
23. Political trust in North America*

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INTRODUCTION

Citizens of the United States of America have always had a love–hate relationship with their government. The nation was formed through a revolution, and deep-seated skepticism of government has been an enduring part of the political culture (Lipset, 1996; Citrin, 2008). Anthony King, for instance, wrote of ‘Americans’ long-standing and well-known proneness to be suspicious of government. Americans are almost certainly suspicious of government today because Americans have always been suspicious of government’ (1999, p. 78). At the same time, there is a well-developed belief about the United States as an exceptionally blessed nation, beginning with John Winthrop’s sermon in 1630 describing America as a shining city on a hill, and down to the present in the rhetoric of contemporary politicians. This contrast is perhaps no better illustrated than by President Ronald Reagan, who castigated government as the source of the nation’s problems in one speech while harking back to the shining city imagery in another speech.

Although this tension has been a continuing feature throughout American history, the dominant view in the mid-twentieth century was that distinctly positive opinions toward government were an important feature of America’s political culture. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963) argued that such trustful, allegiant political norms were essential to a stable, effective democracy (also Stokes, 1962). Lacking such trust, political cooperation and democratic compromise might fail, as seen in the fascist reactions to the Great Depression in Germany and Italy.

Thus, the first evidence of declining political trust in the USA during the last third of the twentieth century created considerable academic and political concern (Crozier et al., 1975). Occurring in parallel with the crises and political scandals of the 1960s and 1970s – Vietnam, urban unrest, and Watergate – Americans’ trust in their politicians sank steadily lower. Trust fluctuated over subsequent administrations, but was generally eroding with the passage of time. Even the end of the Cold War and the dramatic economic gains of the late 1990s saw only marginal increases in public evaluations of government. Today, several indicators of trust in government and confidence in political institutions stand at historic low points. These trends have stimulated a chorus of voices claiming that American democracy is at risk.

Canada has followed a similar downward trajectory despite its different political history and social circumstances (Kanji, 2002). A variety of indicators from the Canadian Election Study (CES) track a decline in political trust since the 1960s. By the summer of 2014 roughly a third of Canadians had pride in their political system and only a fifth expressed respect for political institutions (EnviroNics Institute, 2014, p. 21). This same study concludes that Canadians ‘think much less of the political system and institutions, with trust in both Parliament and the Prime Minister more negative than positive’ (ibid., p. 4).

Declining trust in government has spread across almost all advanced industrial democracies since the 1960s/1970s (also see Dalton, 2004, 2012; Norris, 2011). Regardless of political history, electoral system, or style of government, most contemporary publics are less trustful of government than they were in the era of their grandparents. This suggests that the sources of political change are not unique to any one nation's history or circumstances, but a general feature of these societies. And since this volume has stressed the importance of political trust for the democratic process, understanding this trend is important to understanding the role of political trust in the political process.

Having realized that distrust is spreading across affluent democracies, many political analysts express concerns about the fate of democracy. For example, the editor of *The Economist's* forecast for 2015 recounted this evidence of spreading political distrust. Then he boldly stated 'the West's malaise is dangerous. The failure of democracy to get things done will lead to questions about other features of an open society, such as freedom of the press, free markets, and relatively open borders' (Micklethwait, 2014, p. 20). Academic researchers have echoed this same pessimism (Macedo et al., 2005; Wolfe, 2006). Is the future so dark?

This chapter has three goals. I begin by summarizing the evidence from public opinion polls showing that trust in government is decreasing in the United States and Canada. Second, I discuss the range of theories and research that have attempted to explain the declining trust in politicians, parties and political institutions. Third, I examine the present-day distribution of political trust among citizens in both nations. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of these implications of the trends for these two nations.

THE TRENDS OVER TIME

The first step in my research is to describe the trends in political trust over time. There are multiple levels of political support, and the time trends can differ across levels (for a discussion of the different dimensions of political support see Easton, 1975; Norris, 1999; Klingemann, 1999; Dalton, 2004; Chapter 2 by Norris in this volume). Like others in this volume I focus on trust in politicians, government, and political institutions. If democratic politics is a social contract between citizens and their government, then such a contract builds upon the citizens' implicit trust that elites will represent their interests. In addition, as trust in politicians and government began to erode, this raised the question of whether dissatisfaction would generalize to the institutions and norms of democratic governance as well. Distrust in institutions is seen as a sign of a more fundamental dissatisfaction not just with the incumbents of office, but with the institutions themselves. Thus, trust in politicians, government, and political institutions has been at the center of research on political support.¹

Another important issue is the time frame for comparison. Political reporting in the media often focuses on the most recent opinion polls or the most novel findings. Because trust is so fundamental to the discourse on the political culture of democracies, this chapter takes a longer-term perspective. To the extent possible, I track political trust over decades to put the present into a larger context. Moreover, it is widely argued that 1950s and 1960s were a halcyon time of satisfied and supportive publics in the United States, Britain (and Canada), which provided a solid foundation for democratic politics

(Almond and Verba, 1963). I can only tell if this pattern has changed by taking a long-term perspective. Furthermore, the changes in political trust do not follow a straight line. They are notable because there are large declines over an extended period of time, and so I track these opinions to the present. Examining only recent shorter time series can miss the larger reality of how political cultures are changing.

Trust in Government

The most extensive evidence on political trust comes from the United States with its long series of the American National Election Studies (ANES) (Figure 23.1). While the items in this long time series have become the conventional measures of trust in government in the United States, they differ somewhat from the approach set out in this Handbook (see Chapter 2 by Norris). Below, I will therefore also focus on trust in various institutions. The early readings in the 1950s and early 1960s described a largely supportive public. In 1958, most Americans believed that officials care what people think (71 percent) and that one can trust the government to do what is right (71 percent). These positive feelings remained relatively unchanged until the mid-1960s.

