Do we want trust in government?

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In the analysis of trust and government, we may focus on two quite distinct causal issues: citizen trust in other citizens as a result, in part, of governmental institutions and citizen trust in government itself. The former is a variant of the central thesis of Thomas Hobbes. We need government in order to maintain the order that enables us to invest effort in our own well-being and to deal with others in the expectation that we will not be violated. Almost no one other than anarchists disagrees with this view, although some writers have supposed that large government is disruptive of relations between citizens. The American Anti-Federalists and such anti-urban thinkers as Ibn Khaldun (Gellner 1988) therefore opposed large government or urbanization.

The second issue – that citizens might specifically trust government – is suggested in a passage by John Locke. Locke (1988: 381) wrote that society turns power over to its governors, “whom society hath set over it self, with this express or tacit Trust, That it shall be employed for their good, and the preservation of their Property.” Niklas Luhmann (1979: 54) says that this “old theme of political trust, which played a large role, especially in the period after the end of the religious wars, has virtually disappeared from contemporary political theory.” If it had disappeared, it has come back in force, at least in consideration of the United States and other advanced democratic societies. Now, the supposition that citizens could trust government lies behind a large contemporary literature.

That literature commonly assumes that citizens must trust government if government is to work well and that a reputed decline in citizen trust of government bodes ill for many contemporary democratic societies.

Occasionally, it includes normative claims that people should trust a particular government. By a standard dictum of ethics, one cannot have a moral duty to do what one cannot do. This is expressed in the rule “Ought implies can.” Unless we mean something very different when we speak of trusting government than when we speak of trusting a person, however, citizens typically cannot trust government.

A striking thing about the contemporary vision of society that citizens should trust government (and that it is a failing of either citizens or government if they do not) is that it is starkly contrary to traditional liberalism. Among the core understandings of liberalism is that citizens should distrust and be wary of government. David Hume supposed we should design government institutions so they would serve our interests even if they were staffed by knaves. And James Madison and other federalists attempted to do just that in the US Constitution. Madison’s view was essentially that the incentives to anyone with power are at least partly to abuse that power for their own interests. That is to say that government agents will have incentive not to act in the citizens’ interests.

I wish to address the second of the concerns above – trust in government – rather than the first – the effect of orderly government on individual trust. And I wish even for that issue to focus on epistemological issues of what citizens can know that they must know if they are intelligently to trust government. In general, citizens cannot know enough of what they must to be able to trust government. As Luhmann (1979: 46; cf. 1988: 102) notes, “Modern differentiated social orders are much too complex for the social trust essential to ordinary living to be created solely by trust-orientations toward persons; it is all too obvious that the social order does not stand and fall by the few people one knows and trusts.” Trusting institutions makes little sense for most people most of the time.

Trust and distrust are an odd pair in that they do not fully cover the range of possibilities. Between active trust and active distrust there can be simple lack of either trust or distrust. In the vernacular English usage, to say “I don’t trust you” commonly means “I distrust you,” as though lack of any knowledge on which to base a judgment of either trust or distrust were not a possibility. The stance of citizens toward government could, in principle, be one of trust, distrust, or lack of either. I wish to pursue the plausibility of supposing that the relevant response for citizens, both rationally and actually, is commonly the lack of either trust or distrust because we typically lack the relevant knowledge for going further than that. Moreover, I think it plausible that we should not generally want trust in government for the simple reason that typical citizens cannot be in the relevant relation to government or to the overwhelming majority of government officials to be able to trust them except by
mistaken inference. It may even be true that the conditions for distrust can be met more readily than can the conditions for trust.

Trust is in a cognitive category with knowledge. To say "I trust you" means that I know or think I know relevant things about you, especially about your motivations toward me. It is such knowledge that many of us cannot sensibly claim to have with respect to most government officials or with respect to government generally (Hardin, 1998). The easy answer to the question of my title, therefore, is that, insofar as trust is not possible except by mistake, we do not want it. Because the term "trust" is used in many ways, it is useful to stipulate how it will be used here. Therefore, let us briefly spell out the notion of trust as "encapsulated interest."

