WHAT IS IT ABOUT GOVERNMENT THAT AMERICANS DISLIKE?

EDITED BY

JOHN R. HIBBING

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

ELIZABETH THEISS-MORSE

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 2001

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Sabon 10/12 pt. *System* QuarkXPress [BTS]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

What is it about government that Americans dislike? / edited by John R. Hibbing, Elizabeth Theiss-Morse.
p. cm.—(Cambridge studies in political psychology and public opinion)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-521-79181-2 – ISBN 0-521-79631-8 (pb.)
1. Public administration—United States. 2. Public opinion—United States. 3. Political culture—United States. 4. Political psychology. I. Hibbing, John R. II. Theiss-Morse, Elizabeth. III. Series.
JK2443.W483 2001
320.973–dc21 00-054665

ISBN 0 521 79181 2 hardback
ISBN 0 521 79631 8 paperback

Contents

Figures *page* x

Tables xii

Contributors xv

Introduction: Studying the American People's Attitudes Toward Government 1
JOHN R. HIBBING AND ELIZABETH THEISS-MORSE

Part I: When Do Americans Tend to Be Dissatisfied with Government?

1. Political Trust Revisited: Déjà Vu All Over Again? 9
JACK CITRIN AND SAMANTHA LUKS

2. We're All in This Together: The Decline of Trust in Government, 1958–1996 28
JOHN R. ALFORD

3. Were the Halcyon Days Really Golden? An Analysis of Americans' Attitudes about the Political System, 1945–1965 47
STEPHEN EARL BENNETT

4. Public Trust in Government in the Reagan Years and Beyond 59
VIRGINIA A. CHANLEY, THOMAS J. RUDOLPH, AND WENDY M. RAHN

Part II: With Which Governmental Institutions Do Americans Tend to Be Dissatisfied?

5. Public Confidence in the Leaders of American Governmental Institutions 83
LILLIARD E. RICHARDSON, JR., DAVID J. HOUSTON, AND CHRIS SISSIE HADJIHARALAMBOUS

6. Linking Presidential and Congressional Approval During Unified and Divided Governments 98
JEFFREY L. BERNSTEIN

7. Is Washington Really the Problem? 118
ERIC M. USLANER

8. Explaining Public Support for Devolution: The Role of Political Trust 134
MARC J. HETHERINGTON AND JOHN D. NUGENT

Part III: Do Actions on the Part of Politicians Cause Americans to Be Dissatisfied with Government?

9. On Red Capes and Charging Bulls: How and Why Conservative Politicians and Interest Groups Promoted Public Anger 157
AMY FRIED AND DOUGLAS B. HARRIS

10. A Reassessment of Who's to Blame: A Positive Case for the Public Evaluation of Congress 175
DAVID W. BRADY AND SEAN M. THERIAULT

11. Process Performance: Public Reaction to Legislative Policy Debate 193
CAROLYN L. FUNK

Part IV: How Is Dissatisfaction with Government Measured and Incorporated into Political Theory?

12. Trust in Federal Government: The Phenomenon and Its Antecedents 209
DIANA OWEN AND JACK DENNIS

13. The Psychology of Public Dissatisfaction with Government 227
TOM R. TYLER

14. The Means *Is* the End 243
JOHN R. HIBBING AND ELIZABETH THEISS-MORSE

References 251

Index 271

Figures

2.1. Trust Government in Washington to Do What Is Right *page* 31

2.2. Trust Government in Washington Most or All of the Time 31

2.3. Trust Government in Washington Most or All of the Time by Race 34

2.4. Trust Government in Washington Most or All of the Time by Education 35

2.5. Trust Government in Washington Most or All of the Time by Age 36

2.6. Trust Government in Washington Most or All of the Time by Income 37

2.7. Trust Government in Washington Most or All of the Time by Party Identification 40

2.8. Trust Government in Washington Most or All of the Time by Ideology 41

2.9. Trust and Proportion Citing Foreign Affairs or Defense as the Number One Problem 46

4.1. Government Trust, Responsiveness, and Confidence, 1980:1 to 1997:4 63

9.1. The Ideological Confidence Gap, 1982–94 167

13.1. The Impact of Experience on the Evaluation of Legal Authorities 234

Figures

13.2. Influences on Judgments About the Fairness of a Legal Procedure 238

13.3. Aspects of Experience Influencing Performance Evaluations and Legitimacy 239

13.4. Competence and Benevolence as Antecedents of Evaluation 241

Tables

1.1. Trends in Political Trust, 1964–96 *page* 15

1.2. Correlations Between Political Trust and Approval Ratings 18

1.3. Correlation Coefficients Between Presidential Approval and Congressional Approval by Political Awareness 19

1.4. Explaining Political Trust 21

3.1. Americans' Trust in Government, 1958 and 1964 54

4.1. *F*-Tests of Blocks of Coefficients 70

4.2. VAR Results 72

5.1. Logit Results for Confidence in Legislative Leaders 92

5.2. Logit Results for Confidence in Executive Branch Leaders 94

5.3. Logit Results for Confidence in Judicial Leaders 95

6.1. Models of Legislative Approval, Divided and Unified Governments 109

6.2. Correlation Between Congressional and Presidential Approval, Controlling for Strength of Partisanship, 1990 111

6.3. Correlation Between Congressional and Presidential Approval, Controlling for Cynicism, 1990 112

6.4. Correlation Between Congressional and Presidential Approval, Controlling for Political Knowledge, 1990 113

6.5. Correlation Between Congressional and Presidential Approval, Controlling for Strength of Partisanship and Political Knowledge, 1990 114

