1994

Social Capital and Trust in Government

David Alexander Hawkins

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SOCIAL CAPITAL AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Government
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
David Hawkins
1994
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Studies of American public opinion indicate a substantial decline of trust in government in the United States. Political cynicism, or the suspicion that the government does not meet performance expectations, thus defined demands an inherently narrow explanation. Scholarly attempts to determine the causes of political cynicism fail to reveal a conclusive cause. This paper presents, but does not test, an alternative to previous hypotheses. Using regression analysis, I compare the correlation values of causal variables explored in previous studies with trust in government and conclude that traditional methods are insufficient. I propose a broad theoretical approach, based on Robert Putnam's idea of social capital, that includes historical and sociological factors that contribute to a mood of general cynicism toward all major social institutions.
SOCIAL CAPITAL AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT
INTRODUCTION

Trust in government in the United States is currently at its lowest point since the 1960s. The debate over the cause of political cynicism is too narrowly focused—on politics. In order to fully understand the cause of political cynicism in America, one must step back and observe the totality of circumstances that created the mood of general cynicism and distrust in American social life. Studies attempting to determine the causes of declining trust in government often confuse effects with causality. Early studies characterized voter distrust as a temporary phenomenon, linked to politically traumatic events such as the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal. Public trust in American government, however, has yet to recover, even after the prosperous 1980s and the popularity of Ronald Reagan. Political cynicism, which in this study is synonymous with lack of trust in government, exercises a great deal of influence over political authorities and institutions by shaping the context in which elections take place and public policy emerges.
The trust in government survey questions originally appeared on the University of Michigan Survey Research Center's National Election Study in 1958. The purpose of these questions was to measure the amount of trust Americans had in their political system. Five questions appeared on the original NES format, and the following four remained on the 1992 survey:

1. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?
2. Would you say that the U.S. government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?
3. Do you think the people in government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste much of it?
4. Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think that hardly any of them are crooked?1

As measured by these questions, trust in government declined sharply from 1964 to 1992. According to Paul Abramson, "the decline of political trust is among the most dramatic trends in postwar American politics."2 A persistent debate among scholars is whether these questions measure trust in American democracy or dissatisfaction with outcomes and personalities. In this analysis, I will argue that attention to individual-level variables complicates the

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1Survey questions are transcribed directly as worded on the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies' 1992 National Election Study.

debate over the significance of trust in government by confusing effects with causes. Revealing the origins of political cynicism is crucial to understanding the implications of declining trust for American social and political institutions.

The second section of this paper will provide a definition of trust in government. Rather than depending on the wording of the NES trust questions, I will present a theoretical conceptualization of trust as an attitude. Whether the trust in government questions actually measure the attitude of political trust remains uncertain. Emphasis on voter expectations and perceptions is vital to the accurate description of trust as an attitudinal variable.

The third section of this paper surveys the existing literature on trust in government. President Jimmy Carter's "malaise speech" before a national television audience warned voters and politicians in the U.S. of a "crisis in confidence." In attempting to ascertain the significance of this crisis, previous scholars sought correlations between survey data measuring individual characteristics and attitudes towards the political system -- demographics, incumbent approval ratings, policy positions -- and levels of trust in government. Dissatisfaction with policy outcomes, disapproval of incumbent presidents, national

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3 Seymour Martin Lipset and William Schneider, "The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions," *Political Science Quarterly* 98 (Fall, 1983), 379.
events, political inefficacy, and low institutional evaluations surface consistently as catalysts of voter cynicism. Low trust in government has also been attributed to "system mal-performance" and "spotty performance by central social institutions and leaders." Previous studies reveal that the manifestations of low trust also correlate strongly with reactions to governmental policy and activity. Voter cynicism seems to be transient -- over time, different facets of politics, i.e., unpopular presidents, scandals, or highly divisive policy outcomes, evoke escalations in cynicism as measured in public opinion analyses.

Attempts to determine causality, as stated above, confuses effects of distrust with causes. Studies that examine cross-sectional public opinion data cannot accurately capture the totality of circumstances leading to the decline of voter confidence. Although time-series studies provide more complete analysis of the decline in confidence, the inadequacy of the four trust in government questions prevents a complete understanding of the significance of cynicism in America. The level of political cynicism since the 1960s exhibits a downward trajectory, though occasional increases in patriotism or popularity create temporary increases in confidence. Is political cynicism attributable to attitudes and issues that change with each election cycle? Or is increased political

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4Everett C. Ladd, Jr., "Note to Readers," Public Opinion 2 (October/November 1979), 27.
cynicism the result of a broader movement towards dissociation and distrust among the population as a whole?

Scholars have been successful at identifying certain variables that correlate positively with trust indices, which reveal attitudes that cause fluctuations in political cynicism. The fourth section of this paper includes a statistical analysis that tests for correlations between variables examined in previous studies and trust in government using data from the 1992 National Election Study. To measure the level and relevance of public cynicism, according to Warren Miller, one must make use of a "multiplicity of well-authenticated...general indicators of public concern." In order to accurately test for relationships between certain variables and trust in government, Jack Citrin suggests the following improvements on existing research:

1. develop superior indicators of subjective orientations
2. specify more precisely the cognitive processes linking policy dissatisfaction [or other "independent variables"] to political cynicism
3. distinguish between dissatisfaction with the current government positions, with outcomes of events and policies, mistrust of incumbent office-holders, and rejection.