Beginning at about the time of the crises and political scandals of the 1960s and 1970s – Vietnam, urban unrest, and Watergate – Americans' trust in their politicians sank steadily lower. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter warned that declining public confidence 'was a fundamental threat to American democracy'. The upbeat presidency of Ronald Reagan temporarily improved Americans' image of politics. By the end of the Reagan-Bush era, however, trust in government was as low as it had been in 1980. These indicators hit historic lows in 1994 during the Clinton administration, and then partially improved by 2000. Yet even with the unprecedented economic growth of the 1990s and the consolidation of democracy around the globe, Americans' political trust rebounded only to the levels of Reagan's first administration. Political trust briefly spiked upward after the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States but soon faded. By the

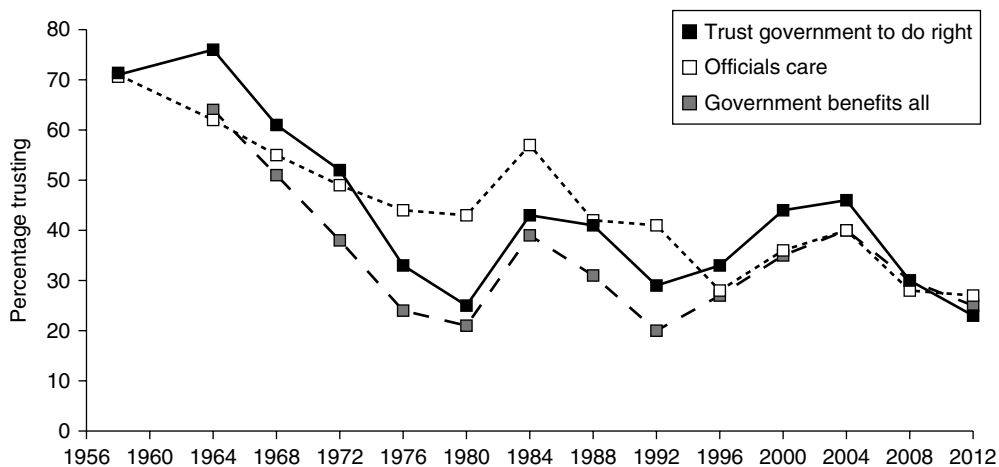


Figure 23.1 Declining trust in government in the United States

2008 elections, trust had decreased to the levels of the early 1990s, and it declined to a new low point in 2012.

Virtually all long-term public opinion series show similar downward trends (Nye et al., 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). For example, since 1966 the Harris Poll asked, ‘The people running the country don’t really care what happens to you’. In 1966, only 29 percent shared this opinion; in 2013, a full 85 percent thought politicians didn’t care. The Pew Research Center (2010) studied attitudes toward government in 2010 and concluded, ‘By almost every conceivable measure Americans are less positive and more critical of government these days’. Polls by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* follow the same trajectory. The trustful American public of the 1950 and 1960s has been replaced by a citizenry who is skeptical of political elites and the government.

American politics scholars see these trends and often explain them in terms of the specific and unique events of American history over this period. Certainly the 1960s’ conflict over civil rights, the war in Vietnam, and the Watergate scandal played a role in reshaping Americans’ views of their government. However, Americans’ doubts about their politicians and political institutions have parallels with their neighbors to the north.

Canada did not suffer through the conflicts over Vietnam and race that divided Americans in the 1960s, and was obviously untouched by Watergate and the scandals of the Nixon administration. Although there were occasional scandals involving Canadian politicians over the past several decades, there was not the long series ranging from Watergate to Monica Lewinsky and impeachment charges against Bill Clinton. And many of the supposed institutional ills of American government – divided government, the imperial presidency, weak political parties, and campaign finance excesses – do not apply to the Canadian case.

Despite these cross-national differences, Canadians’ political trust has followed the same downward trend over the past half-century (Kanji, 2002). Figure 23.2 shows that in 1965 a majority of Canadians felt that the government cared what people thought, and 40 percent rejected the view that MPs soon lose touch with the public. After a slow downward trend, trust dropped off noticeably during the 1990s.² The collapse of the

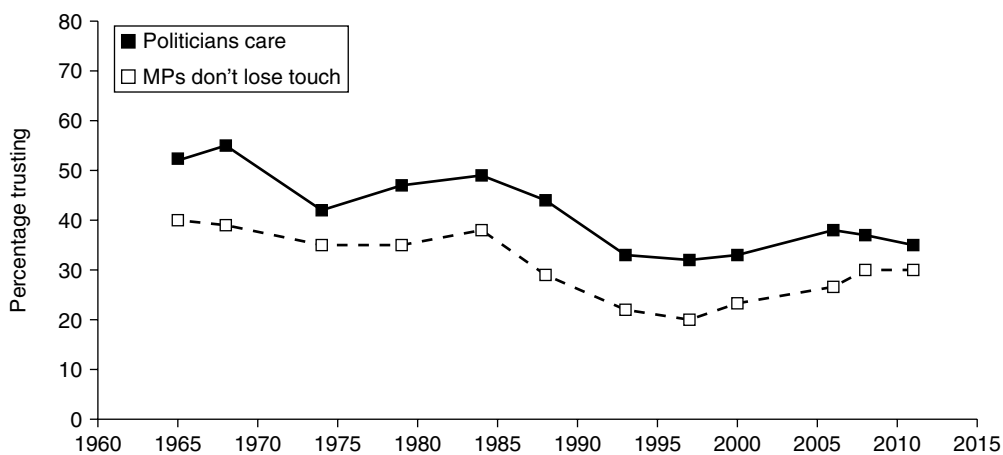


Figure 23.2 *Declining trust in government in Canada*

Conservative Party reflected the public's unprecedented rejection of the status quo in Ottawa, a weak economy, the struggle between nationalism and provincialism, and a backlash to the introduction of the VAT. The dramatic growth of the Bloc Québécois and Reform Party was another sign of this disenchantment. The Liberal Party government then strained to manage these issues, failing to pass a reform referendum in 1992 and suffering at the polls in 1997. This decline in trust was paralleled by a sharp drop in election turnout during the 1990s. Political support has rebounded slightly since 2000, but not back to the initially high levels of the 1960s.³ As in the United States, the climate of the times is for about two-thirds of Canadians to express some distrust of government.