6.6. Correlation Between Congressional and Presidential Approval, Controlling for Cynicism and Political Knowledge, 1990 114

7.1. Regression Estimates for Preference for State or Federal Government 124

7.2. Regression Estimates for Trust in Levels of Government 126

7.3. Regression Analysis of Trust in State Government by Party Identification 131

8.1. Descriptive Statistics for Explanatory Variables 144

8.2. Proportion of People Identifying Federal and State Government as the Level They Have the Most Faith in, by State Law, Efficiency of State Government, and State Fiscal Capacity, 1996 144

8.3. Whether Respondent Identifies Federal Government as the One in Which He or She Has the Most Confidence (Logistic Regression Estimates) 146

10.1. Explaining the Public's Disapproval of Congress 186

10.2. Who Gets Media Coverage? A Multivariate Regression Answer 190

11.1. OLS Regression Estimates of Negative Affect in Response to Congressional Debate 201

11.2. Mean Response to Debate Conditions by Individual Differences in Conflict Avoidance on Index of Negative Affect 202

12.1. Multiple Regression Analysis (OLS) of Institutional Support 220

13.1. The Role of Procedural Justice in Shaping Evaluations of the Legitimacy of the Supreme Court 235

13.2. The Role of Procedural Justice in Shaping Evaluations of Congress 236

13.3. Elements of Fair Decision-Making Procedures: The Supreme Court 239

13.4. Elements of Fair Decision-Making Procedures: Congress 240

I

Political Trust Revisited: Déjà Vu All Over Again?

JACK CITRIN AND SAMANTHA LUKS

A good politician is quite as unthinkable as an honest burglar.
—H. L. Mencken

INTRODUCTION[1]

Trust, once again, is the word on everyone's lips. In the early 1990s, polls recorded a new decline in confidence in America's politicians and government institutions (Lipset 1995; Nye 1997). To many observers (Burnham 1997; Tolchin 1996), the electoral tremor of 1994 expressed feelings of deep anger that subsequent partisan bickering and legislative gridlock would surely reinforce. Good economic times seemed to stop the rot in trust, but with Bill Clinton's travails, Cassandra-like predictions abounded about how a new rise in cynicism toward politics would affect the capacity to govern (Apple 1998).

Such worries are not new, of course. Domestic turmoil in the late 1960s and early 1970s fueled similar anxieties about "the alienated voter" (Schwartz 1973), confidence "gaps" (Lipset and Schneider 1987), and a "crisis of competence" (Sundquist 1980). These convulsive events also spawned empirical research into the causes and significance of political trust (Miller 1974a; Citrin 1974; Citrin et al. 1975; Wright 1976; Hart 1978; Craig 1993). While no one disputed that confidence in government had declined after 1964, the meaning of this trend was controversial from the outset (Miller 1974a; Citrin 1974). The so-called Miller–Citrin debate (1974) centered on two issues: (1) Whether the drop in trust recorded by the American National Election Studies (ANES) signified a growing rejection of the political *regime*, in Easton's

1 An earlier version of this chapter, titled "Revisiting Political Trust in an Angry Age," was presented at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association.

(1965b) sense of the term (Miller), or just more dissatisfaction with *incumbent* authorities (Citrin); and (2) Whether the main source of rising mistrust was disapproval of the *policies* of *both* main parties (Miller) or unhappiness with the *performance* of the sitting national administration (Citrin).

The recent oscillations in the public's outlook—the loss of trust between 1988 and 1994 and the upward bounce between 1994 and 1996—thus provide an opportunity to reconsider these conflicting interpretations and to formulate a unifying account of the entire pattern of change. The present inquiry explores continuity and change in the foundations of political trust and cynicism by analyzing the ANES surveys from 1964 to 1996 and the 1992–94–96 Panel Study.[2] We begin by commenting on the literature concerning the meaning of political trust. Next, we propose and test a modified version of the model proposed by Citrin and Green (1986) to explain cross-sectional variations in trust between 1980 and 1996. The principal modification is to incorporate attitudes toward Congress as a predictor. This provides a more comprehensive assessment of the influence of performance evaluations and helps identify the effects of changes in the *political* as well as the economic context on the institutional focus of mistrust.

SUPPORT FOR THE SYSTEM OR TRUST IN INCUMBENTS?

This argument about the "object" of the conventional trust in government measures seems settled (Norris 1998; Craig 1993). Easton (1965b) assumed that support for the regime would be more enduring and pervasive than support for incumbent authorities or their policies. He also maintained that the implications of an erosion of support would vary depending on the level of the system. The concept of regime refers to the polity's core principles and values and to its operating rules. Yet the items making up the standard survey indicators of political trust and confidence explicitly ask about the "government in Washington," "administrators," or the "people running" the government or a particular branch of it. Many Americans who give cynical responses to these items nevertheless express pride for "our system of government" (Citrin 1974; Lipset 1995). Additional evidence that these questions stimulate opinions about incumbents is that Republicans consistently are more trusting than Democrats when their party occupies the White House, and vice versa (Pew Research Center 1998; Luks and Citrin 1997). Finally,

2 These data were obtained from the InterUniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research and UC DATA, Survey Research Center, University of California, Berkeley.

between 1980 and 1986, favorable beliefs about the incumbent president's performance and character along with an improved economy triggered an across-the-board rise in trust (Citrin and Green 1986). More generally, the trend in political trust closely tracks changes in the national mood, as indicated by questions about whether or not the country is "on the right track" (Pew Research Center 1998). From Easton's theoretical perspective, the fluctuating impact of short-run events is seen as falling more heavily on evaluations of current office-holders than on support for the political regime as a whole (Norris 1998).