**Trust as encapsulated interest**

Before we turn to the problem of trust in government, consider trust in another person, from which we might expect conceptually to be able to generalize to claims about trust in groups, organizations, or institutions. It is often asserted that trust is an inherently moral notion or that it means Q or P. Against any such view, it seems clear that there are no "inherently anything" notions in social discourse. The term "trust" is used in manifold ways in ordinary language as it is in both philosophy and the social sciences. There is little point in quibbling over the essential meaning of trust: It has no essential meaning. Rather, it has a variety of meanings that often conflict. Serious discussion begins with making clear what is to be at issue. Because I wish to explain behavior with respect to government, I am interested in an explanatory account of trust. And I want that account to mirror trust at the level of individuals because an account of trust in government should be consistent with a general account of trust.

Two broad conceptions of trust that I will not consider here are purely normative accounts and purely expectations accounts. First, briefly consider purely normative accounts, in which it is commonly asserted that trust is a moral notion. It is moral to trust and immoral not to trust. In general, it is compelling to argue that trustworthiness can be morally required on many moral theories (Hardin 1996a). It is not generally sensible to claim that trust is morally required by any moral theory, because it cannot be morally required that we trust those who would clearly take advantage of our trust to cheat or harm us or others. If trust is moral, it is moral only contingently. This fact makes it a misfit for anti-consequentialist moral theories. And it makes trust essentially otiose for a utilitarian consequentialist theory, which commands only actions and not attitudes. A utilitarian might be required to cooperate when cooperation would be generally beneficial. The fact that the cooperation would be beneficial is ground for trust, but the trust adds nothing to the obligation, if there is one, to cooperate.

Jane Mansbridge (chapter 10, this volume) speaks of "altruistic trust" as an apparently normative conception of trust. In her actual discussions, however, what she conceives is acting altruistically to cooperate with another despite having inadequate grounds for trusting that other. Many, perhaps most, of us have done that on occasion, especially with respect to children whom we are trying to teach the value of reliability in keeping agreements.

It is perhaps a matter of linguistic taste whether we call this another kind of trust or merely an instance of acting beyond trust. But I think it is not merely a matter of taste. The view of trust as cognitive, and therefore not a matter of choice, can be fitted to various kinds of action. My degree of trust or distrust does not alone determine my action. (As a trivial case in point, note that there are many people in the world whom I trust very much in various realms but with whom I may not ever have reason to cooperate again or at all.) That I risk cooperation when either I have no grounds to trust or I even have grounds to distrust is a matter of sometime rational choice and sometime moral, or altruistic, choice. There is no advantage in conceiving of a separate category of trust to handle each of these varied ranges of action.

Other authors speak of risking trust (Luhmann 1979: 24) or choosing trust. There is similarly no point in such usages because they add nothing to the simpler account of trust as cognitive and of actions taken in the light of one's trust. I might risk cooperating or choose to cooperate with you despite inadequate trust. It is confusing to elide this claim into saying I risk or choose trust. In this elision, my cognitive state and my action are somehow combined into a single concept.

Second, consider purely expectations accounts. If trust is nothing more than the reasonable factual expectation that another will behave in a relevant manner, then it is nothing more than, say, the trust with which we sometimes inductively assert that the sun will rise tomorrow morning because, after all, it has always risen every morning that we can remember. We may similarly inductively trust some part of the government in this very limited sense because we may simply extrapolate from behavior until this moment to predict future behavior. Of course, this means, among other things, that we can trust some government bodies and agents to continue to act corruptly against our interests, we can trust others to continue to be incompetent to do what they are appointed to do, and we can trust many agents of government to lie to us with regularity about important matters for which they are responsible. While this usage of the term "trust" is common in everyday speech, it trivializes what is of
concern in general debates about whether we should trust government. If trust is merely expectations, then the claim that we should trust government is equivalent to some claim such as that we should expect government to do good. The latter would be a stupid claim much of the time. Should Martin Luther King and Ernest Hemingway have expected the FBI not to be spying on and harassing them even though they may have had evidence that it was?

