

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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Ep 38: Losing Trust & Faith in Institutions - Why It's Happening and the Unexpected Consequences: Yuval Levin

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone, it's Lynn Thoman, welcome to another episode. Today, I'm delighted to be here with Yuval Levin. He's the founding editor of National Affairs, Director of Social, Cultural and Constitutional Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, and a contributor editor of National Review. I'm excited to find out why faith in institutions of all kinds has plummeted and how institutions have become platforms for individual performance. Yuval, thanks so much for being here today.

Yuval Levin: Thank you for having me.

LT: My pleasure. What has happened to our trust in institutions?

YL: In a sense, there's a cliché that says Americans have been losing faith, losing trust and confidence in institutions for a generation and more. And of course, that's true. The evidence of that is very clear to see, the public opinion surveys, I would say it's probably the best-established premise in American public opinion, now, that Americans have been losing trust in institutions. But I think we don't often enough ask what does that actually mean? What is trust in an institution and what would it mean to lose that trust?

YL: I think when you start to dig into that, you see that trust in institutions has a huge amount to do with the sense people have that institutions are using their power for the public good, and that people who run them are using their power in a restrained way, they're allowing their ambition to be directed towards some kind of public good, common good, and in a sense, what it means to say that we've been losing trust in our institutions is that we have lost the sense that those people who run our core institutions are elites, are leaders, we've lost the sense that they are formed by those institutions to have in mind some ideal of the public good.

YL: And we've instead come to see the institutions they're part of as platforms for them, as a place for them to stand and improve their prominence and increase their visibility and their social media following and their personal brand rather than to direct them and the power they have toward our good. And so this question of public trust in institutions has a huge amount to do with a series of other questions about transformations in American life that have left people feeling like this society is serving other people.

YL: The populist moment we're living through now can be described that way, it's a sense that people have on the left and on the right in different ways that the core institutions of our society are

not for me, they're for them, they're for those other people. And one of the ways we express that sense, that loss of common feeling is as a loss of trust in institutions. We just have less of a sense that we can count on them, that they're here for us, and that they're shaping people to be reliable and to be good citizens.

LT: What kinds of institutions are you talking about, public ones, private ones, civic ones, political ones?

YL: What's really striking in the public opinion data on this is that the answer to that question is yes, all of those, the loss of trust in institutions is extraordinarily widespread, from the institutions of the national government to large corporations, but also small businesses, to public institutions like the public schools, to private institutions of all sorts. And even in civil society, Americans have been losing the sense that these institutions can be trusted.

YL: Gallup has great data on this that goes back to the early 1970s and in a looser way even before that, but ever since 1973, they've been asking people if they have confidence in some set of institutions, they've asked about politics, they've asked about the professions, about education, about American medicine and the media. That data is just incredibly striking. There is one exception among our major institutions to this loss of trust, and that exception is the US military, which is more trusted today than it was in the early 1970s.

YL: Of course, the military started out at a low point in that data because in the wake of the Vietnam War, trust in the military was unusually low, but it's also increased and continues to increase in some ways, but trust in government is dismally low now. Gallup in the early '70s found, in fact, the striking figure here is from 1975, the year after Richard Nixon resigned in disgrace, Gallup found that more than 50% of the American public had a high level of confidence in the American presidency. That figure now is in the high 20s, and it doesn't really matter who the President is, it varies, the partisan makeup of that changes a little, but basically less than a third of Americans would now say they have trust in the presidency, and trust in Congress is dismally low, it's almost in the single digits. Last year, the figure was 11% of Americans say they have confidence in the US Congress.

YL: It's a little higher in the courts, but not much, but it's not just government, it's not just politics, people have very low levels of trust in corporations, in their own physician and in American medicine more generally, in the schools, and to some degree, there's this kind of effect where people say, well, I don't like politicians, but I like my own member of Congress or I don't trust medicine, but I like my doctor, that does happen in this data, but even the levels of trust in the people you know, in your member and your doctor and your lawyer, those levels have been falling dramatically for more than three decades.

LT: And what do those numbers look like? What did they used to be and what are they now?