At a minimum, the ANES trust index fails to discriminate between "alienated" cynics, who truly reject the political system, and "performance" or "partisan" cynics, who merely dislike the party in power, the incumbent president, or current government policies. But it seems clear that the latter group is the more numerous. For one thing, to say that one can trust the government to do what is right "only some of the time" hardly bespeaks a desire to transform existing processes or institutions.

On the other hand, political trust and presidential popularity are not identical. Many who approve of the president express mistrust of government "in general;" there is no evidence that trust soared when George Bush's approval rating reached 91 percent just after the Gulf War. One explanation for the sluggishness in political trust is that a component of people's responses to the usual measures is a "ritualistic" disdain for politicians as a class (Citrin 1974). Another is that "the government in Washington" means more than just the president, so his short-run success need not mitigate disapproval of how other institutions, such as Congress, are performing. And to the extent that mistrust reflects a perceived gap between democratic values and entrenched practices, the persistence of low levels when presidential approval climbs arguably indicates that there has been some loss of support for regime processes (Norris 1998).

Upon reflection, the debate between Miller and Citrin probably posed too stark a distinction between support for the political system and trust in the government of the day. It is not simply that these attitudes are empirically interrelated, even in a stable regime like the United States (Citrin et al. 1975). In addition, *both* concepts have multiple referents. For example, the desire to reform the two-party system is a criticism at the regime level, even if it does extend to rejection of other institutional arrangements. Similarly, in the American political system, the key incumbents include both executive and legislative actors. Citrin and Green (1986) argue that feelings about the president drive changes in the level of political trust in part because the presidency dominates news coverage of current politics (Graber 1997). However, they do not

explicitly consider the role of attitudes toward Congress, which Feldman (1983) concludes is the cognitive focus of the ANES trust in government questions.

Since "the government in Washington" encompasses both president and Congress, the specific actors whose conduct provokes one's overall level of political trust may vary across individuals or time. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) argue that the public does make distinctions in how they evaluate individual institutions. Furthermore, divergent attitudes toward the president and Congress may be more prevalent in a period of divided government. These considerations prompt our attention to how the political context may condition the *relative* influence of feelings about president and Congress on one's overall sense of trust in government.

If many streams flow in (or out) of the reservoir of political trust, then whether feelings about the president or about Congress have the heavier impact should depend on how people allocate responsibility for national successes or failures. In other words, reactions to events, doubtless mediated by news coverage, may determine the institutional focus of political trust as well as its overall level. For example, it is plausible that congressional scandals and follies, including the abortive effort at a pay raise, widespread check kiting, and misuse of campaign funds, contributed to the rise in cynicism between 1990 and 1992.

Whatever the institutional focus of mistrust at any given time, the particular aspect of either presidential or congressional conduct that elicits public disaffection is another significant empirical question. For example, is it perceptions of the president's perceived job performance, policies, or personal character that most strongly influence overall feelings of trust in government? Disentangling the relative influences of these beliefs is complicated, since they are inevitably interrelated. Politicians use statements about policy to convey messages about their personal qualities, so someone who approves of the administration's generous attitude toward the poor is likely to view the president as compassionate. Similarly, approval of a forceful foreign policy should reinforce beliefs that the president is a strong leader. Competence and integrity generally are cited as critical for favorable assessment of political institutions and leaders, but, as the trajectory of opinion toward President Clinton indicates, positive ratings on these traits do not always go together. Thus, in this analysis, we shall explore how the political and economic context may affect the chosen criteria for assessing the government's trustworthiness.

HYPOTHESES, DATA, AND METHOD

Trust refers to expectations of future behavior and is based on beliefs about the trustee's competence and sense of fiduciary responsibility

(Barber 1983). Accordingly, one can conceive of mistrust as resulting from a gap between expectations and perceived outcomes. Orren (1997) distinguishes between long-term influences on mistrust, such as the suspicion of power endemic to American political culture and the lack of deference to authority that comes with modernization, and short-run influences, such as national conditions, evaluations of the government's performance, dissatisfaction with policy, and media coverage of scandals and government corruption. The explanation developed here focuses on the role of the more immediate political factors. Our special concern is the stability, at the theoretical level, of the causes of political trust. We ask whether the same factors explain trust when the aggregate level is rising as when it is falling, when a Democrat is president as when a Republican, and when government is unified as when it is divided.

Our starting point is the model of political trust proposed by Citrin and Green (1986). They emphasize the role of presidential leadership and evaluations of the nation's economy in causing the rise in trust during the early 1980s. Our expectation is that these factors remain significant in the 1990s too. However, we modify the Citrin–Green account to consider the influence of evaluations of congressional performance. Since the cognitive association of Congress and "the government in Washington" is natural, satisfaction with this institution also should predict political trust.

The biennial ANES data make it possible to track changes in the focus of popular discontent. The nature of the political environment and the flow of information about current reality should affect which institutions and what specific aspects of their behavior are salient when respondents are asked about their overall level of trust in government as a whole. For example, news about corruption in government may concentrate on members of Congress. If "priming" effects are potent (Iyengar and Kinder 1987), then when one asks about trust in government, widespread exposure to this information should result in a stronger causal influence for attitudes toward Congress as opposed to feelings about the incumbent president. In Zaller's (1992) terms, the accessibility of stored information about Congress will make it an important consideration in forming opinions about the government's trustworthiness.