Anyone who wishes to insist that either of these notions (or any other notion) of trust is the true meaning of the term is whistling nonsense, for which, of course, there is a grand tradition in social thought, a tradition that may be both older and more copious than any more nearly analytical tradition. No one need be deterred from contributing to that hoary tradition, which has seductive, rhetorical pleasures that are not to be denied.

My central concern is with the explanation of behavior that is grounded in a particular, coherent vision of trust. That vision is of trust as an expression of encapsulated interest (Hardin 1991). To say that I trust you with respect to some matter means that I have reason to expect you to act in my interest with respect to that matter because you have good reasons to do so, reasons that are grounded in my interest. In other words, to say that I trust you means I have reason to expect you to act, for your own reasons, as my agent with respect to the relevant matter. Your interest encapsulates my interest.

Trust is generally a three-part relation: A trusts B to do x (or with respect to x). There are several important considerations in this formula. Perhaps most obviously, there is the final clause, which is commonly omitted from ordinary expressions of trust. In virtually all cases of trust, the trust is limited to certain areas. I trust you to return the money for your morning cup of coffee, but I might not trust you with an unsecured loan of thousands of dollars for your down payment on a house. As Tolstoy (1949: 347) wryly notes, a Russian nobleman of his time could be trusted with gambling debts to another nobleman, but not with another nobleman’s wife or with debts to his tailor. We each generally differ from Tolstoy’s noblemen only with respect to the categories in which we can be trusted and distrusted.

More centrally, however, my trust of another individual typically turns on expectations grounded in the interest the relevant person has to do various things. It is trust rather than mere expectation if A expects B to do x because B has a reason to do it that is grounded in A. That reason could be an ongoing relationship – including love, friendship, or mere exchange, as in business – a relationship with A that B wants to maintain. Or it could be some other interest B has that A somehow influences. For example, A may influence B’s prospects for re-election.

There is a common conception of trust that holds it to be grounded in thick, ongoing relationships (e.g. Williams 1988). In this conception, I can trust only a person with whom I associate frequently and fairly intensively, so that I am in a position to know that person’s motivations toward me and to know whether my risk in giving him or her power of agency over some aspect of my life is justified. I will be justified in trusting you if you can be supposed to have a strong interest in maintaining good relations with me for future exchanges or dependencies. While the gist of this limited model of trust fits the encapsulated-interest account, it is not true that the relevant expectations can be grounded only in thick relationships. I can expect you to act well as my agent for the reason that you will suffer loss if you do not. This can happen because of the iterated nature of our interaction, as in the thick-relationship model, or because of reputational effects that will enable you to benefit from relationships other than ours, or because there is an imposed structure of incentives to get you to act well as my agent.

There is an intermediate kind of case in which all but one of the elements of the encapsulated-interest model of trust are present. Consider an example. Suppose I think environmental protection, depending on its costs, is in my interest. I may not know very much about the basic technical issues involved, so I am not competent to judge my own interest in detail. For example, I may not understand the account of ozone depletion and its significance for me or my children. But I still may think I have good reason to suppose that, say, the Sierra Club policy experts are competent to understand these matters and that the Club shares my interest in environmental protection. Suppose further that I do not contribute to the Sierra Club and therefore do not think that its stance depends on my interest either directly or indirectly. Rather, it simply does share my interest, just as some of my neighbors also do, and it and my neighbors act in ways that forward my interest merely for the reason that forwarding their own interest coincidentally forwards mine.

This coincidence of interests is a spurious causal relationship. The Club and my neighbors are not my agents, although, of course, I may be glad they are there and working in ways that forward my interest. In the vernacular, one might say both that I trust them and that I have put no trust in them. In the encapsulated-interest account, however, I do not trust them with respect to my environmental interest, nor should I distrust them. Their interest does not encapsulate mine; it merely correlates with mine. To refer to such a relationship, let us call it near-trust.