By expanding the cross-national and cross-temporal breadth of the empirical data, there is now clear evidence of a general erosion in support for politicians and government in most advanced industrial democracies (Pharr and Putnam, 2000; Dalton, 2004, 2012; Dalton and Welzel, 2015). The major variation across nations is in the timing and pace of decline, rather than the direction of the change. While Pippa Norris (2011) has questioned whether trust is really declining based on recent polls, this observation arises largely because she focuses on recent trends – and the greatest declines often pre-date the time series she presents. Even US trends would be less obvious if one began tracking opinions in 1980, but the evidence of declining trust since the 1950s and 1960s is clear-cut.⁴ Moreover, it was the pattern of a supportive public in the 1950s and 1960s that generated the theoretical argument that political support is essential to stable and effective democratic government.

Trust in Institutions

Empirical research on the first dips in political trust in the United States debated the significance of these trends. Experts worried that if distrust generalized to the institutions and procedures of a political system, it might erode the foundations of democracy. For example, Neil Nevitte and Mebs Kanji (2002) warned that 'the worry is that dissatisfaction with particular governments might turn into dissatisfaction with the workings of democracy more generally'. So I next ask whether distrust of political elites has spread to attitudes toward the institutions and structure of government.

A common set of survey questions taps public confidence in the people running major social, economic, and political organizations. Figure 23.3 shows that confidence in the leadership of virtually every US institution has tumbled downward. In the 1960s many Americans expressed a fair amount of confidence in the Executive Branch (41 percent) and Congress (42 percent), but these positive evaluations dropped substantially over time. In 2012 only 15 percent of Americans had confidence in the Executive Branch, and Congress fared even worse (7 percent). The Supreme Court fares better, but it has also seen its confidence level drop from 50 percent in 1966 to 29 percent in 2012. Norris (2011, pp. 67–8) discounts this evidence because she begins with the General Social Survey (GSS) in 1972 and excludes the earlier Harris Polls because they came from a different source. However, the complete trends from the Harris Poll also show that confidence in institutions dropped from the high points in the 1960s to 6 percent for Congress in 2012 and 22 percent for the Executive.

Some observers have noted that these questions ask about the people running each institution, so they might be tapping confidence in individuals rather than the institutions



Figure 23.3 *Declining confidence in political institutions*

per se. However, other survey series focus explicitly on the institutions. The Gallup Polls, for example, found that confidence in Congress has dropped from 43 percent in 1973 to only 13 percent in 2013. Confidence in the presidency dropped from 52 percent in 1975 to 36 percent in 2013. Gallup released the 2013 poll results with the headline proclaiming that ‘Americans’ confidence in Congress falls to lowest on record’ and noted that Congress scored last among the 16 institutions included in the survey.⁵

Evidence on Canadians’ trust in parliament is less systematic. A time series from Gallup Canada conducted by the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion (CIPO) found a marked decrease in confidence in the House of Commons between 1979 and 1999 (Dalton, 2004, p. 37). More recently (and using a different question), the AmericasBarometer study maintained that trust in parliament dropped between 2006 and 2014 (EnviroNics Institute, 2014).⁶ In 2014, only 16 percent of Canadians said they trusted parliament. The same study reported a drop in Canadians’ confidence in the political system between 2006 and 2014.

Another key element of democracy is political parties. They often bind people to the polity, structure public opinion, and mobilize citizens to participate. One might argue that parties are the central institutions of representative democracy in organizing elections, selecting candidates to run for office, and organizing the affairs of government.

Contemporary publics in both nations are more skeptical of political parties in general.⁷ For instance, Gallup Canada found that only 30 percent of Canadians expressed quite a lot of confidence in political parties in 1979 – already a fairly low level of support – and this dropped to only 11 percent by 1999 (Carty, 2002; also see Gidengil et al., 2002). The ANES found that in the 1960s about 40 percent of Americans thought parties were responsive to public interests; this decreased to about 30 percent in the 1970s and 20 percent in the 1980s (the question has not been repeated since then). Perhaps even more insightful, the World Values Survey asked about public confidence in 15 social and political institutions (Figure 23.4). Political parties ranked last on this list, with only 13

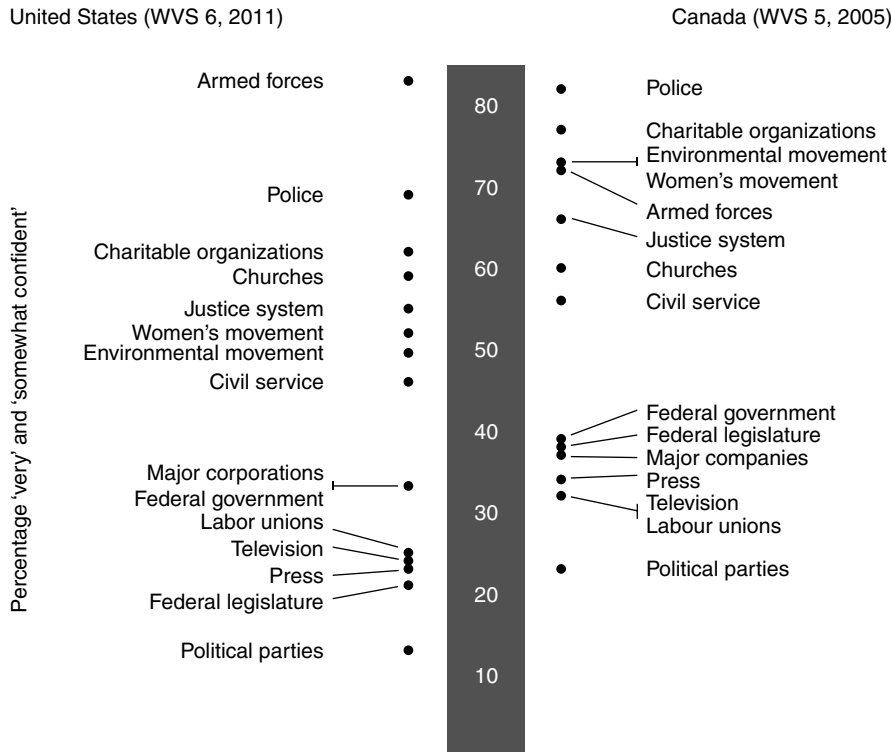


Figure 23.4 Confidence in political and social institutions

percent of Americans and 23 percent of Canadians expressing confidence. Other political institutions – national legislature, federal government, civil service, and the justice system – evoke significantly higher levels of confidence, even though most institutions have also trended downward over time. The negativity toward the branches of government is even more apparent in comparison to other groups. Institutions that guarantee social order – the armed forces and police – evoke widespread confidence. By contrast to the political institutions, business and labor groups and especially social movements also garner more support.⁸ Canadians generally express more confidence in these institutions than Americans, although the rankings of groups are relatively similar.