Turning to methodological issues, the data we analyze are the ANES surveys. In tracking aggregate trends, we start with the 1964 election study. The multivariate analysis begins with the 1980 survey, however, because the earlier surveys did not include measures of key explanatory variables such as presidential character and attitudes toward Congress. We follow Citrin and Green (1986) in using a two-item version of the Trust in Government Index rather than the five-item measure previously

used by Miller (1974a) and Citrin (1974). The truncated measure simply sums responses to the questions "How much of the time do you think that the government in Washington can be trusted to do what is right?" and "Would you say that the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all people?"[3] Finally, in reporting trends in trust we employ the summary Percentage Difference Index, which is computed by subtracting the proportion of cynics (two cynical responses) from trusting (two trusting answers) respondents in each designated group. In estimating the multivariate model of trust in government, we use ordinary least squares regression.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTOURS OF CHANGE IN POLITICAL TRUST

The "Reagan recovery" in political trust ended during his second term, due in part to the corrosive effects of the Iran-Contra revelations (Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Citrin, Green, and Reingold 1987). Trust continued to crumble through the Bush presidency. The decline was variously attributed to the bickering and gridlock characteristic of divided government, the deteriorating economy, Bush's lack of charisma when compared to his predecessor, and congressional scandals. The 1992 election brought unified government, but no end to gridlock, investigations of official malfeasance, or economic anxiety. President Clinton's first two years in office witnessed another upsurge in mistrust, with scores on the ANES index reaching their nadir in 1994. Just as in 1984, sustained economic growth and increased presidential popularity produced a rise in trust between 1994 and 1996.

Table 1.1 compares the trend in political trust among major social and political groups. These data have theoretical relevance in that the pattern of social cleavages is a clue to the motivational basis of mistrust. For example, if rich and poor or black and white move in opposite directions, an implication is that ideological disagreement over distributional issues are salient. On the other hand, if most groups move in the same direction, it is more likely that perceptions of performance on "valence"

3 The resultant three-point index clearly is highly correlated with the earlier, longer measure. Citrin and Green initially employed the truncated version because some of the other items were not included in the surveys they analyzed. In addition, the items about "wasting our tax money" and "crooked administrators" omitted from the short version have a ritualistic flavor and somewhat different objects that on their face are more specific and less "regime-like." In addition, replication of the analysis using the longer version of the trust in government index does not affect the results.

Table 1.1. *Trends in Political Trust, 1964–96*

	1964	1966	1968	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980	1982	1984	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996
Total Sample	47	31	19	–1	–6	–36	–41	–44	–52	–35	–14	–27	–47	–50	–58	–40
Race																
White (not Latino)	47	29	16	2	–2	–35	–33	–46	–55	–33	–11	–23	–50	–53	–59	–42
Black (not Latino)	47	47	36	–26	–42	–59	–46	–35	–35	–46	–38	–48	–54	–51	–56	–33
Party Identification																
Strong Democrat	59	47	38	–16	–28	–38	–60	–26	–33	–42	–30	–47	–54	–46	–36	–19
Weak Democrat	52	43	19	–1	–10	–36	–41	–42	–49	–37	–17	–33	–48	–50	–59	–32
Independent Democrat	58	33	15	0	–25	–39	–62	–42	–54	–49	–41	–32	–55	–62	–59	–43
Independent	31	21	–14	–12	–5	–48	–46	–50	–61	–41	–10	–36	–50	–61	–72	–55
Independent Republican	23	14	13	0	14	–17	–28	–64	–69	–31	–9	–22	–40	–47	–64	–50
Weak Republican	47	21	20	12	12	–32	–27	–46	–59	–10	–3	–11	–43	–40	–57	–48
Strong Republican	19	5	13	26	18	–24	–5	–51	–53	–21	10	1	–27	–43	–66	–55
Congressional Approval																
Approve									–30	–5	5	–7	–22	–13	–31	–24
Neutral									–60	–39	–27	–46	–48	–46	–55	–53
Disapprove									–65	–54	–39	–50	–62	–66	–73	–53
Presidential Job Performance																
Strongly Approve									–23	–9	12	–3	–24	–29	–35	–18
Not Strongly Approve									–37	–25	–5	–17	–44	–40	–54	–39
Not Strongly Disapprove									–60	–40	–41	–44	–57	–49	–64	–55
Strongly Disapprove									–68	–60	–49	–54	–77	–65	–75	–70

(continued)

Table 1.1 *(continued)*

	1964	1966	1968	1970	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980	1982	1984	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996
Personal Financial Situation Compared to Last Year																
Better		44	30	9	–2	–31	–28	–30	–45	–20	1	–15	–36	–40	–51	–30
Same		30	16	–4	–6	–36	–44	–47	–48	–33	–19	–29	–53	–50	–59	–43
Worse		13	6	–3	–28	–41	–51	–56	–61	–47	–32	–44	–55	–57	–67	–53
Affect Toward Major Parties																
Positive–Positive	48		43		29		–12	–17	–46	–12	14	–9	–17	–25	–44	–20
Positive–Neutral	61		27		4		–25	–36	–43	–23	–6	–20	–18	–35	–38	–27
Positive–Negative	46		18		–11		–44	945	–52	–42	–25	–30	–63	–54	–62	–43
Neutral–Neutral	52		18		–1		–36	–42	–52	–26	–4	–29	–45	–44	–56	–32
Negative–Neutral	36		8		–33		–51	–57	–62	–49	–27	–27	–63	–64	–70	–49
Negative–Negative	0		12		–32		–69	–75	–77	–49	–45	–46	–77	–66	–84	–70

Note: Entries are percentage difference index scores: the percentage of respondents giving two trusting responses to the trust government and big interest items, minus the percentage giving two cynical responses.
Source: American National Election Studies.

questions such as peace and prosperity are motivating responses about trusting the government.