Note, however, that agencies and persons – such as the Sierra Club or my neighbors – that share our interests can be useful in certifying the trustworthiness of others. Hence, they can help to give us the grounds for
trusting or distrusting these others. For example, my neighbor, whom I know to be a close associate of yours and whom I trust with respect to my interests in some matter, might advise me that I can trust you. Here, my neighbor has the role of providing the knowledge base for informing judgments of trustworthiness (see Warren chapter 1, this volume). Organizations also can perform this role for us, as they do in simple contexts of informing us of someone’s credit worthiness. (I will return below to the general issue of agencies for judging trustworthiness in politics.)

Now consider this model of trust applied to trust in government. Again, A trusts B to do x (or with respect to x). For the case in which A is a citizen and B is an officeholder, office seeker, organization, or institution, the most likely reason for A’s trust in B is that there is a structure of organizational or political incentives imposed on B that will get B to act well as A’s agent with respect to x. Of course, it is possible that I could actually know a particular government official in ways that fit the ordinary account of individual trust in another individual, because we might have a thick or iterated relationship. This cannot be typical of anyone’s trust in much of government, however, because in a large society we simply cannot have thick relationships with enough people.

Our common, and commonly justified, reaction to people who regularly tell us that very many people are their very close friends is to suppose they do not mean what we mean when we say someone is a close friend. It is not possible to have many very close friends for the simple reason that there are not enough hours in life to sustain many close relationships. Similarly, there are not enough hours to sustain enough thick relationships to be able to claim to trust many people for reasons of their dependence on our direct future relations with them. Indeed, we have created many institutions in effect to handle the problem of lack of direct relations with others that would enable us to live well.

Finally, there are two central elements in this model of trust that have been only implicit so far. First, if A is to trust B, then B must have not only the motivation to do x but also the competence. An agent who cannot act on my behalf is a poor agent. Second, if A’s trust is to be fulfilled, A must have the competence to judge B. A’s judgment might be delegated to relevant agencies when they exist, but in politics finding a trustworthy agency for such delegation is often difficult. Moreover, there are likely to be competing agencies attached to conflicting interests, and these agencies are apt to produce contrary, not congruent, judgments.

There are conceptions of trust other than the three-part relationship of trust as encapsulated interest. Indeed, there are other conceptions included in this volume. In addition, trust is often discussed very loosely without a clear sense of what would or would not count as an instance of trusting. Loose usage, as in several recent books on trust, allows authors to make inconsistent claims without awareness and sometimes to make very grand claims whose content is, at best, vague. Such usage then forces readers to interpret in their own ways. In part, this results from the normal, confusing richness of terms in ordinary language. Terms often have the quality of family resemblance. Any two notions of trust might have some common ground. But the set of all notions in use might have no element in common, just as the set of faces from some family might clearly resemble one another without having any particular element in common to all the faces. One might have supposed (as I do) that a notion of trust that does not include at least some sense of expectation is of no interest to us, but there are some odd claims for purely normative conceptions of trust that include no element of expectations.

Representation and bureaucracy

The nature of democratic government in modern states, which are far too populous for direct democracy on most matters, is representative. Furthermore, even representative bodies cannot handle the mass of detail involved in governance, so modern government is necessarily handled by large bureaucratic organizations. Hence, our governors are often twice removed from oversight by citizens. Given the size of the constituencies of both representatives and governmental bureaus, citizens cannot be expected to know their representatives or the bureaucratic agents who govern them well enough for the model of thick relationships to characterize their trust in government.

How, then, can we make sense of trusting an institution if trust requires grounding in the interests of the institution and its agents? There are at least two ways we might unpack our trust of an institution. First, we could trust every individual in the organization, each in the relevant ways, to do what each must do if the organization is to fulfill our trust. Second, we could know that the design of the roles and their related incentives will induce role-holders to do what they must do if the organization is to fulfill our trust. Here we essentially trust the structure of incentives to get individual officeholders to act well as our agents. In this case, the individual role-holders might be broadly interchangeable, and we need know few, if any, of them.