Thus, the United States and Canada are first characterized empirically by a wide-scale erosion of trust in government and political institutions during the latter part of the twentieth century. While their citizens once expressed allegiance and support for their democratic governments, skepticism and distrust have become the *Zeitgeist* of the contemporary age.

Dissatisfied, but Democrats

At the same time that people have become less trustful of government, other opinion surveys show continued and widespread attachment to democracy and its ideals, which

even may have strengthened in recent decades (Norris, 2011; Dalton and Welzel, 2015). This mix of attitudes toward government and democracy represent an important change in the political norms of contemporary publics.

Significantly, *declining trust in government does not represent alienation from the democratic process* – as it often signified in the mid-twentieth century when fascist and communist ideologies challenged democracy. Instead, I see a new pattern of ‘dissatisfied democrats’; that is, people who distrust government and political institutions but are supportive of democratic principles (Klingemann, 1999, 2015; Norris, 1999). In many established democracies these dissatisfied democrats now represent a majority of the public, with a growing share over time. Their adherence to democratic values may reshape the sources and consequences of declining political trust as I discuss below.

RESEARCH ON WHY TRUST HAS DECLINED

To understand the significance of decreasing political trust, one needs to identify the cause. Even though national experts vary in the factors they cite as potential causes of the decline, the downward trend is similar across nations. This common pattern tends to discount explanations that are linked to the unique history or policy performance of the nation. For instance, Canadians discuss the tensions over nationality and Quebec, and Americans point to a series of visible scandals and the peculiar structure of government in the United States. In every nation there are unique explanations for the drop in trust in government. But a simultaneous decline of trust in affluent democracies during the late twentieth century for purely coincidental reasons seems unlikely. Thus, I review the major explanations for the decline of political trust and judge them against the available evidence. No single factor is sufficient to explain a trend that has occurred across nations, but with different timing and intensity many factors are converging to produce these changes in public sentiments.

Performance and Trust

Democratic politics is first of all a social contract whereby government performs certain functions in exchange for popular support. David Easton (1975, p. 436), for example, notes that:

[. . .] leadership assumes the responsibilities for tending to the problems of societies. In return the leadership gains the power to enable it to make and implement binding decisions, a power that it loses to an alternative set of leaders if it is unable to supply some average level of satisfaction to its supporters.

If governmental performance falls below expectations, specific support for political authorities may suffer as a consequence. If these patterns continue for an extended period of time, the decline of trust may generalize to broader evaluations of political institutions and the regime. Indeed, many accounts of declining political trust in the USA, Canada and other nations cite examples of poor government performance to explain the decline.

Economic performance

One of the complications of the performance-based approach is that many different aspects of government performance might affect citizen evaluations (see Chapter 17 by Van der Meer). The narrowest approach focuses on economic performance. Often the research literature links declining trust to negative economic conditions. For instance, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)-induced worldwide recessions in the late 1970s and early 1980s is tied to growing public concerns that government could not address economic needs and other policy demands (Alesina and Wacziarg, 2000). The end of the post-war growth decades supposedly marked a new cynicism (or realism) about the limits of government. Indeed, this economic tale is repeated in the research literature of many nations. This theme re-emerged with the Great Recession of 2008 and ensuing economic crises in Europe (Armingeon and Guthmann, 2014).

One version of the economic performance thesis suggests that individual-level perceptions of economic conditions may influence citizens' images of government. If citizens are pessimistic (or optimistic) about the economy or their personal economic situation, then these perceptions may affect feelings of political support. There is modest empirical support for this version of the performance hypothesis. Several studies of American public opinion found a correlation between perceptions of economic conditions and measures of political support (Lawrence, 1997; Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Orren, 1997). Similar patterns have been identified among Canadians (Kornberg and Clarke, 1992, ch. 4; Crête et al., 2006). Cross-national studies demonstrated that perceptions of economic performance are significantly related to political trust across established democracies (e.g., McAllister, 1999).

This still leaves the important question of whether these correlations are evidence of causal influences. First, to explain the long-term decline in political support, citizens' perceptions of economic performance would have to trend downward over time, which would then lower support. But perceptions of economic performance fluctuate over time without a consistent downward trend. Second, the two trends would have to be closely related.

Longitudinal analyses provide limited support for economic explanations. Economic cycles have varied across the USA and Canada and the fit to trends in political trust is ambiguous. For instance, after comparing US economic statistics with levels of political support, Nye and Zelikow (1997) discount economic factors as a major explanation for the long-term trend in the United States. Americans experienced exceptional prosperity and low employment during the late 1990s, yet simultaneously they were cynical about the governing institutions that presided over this prosperity. Dalton (2004, ch. 6) tested the relationship between consumer confidence and political trust, and found weak longitudinal correlations in the United States and most other nations, but a significant relationship in Canada. Similarly, Clarke et al. (1993) found only a modest empirical relationship between economic conditions and satisfaction with the functioning of the democratic process for several European nations. In short, growing public skepticism about politicians, parties, and parliaments does not match the general economic trends in these nations.

Performance on other issues

Other theories maintain that performance evaluations of government should extend beyond the economic realm (King, 1997). Contemporary governments address a broad range of policy areas, and some of these non-economic domains may generate the public's declining political trust (Inglehart, 1990; Hardin, 2013).

