat his challenger. There were various reasons for these people to believe so. The limping economy with a highest unemployment rate for an incumbent president since the Great Recession in the 1930s is an example. Indeed, economic recovery and employment,

among others, are the most concerns of Americans. Slight positive signs of economic recovery reassured voters that Republican critique of Administration policies was exaggerated. That Obama won in the battleground State Ohio, where he undertook drastic measures in his early presidency with endorsement of the then two Democrat-controlled Houses of Congress to bailout the automotive industry and generate jobs for many people, is evidence of the trust capital that he creates and accumulates (Malanga, 2012).

Though quite a large number of American voters believed that their lives were not better than four years ago. However, they understood that four years might be an insufficient time for the president to help them return to an affluent life, even if it was possible given the impact of other global factors and the legacy of the previous administration. Crucially, they believed that Obama understood 'real-life' issues such as costs associated with their children's schooling, health insurance and decreased living standards. It was Obama's family background and his policies aimed at the poor and the mass also helped him to win credibility over Mitt Romney who was believed representing the rich elite in the American society.

While the economy remained in crisis, the rich and poor gap was paradoxically still yawning and social inequality increasing. This worsened the divide in society and potentially threatened social conflicts. The Wall Street Occupy

movement was not a public outrage against the administration, but a clash between the have and the have not, the elite and the impoverished. These conflicts challenged the value systems that many Americans embraced and Obama was seen as less likely to accentuate them. Obama supporters also gave credit to his policies such as high tax on high-income earners, health and health insurance reforms for the poor and deficit reduction.

On other issues such as national security, energy, environmental protection, disaster relief, Obama also won the credibility of American voters in his approaches and outcomes from the executive programs. In contrast, his Republican contender, Mitt Romney, lost credibility or received, if any, negative trust of voters in these areas. Most Americans believed that Romney's economic policy, if elected, would aim to protect the interests of the rich and superrich who accounted for only 1% of the national population, or ignore the rest 99% of Americans. American voters also believed that many of Romney's proposals were out touch and ignored reality (on federal income-tax reform), apathetic towards environmental protection and climate change (on energy exploration and exploitation), not specific on plans to cut spending (on deficit reduction), and inconsistent (on disaster relief) (Gelinas, 2012).

Obama not only won credibility on the domestic, but also on the external front. The international community believed that Obama's approach would be less

aggressive than Romney's. While people around the world have been already weary of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, pro-war speeches of Mitt Romney made it a disaster for him. International opinions expected Obama rather than Romney to win. The international trust would not directly influence the choice of American voters or could possibly even have reactance effects, but it was a plus point for Obama to defeat his unpopular rival.

Indeed, Obama had built up credibility for him through actions in the first term. It was this trust capital that could assist him to gain more supportive votes so that he could remain in the White House for more than four years. American voters believed that he was the man who kept promise and would implement his commitments during the campaign.

Concluding remarks

Trust in government, trust in public institutions, trust in social institutions, and trust in political leaders is not a decisive, but arguably a necessary and sufficient condition for democratic consolidation and development. The 2012 American presidential election was a good comparative example of significant impacts of trust over distrust.

Many commentators on American presidential elections tend to say that it is a simple case of money politics. Inevitably, in a competitive electoral democracy, a record amount of 2.7 billion dollars spent for the two candidates' campaign was not a question. This excluded the fact that the super packs spent an additional four

billion dollars running television commercials in support of the two candidates. Money might be important, but cannot determine everything. A democracy would not work properly and effectively when the public lacks trust in their government and politicians. Trust capital is foundational to democracy. The trust in this context must be voluntary and positive. In this sense, it requires the government and politicians to keep their promise and be consistently responsive to the needs and expectations of the constituencies. How Obama responds to the trust of voters in his second term would create either good or bad effects for the Democrats in the next election in 2016.

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