YL: In the early 1970s, there is some Gallup data that goes earlier than that, but the easiest place to start is in 1973. In almost all these institutions, there was more than 50% levels of trust, and in some were quite high. Trust in doctors and hospitals was in the 70% range in the early 1970s, trust in public schools was extremely high, but you could even ask people, do you trust big business? And the way of putting that invites a negative answer, and yet almost 60% of Americans said yes in the early 1970s, and now those figures are more like 30%, so that over and over you see a dramatic

decline from very, very high levels of trust to extremely low ones.

YL: Now, I would say both ends of that story are interesting. On the one hand, Americans did really have very high levels of trust in our institutions in the middle of the 20th century, and you might say that is the unusual situation, not this one. I think if you had checked in on Americans at any point in the 19th century, even leaving out the 1860s, the Civil War, you would have found a country with very little confidence in its institutions. We don't have modern-style public opinion data, but trust in Congress was surely very low in the 1880s, 1890s, and similarly with attitudes towards business, attitudes towards the education system.

YL: So that in a way, the situation we're living with now is a little more normal than the middle of the 20th century, where after decades of war and depression and consolidation, Americans really did have very unusually high confidence in the institutions of our society, but the decline has been precipitous, it's been really extraordinary, and in some ways, it has accelerated in the 21st century, so that these numbers are falling faster. And the generational data is pretty alarming: Younger Americans are particularly disinclined to trust our major institutions and to trust leaders, to trust people in positions of authority. And so it really is true that we are living in a moment that can be defined as a crisis of trust, crisis of confidence, and we have to ask ourselves how is trust achieved? Where does it come from? And so how can it really be rebuilt.

LT: Is this decline in trust a US phenomenon, or is it a global one?

YL: That's an important question, and the answer is a little bit complicated, but broadly speaking, it's a global phenomenon, or at least you would say it's a US-Europe phenomenon. You can see the same levels, both of extremely high trust in the 1960s and '70s, and of declining trust since about the 1990s, certainly in Britain, to a lesser but significant degree in France, in Germany and Belgium, and much of the rest of democratic Europe. Obviously, the data is complicated a little bit in the East, and by the end of the Cold War and trust levels are still very high in places like Japan and South Korea, the Asian democracies are really very different from us in this sense. But in the English-speaking world and in the democratic West, you have seen a decline in trust that has been accelerating in the 21st century.

LT: And what are the implications of this decline of trust?

YL: It's very hard to have a society where people don't trust each other, right, and where no one takes authority seriously. And in a sense, these are two different problems, but they're very closely connected. When we say we don't trust people in authority, when we say we don't trust institutions, we're also saying at some level that we don't really quite trust each other, we have a sense that this isn't a society where people are looking out for one another or where people in power are looking out for me. And democracy relies on a huge amount of trust, everything about the free society requires us to assume that in our everyday lives we can take modest risks that will work out if we can trust other people.

YL: That's true in the marketplace where we're willing to pay for something and assume that it will arrive a few days later, we have a lot of trust in people when we do that, and we live our lives that way, but it's also true in our everyday lives when we go to the bank, when we go to the doctor, when we send our children off to school, we have to believe that what happens there is going to be what we expect and what we need. And obviously there is still a significant baseline of trust there

where we do, even if we tell a pollster that we don't trust anybody, the way we live our lives in a free society suggests we have a fair amount of trust in a fair number of people.

YL: But as that declines and as the baseline becomes a kind of mistrust, everything about the free society becomes harder. You have to prove everything to everyone all the time, rather than assume that they will believe you because you are an expert or a professional or in some position of authority, and life becomes much more difficult, much more complicated when you lose that trust. And secondly, I would say that trust is essential to feeling like you're part of something, and one way to describe the social crisis that we're living through in American life now is as a crisis of isolation, a crisis of connectedness.

YL: People feel like they're alone, whether it's in terms of reported loneliness or in terms of secondary symptoms, like increases in suicide rates and opioid abuse. Some of the challenges we find in parts of our society just seem like they result from alienation. And I think that has a lot to do with this loss of trust, there's just a sense that we don't feel as much a part of something worthwhile as Americans might have two generations ago, and that reflects itself in all kinds of ways in how we live, and it's just essential to rebuild some of that trust, if we're going to hold together as a society.

LT: Do well-functioning institutions and trusted institutions, do they establish a higher level of responsibility and character from people that are associated with them?