Again, there is only mixed evidence that objective conditions track the aggregate declines in political support. In many areas, if not most, advanced industrial democracies have made considerable progress in improving the welfare of their citizens over the same period as support has decreased. For example, Derek Bok (1998) concludes that the American condition in most policy areas has improved in absolute terms during the post-war period, and even relative to other Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD) nations. Canada's record of policy performance is generally stronger. Indeed, the record of advancing incomes, spreading social security, improving civil rights, and other policy advances fits the post-war history of most advanced industrial democracies. A pure performance-based explanation would argue that a systematic decrease in trust across the advanced industrial democracies would occur if all these political systems are worse off than a generation ago. Some pessimists might claim this is so, but the empirical evidence in support of this proposition is very uncertain, especially as a general pattern for all advanced industrial democracies.

The expansion of the government's policy role may affect political trust in another way, however. The multiplication or fragmentation of political interests makes it difficult for government to be equally responsive to all interests, and thus satisfy most people most of the time – as was more likely when the structure of politics was simpler. In a multidimensional policy world, there is no single mix of government actions that satisfies most of the people most of the time. Broadening issue agendas thus may be creating new challenges for democracy to balance the tensions inherent in complex societies with fragmented interests. Dissatisfaction with the political process may signal that the current processes are not seen as equal to this challenge. But this hypothesis has not been fully demonstrated in the research literature.

Scandals

Perhaps the most obvious explanation for the decline in political trust is that politicians no longer deserve our trust because of the mounting number of scandals and poor behavior in office (Craig, 1993). There is a long and inglorious record of poor behavior by political elites in the United States just in the two decades starting with Nixon's impeachment. In Canada, during PM Brian Mulroney's term, scandals forced a number of cabinet members from office, culminating in Mulroney being implicated in the Airbus kickback scandal in 1995.⁹ Since then there has been an apparently increasing number of exposés on the failures and illegal actions of Canadian political elites at the federal and provincial levels.

I do not doubt that scandals will diminish people's trust in government. Perhaps it is an analogous to a friend or spouse who betrays one's trust, making it harder to trust them again as a result. Keele's (2007) longitudinal study of trust in the USA provided some empirical evidence. But two factors give me pause. When political leaders and governments change, trust has not rebounded. When Jimmy Carter followed the Nixon/Ford

administrations and tried to restore public trust in government, he faced a public that remained distrustful. Similarly, when Canadians voted out the Mulroney administration in 1993, trust in government did not return to its previous level. Changing political friends (governments) does not recreate a trusting public. In addition, it is unclear whether the increasing visibility of political scandals represents the deteriorating behavior of political elites, or a more skeptical public (and media) that are willing to discuss elite transgressions. We are no longer as deferential to elites as in the past, at least in public discourse. John F. Kennedy's affairs went unreported, while today nothing in politicians' personal lives appears to be off-limits.

The Media and Trust

The mass media, especially the rise of television, are often cited as a major factor in reshaping contemporary politics and promoting distrust (see the review in Norris, 2000b; see Chapter 22 by Newton). From one perspective, the media focus on scandals and gossip that would not have entered the political discourse a generation ago. This ranges from illegal behavior to the private affairs of politicians. Attack journalism appears to be a new standard, in the American press at least, accompanied by changing journalistic norms about the role of the media. Longitudinal studies of media content in the USA suggest that the news has become increasingly critical of politicians and the political process (Patterson, 1993). Nye and Zelikow (1997, pp. 268–9) see media effects as a likely explanation for decreasing trust in government.

A less malevolent, but equally negative, interpretation of media effects is that the modern media simply violate Bismarck's quip that laws are like sausages, it is better not to see them being made. Many experts assert that the expansion of news coverage has focused public attention on the conflictual parts of politics that alienate many people (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). Similarly, a rancorous question hour in the Canadian House of Commons or hostile political debate on television may be accepted as normal political sport by parliamentarians, but it may generate political cynicism by the average viewer.

Other scholars argue that the media are a relatively neutral transmission belt for information about politics.¹⁰ If the news is critical of politicians, it is not because the media are negative but because they are reporting on events as they occur and reflecting a changing public mood – not creating it (Garment, 1991). After Watergate, it seemed that every journalism student wanted to be Woodward or Bernstein; today, US journalism students see Jon Stewart¹¹ as a role model. In other words, media content may be both a cause and a consequence of the public's changing political orientations.

Most previous studies found weak or insignificant correlations between mass media usage and lower trust in government (Newton, 1997; Norris, 2000b).¹² Pippa Norris (2011, pp. 180–86) used short time series of the media's coverage of politics to predict political trust in the USA and Britain, which yielded scant evidence of causality. Furthermore, the decline in trust occurs across nations regardless of the structure of the media (public or private) or the nature of political commentary about politicians in the nation, which suggests that the media climate is not a cross-nationally consistent factor. These results echo Pippa Norris's (2000a, p. 250) conclusion that 'we need to look elsewhere than television news for the source of our political ills'.

Social Capital and Trust

Another theory for declining trust is the supposed erosion of social capital in affluent societies. Social mobility, geographic mobility, and other forces of modernization have supposedly weakened the ties between individuals and social communities. Robert Putnam (2000) provocatively argued that social capital is decreasing as a result of these societal trends. He further argues that the decline in social capital erodes political participation, interpersonal trust, and political trust.

Putnam's 'bowling alone' thesis generated substantial attention in the political community. Researchers found a positive correlation between social capital measures and political trust (Newton, 1999; Newton and Norris, 2000; Dalton, 2004, ch. 3). However, it is unclear whether social capital is broadly decreasing cross-nationally, and if these trends can explain the decline in political trust (see also Chapter 21 by Liu and Stolle; Putnam, 2002). Keele (2007) found a relationship between social capital and trust measures in the United States. But the timing of both trends does not seem to be temporally matched, especially when one looks across advanced industrial democracies. It appears that the distribution of social capital at any point in time might be linked to political trust; those with higher levels of social capital tend to be more trusting of government. But it is unclear whether this is a cause of the decline in political trust (Nye and Zelikow, 1997).