Primarily a response to Arthur Miller's hypothesis that voter distrust is a result of disagreement with the federal

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5Warren E. Miller, "Misreading the Public Pulse," Public Opinion 2 (October/November 1979), 10.

government over policy outcomes, Citrin's advice is nevertheless useful to this study.

Most of the research on trust in government uses data from the National Election Study in order to quantify trust in government and other attitudinal variables. If trust in government is but one manifestation of a larger trend towards socially institutionalized cynicism towards institutions, analyses based solely on NES trust in government data are insufficiently narrow. The existing data may, however, be useful in supporting the idea that cynicism, while not exclusive to politics, represents declining expectations of social institutions in general rather than simply declining trust in American government.

Studies attempting to reveal the causes of declining trust in government focus too narrowly on survey data from National Election Studies and should adopt a broader theoretical perspective that considers the social context surrounding the decline in trust. Political cynicism in the United States is the result of historical events and the continuing fragmentation of American society. Cynicism is not exclusive to politics. The move towards fragmentation within American society caused a shift in attitudes towards both individual and collective authorities that became "institutionalized" into American social life. Adapting Robert Putnam's theory of "social capital," which stresses the importance of cooperation and participation in the civic community, I will argue that the fragmentation of American
social life, along with events of historical significance over the last thirty years, are the true causes of declining trust in government. Previous research confuses effects with causes -- trust in government fluctuates with shifts in voter approval ratings, but is the source of an entirely different perspective towards the political system on the part of the individual. In order to go beyond previous research, this analysis will present an alternative theoretical framework based on the formation of social capital and its effects on the performance of government.

Finally, I will present an alternative to previous studies by introducing a more comprehensive theoretical approach that accounts for changes in American social and political life as well as attitudinal and demographic trends. In contrast to previous studies, I find that none of the independent variables show strong correlations with trust in government. In the final section, I present the alternative hypothesis that the fragmentation of American social life, along with historical events and the structure of the American constitutional system, caused the institutionalization of cynicism.

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CHAPTER I
TRUST IN GOVERNMENT DEFINED

1. Trust as a political attitude

Cynicism in the United States is not exclusive to politics. As Lipset and Schneider assert, business and organized labor, as well as government, are all experiencing a "broad loss of confidence in the leadership." The nonexclusivity of cynicism necessitates a broad conceptualization of the causes and effects of increasing political cynicism. The terms "political cynicism" and "low trust in government" will be used interchangeably in this study. Political cynicism reflects the basic proposition stated above—that trust is an attitude towards the government based on memories of past events and future expectations. Those who have been disillusioned by past occurrences and have little reason to expect improvement are likely to be cynical or low in trust.

Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin assert that "those high in trust are satisfied with the procedures and products of

government." Similarly, those who are politically cynical believe government "is not producing policies according to [their] expectations." While this definition describes the normative element associated with the outputs of American government, i.e. opinions of government legislation or policy regarding welfare, health care, or gays in the military, a complete definition of trust necessarily includes a cognitive element as well. Fiorina introduced the "running tally" theory of partisan identification -- that voter choice of party membership is "based on a running tally of retrospective evaluations of party promises and performance." In accordance with Fiorina's theory and previous research conducted by Arthur Miller and Jack Citrin, voters who have little trust should express dissatisfaction with past government promises and performance. "Trust in government" as an attitudinal variable, however, also involves a prospective evaluation of future governmental performance.

According to Paul Abramson, "the trend toward increased distrust...reflects growing dissatisfaction and discontent with the performance of government in the United States."  

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11Paul R. Abramson, Political Attitudes in America, 205.
Similarly, Miller and Borrelli assert that "declining trust represents a growing discontent with the institutional arrangements that affect the distribution of resources and political power." More comprehensive than Miller's definition, these reflect a more general definition of cynicism. As Citrin is careful to note, a "diffuse sense of pride in and support for the...'form of government' can coexist with widespread public cynicism about the government in Washington and the people running it." The definition of political cynicism used in this study is an attitude of vague criticism of those who govern rather than rejection of the democratic system.

In public opinion analysis, using trust as a dependent variable requires the use of the trust index. Using the National Election Study, the four trust questions collapse into a trust index, which subdivides into three levels of trust. Each respondent receives a score of zero to eight based on the responses provided for each query; scores of zero through two are "low," three through five "medium," and six through eight "high" in trust.

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14 This measure was based on previous research conducted using the National Election Study "trust in government" questions. For each question, the most negative response was assigned a value of 0, the most positive response a 2, and a neutral response (if available) a 1. Adding the four
In sum, political trust is defined as follows: an individual evaluation, both retrospective and prospective, of the government's effectiveness and efficiency, as well as an individual judgement about the ability of the individual to affect the legislative process. Trust in government, as conceptualized in the National Elections Studies, measures criticism of political authorities. The questions do, however, pick up substantial number of negative responses regardless of prevalent issues or the passage of time. Although levels of trust in government on the NES may respond periodically to specific individuals or specific institutions, the overall level of political trust continues a downward spiral. There are no subjective measures of individual expectations that can determine if an individual is cynical or if the individual is merely dissatisfied with outcomes. Subsequently, trust in government must be considered in light of the fragmentation and compartmentalization of American society.

