



Why Washington Won't Work: Polarization, Political Trust, and the Governing Crisis (Chicago Studies in American Politics)

By Marc J. Hetherington, Thomas J. Rudolph

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Polarization is at an all-time high in the United States. But contrary to popular belief, Americans are polarized not so much in their policy preferences as in their feelings toward their political opponents: To an unprecedented degree, Republicans and Democrats simply do not like one another. No surprise that these deeply held negative feelings are central to the recent (also unprecedented) plunge in congressional productivity. The past three Congresses have gotten less done than any since scholars began measuring congressional productivity.

In *Why Washington Won't Work*, Marc J. Hetherington and Thomas J. Rudolph argue that a contemporary crisis of trust—people whose party is out of power have almost no trust in a government run by the other side—has deadlocked Congress. On most issues, party leaders can convince their own party to support their positions. In order to pass legislation, however, they must also create consensus by persuading some portion of the opposing party to trust in their vision for the future. Without trust, consensus fails to develop and compromise does not occur. Up until recently, such trust could still usually be found among the opposition, but not anymore. Political trust, the authors show, is far from a stable characteristic. It's actually highly variable and contingent on a variety of factors, including whether one's party is in control, which part of the government one is dealing with, and which policies or events are most salient at the moment.

Political trust increases, for example, when the public is concerned with foreign policy—as in times of war—and it decreases in periods of weak economic performance. Hetherington and Rudolph do offer some suggestions about steps politicians and the public might take to increase political trust. Ultimately, however, they conclude that it is unlikely levels of political trust will significantly increase unless foreign concerns come to dominate and the economy is consistently strong.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Hetherington and Rudolph marshal a massive array of evidence to show that political trust guides American political life, particularly when the public is focused on international affairs. The book is a mammoth contribution, and it is likely to be influential for decades.”

(Jason Barabas, Stony Brook University)

“*Why Washington Won't Work* makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the roots of dysfunction in American government. Hetherington and Rudolph present a highly convincing case that the partisan polarization of the mass public has contributed to the problem by polarizing trust in government. Their creative and persuasive analysis reveals many new insights into the vital role of trust in government for explaining why the public supports or opposes government action and how we might seek solutions.”

(Stephen Nicholson, University of California, Merced)

“Hetherington and Rudolph’s *Why Washington Won't Work* zeroes in on the affective component of polarized politics: Republicans and Democrats not only disagree on issues, they also just don’t like one another. Mutual antipathy undermines trust, which inhibits the deal-making essential to governing under our Madisonian system. This cogent and well-supported argument helps to explain why gridlock and stalemate have become the new normal.”

(Gary Jacobson, University of California, San Diego)

“*Why Washington Won't Work* is a marvelous book. Hetherington and Rudolph have written a compelling and smoothly accessible work that reveals more about the troubled condition of American politics than any presidential campaign tome—and they have accomplished this while maintaining the most rigorous methodological standards of political science.”

(David Maraniss, author of *First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama: The Story*)

“Hetherington and Rudolph argue that a profound, and historically high, lack of trust among the public reduces the likelihood of compromise in Congress. In an increasingly polarized political environment that is already predisposed to gridlock, this finding on public trust helps to further explain the inability of Washington to govern, effectively legislate, and *work*.”

(*New Books in Political Science* 2015-11-16)

“Hetherington and Rudolph’s careful statistical analysis of public opinion expands the understanding of the role of political trust in the governing process by treating it as a cause rather than a consequence of public policy. . . . Highly recommended.”

(*Choice* 2016-04-25)

About the Author

Marc J. Hetherington is professor of political science at Vanderbilt University. He is the author of *Why Trust Matters* and coauthor, with Jonathan D. Weiler, of *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics*. **Thomas J. Rudolph** is professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-

Champaign and coauthor of *Expression vs. Equality*.

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