Globalization and Trust

Globalization has affected economic systems and been an impediment to increasing standards of living among working and middle-class employees in advanced industrial democracies (Alesina and Wacziarg, 2000). Globalization can also restrict the power of governments to direct the society and economy. Multinational businesses are difficult to regulate, economies are increasingly shaped by international forces rather than domestic policy, and even political movements are transnational. These patterns are even strong among member states of the European Union (EU), where EU policy and institutions can take precedence over national policy.

This situation has prompted some scholars to argue that the restrictions that globalization has placed on national government significantly contribute to the erosion in trust because policies are shaped by forces beyond the nation's control (Lawrence, 1997; Katzenstein, 2000; Hardin, 2013). While the statements in the previous paragraph may hold, the impact of these forces on political trust is unclear. Nye and Zelikow (1997) noted that the nature of the causal connection is indirect at best. How does one measure globalization in a way relevant to trust? And more important, the timing of globalization forces and the decline of trust do not clearly coincide. Globalization processes accelerated in the United States in the late 1980s and 1990s, but trust suffered its major decline in the 1960s and 1970s. In Canada, the largest drop in trust occurred in the 1980s; the pacing of decreasing trust is equally varied across EU member states. Thus Nye and Zelikow (1997) largely discount globalization as a major factor explaining the decrease in political trust in the United States. Discontented politicians and citizens may use globalization to illustrate their dissatisfaction with government or mobilize those already skeptical of government; but if so, my impression is that it is just one of many such issues that are regularly part of the political debate.

Value Change and Trust

Another explanation for the decline in political trust focuses on changing citizen values and expectations of the political process (see also Chapter 11 by Mayne and Hakhverdian). With spreading affluence, education levels, and other features of social modernization, Ronald Inglehart (1990) showed that public priorities are broadening to include new postmaterial values that stress autonomy, self-actualization, and a more assertive political style. Postmaterial values also have a libertarian component that leads individuals to question authority, and these values seem antithetical to a deferential model of citizenship (Nevitte, 1996, 2002). This may lead postmaterialists to be less trustful of politicians and political institutions such as parliaments and political parties. This interpretation is supported by evidence that some of the groups most vocal in their criticisms of government – the young and better educated – also tend to be postmaterialists. In addition, this process of value change is occurring across affluent societies as a consequence of social modernization, and thus might explain a general cross-national pattern of decreasing political trust.

Several cross-national studies have shown that postmaterialists express less confidence in most institutions of government (Inglehart, 1990; Dalton and Welzel, 2015). Neil Nevitte (2015) recently demonstrated that postmaterialists tend to be less deferential to political institutions and hierarchic authority in general. Nye and Zelikow (1997) evaluated this value change hypothesis as a highly likely cause of decreasing political trust. In addition, Dalton's (2009) study of Americans' norms of citizenship shows that traditional 'duty-based citizens' think of the nation as that shining city on the hill that conservative political figures describe. They are more trustful of government, more deferential to elites, and more enthusiastic in their national pride. In contrast, 'engaged citizens' (who are conceptually equivalent to postmaterialists) are less trustful of politicians and political institutions, even controlling for other potential correlates of trust. Engaged citizenship also stimulates support for democratic values, especially an emphasis on equality and the protection of minority rights and expression. Consistent with their self-definition of citizenship, engaged citizens expect more of the government than social order and allegiance. In short, postmaterialists tend to typify the new style of dissatisfied democrats who are an increasing share of contemporary publics.

EXPLAINING COMMON BUT UNIQUE TRENDS

This chapter and other contributions to this Handbook have offered a long list of suspects for why citizens are less trustful of their governments. Each has some merit. But the commonality of this pattern across nations with different political histories and institutions prods us to look for common forces that transcend unique national conditions. Explanations based on 'proper nouns' – such as the Watergate scandal in the United States or the national identity conflicts in Canada – seem to be post hoc interpretations of these trends, and the fundamental causal forces lie elsewhere.

My own view from this literature is that two broad forces are at play. First, there is often a precipitating factor that makes people begin to question government in a new way: an egregious scandal, a sharp economic downturn or other policy crisis. This is what draws

the attention of political analysts when trends first turn dramatically downward. But when conditions improve – a new government is elected or the policy issue is resolved – trust does not return to its previously higher level. Thus a second set of factors comes into play. One major influence is a change in citizen expectations of government, partially conditioned by the process of postmaterial values change. Having seen the failures of government, people are less likely to trust again, and they favor a change in the relationship between citizens and their government. These changes are reinforced by supportive social forces. The mass media sense the change in the political climate, and become less deferential to political elites in their reporting. More information on government's shortfalls is available. The proliferation of public interest groups challenges the government on a range of policies and challenge the way that representative democracy functions. In short, a significant portion of the citizenry shifts from allegiant to assertive norms of citizenship, so the trustful deferential public of the past fades over time even if government performance improves (Dalton and Welzel, 2015).

Who Trusts Government?

This section describes how various social and political groups vary in their levels of political trust among Americans and Canadian publics. It is important to note that the current correlates of trust do not necessarily indicate the sources of decreasing trust – they are relationships at one point in time rather than evidence of longitudinal change. Most analyses of political trust in both nations find that trust has decreased across virtually all social and political groups, although the rate of change varies (Nye et al., 1997; Dalton, 2005). If a trait is positively related to trust and all categories decreased by roughly the same amount over time, then a correlation today does not signify a causal process over time. Thus, I describe who trusts and distrusts government today rather than how they may have changed over time.

The descriptions of trust are more specific than elsewhere in this Handbook, based on the question of whether politicians/government cares what people think. These data are taken from the 2012 ANES and the 2011 Canadian Election Study (CES). Figure 23.5 describes the levels of political trust across social and political groups that are tied to the theorized causes of trust presented in the last section. Since the questions and response categories differed slightly between nations, the figure displays the trust of each group in comparison to trust for the public overall.