2. Trust in decline

The decline of trust in government has been well-documented by the National Election Studies since 1964. For each set of responses to the trust questions, the percentage of individuals scoring "low" in trust subtracted from those scoring "high," yields a percent difference index (PDI—see responses for each respondent yielded a scale of 0 to 8 for each individual.
Figure 1). In 1964, the PDI for trust in government produced a score of +39, indicating a overwhelmingly high trust in government. By 1980, the PDI for trust in government was almost completely reversed at -29. After the popular President Reagan left office, the PDI climbed to -16.¹⁵

The most recent national election study reveals that trust in government reached a nadir. The PDI for 1990 dropped to -46. Just after the 1992 presidential election, the PDI for trust in government descended to -48. As Table 1 indicates, voters in 1992 continued to be very cynical about the government.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Trust</th>
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<th>% of respondents</th>
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<td>LOW</td>
<td>1539</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEDIUM</td>
<td>477</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>3</td>
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A survey of the existing literature generates several consistent "independent variables" often tested as possible

¹⁵Arthur Miller and Stephen Borrelli, "Confidence in Government During the 1980 s," 150.
causes of low trust in government. In the sections that follow, I will identify these variables and test them against the 1992 trust in government index for evidence of causality using traditional methods.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW - TRUST AND POLITICS

The search for the source of political cynicism in previous literature reveals several variables which correlate strongly with responses to trust in government questions. The shortcoming of this literature is that, depending on the nature of the times, certain variables correlate more strongly with levels of trust in government. Figure 2 shows that fluctuations in presidential approval ratings correlate strongly with fluctuations in the trust in government PDI.\(^{16}\) In this analysis, the measures referred to as "independent variables" are those which show the closest correlations to trust in government in previous studies.

There are three primary groupings of independent

\(^{16}\)Arthur Miller and Stephen Borrelli, "Confidence in Government During the 1980's," 158.
variables. First, there are individual attributes or characteristics. The two that surface most often in the literature are demographic characteristics and political efficacy. These variables are descriptions of an individual's position with respect to other individuals and to the government. The presence of correlations between demographics and trust indicates that certain groups trust the government because of their position in society. Similarly, correlations between trust and efficacy indicate trust in government based on the individual's perception of her ability to affect governmental outcomes.

According to Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes, "to some people politics is a distant and complex realm that is beyond the power of the common citizen to affect, whereas to others the affairs of government can be understood and influenced by individual citizens." If there is a causal relationship between political efficacy and political trust, those who feel politically efficacious should exhibit higher levels of trust in government than those who feel politically powerless. The relationship between efficacy and trust, however, may be products of a common cause. Like distrust of institutions, political inefficacy may be the result of the detachment of the individual from collective action.

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The second variable grouping associated with political cynicism is institutional support. In the debate over the implications of trust in government, much of the "analysis rests on the assumption that trust in government measures alienation from the political regime rather than disapproval of incumbent political leaders." 18 Institutional support is defined as approval of collective bodies, i.e. Congress, the President's Administration, and the Supreme Court, rather than approval of individuals within the government.

As stated above, the trend of declining trust in government does not threaten the legitimacy of the American system. The causes of social and political cynicism have significant implications for the maintenance of institutions and the conduct of politics. Dissatisfaction with institutions rather than with individual politicians supports the notion that individuals feel increasingly isolated from collective institutions.

The final variables that correlate strongly with trust in government are attitudinal variables that measure the individual's preferences for policy outcomes and the performance of political authorities. According to Citrin and Green, "People may lose confidence in government because its top leaders are perceived as immoral, incompetent, or both." 19 Some assert that voter cynicism is a result of

negative evaluations of presidential leadership. If incumbent approval is the cause of voter cynicism, cynicism should appear and disappear with time and as presidential evaluations fluctuate.

Warren Miller asserts that "trust is heavily influenced by partisan and policy preferences: there is simply no evidence that the rise in cynicism is threatening to destroy the social and political fabric of America."\(^{19}\) Citizens who consistently disapprove of policy outcomes and who perceive little possibility of change in the future should be less likely to express trusting attitudes.

1. Individual Attributes and Characteristics

Agger, Goldstein, and Pearl examine relationships between demographics and responses to trust in government questions from a regional survey. Their most significant conclusion is that political cynicism is strongest among those with low levels of education and high levels of personal cynicism.\(^{20}\) Agger's analysis shows that higher levels of education correlate with higher levels of political sophistication, which then correlate with stronger feelings of political efficacy. If you know how the system operates, you are much more likely to identify opportunities

\(^{19}\text{Warren Miller, "Misreading the Public Pulse," Public Opinion 2 (October/November, 1979), 12.}\)

for expressing your preferences. According to Agger's conclusion, higher levels of education and efficacy should correlate positively with high trust in government.

Agger also concludes that "age...[has an] independent effect on political cynicism," as older cohorts are less trusting than the young. Higher levels of formal education among younger cohorts could cause increased feelings of political efficacy, which, in turn, could produce higher levels of trust. One would expect, then, that trust in government would rise with generational replacement. Instead, trust continues to decline as young cohorts replace their elders. According to Paul Abramson, "the main reason for the decline of political trust within each birth cohort cannot be aging, but historical forces that erode trust among persons of all ages." There are other demographic variables that consistently resurface in the literature, but relate closely to policy predispositions and have inconsistent correlations with levels of trust in government. Abramson finds that "between 1970 and 1976, blacks are much less trusting than whites, but, in 1978, racial differences are small and, in 1980, blacks are somewhat more trusting than whites."