Our results support the latter interpretation. Just as in earlier decades, the recent data find few demographic fault-lines in the public's outlook. The decline in trust after 1986 was an across-the-board phenomenon (Alford, this volume; Pew Research Center 1998). Blacks and whites, men and women, young and old, rich and poor consistently moved in the same direction. Table 1.1, however, also points to the influence of support for the incumbent president on trust in government. During the Reagan-Bush years, whites expressed more trust than blacks; with Clinton in office, the opposite is true.

The evidence of strong period effects in Table 1.1 indicates that whatever one's party affiliation or ideological identification, one swims with the cynical (or trusting) tide. For example, both strong Democrats and strong Republicans became more trusting between 1994 and 1996. But there is also a partisan component in changing attitudes. All groups became more trusting during Reagan's first term, but the largest shift took place among Republican identifiers. With Clinton in the White House, Democrats changed the most. Nevertheless, we do find that respondents who are negative about *both* major parties tend to be more cynical than any other group, including those who like the "ins" and dislike the "outs."[4]

Table 1.1 also supports earlier findings about the significance of economic conditions in influencing the level of trust in government (Citrin and Green 1986; House and Mason 1975). In the 1990s, as earlier, people whose financial situations are improving express more political trust than those whose circumstances are worsening. Interestingly, this relationship seemed relatively weak in 1994, perhaps because economic issues were less salient during an election dominated by the Republican attack on the size and ineffectiveness of the federal government.

PRESIDENT AND CONGRESS?

The bivariate relationships reported in Table 1.1 also show that approval of how *both* the president and Congress are doing is associated consistently with generalized feelings of political trust. This relationship persists in the 1990s, when the level of public approval of Congress dropped sharply. Moreover, as shown in Table 1.2, the size of the correlations between trust in government scores and approval of the

4 This analysis was based on Wattenberg's (1996) technique of summing the number of "likes" and "dislikes" expressed in open-ended responses about the Democratic and Republican parties (Luks and Citrin 1997).

Table 1.2. *Correlations Between Political Trust and Approval Ratings*

	1980	1982	1984	1988	1990	1992	1994	1996
Presidential Approval	0.24	0.26	0.30	0.27	0.25	0.18	0.20	0.25
Congressional Approval	0.22	0.28	0.25	0.25	0.26	0.34	0.32	0.19
Approval of Own Representative	0.04*	0.10	0.10	0.14	0.08	0.08	0.11	0.03*
Correlation Between Congressional Approval and Presidential Approval	0.24	0.19	0.08	0.02*	0.14	0.11	0.30	–0.07*

Note: * Not significant at $p < .05$.

president's and Congress's performance, respectively, generally are very similar, even when the relationship between evaluations of the executive and legislative branches diminishes, understandably, during years of divided government. In 1992 and 1994, however, the link between attitudes toward Congress and political trust seemed distinctively strong, congruent with accounts that the public's anger was aimed at incumbent legislators at that time (Mann and Ornstein 1994).

Overall, these trends suggest important continuities in the causes of political trust over more than three decades. Events matter, exerting a potent and similar influence on the attitudes of every social and political group. Political trust, as conventionally measured, taps a diffuse orientation toward government founded on evaluations of incumbent authorities. But it is not just the president whose performance is critical for trust. The public desires peace, prosperity, and a modicum of honesty in government, and Table 1.2 indicates that the public tends to hold each of the major policy-making branches jointly and severally responsible for how well the country is doing on these "valence" issues.[5]

There also is a partisan component of political trust. Even during periods of divided government, a lack of affiliation with the party controlling the presidency lowers one's level of trust. But if partisan effects are strong, it is puzzling that approval of each branch of a divided government contributed *independently* to overall trust. One explanation may be that there are differences between groups with convergent and divergent evaluations of the president and Congress, respectively. In fact, Table 1.3 reveals an intriguing difference in the level of political aware-

5 This conclusion is buttressed by the finding that respondents' feelings about their own representative, as opposed to Congress as a whole, have only weak and inconsistent associations with trust in government.

Table 1.3. Correlation Coefficients Between Presidential Approval and Congressional Approval by Political Awareness

	1992	1994	1996
Low Awareness	0.24	0.31	0.15
Medium Awareness	0.10	0.31	–0.07*
High Awareness	–0.13	0.26	–0.33

Note: Entries are Pearson Coefficients; * not significant at 0.05 level.

ness among these groups of respondents.[6] In 1994, when the Democrats controlled both institutions, approval of the president and Congress were positively correlated all along the continuum of political sophistication. When partisan control of "the government in Washington" was divided in 1992 and 1996, this relationship still prevailed among those with little political awareness. Among the politically knowledgeable, however, approval of the president and Congress were negatively associated, particularly in 1996 when the ideological confrontation between the two branches was intense. This pattern suggests that for those lacking political interest and information, "government" is a relatively undifferentiated object that is evaluated as a whole on the basis of global events. The politically sophisticated, by contrast, have a more complex image of government that differentiates among specific institutions. Since this group is more likely to know and care about "position" issues, it is here that policy preferences should have a relatively stronger influence on evaluations of incumbent authorities and, ultimately, on political trust.