Neither of these visions is plausible for citizen trust of modern governmental institutions. Scale factors make the first of these implausible. Virtually no one can know enough of the large number of individual

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2 Most of this section is borrowed from Hardin (1998).
role-holders to claim to trust them in the strong sense of seeing that they have interests in fulfilling trust placed in them. Against the second of these ways of establishing trust in government, few people can have an articulate understanding of the structures of various agencies and the roles within them or of the overall government to be confident of the incentives that role-holders have to be trustworthy. Hence, as a matter of actual practice, it is utterly implausible that trust underlies most citizens’ views and expectations of government.

In actual life, we might often not trust an organization but might merely depend on its apparent predictability by induction from its past behavior. Then we have merely an expectations account of the organization’s behavior. Inductive knowledge in some contexts seems very compelling. Most of us expect the sun to rise tomorrow just because that is what has always happened so far as we know. For many people, that expectation is reinforced by the belief that there are physical laws to govern the sun’s rising. Their expectations are Newtonian and not merely inductive.

Expectations of human behavior are much less reliable than the merely inductive expectations about the sun’s behavior. Indeed, their unreliability is the central driving force of most great literature. In a cute moment, one might say that one of the strongest expectations we must have of people in the long run is that they will defy our expectations. While there is no analogue of Newtonian physics to reinforce our expectations of human behavior, there is a consideration that is arguably far more widely understood than is Newtonian physics. We base much of our expectations of people’s actions on beliefs about human psychology. Among the most compelling and generalizable of psychological traits is that people are motivated by their interests. Hence, trust — expectations grounded in encapsulated interest — may be more widely motivated than beliefs about physical relationships that are grounded in nothing more than induction.

Of a large part of the population, perhaps, we can claim no more than that they have inductive expectations about government, not that they have grounds for trust as encapsulated interest. That an agency or its role-holders are trustworthy might matter to some people, but to most there is nothing beyond expectations. Kant’s neighbors may have relied on his punctuality in his morning walk to set their schedules. To trust requires more: that they rely on his having their interests at heart in deciding when to take his walk. If they could not think he did, they could not be said to trust him (Baier 1986: 234). Like Kant’s neighbors, those people who have merely inductive expectations cannot be said to trust government. Inductive expectations that government will be capricious might be sufficient to ground distrust, but for most people there might be neither trust nor distrust of a reliable government or agency.

Do we want trust in government?

The trustworthiness of government might matter enormously to some citizens, but it might count only by default for many others. Distrust comes easily; trust requires too rich an understanding of the other’s incentives for it to come easily to many people. If our understanding of government is that it must be grounded in trust to be legitimate, then no major government of modern times is legitimate. Indeed, even if all we require is the near-trust of merely correlated rather than encapsulated interests, no modern government is likely to be legitimate for more than passing moments. For example, the government of the Czech Republic in its early days or the governments of England and the United States during World War II might have been legitimate in this limited sense in the eyes of most citizens. Even during these periods, near-trust cannot have been at all complete, because citizens’ interests cannot have been correlated on any but certain central matters such as prosecuting the war or establishing a non-dictatorial government.

Even in this limited sense of near-trust, the government of the United States since World War II cannot have counted as legitimate. Evidently, government need not be legitimate in this sense for it to survive and even manage a nation through major difficulties and into prosperity. It may suffice that government not be generally distrusted. If some core of the populace genuinely trusts at least parts of a government and not too much of the rest of the populace actively distrusts it, then it likely has done well by historical standards for large states.

In the end, trust still may be crucial to the success of government. Those most attentive to government also will be those most likely to know enough about governmental actions and structures to know whether the government or at least some of its agents are trustworthy. If they are also the people most likely to oppose government in response to its failings, then the possibility of trustworthiness and the epistemological possibility of trust could be important to the stability of government. The significance of their role in support of government might be ramified by the implicit support of those who act from mere expectations without articulate knowledge of the trustworthiness of government. The expectations of the latter group might be based in large part on the expectations of others, just as most of us know many of the things we know only in the sense that we gather that others think those things are true. Our crippled epistemology is little more than mimicry.

Low voter turnouts in many nations — including, notoriously, the United States — are commonly taken as evidence that government has failed to elicit support. But, prima facie, an equally or even more plausible conclusion may be that such turnouts are evidence that government has not engendered grievous distrust and opposition. Silence cannot
unnambiguously prove the case for or against government. If mimicry underpins many of our expectations of government, then the limited commitment of most people to try to change or affect government makes epistemologically good sense.