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23Ibid., 232.
1992, 77 percent of black and 73 percent of white respondents expressed low trust in government.\(^{24}\) The variation between income strata was similarly small, the most highly cynical ranging from 66 to 76 percent. Differences between the genders were also minimal, as 75 percent of women and 74 percent of men expressed low trust in government. Education in 1992 did not have an independent influence on trust in government. The data show that, aside from overwhelmingly low trust overall, those with high school degrees or some college experience (78 percent) expressed the lowest levels of trust. Seventy-three percent of respondents with college degrees were low in trust, compared to 72 percent of those with less than high school educations.

Age cohorts, however, did differ in levels of trust in 1992. Sixty-five percent of respondents in the youngest age cohort (aged 18 to 35) were low in trust, while 35 percent expressed "medium" or "high" trust. Eighty-one percent of those in the oldest age cohort (aged 65 and over) distrusted government, while only 19 percent voiced "medium" or "high" levels of trust.

Two important conclusions emerge from the preceding comparisons of demographic variables and levels of political trust. First, low levels of trust in government cut across

\(^{24}\)Percentages of those "low in trust" refer to those respondents who placed in the zero to two category on the four-question trust index on the 1992 NES.
racial, educational, gender, and socio-economic boundaries. Even across age cohorts, the negative response rate to the trust questions is overwhelming, rendering the differences between them less significant. Thus, political cynicism continues to be a pervasive attitude among the American electorate. Second, that older age groups exhibit less trust in government lends credence to the idea that levels of trust decreased due at least partially to events and scandals which altered their perceptions of government. Finally, older age cohorts may have found that, even with higher levels of political sophistication than previous generations, they are nonetheless unable to exert any influence over the political system. Young people, as a result of the "institutionalization" of cynicism, are socialized into a cynical political environment and are overwhelmingly low in trust. That they are slightly more trusting than their elders may be the result of distancing from the original causes of cynicism or from incomplete political socialization.

If there is a causal relationship between political efficacy and trust in government, those who are politically efficacious should exhibit higher levels of trust. High levels of political efficacy should be present in an electorate with social capital. Frequent group interaction and participation should foster higher feelings of effectiveness in the individual. Political inefficacy should exist when social capital is scarce, and when the
individual feels powerless to make or change decisions.

Political efficacy, as included in the National Election Study, breaks down into two subcomponents. Internal political efficacy refers to an individual's perception of his relationship as an individual to the political system. Internal efficacy is measured by responses to the following questions:

1. People like me have no say about what the government does—agree or disagree.
2. Public officials don't care what people like me think—agree or disagree.

The internal efficacy questions measure respondents' perceptions of the single individual in the democratic process.

External efficacy refers to the respondents' perception of how individuals as a collective, i.e. the voting public, are able to affect the political system. External efficacy is measured by responses to the following questions:

1. Do elections make the government pay attention to what people think—a good deal, some, or not much?
2. How much attention does government pay to what people think when making decisions—a good deal, some, or not much?

Political efficacy, then, is the individual's perceptions of how much influence the single citizen and the electorate as a whole have over governmental decision-making.

According to both Agger and Abramson, political efficacy retains a significant relationship with trust in government since many variables that correlate strongly with trust also correlate strongly with efficacy. Indeed, it is
possible that these variables measure the same attitudes. If an individual does not trust government to do what is right, then that individual may not feel that she has much of an impact on policy outcomes. Likewise, if an individual perceives little opportunity to influence decision-making, he may not trust the government to enact policy favorable to him.

Trust in government and political efficacy are interrelated. Indeed, both have declined drastically since the 1960s. A strong relationship between these two variables in public opinion studies may be the result of a larger trend in American politics of alienation that, instead of being caused by a single event or trend, is the result of a progression towards alienation and inefficacy in social organizations in general.

2. **Institutional Support**

Since President Carter's 1979 "malaise speech," scholars and pollsters have debated over the extent to which public cynicism threatens the foundations of American government. If institutions are consistently the subjects of voter cynicism, speculation about a crisis of legitimacy for American democracy may be warranted. One problem with these measures, however, is that institutional evaluations are based on the performance of the individuals occupying positions of power within them. Thus, it is important to distinguish between institutional support and regime
support. This analysis assumes that questions based on institutional support do not measure attitudes about democracy in America, but attitudes about the efficiency and effectiveness of those institutions as collective bodies.

Patrick Caddell, pollster for President Carter, urged the president in 1979 to give the infamous "malaise speech," in which Carter suggested that American society was facing a "crisis in confidence." Based on his interpretation of responses to trust in government questions, Caddell proposed that "sustained distrust of both the general and specific actors over a long period of time will call into question the viability of the entire constitutional process." The increasing tendency towards judicial governing, the move for constitutional amendments for women's rights and a balanced budget, and an increase in state legislative autonomy, according to Caddell, were all manifestations of "extra-constitutional" activities in response to low levels of trust in government.

The assumption that a correlation between cynicism and disapproval of institutions does not represent rejection of the political system is supported by previous research. Warren Miller asserts that there has been no net change in levels of political trust in American institutions. Rather,


26Ibid., 7.
"trust in government is heavily influenced by partisan and policy preferences: there is simply no evidence that the rise in cynicism is threatening to destroy the social and political fabric of America." In other words, trust in government questions measure low approval ratings and partisan differences rather than institutional rejection.

Indeed, Lipset and Schneider cite unwavering support in public opinion polls for the basic tenets of American democracy. Low institutional approval ratings coexist with feelings of patriotism and pride in the political system. According to Lipset and Schneider, 60-70 percent of respondents believe that there is no need for major change in the political system, believe that the country is "on the right track," and have pride in the American form of government. Despite consistently low levels of trust in government, the authors conclude that Americans have not "lost [their] basic confidence in the American political system itself," but against the individuals who hold positions of power.