THE CAUSES OF TRUST THROUGH POLITICAL TIME

In charting the contours of trends in political trust, we have described a series of overlapping correlations. To determine the robustness of these relationships and the interplay among the hypothesized causes of political trust, we turn to the multiple regression analysis reported in

6 Political awareness is measured by an index comprised of the interviewer's rating of the respondent and correct answers to questions about current politicians, party differences, and constitutional provisions. Because the items varied from one year to the next, the low, middle, and high groups are trichotomies of the distribution of index scores, with about 30% in the low group, 40% in the middle, and 30% in the high awareness group. A full discussion of these measures can be found in Luks (1998).

Table 1.4.[7] The model estimated revises the Citrin and Green (1986) equation by adding the respondent's approval of Congress as a predicted variable and by coding age as a series of categorical variables. Feldman (1983) maintains that trust in government reflects evaluations of institutions (such as Congress) more than reactions to individual leaders (such as the president). Yet the capacity of the average citizen to make the distinction between institution and incumbent is an open question. In any event, since neither feelings about the presidency as an institution nor approval of specific congressional leaders are measured, this hypothesis cannot be tested directly.[8]

The main finding of Table 1.4 is continuity in the underpinnings of political trust. Whether a Republican or Democrat is president, whether there is unified or divided partisan control of national government, and whether times are good or bad, the underlying structure of causality is essentially the same. As one would predict, the effects of demographic group membership on political trust generally are mediated by the influences of political predispositions or beliefs about presidential or congressional performance. More significantly, the causal influences of both party affiliation and ideological orientation also are explained by the intervening role of approval of incumbent authorities.

The inclusion of evaluations of Congress as a predictor does not alter the finding that both the president's job performance and his personal image significantly affect trust in government (Citrin and Green 1986). Table 1.4 also shows that economic judgments retain a significant independent effect on political trust in the full model, even after we controlled for the impact of beliefs about the performance of incumbent authorities. The model includes both reports about one's own and the nation's economic situation as predictors; in every year, one or both of these interrelated indicators has a significant causal influence. Finally, these data confirm the speculation that approval of Congress has an influence on political trust, independent of how one evaluates the president, and that the relative causal impact of these feelings is roughly the same.[9]

7 The table reports results for the presidential election years of 1980, 1984, 1988, 1992, and 1996. The surveys before 1980 did not include questions about approval of presidential or congressional performance. In addition, we include the off-year 1994 study because of our interest in assessing the contextual influence of events focusing on the performance of Congress.

8 When the question about how respondents evaluate their own member of Congress is added as a predictor, this variable fails to achieve a statistically significant effect on trust in government.

9 The presidential approval variable is scaled from 1 to 5, whereas approval of congress is scaled from 1 to 3, making the magnitude of its unstandardized regression

Table 1.4. *Explaining Political Trust*

	1980		1984		1988		1992		1994		1996	
	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.
Presidential Approval (strongly disapprove = 1 to strongly approve = 5)	0.04*	0.09	0.09***	0.17	0.06**	0.12	0.04**	0.09	0.02	0.04	0.04*	0.08
	(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.01)		(0.02)		(0.02)	
President Moral (strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 4)	0.03	0.04	0.07*	0.07	0.14***	0.13	0.02	0.02	0.07*	0.90	0.15***	0.17
	(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.02)		(0.03)		(0.03)	
President Strong Leader (strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 4)	0.13***	0.16	0.07*	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.05*	0.06	0.07*	0.90	0.10**	0.11
	(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.02)		(0.03)		(0.03)	
Approval of Congress (disapprove = 1 to approve = 3)	0.11***	0.15	0.19***	0.21	0.22***	0.26	0.23***	0.30	0.18***	0.25	0.16***	0.21
	(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)	
Party Identification (strong Dem. = 1 to strong Rep. = 7)	0.02	0.05	–0.01	–0.01	0.02	0.06	0.00	–0.01	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.05
	(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.01)	
R Liberal/Conservative (strong liberal = 1 to strong conservative = 7)	–0.01	–0.02	0.01	0.01	–0.01	–0.02	–0.01	–0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
	(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.01)		(0.02)		(0.02)	
Personal Financial Situation (worse = 1 to better = 3)	0.04	0.06	0.06*	0.05	0.06*	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.06*	0.08	0.04	0.04
	(0.02)		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.03)	
National Economy (much worse = 1 to much better = 5)	0.06*	0.07	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.04*	0.06	0.04*	0.07	0.07***	0.11
	(0.03)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)	

(continued)