Democracy and knowledge

Pragmatists such as Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey justified democracy in part with the claim that democracy is necessary for the optimal generation of knowledge in a society. The inclusiveness of democracy would bring greater input of ideas. Dewey may have held somewhat contradictory views. He supposed that the best way to fix beliefs is with a community such as that of science, with canons of testing, experimentation, and openness. Communities of science are, however, not democratic and inclusive. Rather, they are highly meritocratic and openly exclude some people, indeed, most people. Dewey wanted to extend the purview of such communities to cover moral and political issues as well as the standard issues of the putatively objective sciences. In such an extension, one might see the requirement for inclusiveness and therefore reject the model of communities of science. Moreover, one might reject Dewey's seeming supposition that there is an underlying objectivity for our value concerns to which a community of science could direct its attention.

Against the pragmatic claim that we need democracy to generate knowledge, it seems very clear that the market in a highly advanced market economy generates vastly more knowledge than politics can and that the knowledge it generates, much of it diffused through society, enables us to accomplish things far beyond what central control of the economy could accomplish for us. The broad failure and recent demise of state-run economies in much of the world suggest that politics can be a disastrous system for generating important kinds of knowledge. Indeed, the idea that the generation and evaluation of knowledge require anything vaguely like equal inputs or even broadly representative inputs is odd. Nobel Prizes are rightly not awarded equally or representatively to all. More generally, it is arguments from knowledge that commend meritocracy of the modern kind, that is, expertise or competence (as opposed to putative merit from birth or position).

Contrary to Dewey's and Peirce's pragmatic arguments, therefore, the central problem of competence in governance inherently involves a combination of democratic choice and meritocratic decision-making. The crux of the problem is that the meritocrats have to be selected through democratic devices. This means democratic devices somehow must be good at choosing meritocrats even though they are surely not capable of directly meritocratic assessment of policies. In principle, it is not impossible that we could democratically judge competence. For example, it seems likely that democratic choice of the most competent basketball player of the 1990s would overwhelmingly confirm the views of some selection of supposed experts such as, say, National Basketball Association coaches. But it is implausible that we can democratically assess who is the smartest or most competent person in many areas of endeavor. For example, democratic choice of whose views on AIDS, secondary education, or the design of a new aircraft are best would plausibly be a travesty, especially when such choices become a regular part of politics, so that interests begin to coalesce around various positions on such matters.

Competence

We want governors to be competent, even expert, with respect to many things. We have social systems for establishing credentials for competence in many social realms in which ordinary citizens could not expect to evaluate individual competence. For example, universities certify the competence of professionals in engineering, law, medicine, and so forth. Professional organizations also evaluate and certify individuals in various realms. And large organizations such as firms, hospitals, and research laboratories evaluate competence. The striking feature of politics in purely electoral and, on occasion, even appointive offices is that there is little or no such evaluation of merit. Voters must choose candidates who essentially bundle competence, value commitments, and interests.

While no one of these always trumps, interests often seem to be the predominant factor in electoral choice. This is an almost uniquely different feature of politics. In other arenas, we do have some concern with problems of interest, as in conflict between particular experts' interests and the interests of their clientele. And we even may have some concern with problems of the conflicting values of particular experts such as, for example, the doctor who recommends against amniocentesis because she is opposed to abortion rather than because she is concerned for the interests of her patient. We have many institutional devices to manage these problems, which often may seem negligible. Moreover, we have the important institutional device of competition between experts at the level of the particular decision of the moment rather than merely for a substantial term of office commonly without much respect to particular decisions or issues.

Suppose, however, that we did not have the problem of bundling competence with other considerations in our potential officeholders. Could
we expect democratic procedures to select for competence or merit? We might be able to do so for evaluating, say, candidates for Nobel Prizes if—and this is a very big if—we had reliable agencies to inform us of the competence of the candidates. While we are not completely without such resources in political choice, we do not have such reliable agencies in general. If competence were the only issue, we might expect such agencies to arise and help us make better judgments. Indeed, in many jurisdictions in which judges are elected in the United States, there are agencies, such as the Independent Voters of Illinois, that evaluate for competence and whose evaluations evidently affect voter choices.