YL: I think this is really a central question, and it seems to me that this gets to the heart of what it would mean to rebuild trust. If we ask ourselves, what does it mean to trust an institution, really it means to believe that the people within it are trustworthy, and that in turn means that those people behave in a way that is guided by the ideal of integrity that belongs to that institution. Different institutions have different forms of integrity about them: A university is devoted to pursuing knowledge, a police force is devoted to enforcing the law in an equal way. Our politics is devoted to the public interest in some fundamental way. A company makes a commitment to you to provide a product or a service in a reliable way, and the people within each of those institutions have to take that ideal and make it their own definition of integrity.

YL: To believe that they do that is to trust the institution. When we find it harder to believe that, essentially what we're saying is we don't trust those people, and we don't trust that the institution imposes some form of behavior or some set of guidelines or a code on those people, and I think that's what's behind a lot of our loss of trust in our political institutions and in our cultural and economic and educational institutions. The exception here is worth thinking about: The US military is trusted to an extraordinary degree by the public, and I think the reason for that is not just that the military is good at its job, but that the military is unabashedly formative.

YL: It says to the country, we take men and women and we turn them into soldiers and marines and sailors and airmen, and that is a better kind of person, and they say it in a believable way because it seems to be true, they really do transform people. And they're not shy about it, that's how they present themselves to our society, and so we take them seriously. When somebody tells you that they went into Harvard, you think, well, maybe that's a smart person, they got into Harvard. When soon tell you they went to the Naval Academy you think that's a serious person, and not because they got into the Naval Academy, but because the Navy just makes serious people.

YL: But that's how our institutions should want to be thought of by the public. In their various

ways, given their various aims and forms of integrity, they should want to be thought of as that's a place that makes serious people, that makes trustworthy people. And of course, a lot of our institutions now don't seem to be in that business, and so really have become harder to trust.

LT: How do you see President Trump and President Biden as leaders of the US government? How did they both see the government and act?

YL: Well, this really takes us to the heart of this notion that institutions are formative of the people in them, that what it means to become a trusted leader is to somehow be formed by the institution in order to act through it and within it in a way that's trustworthy. And there are some political leaders who clearly have been formed by their experience within our political institutions, and there are some, especially in our time, who operate as outsiders, who stand outside of that set of institutions and maybe stand on it to gain attention more than work in it.

YL: I think Donald Trump is very much an example of the latter kind of leader. He in fact uniquely among America's Presidents had not held office before he was President of any kind, and had not been a senior military officer or an appointed official, anything like that. His first government job was President of the United States, and he had not been formed therefore by some understanding of the structure and interactions and purposes of our political institutions, and so he often could be found in a sense acting on the government rather than in or through the government. You'd find them on Twitter yelling at the Department of Justice, when the Department of Justice works for the President.

YL: And so there are other ways that he could get them to do what he wants, but he understood himself as an outsider, as a commentator, as a performer. Joe Biden, in a sense, at least on the surface, would seem to be the opposite of that. He's spent his entire adult life in elective office, about half a century in the US Senate and as Vice President, and so has been very deeply formed by these institutions, and inclines to think about the role of the President through and mediated by the structures of these institutions.

YL: It's early in his presidency, so it's hard to say, but I certainly do think that so far, it seems like Biden is much more inclined to allow himself to be shaped by the particular kinds of responsibilities that come with being President. In a sense, to ask the key question that I think goes unasked now in too many of our institutions, the question is: Given my role here, how should I behave? And that's a question that says given the structure of relationships that's established in this institution, what obligations do I have? That's a question that you only ask after you've really been shaped, formed, habituated by an institution over a long period of time, and after a while, it comes naturally.

YL: I do think that Jo Biden is unusually well-suited to have been formed that way, and time will tell how he functions as President, but I think he comes in at the opposite end of the spectrum from Donald Trump on this question of institutional formation.

LT: Let me ask that same question with respect to our members of Congress. How do you see Republican and Democratic members of Congress acting toward the Senate and the House of Representatives? How do you see their role and what do you think it should be?

YL: I think in Congress is where we've really seen this deformation of institutional obligations most

profoundly in our politics, where you find a lot of members now, especially younger members, coming into the institution with a sense that what it offers them is a platform, is a way to build their personal brand, to raise their profile and their following and to play a part in the cultural theater of our politics rather than to see themselves as legislators formed by the shapes and forms of the institution and acting within it to make deals to advanced legislation to serve the interests of their constituents.

