

NATIONAL REVIEW

Why Americans Don't Trust Government

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Larry Summers had an interesting piece in the *Washington Post* last week about why Americans don't trust the government. He first links to an op-ed he wrote about the scandalous cost overruns and delays that occurred in maintenance and repairs for the the Anderson Memorial Bridge over the Charles River. Then he writes:

At another level, though, our story may illustrate phenomena that go way beyond infrastructure. I'm a progressive, but it seems plausible to wonder if government can build a nation abroad, fight social decay, run schools, mandate the design of cars, run health insurance exchanges, or set proper sexual harassment policies on college campuses, if it can't even fix a 232-foot bridge competently. Waiting in traffic over the Anderson Bridge, I've empathized with the two-thirds of Americans who distrust government.

That's a very good question to ponder. He then says that for the American people to start trusting the government to do the big stuff, it needs to show that it can do the little things:

Faith in government's ability to do big things depends on its success in executing on routine responsibilities.

That's kind of right. When you find out that the government spends \$1 million to study monkeys running in hamster balls on a treadmill or \$706,800 to conduct a so-called "shrimp fight club," you have good reasons to doubt that it will be able to pull off a federal health-care exchange. But then again, there are also plenty of *major* government failures and failed promises to convince us to never trust government and politicians ever again ("if you like your plan, you can keep it," Operation Fast and Furious, the war in Iraq, the failure of the war on drugs, Benghazi, the Veteran Affairs scandal, the worst recovery since World War II, just to name a few).

Yet, Summers believes that this sad state of affairs could be changed if only we could get the American people and the press out of "a dismal cycle of low expectations, poor results and shared cynicism." To escape this cycle, we must start holding the government accountable, he believes. That would lead to more efficiency and more trust in government.

Unfortunately, I am afraid he is way too optimistic. For one thing, holding government officials accountable isn't as easy as it sounds. How do you do that? The government spends \$4 trillion a year. How do we monitor every government program out there and complain about what's not working? By writing letters to your representative? How many regular people without deep pockets and a promise to finance a future campaign does it take to catch the attention of one's representative? Do we hold them accountable by voting our representatives out of office if they

don't do anything about a given problem? The chances are that the next guy won't be able to do any better.

I have said it before, but it is worth repeating, because the unseen army of bureaucrats and administrative agencies that effectively run the government (and our lives) are just as self-interested as the worst of the politicians that we elect, but they're rarely accountable. (On that note, Chris Edwards at Cato has a good/depressing post about the bad behaviors of federal bureaucrats at the TSA.)

Also, most decisions made in government are made based on politics, not economics. (Sorry to say but the Ex-Im Bank renewal by Republicans joining forces with Democrats is a good example of that!) And, at every turn, the incentives to get the job done properly are incredibly weak, while there are plenty of incentives to reward political allies by doing things that are less than ideal for the American people.

I will end once again with this quote from economist F. A. Hayek's 1974 Nobel Prize lecture called "The Pretense of Knowledge":

The recognition of the insuperable limits to his knowledge ought indeed to teach the student of society a lesson of humility which should guard him against becoming an accomplice in men's fatal striving to control society — a striving which makes him not only a tyrant over his fellows, but which may well make him the destroyer of a civilization which no brain has designed but which has grown from the free efforts of millions of individuals.

While Hayek was warning his fellow economists of the limits of their own knowledge he might as well have been addressing the army of well-intentioned lawmakers and bureaucrats who want to intervene in our life on a daily basis through new regulations and government programs.

In other words, Summers correctly recognizes that the government doesn't deserve to be trusted these days. But he is mistaken that the inefficiencies he identifies can be addressed with more accountability. They can't. We can't change the fundamental nature of government. So if we want less inefficiency in government and less blatant failures, we need to considerably shrink the size and scope of government to limit the damages it can do. Pessimistic maybe, but realistic I am afraid.