3. Attitudinal Variables and Performance Evaluations

Arthur Miller asserts that "the long-term trend of growing discontent evident since the early sixties was...the

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27Warren E. Miller, "Misreading the Public Pulse," 12.

result of...a series of incumbents all of whom proved incapable of dealing effectively or fairly with...social, economic, and political problems."29 Political cynicism here is based on evaluations of incumbent presidents' leadership ability. Since 1964, changes in the level of trust in government roughly match changes in levels of presidential approval.30

During the Johnson Administration in 1964, Americans exhibited high levels of trust in government. As Vietnam and Watergate unfolded, and as Nixon succeeded Johnson as president, trust in government plummeted. During the Carter Administration, the level of trust continued to decline, as esteem for the president fell to all-time lows. Under President Reagan, whose approval rating soared above any president since Truman, trust in government rose dramatically. After Reagan's conservative fiscal policies began to appear "unfair" to voters and the Iran-Contra scandal, trust in government again retreated.31 Similarly, as President Bush's popularity dropped following the Persian Gulf War euphoria and the recession worsened, trust in government reached its present low levels.

Citrin and Green attribute political cynicism to

29Arthur Miller, "Is Confidence Rebounding?" Public Opinion 6 (June/July, 1983), 16.

30Miller and Borrelli, "Confidence in Government During the 1980's," 158.

31Ibid.," 150.
evaluations of individual performance of those in power. Rather than a broad institutional evaluation, trust in government reflects popular disdain for the inefficient and incompetent operation of the government in Washington.\textsuperscript{32} While Congress as an institution fares poorly in public opinion surveys, individual Members of Congress and Senators enjoy relatively high approval. There is little mention of individual Congressional approval in the literature because of the tendency of voters to dislike Congress, but to like their Congressman.\textsuperscript{33}

Individual incumbent evaluations are therefore crucial to the search for the cause of political cynicism in America. Individual evaluations should not correlate strongly with trust in government if the cause of political cynicism is the fragmentation of social activity. Whereas political institutions are collective bodies that have little contact with the individual, individual legislators and presidents are perceived more personally because of public appearances, franking privileges, and constituent service. Thus, distrust of government could and does coexist with high approval ratings of individual incumbents. Individual actors may be foci of voter distrust, but these individuals cannot be the sole cause of declining

\textsuperscript{32}Citrin and Green, "Presidential Leadership and Trust in Government," 176.

\textsuperscript{33}See Appendix -- individual incumbent index variable includes ratings of Congresspersons and Senators in addition to approval rating of President.
trust in government. Fluctuations in levels of trust may be attributable to politicians who are extremely popular (Ronald Reagan) or extremely unpopular (Richard Nixon). Political cynicism, however, remains prevalent, which implies that other factors are at work that supersede incumbent approval and ensure low levels of trust in government over time.

According to Arthur Miller, political cynicism is "the negative affect towards the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations."\(^{34}\) The subject of Miller's study is the relationship between satisfaction with governmental policies and levels of trust. Using NES data, Miller crosstabulated scores from the trust in government index with respondents' self-placement on seven-point issue scales. On racial issues, those favoring government activity (to enforce the 1964 Civil Rights Act) trusted government more than those who were opposed to governmental intervention. Miller finds that the relationship between attitudes on Vietnam, social service spending, and political cynicism are more complex. Respondents who perceive differences between their position and that of the federal government, titled the "cynics of the right and left," are less trusting than those who

\(^{34}\)Arthur Miller, "Political Issues and Trust In Government," American Political Science Review 68 (September, 1974), 970.
perceive no difference between their position and that of the federal government.35

Miller argues that the centrist policies of the federal government under the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon Administrations caused increasing political cynicism on both the left and right. Correspondingly, support for the federal government's position on all issues "decreased substantially between 1964 and 1970," along with trust in government. Miller concludes that discontent among the electorate will not be remedied by centrist policymaking if the perception that government is doing nothing to solve social and economic problems persists.

It is also possible that members of the party that controls the presidency are most likely to express higher levels of trust. If party membership correlates strongly with dissatisfaction with governmental policy, one would expect levels of trust to fluctuate depending on the party occupying the presidency. Miller and Borrelli find in time-series analysis that levels of trust among partisans fluctuate—those who belong to the party of the president exhibit higher levels of trust than those in the opposite party.36 In 1990, 62 percent of strong Republicans expressed low trust along with 75 percent of strong


36Miller and Borrelli, "Confidence in Government in the 1980 s," 155.
Democrats. Immediately following the 1992 presidential election in which Democrat Bill Clinton defeated Republican George Bush, 69 percent of strong Republicans and 73 percent of strong Democrats scored "low" in trust, immediate evidence of shifts in trust based on party affiliation and the party in power.

Disagreement over policy positions, however, is not exclusive to post-1960s politics. Like demographic variables, the correlations between policy preferences and trust in government fluctuate across issue areas depending on the party in power and on the nature of the times. Agreement with the government's policies, like incumbent approval, causes temporary fluctuations in the level of trust in government, but does not adequately explain why a large percentage of the electorate retains a consistently cynical attitude towards American government.