YL: Ultimately, I think the purpose of the Congress in our system of government is to serve as an arena for contention and bargaining. It's a place to make deals, that's Congress. It's not self-evident that way, you have to come to that understanding, because there is another way to think about what it's for, there's a European model of parliament which says the purpose of the parliament is to enable the majority party to have its way until the public throws it out, and European parliaments are just as legitimate legislatures as our Congress, but our Congress has never had that purpose. Its purpose has always been to compel accommodation among differing groups in our society, and it is the only arena on our politics where that kind of bargaining, deal-making accommodation, literally dealing with each other, when you come from different places in our society has to happen.

YL: When it doesn't happen in Congress, it doesn't happen anywhere. And right now, it isn't happening anywhere, and that contributes enormously to the kind of polarization that we find debilitating our politics. And I think part of the reason for that is this sense that members come in with, that their job is not to bargain with the other party, their job is to be seen very performatively, to complain about the other party, to oppose the other party, to wait until the next election when the other party can finally go away; in any case, to just channel the frustration of their own voters in the case of each party.

YL: The trouble is, the other party is not going away. Our differences aren't going to disappear, they have to be worked out, they have to be bargained through. If we're going to make progress on practical problems, the parties have to deal with each other. So that I think the failure of a lot of members of Congress now to grasp their institutional obligations has enormous costs, very practical costs when it comes to the ability of our government to address its problems. And after a while, members lose the knack, lose the habit of dealing with each other, they lose the sense of how that can work and what it looks like, what it feels like when a big piece of legislation that has behind it a strange kind of quirky bipartisan coalition is moving through Congress.

YL: That hasn't happened in a long time, and as we forget how to do that, we forget how to enable our society to live with the differences that are always going to define us. In Congress more than anywhere, the loss of this sense of institutional purpose and institutional formation is an enormous problem for our politics.

LT: This loss of institutional loyalty that you're talking about, is it limited to politics and the political world, or do you see it outside of politics, and if so, where?

YL: I think it's very much there outside of politics, it's a very broad-based phenomenon in our culture now. You can see it in some of the professions, for example. The professions themselves can be understood as institutions, they impose certain kinds of codes of integrity, they enable us to trust people by restraining those people in particular ways. Why do we trust an accountant? I trust an accountant, not just because she knows how the carried interest rule works, but because there are things an accountant wouldn't do. If this person puts her name on this piece of paper, that means

that what it says she believes to be true. I trust a lawyer for a similar reason. I trust a scientist because a scientist wouldn't just say something that hadn't been through some process of verification, similarly a journalist.

YL: And yet in a lot of these professions now you find that the draw of our political culture, the draw of the culture war, the draw of prominence and visibility draws people out of these professional constraints and puts them on platforms directly as individuals. You can see this most clearly in journalism. We trust journalism basically only because the institutions of journalism promise us a process of confirmation and verification, what we read in the paper has been through some process aimed to make sure that it is as true as it can be. But when elite reporters then take themselves out of those constraints, put themselves directly personally on Twitter and model the difference between their professional and their personal work and their views, it becomes very difficult to trust the institution. We lose our trust in journalism when we can no longer tell if what we're seeing has been through that process or not.

YL: And I think the reason it's happening, or one reason it's happening, is the appeal of this idea of institutions as platforms rather than as molds of character and behavior. People just want to stand on the platform and become more prominent and visible. And I think similarly, in almost any profession where trust is built up by constraint in that way, there is now a very powerful appeal and draw and incentive to step outside those institutional frameworks and stand on your own on a platform.

YL: Similarly, I think you can find in a lot of our institutions a way in which they've just become stages for cultural or political performance art. This happens sometimes in a university now, it happens in American religion, where institutions that are meant to shape people are instead being used to display people, to let them show what party they're in or make a statement, and it's done often with good intentions, or at least without realizing how much is lost when you make it harder for people to trust the institution in that way. I think it's a very widespread phenomenon now, and it has a lot to do with the public's very widespread loss of trust in institutions.

LT: What you're describing is very clearly individuals using institutions as their own stage, as their own platform to build their own brand. How do you change that, how do you rebuild trust in institutions?