Table 1.4 *(continued)*

	1980		1984		1988		1992		1994		1996	
	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.	Unstd. Coeff.	Std. Coeff.
Age												
17–29	–0.03	–0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.11*	0.06	–0.17**	–0.11	–0.03	–0.01
	(0.06)		(0.07)		(0.06)		(0.05)		(0.06)		(0.07)	
30–44	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.00	–0.13*	–0.08	0.05	0.03	–0.12*	–0.09	0.03	0.02
	(0.07)		(0.06)		(0.06)		(0.04)		(0.05)		(0.06)	
45–59	–0.12	–0.07	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.07	0.04	–0.08	–0.05	0.14*	0.08
	(0.07)		(0.07)		(0.06)		(0.05)		(0.06)		(0.06)	
Female	–0.08*	–0.06	0.09*	0.06	–0.04	–0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.01	–0.05	–0.03
	(0.04)		(0.04)		(0.04)		(0.03)		(0.04)		(0.04)	
Nonwhite	0.03	0.02	–0.03	–0.01	–0.09	–0.04	0.01	0.00	–0.13*	–0.06	–0.07	–0.03
	(0.07)		(0.07)		(0.06)		(0.05)		(0.06)		(0.06)	
Non-South	0.00	0.00	–0.06	–0.04	0.03	0.02	–0.01	–0.01	0.09*	0.06	–0.07	–0.04
	(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.04)		(0.03)		(0.04)		(0.04)	
Education	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.04*	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.03
(low = 1 to high = 5)	(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)	
Income	0.00	–0.01	–0.02	–0.02	0.05*	0.06	–0.02	–0.03	–0.02	–0.03	–0.02	–0.03
(low = 1 to high = 5)	(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)	
Constant	0.60		0.48		0.17		0.67		0.55		0.20	
	(0.17)		(0.15)		(0.15)		(0.12)		(0.17)		(0.18)	
R-squared	0.10		0.15		0.18		0.14		0.13		0.14	
N	1,002		1,403		1,350		1,790		1,102		1,292	

Note: Entries are unstandardized and standardized OLS coefficients; standard errors in parentheses. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.
Source: American National Election Studies.

The increased influence of the approval of Congress variable in the 1992 and 1994 data supports our contention that events channel attention to the trustworthiness of specific institutions. The political context also may influence which dimensions of presidential character inspire trust. Citrin and Green (1986) hypothesized that during periods of crisis and national pessimism, the public craves direction and strong leadership. Table 1.4 shows that in the 1988, 1994, and 1996 surveys, the belief that the president was moral was a strong influence on trust in government. In 1992, however, no such relationship emerged, but the image of the president as a strong leader did matter. We speculate, therefore, that while scandals such as Iran-Contra or Whitewater may prime people to tie confidence in government to their leader's integrity, when the state of the economy is the most salient political issue, trust is based more strongly on perceptions of the president's competence than his moral rectitude.

DISCUSSION

We have revisited earlier debates about the meaning of political trust by examining public opinion in the early 1990s when the nation's dominant mood seemed angry and disillusioned. Deja vu. Now, as before, dissatisfaction with the state of the nation, filtered through evaluations of incumbent authorities, underpins a loss of generalized confidence in government. Whatever the roots of political trust in early socialization (Easton and Dennis 1969; Jennings and Niemi 1981), lifelong openness corresponds most to this attitude toward government. When opinion moves, people of all ages and background tend to shift in the same direction.

While our analysis relies exclusively on the ANES Trust in Government items, the General Social Survey Confidence in Institutions questions produce similar results (Brehm and Rahn 1997). The 1998 Pew Survey confirms that the performance of government and opinions about the dishonesty and self-interestedness of political leaders are the main causes of distrust. This study also speculates that worry about the moral health of American society is suppressing the rise in political

coefficients appear larger. In addition, the presidential approval, president moral, and president strong leader variables are interrelated, of course, and including all three as predictors "splits" the variance accounted for by any one. If one rescales these variables and compares the standardized coefficients, approval of Congress generally has an apparently stronger effect than any single one of the three indicators concerning the president although not stronger than their joint effect, except in 1992 and 1994.

confidence engendered by a thriving economy. Nevertheless, most citizens with mistrusting attitudes view themselves as frustrated, not deeply angry.

The foundations of trust in government, then, are largely political in nature. Though fundamentally correct, the account proposed by Citrin and Green (1986) is incomplete. Approval of Congress, an excluded variable in their original model, turns out to be a robust predictor of trust in government scores. A broader view of the institutional focus of political trust permits a more nuanced explanation of shifts in the public's outlook. Attitudes toward Congress seemingly were more important sources of political trust in the early 1990s than previously, we believe, because of heightened attention to its performance during a period of intense executive–legislative conflict and the involvement of prominent legislators in a series of scandals.

One obvious task for future research, therefore, is to identify the ingredients of generalized approval of Congress, much as Citrin and Green decomposed evaluations of the president into beliefs about performance, policy, and personality. In the same vein, is approval of Congress based upon ideological agreement with the majority party's policies, opinions about prominent leaders such as the speaker of the House, or judgments about the fairness of internal rules and procedures?

A second question to explore concerns the manner in which people combine their attitudes toward the presidency and Congress, respectively. For the less politically engaged segment of the public, an undifferentiated image of government seems to prevail, fueling an apparent tendency to project feelings about one institution onto the other. More generally, the impact of divided government on the foundations of political trust deserves additional study. By impeding change and enhancing the need to compromise, this circumstance increases the frustration of those at both ends of the ideological spectrum. This may accentuate the impact of policy dissatisfaction on confidence in government, although the institutional focus of mistrust would differ for liberals and conservatives.