In order to fully explore the possibilities of the explanatory potential of the three preceding groups of "independent" variables, I use ordinary least squares regression analysis to test the variables against the data on trust in government as measured by the 1992 National Election Study. This type of analysis will only show correlations between variables, and cannot prove a single causal relationship with political cynicism. It will show whether cynicism correlates strongly with attitudes towards individual politicians, efficacy, institutions, or non-attitudinal variables such as age or education.
CHAPTER III
TESTING THE VARIABLES

To represent the three preceding variable groupings, I created aggregate index measures using responses to public opinion questions. Using the 1992 National Election Study, survey questions representing each measure were combined into index variables which provide general scales for assessing attitudes.\textsuperscript{37} Age and education were also included to represent the strongest demographic variables. Using ordinary least squares regression, the index scores that represent the five issue areas detailed above were tested against the trust index to determine correlation values. Regression analysis is more appropriate than simple correlations since a number of different variables may be tested in the same equation. The regression equation appears as follows:

\[\text{\ldots}\]

\textsuperscript{37}See Appendix for the questions which comprise each index variable and for coding information.
$$T^I = \beta_0 + \beta_{IC} + \beta_{IN} + \beta_{EF} + \beta_{PA} + \beta_{AGE} + \varepsilon;$$

where $\beta_0$ = a constant term,
$\beta_{IC}$ = individual incumbent rating scale
$\beta_{IN}$ = institutional evaluation scale
$\beta_{EF}$ = political efficacy scale
$\beta_{PA}$ = policy agreement scale
$\beta_{AGE}$ = recoded age and education, and
$\varepsilon$ = an error term.

Table 2 includes the standardized slope coefficients for each of the five independent variables in the equation.

The results of this regression analysis indicate that the policy agreement and individual incumbent approval measures did not have strong correlations with trust in government in 1992.

**TABLE 2**

**INDEX REGRESSION ANALYSIS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VARIABLE</th>
<th>BETA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INDIVIDUAL INCumbENT RATING</td>
<td>.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSTITUTIONAL EVALuations</td>
<td>.340*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLITICAL EFFICACY</td>
<td>.316*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLICY AGREEMENT</td>
<td>-.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE AND EDUCATION</td>
<td>-.009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at the .0001 level, $R^2=.24$, N=696.

Political efficacy and institutional evaluations showed the
strongest correlations with trust in government. Respondents who are more politically efficacious or who are more approving of institutions of American government are likely to be more trusting. Age did not have the independent effect on trust in government that Agger found in his analysis.

The results of this analysis indicate that politically cynical individuals are motivated by perceptions of institutions in American politics and by feelings of inadequacy in dealing with a large and unresponsive government. Evaluations of individual politicians have little effect on responses to trust in government questions, except for evaluations of the president.38 Similarly, trust in government is not significantly altered by respondents' policy positions—possibly due to the absence of a divisive issue in the presidential election.

This comprehensive index model explains only some of the variance in responses to the trust in government questions. The index-based equation produces only modest figures for $R^2$ (the goodness of fit). Obviously, a model of this small size cannot take into account the full range of governmental activity that may influence the attitudes of the electorate. Similarly, the cross-sectional nature of

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38See Appendix for an explanation -- the presidential approval rating was isolated and tested without the Congressional and Senatorial approval ratings. It did not, however, exhibit a significantly higher slope coefficient by itself.
this form of analysis excludes past events that irrevocably altered voter confidence in the United States. This model does show, however, that there are certain variables that have distinct correlations with trust in government.

The analysis of the variables most often discussed in the literature confirms that voters are now less trusting than ever, and that there are no clear relationships in public opinion data that can be interpreted as the cause of political cynicism. Although the standardized regression coefficients for institutional evaluations and political efficacy are significant and of a decent size, neither provides definitive proof due to uncertainty about the direction of causality. I have neither proven nor disproved previous theories about causality. Does political inefficacy cause low trust in government, or does low trust in government cause political inefficacy? The relationship between political efficacy and trust in government indicates that many Americans believe government is unresponsive to citizen demands, and, as a result, cannot be trusted. I do, however, question the completeness of previous analysis.

Among the three variable groupings, the attitudinal variables and individual performance evaluations fared the worst, indicating that the cause of voter cynicism cannot be attributed to disagreement with policy positions or incumbent evaluations. The correlation between political efficacy and trust indicates that the trust in government questions are at least partially measuring attitudes about
the individual's position with respect to the political system. The correlation between institutional evaluations and trust signifies that the trust questions measure significant disapproval of collective institutions rather than individuals. In sum, the crisis of confidence in the United States is more than "casual and ritualistic negativism."39 The regression coefficients for institutional evaluations, however, are hardly indicative of a threat to American democracy. The middle ground that remains is a pervasive sense of dissociation from American government and a lack of trust in governmental institutions.

Larry Bartels asserts that in presidential nomination races, "information is positively related to support."40 In a democratic society, information is power. The ability to monitor the political process and organize to enact change or enforce the existing order is crucial to a functioning democracy. The loss of the ability to assemble and communicate means loss of information about the political process, which translates into a loss of power at the individual level. Fragmentation and declining group participation weakened the information-gathering networks that existed earlier in the century in political parties, communities, and civic groups. The lack of information


about major social institutions and collective decision-making processes, along with political scandals of the last 30 years, caused the institutionalization of cynicism.
CHAPTER IV
SOCIAL CAPITAL AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Studies of trust in government thus fail to adequately pinpoint the cause of the decline in confidence among Americans since the 1960s. While I cannot test the following hypothesis in this study, an alternative framework may provide fertile ground for future research. An improved theoretical framework would acknowledge path dependence, that is, the idea that the final outcome of any process is the exclusive result of a specific series of events and actions. According to Robert Putnam, "path dependence can produce durable differences in performance between two societies, even when the formal institutions, resources, relative prices, and individual preferences in the two are similar." The search for the cause of political cynicism in America cannot be reduced to cross-sectional study, nor can it be captured adequately by studying only public opinion survey data. Rather, studying the variables that

41Robert Putnam, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy, 179.
correlate well with trust in government may provide clues to the source of public cynicism.