YL: It's challenging, because the incentives for doing that are very strong, and they're economic incentives, they're cultural incentives, they're just ambition incentives, this is a way to become better known, better appreciated, and everybody wants that. So the question really is, how do we change the incentives, how do we change the incentives confronting our politicians, confronting our business leaders, confronting people in so many different institutions? There's no easy answer, but I think that if you ask yourself where we can begin to make an intervention, where we can break into the vicious cycle that leads us in this direction, the answer has to begin in a sense at the interpersonal level, it has to begin with us.

YL: Each of us has some role to play in some set of institutions, and we can each ask ourselves how can we be more trustworthy? We can ask that unasked question: Given my role here, how should I behave? Not just what do I want to do, or how do I want to be seen, but given that I am an employer or an employee, a teacher, a student, a member of Congress, a President, given that, how should I behave in this particular situation? That's a question that doesn't come as naturally as it ought to

now in American life. And we can each begin by asking that question and by demanding that others ask in the institutions that we're part of.

YL: Obviously that's a small step, that's not a social transformation, but I think that it's in the nature of institutional reform that it has to be desired by the people in the institution, and that means that it has to begin by a change of attitude, really where we are.

LT: How do we change the trust in our government? It seems like there's a lot of lack of trust on the part of Democrats versus Republicans, Republicans versus Democrats, and the public, as you know, has now made the people unaffiliated with either party, independents, the largest party in the United States. How do we improve these political issues and the legitimacy of our representatives in our government?

YL: This is an enormous problem, needless to say, and in one sense, the answer is similar to what we might say about our other institutions, that we need reasons to believe the people with power in our politics and in our government are using that power responsibly. And it is incumbent on them to show that they're constrained, that they're restrained, that there are things they won't do, that they follow the rules. And we can point to a lot of our leaders who have failed to do that in recent years, and that obviously contributes to a loss of trust.

YL: But I also think what's required is sense of confidence in the rules, and here we're in real trouble. For example, the debate we're seeing about American elections now, where in different ways, both parties are effectively telling the public not to trust our election system. One party says it's because there's too much restraint and constraint on who can vote, and so votes are being suppressed; the other party says the rules are too loose, and so there's fraud in our elections. And you know what? They are both wrong. The fact is, at this point, American elections are administered about as well as they've ever been, it's easier to vote in America than it has ever been in our history, and we have very, very little fraud in our elections.

YL: Imagine if our debates about election rules began from that premise, which is a fact, and then asked, how can we make things better, rather than began from the premise that the other party is destroying our elections and now we can't trust them and try to push back against various kinds of imaginary evils. That's the kind of beginning we need. We need to start from where our strengths are and the reasons we have for trusting in our system, and then talk about what needs to be fixed. But the political incentives obviously push the other way, each party benefits from creating a sense of dread about the other, and for the moment, that means that all the incentives pushed toward encouraging people to lose trust in a system that allows for the other party to have power, and here we are.

LT: Before I ask for the three key takeaways that you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you would like to mention that you haven't already discussed?

YL: I really appreciate this chance to talk about these questions. These are often underlying questions that are beneath a lot of our normal political debates, and which we really have to work to see in their own terms if we're going to address what's needed in those debates. And so, grateful for the chance.

LT: Yuval, what are the three key takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

YL: I've been involved in one way or another in politics now, working for politicians or around the system, for more than two decades, and I would say three lessons that I've walked away with are, first of all, that people want to belong even more than we want to be free. The desire for affiliation, for solidarity, is extremely powerful and often is under-appreciated in our politics, and we've got to take it seriously if we're going to understand what happens in the political world.

YL: Secondly, I've come to believe that cynicism is blinding, that people believe they are acting for the greater good, and that a key to understanding people you disagree with is that they aren't trying to harm anybody, they believe they are acting for the greater good. And if you're going to understand their motives, you have to begin from that premise, because otherwise you're fooling yourself, and they think the same about you, and so neither of you is going to understand very much. It's very important to overcome cynicism in thinking about politics.

YL: And finally, a point that we very much came to in this conversation, I would say constraints can be empowering. There is a way that limitations define us and shape us, they're the source of people's trust in us, they're the reasons why we need each other, and so we have to see that striving to be liberated from constraint is the wrong way to think about life. Ultimately, our constraints are what make us who we are.

LT: Yuval, this has been terrific. Thank you so much.

YL: Thank you very much.

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