In politics we have, oddly, competing agencies for the evaluation of competence. For example, when scientific judgments are of concern in the policy arena, we generally can expect to hear competing “experts” making claims about the scientific merits of various matters. Certified scientists still can be found to say that smoking is not causally responsible for lung cancer. The correlation is greater than virtually all that any social scientist has ever been impressed with in her own causal accounts of social matters, and it convinces the overwhelming majority of scientists of all, and especially of relevant, disciplines and may even convince most smokers. But the political arena is one in which stupid and disreputable claims often get great play and even carry the day, especially if there is money behind them.

In many such matters, energetic competition in the evaluation of the competence of politicians leads to confusion on the part of many electors. Moreover, the task of evaluation is inherently complicated by a consideration that is often much less important or not important at all in ordinary, more nearly technical matters. Part of what we must discover or come to understand is our interests, and therefore we often are forced to reach simultaneous judgment on what our interests are and on who can best deal with them. Our interests are not simply given in many policy issues. My interest when I go to a doctor with my broken finger, take my stalled car to a mechanic, or seek insurance is relatively clear and straightforward. My interest in the potential redesign of the public school system, the regulation of some industry, or such complex issues as pollution commonly, even most likely, is not. One of the most important inputs to my assessment of my interests commonly may be the claims of politicians who want my vote. My choice of a candidate for office who stands on one side or the other of such issues is doubly complex and difficult.

One way to restate this doubly complex problem is to say that in cases such as my broken finger the definition of my welfare is quite clear, so that the only issue is the means to serve that welfare. And even the means may be quite clear. In the politics of pollution, however, I first do not even know what my welfare is and typically cannot know what means would serve it. I choose both at once, so that these concerns are bundled. This problem is not unique to politics, but is distinctively central to politics. For medical care, plumbing, building, and so forth, we have long-established institutional devices for assessing means to various ends, and we have relatively clear senses of what our ends are. Moreover, there is commonly little difference in your and my ends. Politics often lacks all of these features.

Even if there were no problem in evaluating competence, in many contexts there is virtually no chance of finding competence, not least because theory and institutional devices are inadequate to handle the problems at issue. Competition in the evaluation of policies occurs even within government agencies. If the government's own supposed experts contest the issues, the implementing agents of government are in trouble. William Eskridge (1996) suggests that intra-agency problems often are compounded by the fact that regulation involves lawyers and judges, who are apt to be “morons” on scientific issues. The problems of incompetence are severe even for relatively technical problems, such as auto safety (see Mashaw and Harfst 1990), that do not involve massive social issues, such as school busing and endemic poverty (see Nelson 1977).

Trust and democracy
To trust someone with respect to some matter entails delegating that matter to them to some extent. That is why trust is at issue. Because we delegate, we empower someone to cause us harm or to fail in some task on our behalf. We do, of course, delegate many matters to government officials. But in this case, delegation is inherently necessary merely to accomplish various things, such as social order. We therefore can delegate without trusting. To some large extent, that is what we rationally should do with respect to government and its officials. This is nothing unusual. Indeed, we should rationally take most of our knowledge more or less on faith from a hodgepodge of ill- to well-qualified experts or authorities (Hardin 1996b).

When we give someone power over x, we very often implicitly and inescapably give them power over other matters. Libertarians do not want government to have power to manage the economy or to override individual freedoms, but only to maintain social order. Besides wanting government to maintain social order, liberals are willing to let government have power to manage the economy, but they do not want it to have power to override individual freedoms. Both therefore want government with limits. Yet if we empower government enough to allow it to
accomplish the tasks we delegate to it, we likely empower it to go well beyond our delegations. Again, we must delegate, but it does not follow that we must or can trust.