According to Putnam, an effective representative government relies the buildup of "social capital" within the civic community. Social capital is defined as the degree of faith in the reliability of social networks and institutions strengthened by group participation and involvement. In the evolution of the political community, the character of inter- and intra-group association determines the context in which institutions and policy are created. Putnam finds that "civic associations are powerfully associated with effective public institutions." Thus, varying forms of social interaction produce social capital. Those in search of the causes of political cynicism in America would benefit from using a framework of analysis that, like Putnam's, considers the effects of declining group participation and increasing fragmentation on citizen expectations and governmental performance.

1. Institutions are shaped by history. The significance of historical events cannot be underestimated in the discussion of trust in government. The Vietnam War and accompanying social upheaval of the 1960 s and early 70's introduced a new dimension into American politics—
institutions governed by supposedly well-informed leaders responsible for securing American interests at home and abroad suddenly appeared incapable of doing so. The crises of the 1970's, including the oil embargo, stagflation, and the Iranian revolution, caused public approval of government and the president to plummet.

Likewise, varying styles of leadership, often associated with responses to these major crises, influenced levels of cynicism. Presidential approval ratings, as discussed above, have high correlations with fluctuations in levels of trust in government. Miller and Borrelli state that correlations between presidential approval and trust in government "appear to reflect public assessments of how well the president is dealing with policy, rather than a response to his personal popularity."45 Lyndon Johnson's policy of escalation in the Vietnam War forced him to retire from the presidency after one term. The exposure of Richard Nixon's involvement in the Watergate scandal left an emblazoned image on the American political psyche. Jimmy Carter's perceived ineffectiveness and mishandling of the hostage situation in Iran had the dual effects of sending voter confidence to unprecedented depths and removing the incumbent president from office. Finally, Ronald Reagan's image as a strong leader invoked patriotism and pride in Americans. The economic and military success under Reagan

45Miller and Borrelli, "Confidence in Government during the 1980's," 158.
paralleled an increase in trust in the United States. Similarly, fiascoes in the legislative branch, such as the ABSCAM, savings and loan, and check-bouncing scandals leave negative impressions on Congress as an institution.

The history that has shaped American social and political institutions in the last thirty years was traumatic enough to produce a widespread feeling of cynicism towards authorities. The performance of government in the late 1960's and early 1970's fostered low expectations and distrust of government. Similarly, the fragmentation of American society resulting from shifts from urban to suburban residence as well as to technological advances isolating individuals increasingly from social activity reduced the amount of group interaction and produced trends of declining partisan identification, voter turnout, and participation in political activities. Accordingly, individuals' dissociation from collective social and political activity resulted in declining trust in government and the institutionalization of cynicism. The result is a "vicious cycle" in which lower expectations contribute to inefficient and unresponsive government, which then creates lower expectations.

2. Institutions shape politics. In contrast to previous studies of trust in government, I suggest that part of the cause of cynicism in American politics lies within

\[46\] Robert Putnam, Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy, 7.
institutional structures. The institutional structure of
the constitutional system in America inhibits the activities
of individuals by ensuring only gradual reform and by
necessitating well-informed, organized group activity to
produce significant change.

Robert Dahl asserts that "the effect of the
constitutional rules is to preserve, add to, or subtract
from the advantages with which they [different groups] start
the race."47 The institutional structure in the United
States is such that large, well-organized and well-funded
groups enjoy significant influence over the legislative
process. The individual finds it increasingly difficult and
futile to spend time and effort participating in political
activity, due to the lack of significant incentives. The
result is an overall decline in political efficacy and
trust. In a system that requires well-organized group
efforts for exerting influence over the legislative process,
the individual in a fragmented society with low group
interaction would find it difficult to affect governmental
action. If the individual in this society has no influence
over the legislative process, his responses to questions
like those on the NES regarding efficacy and trust, are not
likely to be positive.

The findings in the statistical analysis above support
this conclusion. Political efficacy and institutional

47 Robert Dahl, A Preface to Democracy (Chicago: The
University of Chicago Press, 1956), 137.
evaluations showed the strongest correlations to trust in government. If group association is crucial to the aggregation of preferences in the United States, then declining social capital and group interaction should produce lower efficacy and trust.

3. Social context shapes institutions. Low levels of social capital, according to Putnam, contribute to the inefficiency and irresponsibility of political institutions as bases of social cooperation and preference aggregation begin to deteriorate. Declining social interaction in the United States during the period from 1960-1992 removed the means of cooperation and information-gathering among individuals. In other words, increasing fragmentation in a political system that relies very heavily on group membership as a vehicle for social and political power may have significant consequences. Again, the compartmentalization of social life produces little opportunity or incentive for collective action, which would leave the individual relatively powerless in a governmental system she perceives to be dominated by large interests.

Evidence of fragmentation in American political life abounds. The decline of American political parties has been well-documented in political science. After the 1950s, political parties underwent significant change which transformed national parties from primarily grassroots

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support activators to national policymaking institutions. According to Martin Wattenberg, the result of party decline in America from 1952-1988 is "a system that articulates interests superbly but aggregates them poorly." Thus, individuals are less able to affect the process of partisan politics, and are becoming "more neutral" towards the system as a whole.