Our explanation of trends in the level and focus of political trust emphasizes the role of "contextual" factors. This broad term, however, fails to specify what features of the political environment are salient and when. Indeed, a faint odor of tautology emanates from the proposition that satisfaction with the conduct of incumbent authorities is the proximate cause of trust in government. We therefore need to probe the nature of earlier links in the causal chain. The economy matters for approval of the president, but it is not all that matters; the erosion of political trust began in the mid-1960s when times were good (Lawrence 1997). A comprehensive account of political trust should consider the

role of economic and social conditions, the public's perceptions of the nation's problems, and citizens' expectations of government in shaping evaluations of political leaders. Clearly too, there may be group differences in these expectations and perceptions that depend on people's underlying values and interests. The Pew Study (Pew Research Center 1998) concluded that cynicism about the honesty of leaders is especially critical to distrust among Americans who came of age after Vietnam and Watergate, while performance failures are more important to older generations.

How people interpret the current state of the nation is also a function of what and how they learn about political events and outcomes. Here the interplay between "reality" and "mediality" is significant. Do real-world cues or media frenzies change or reinforce opinions about the trustworthiness of government? The Reception–Acceptance model's axioms regarding the impact of prior attitudes and political sophistication on one's susceptibility to news stories (Zaller 1992) is a useful starting point for addressing this question. For example, some have speculated that the reason that allegations about President Clinton's perjury and adultery had a limited impact is that cynicism about all political leaders is already deeply entrenched.

IMPLICATIONS

Anxiety about the consequences of declining political trust is one motivation for diagnosing its causes. In addressing the "so what" question, it is important to disentangle the specific objects of eroding trust. Since so many Americans mistrust politicians as a class while remaining deeply attached to the political community and to underlying democratic principles, a drop in confidence, even if sustained, poses little threat to the stability of existing institutions. Moreover, to some degree the long-run increase in political cynicism reflects a change in how people speak about politics. The dominant discourse is critical. From talk shows to *Saturday Night Live*, no one hesitates to mock and denigrate the nation's top leaders. But as linguistic standards change, so may the emotional significance and behavioral implications of verbal expressions of mistrust.

Criticism of the political process does not necessarily imply disengagement. Political cynicism, at least as measured by the ANES items, does not stimulate voter apathy (Luks and Citrin 1997). There is no relationship between trust and turnout at the individual level, and the politically cynical and trusting are equally likely to engage in more intense forms of electoral participation such as attending rallies or displaying bumper stickers (Citrin and Luks 1998).

Political mistrust stimulates voice rather than exit. There is a strong association between mistrust and voting against the incumbent president or his party's candidate. This anti-incumbent effect remains statistically significant even after one imposes a rigorous set of controls (Hetherington 1997; Luks and Citrin 1997). Thus, rising mistrust, if based on realistic assessments of governmental performance, may contribute to the maintenance of democratic accountability through electoral change.

On a day-to-day level, government functions smoothly when citizens voluntarily obey the law, even when it entails personal sacrifice. For example, belief in the fairness of authorities boosts compliance in paying taxes (Scholz and Pinney 1995) and a willingness to comply with government-sponsored restrictions on water usage (Tyler and Degoey 1995). This implies that widespread trust facilitates the mobilization of citizens when the government proposes policies requiring cooperation and sacrifice. Still, there is little evidence that lower levels of political trust have produced a nation of scofflaws.

In bemoaning the decline of trust in the 1960s and 1970s, several theorists "blamed the victim" (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975); weakening confidence was due to the excessive demands of citizens rather than the failures of ruling elites. Today, a populist perspective seems more appropriate. Trust is a gamble that others will act responsibly on one's behalf. So continued trust is rational only if it is earned (Hardin 1993). It may be wise to give someone with an established reputation the benefit of the doubt, but foolish to entrust one's interests to a proven failure.

The political relevance of declining trust in government may lie in how a suspicious climate of opinion shapes the decisions of politicians rather than the actions of ordinary citizens. It is often argued that when the reservoir of trust is low and people are unwilling to give their leaders the benefit of the doubt, the government becomes timid, shunning innovation and failing to make necessary, if potentially costly, commitments. A president who lacks credibility cannot use his bully pulpit effectively. Whether this is worrisome, however, depends on the wisdom of the proposed undertakings.

A cynical climate of opinion probably emboldens opposition forces, fueling demands for changes in public policy. The erosion of trust in recent decades almost certainly contributed to the passage of conflict of interest regulations, changes in campaign finance rules, ethics committees in Congress, term limits in many states, and even the independent prosecutor law. Taken together, these measures significantly altered how government functions, without constituting a revolution in the normal sense of that term.

Since a return to the confidence levels of the 1960s seems unlikely, the fact that mistrust is not always malign is comforting. The most obvious basis for increasing trust would be consistently effective performance, particularly in the economic domain. The belief that government has a universal realm and must deal with virtually every important problem, however, makes setbacks inevitable. Moreover, the proliferation of combative social movements and the ideological polarization of the political parties undermine the development of a consensus on how to solve these problems. Add to this the cultural revolution that has shattered older traditions of deference to authority and media practices that accentuate the negative about politics. In sum, the cynical zeitgeist is unlikely to vanish.

In this context, shared values are another potential basis for boosting trust. People are more likely to trust authorities whose personal characteristics imply this mutuality of interests. The American dilemma is reaching common ground in a diverse society where every faction can advocate its particular viewpoint. Finally, trust may be based on the belief that institutional *processes* encourage dutiful conduct and punish wrongdoing. Reforms that demonstrate commitment to these norms thus can have symbolic as well as substantive importance. As this suggests, political trust is never fully realized; its production is an ongoing process of exchange between citizens and authorities.