The top panel of Figure 23.5 shows that political trust is strongly related to current perceptions of the national economy in both nations – reflecting the economic performance theory. In the 2011 CES, for example, there is a 10 percentage point gap between those who thought the economy had improved over the previous year versus those who thought it had worsened. Perceptions of the individual's own financial situation display a similar pattern (data not shown). To some extent, economic perceptions and trust may reflect a single trait – evaluations of the status quo. Those who trust the government are likely to be more optimistic about the economy, and vice versa, rather than a simple causal relationship. In addition, this economic relationship is fairly constant across time. In other words, perceptions of economic performance describe the distribution of trust at any one point in time, but do not explain the trend of eroding trust (Dalton, 2004, ch. 6).

The relationship between media usage and political trust is also somewhat tenuous. In

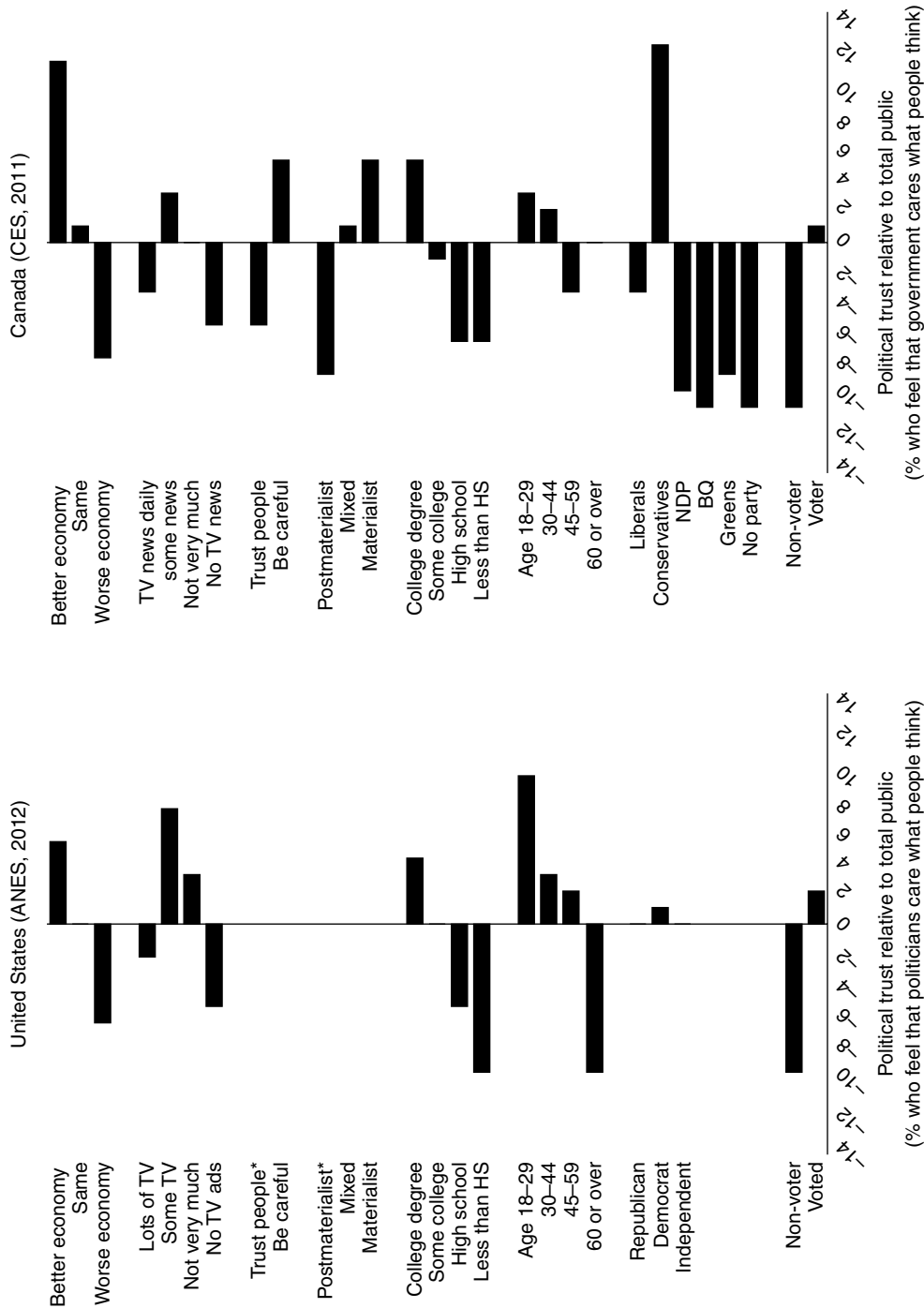


Figure 23.5 Levels of political trust relative to total public

both nations, those who watch the most about politics on television news and those who watch the least are less trusting; those with moderate television are slightly more trusting. These relationships are fairly weak, however. Additional analyses of the 2011 CES showed that none of the items on usage of various mass media has a substantial correlation with trust (Pearson r above 0.10). This ambiguous pattern is what has generated doubts about media effects shaping political trust (Norris, 2011).

As a partial test of the social capital thesis, the 2011 CES included the standard question on social trust that is at the heart of Putnam's discussion of declining social capital in America. The figure shows a 10 percent gap in political trust across categories of social trust. These two traits do tend to overlap in a cross-section, even if we discount the social capital theory as an explanation of decreasing political trust.

The most direct measure of the value change thesis is the postmaterialist values index developed by Inglehart (1990), which was included in the 2011 CES. Consistent with previous studies, postmaterialists in Canada are about 5 percent below the national average in their trust, while materialists are 8 percentage points more trustful.¹³ In addition, value priorities in both nations have shifted in the postmaterialist direction over time, so value change may contribute to the decrease in trust.

The figure also presents several other traits that might identify the social location of political trust. For example, in the halcyon days of the 1950s–1960s, better-educated Americans were more trustful of government. Between 1952 and 2000 the trust levels of the better educated decreased at a steeper rate than for the less educated (Dalton, 2005). This reinforces the notion that changing expectations, rather than changing performance, is eroding political trust. In both current surveys, however, the less educated remain less trustful of government. This social status pattern has probably narrowed over time – but this gap is still apparent in current public opinion (see also Chapter 11 by Mayne and Hakhverdian).¹⁴

Generational change is another factor linked to political trust. In the quieter days of the early 1960s, the young began their political experiences with a positive orientation toward government that gradually faded with time (and presumably with the accumulation of less than idealistic political experiences). Events since then highlighted the political cynicism of successive generations. The faces of the young were prominent in the emergence of the student movement, the environmental movement, women's groups, and other new social movements in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the Occupy movements of this decade. However, Figure 23.5 shows that those under age 30 are more trustful in both nations. The pattern is more apparent in the United States, and this may be a reaction to youth's embrace of the Obama administration and the rejection of Obama by older Americans. Until Obama's election in 2008, younger Americans had become relatively more distrustful of government. A similar, albeit much weaker relationship, exists in Canada as well.