Borrowing from Carmines and Stimsons' conceptualization of issue evolution, I argue that cynicism resulting from the decline of social capital is an "issue capable of altering the political environment within which [it] originated and evolved." The social group networks associated with the mid-twentieth century--political parties, rural townships, inner-city ethnic communities, and civic organizations--suffered from the fragmentation that resulted from the social, residential, and technological developments of the past thirty years. A result of the fragmentation of American social life, decreasing trust, has on occasion been crystallized by elite action (as evidenced by the aforementioned political crises) into distrust correlating strongly with disapproval of individuals and

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50 Ibid., 55.

policy outcomes. Most recently, political cynicism appears to be the cause of the most significant shift in Congressional power in the last 40 years, as the Republicans took control of both the Senate and House of Representatives in the 1994 mid-term elections.

There is a general shift in the attitudes of Americans toward cynicism. An environment of cynicism toward major social institutions creates a vicious cycle, wherein expectations become lower, which leads to decreased performance, which repeats into even lower expectations. Political cynicism, then, is only part of a pervasive mood of cynicism in American society, not an anomalous "misreading" of the public pulse. While actions or individual politicians' actions were temporarily able to produce fluctuations, the "institutionalization" of cynicism irreversibly altered the political environment.
CONCLUSION

Previous studies are consistent in their findings in regard to one question: are individuals expressing dissatisfaction with the basic premises of the American political system, or are they merely dissatisfied with the performance of individuals who inhabit the institutions? The consensus in the field is that declining trust is less than a "crisis of legitimacy, but more than a passing fad.52 Most studies use responses to trust in government questions as the dependent variable and a variety of opinion data, demographics, and policy orientations as independent variables. But I demonstrate that these variables alone are inadequate.

For example, a complete search for the causes of political cynicism within this theoretical framework would necessarily include an examination of time-series data on group membership. The ability of Americans to live in isolation increases with innovations in technology. In order to know whether the fragmentation of American society

causes higher levels of cynicism, one would seek correlations between declining group membership and increasing cynicism. The fragmentation and compartmentalization of social life may have also sparked the rise in voter "Independence." Interestingly, the trends towards political Independence and lower trust in government cover roughly the same time periods.

A complete search for the source of political cynicism in the United States should include an assessment of the impact of group membership and participation over the last 30 years. If Robert Putnam is correct and the amount of social capital can determine the performance of institutions and expectations of individuals, declining social interaction could certainly reduce the effectiveness of social institutions and lower the standards to which they are held by the population. Lower expectations, in turn, shape the performance and perceptions of individuals and institutions in the political system. The result is the institutionalization of cynicism and the continuing decline of trust in government.

While it is beyond the scope of this study to attempt a sweeping sociological and historical analysis of American political and social life in the twentieth century, one must nonetheless take into account the totality of events and trends that occurred both inside and outside of politics and government. Arthur Miller asserts that "discontent can be functional for a political system if it
acts as a catalyst for orderly change, but when the normal channels are perceived as ineffective, the probability that conflict may burst forth...increases." On the contrary, Jack Citrin suggests that individuals expressing low trust in government are responding to the "current zeitgeist of casual and ritualistic negativism."54

While the institutionalization of cynicism has significant implications in a representative democracy, distrust in the United States is not limited to politics. Rather, declining trust in government seems to be part of a larger trend of "loss of confidence in the leadership of our major political and economic institutions."55 Americans increasingly lack trust in the authorities' ability to make decisions about their welfare. The persistence voter distrust after 30 years signifies lasting and significant social change which could permanently alter the nature of American politics.


54 Jack Citrin, "Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government," 970.

APPENDIX

THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLES IN THE INDEX REGRESSION EQUATION (TABLE 2) ARE CREATED AS FOLLOWS.

The individual incumbent rating, institutional evaluations, and political efficacy variables are index variables that are created by recoding responses into 0, 1, or 2 scores. Each index variable listed above is made up of a set of survey questions from the 1992 NES.

**Individual Incumbent Rating.** For each case, responses to presidential job approval, approval of both Senators, and approval of House incumbent are recoded to create an index of 0 (totally disapprove of all incumbents) to 8 (totally approving of all incumbents).

**Institutional Evaluations.** For this variable, responses to approval of the federal government in Washington, approval rating for Congress, and support for term limits are recoded to form an index scoring from 0 to 6 (disapproving to approving). I used approval for term limits as an institutional evaluation since many voters approve of their incumbent Congressperson, but at the same time favor term limits. This indicates hostility towards Congress as an institution combined with lack of sufficient ability or willingness to change the institution by "conventional" means, specifically voting. This could represent the type of "extra-constitutional" behavior mentioned by Patrick Caddell above.

**Political Efficacy.** The four efficacy questions are collapsed into an index scoring 0 to 8 (see text for question wording.)

**Policy Agreement.** For this variable, self-placement scales regarding spending for welfare, aid to blacks, spending on education, and spending on social security were recoded to place each respondent on an index scale from 0 to 8 (strongly disagree with government position to strongly agree with government position).

In the regression analysis, only the institutional evaluation and political efficacy index variables achieved statistical significance. To test for strong correlations between presidential job approval and trust, I ran the regression using presidential approval alone instead of the individual incumbent rating index. Presidential approval attained a regression coefficient of .095, but did not achieve statistical significance.
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VITA

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