Finally, I considered two political variables: party identification and voter turnout in the election. Especially after the election of a Conservative government in 2011, Conservative Party identifiers were 12 percent more trustful than the average citizen, while all other parties were less trustful. The differences in the USA are more muted in 2012, but were quite sharp in 2008 before Obama won the election. These patterns highlight how trust in government has a short-term component that reflects how one's political values match the incumbent government. The final panel in the figure shows that voters are more trustful than non-voters in both nations. Elections are partially an act of allegiance and support

for the political system, and thus there is a tendency for the trustful to vote, and the less trustful to turn to other forms of political action.

CONCLUSION: THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON POLITICAL TRUST

The evidence presented here may change prevailing images of trust in government in two major ways. First, many scholars attribute the decline of political trust to the unique political history of a nation. My findings demonstrate that cynicism is spreading in the United States, Canada, and most other advanced industrial democracies. Rather than coincidental events occurring simultaneously cross-nationally, some common force seems to be affecting these nations.

Second, the implications of this new skepticism depend on why public opinion is changing. I argued that decreasing trust in affluent societies seems to be linked to a process of social modernization and value change. The changing values and skills of Western publics encourage a new type of assertive or engaged citizen who is skeptical about political elites and the institutions of representative democracy (Dalton and Welzel, 2015; Klingemann, 2015). Such cynicism may also generate a dynamic where additional scandals or negative news about government reinforce these impressions, while positive news about government is discounted. In the end, this process could produce the enduring negativism about government, even when economic and political conditions are positive. Indeed, it seems that one feature of contemporary democratic processes is that they teach citizens to be critical of government.

These public criticisms of government can have beneficial effects. For example, they have stimulated various proposals to reform the institutions of democratic governance, and thereby renew trust in government. Dissatisfaction with partisan politics has led to calls for reform of the electoral system across Canada. In the United States it fueled the term-limits movement of the 1990s and current calls for electoral reform by both Democrats and Republicans (albeit of different substantive basis). Other experts lament the failures of the US Congress, arguing that legislative reforms in how Congress operates will improve trust. The same scenario could be played out for most other advanced industrial democracies. Assertive citizens will also press government to be more accountable to the public.

Certainly democratic institutions should adapt and explore alternative forms. Partially prompted by popular dissatisfaction with the governing process, contemporary democracies have implemented reforms to expand access, increase transparency, and improve the accountability of government (Cain et al., 2003; Smith, 2009). These reforms are expanding citizen access in significant ways and transforming the democratic process. Yet, such reforms should be judged by their ability to improve the democratic process, not to change citizens' negative images of government. I believe that we have entered a new period when governments must confront a public skeptical of their motivations, doubtful about the institutions of representative democracy, and willing to challenge political elites. Yet these same dissatisfied citizens support the democratic ideal and want to strengthen democracy. The 'new civic culture' of advanced industrial democracies is thus fundamentally different from the cultural model of the past.

NOTES

- * The data analyzed in this chapter were provided by the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research and the archives of the Canadian Election Study. I am indebted to the national election study teams for collecting these data and making it available for secondary analysis. I would also like to thank André Blais, Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte, and Steve Weldon for their comments on these analyses.
1. There is a rich ongoing debate on the theoretical and empirical meaning of political trust, and the relationship of these items to other dimensions of political support (see other chapters in this Handbook and Norris, 1999).
 2. Two other questions from the CES (whether politicians are honest; whether government wastes a lot of tax money) both follow the same downward trend (Kanji, 2002).
 3. Although definitive data are not available, the 2014 shootings at parliament may produce a spike in political support and national attachments, but prior research suggests this could be a short-lived phenomenon.
 4. One common limitation of these surveys is their short length for many nations. If the American series had only started in 1976, for example, the marked drop in political trust would be less evident (or even invisible).
 5. Gallup (2013), 'Americans' confidence in Congress falls to lowest on record', 13 June, accessed 7 August 2016 at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/163052/americans-confidence-congress-falls-lowest-record.aspx>.
 6. AmericasBarometer (2012), *Canada 2012 Final Report*, accessed 7 August 2016 at <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/canada/Canada-2012-Report.pdf>.
 7. Party attachments and support for political parties has also declined in the USA, Canada and other advanced industrial democracies (also see Dalton, 2012, ch. 9).
 8. Business, labor, higher education, organized religion, the press and other social organizations have suffered similar declines in confidence over time over the past four decades (Lipset and Schneider, 1983; Nye et al., 1997).
 9. CBC News (2005), 'Up the skirt or in the till: Top ten scandals in Canadian political history', 10 February, accessed 7 August 2016 at <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/cdngovernment/scandals.html>.
 10. Few experts claim that media coverage increases public trust in government. However, some research stresses the media's role in providing political information; newspaper readership, for example, is often related to greater political interest, high information levels, and greater political involvement (Norris, 2000b).
 11. Between 1999 and 2015 Jon Stewart was the host of *The Daily Show*, which satirically discusses daily political affairs as well as news media coverage itself.
 12. There is also some evidence that media attention is positively related to support for the democratic process (Norris, 2011, ch. 9).
 13. This is based on the simple four-item values measure (Inglehart, 1990). The more robust 12-item index typically displays even stronger relationships, but this was not asked in either election study.
 14. Education levels have obviously increased markedly in both nations over time, but the interaction of education and trust makes it complicated to estimate the impact of rising education on political trust. Estimates for the USA since 1958 suggest that educational effects explain about a fifth of the decline in political trust (see Dalton, 2005).

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