Delegation of authority via democratic procedures is more complex than merely this account, however, in that it is accomplished by devices shot through with logical problems of the fallacy of composition. I vote for one thing, you vote for another, and yet we get the same representative. We seemingly collectively delegate power to our candidate to decide numerous issues, yet neither of us might actually want much of what the candidate does once in office. On any given issue, we might be able to escape this problem by deciding via referendum. But for the whole range of issues that concern us, the outcome of referenda would likely depend on the order in which we considered issues and the way in which we packaged them. It is almost logically excluded that I can genuinely delegate what I want to delegate if political choice is over a relatively complex range of matters, as it is in a modern polity.

**Agencies for judging trustworthiness**

Historically, the chief agencies for judging trustworthiness of politicians were political parties. In principle, parties could be good at judging both the competence and the commitment of potential officeholders. Hence, they could supply citizens with the knowledge they needed to determine whether candidates were trustworthy even when the citizens could not directly know the candidates well enough to make such assessments on their own. There are at least two problems with this possibility today. First, at one time we might have believed we could delegate to a party as our agency because we could have thought most issues came under a fairly coherent ideological system. That is an implausible assumption today in stable, advanced democracies. It still might make sense for the transitional period from state control of the economy to market control in some newly democratizing and marketing states, as it still might make sense for brief periods of crisis in advanced democracies when concern with ideological issues might briefly dwarf other concerns in apparent importance. In the late twentieth-century United States, it is arguably implausible for any significant group other than fundamentalist religious voters.

Second, parties in the United States do not have much control over candidate selection. And indirectly, therefore, they also do not have much control over the selection of appointive officeholders. Strangely, then, the chief controlling agency for citizens' judgments are citizens' judgments. This raises complex issues in street-level epistemology.

Do we want trust in government?

If individual judgment is not good, collective judgment might nevertheless be good in some choice contexts, such as those covered by the Condorcet jury theorem. According to this theorem, if the average juror is likely to have at least a slightly better than even chance of correctly assessing the truth of the innocence or guilt of an accused, then a very large jury will approach certainty of getting it right. Unfortunately, however, the conditions for the jury theorem are not met in candidate selection. First, the choice is not a binary one analogous to the choice between guilt and innocence. And, second, my fellow citizens cannot generally be expected to get the judgment of candidates more likely right than wrong. Therefore, an election may well come closer to getting the choice wholly wrong than wholly right.

In some matters, conventional collective knowledge is good. Often this is because there is a matter of objective rightness or wrongness that is put to test over an extended range of experiences, so that it becomes more or less perfected over time. Nevertheless, collective knowledge that is bad often may be sorely resistant to correction simply because the collectivity cannot see it put to test altogether. You may have seen correcting evidence, whose conclusion you report to me. But twelve other associates, who have not seen such evidence, question my good sense if I now reject the currently dominant collective view of the matter. I may have no independent judgment of the relative authority of my various associates and may naturally yield to the force of numbers. Hence, collective knowledge is apt to be relatively conservative.

The problem is even worse for politics. In politics, there is often little convincing evidence one way or the other for how good a policy will be. This is true already at the level of the best-informed experts. Consider debates a generation ago over school busing, for example, or currently over school choice. The typical citizen is in no position to judge such matters well, although sometimes the citizen can judge the immediate impact of a particular policy on her own immediate life, as many citizens did in the case of school busing.

Because candidates might be seen more or less as bundles of policy positions, they are similarly hard to assess. The so-called incumbency effect – incumbents have a strong advantage over challengers – may be in large part the result of two things related to this problem of collective knowledge. First, citizens typically may have more knowledge about the effects of an incumbent's positions than about the effects of a challenger's positions. Second, citizens typically may have far more knowledge about the competence of an incumbent than about that of a challenger.

For some policy issues, although less commonly for candidates, there are independent agencies whose judgments are relatively effective in
reaching large publics. For example, the medical profession has been relatively effective in conveying the belief that smoking is causally associated with lung cancer. Even for many of the best such independent-agency judgments, however, there often are competing judgments that publics must weigh in adopting their own beliefs. Here, “adopting” is perhaps too strong a term, but it is rightly suggestive. Beliefs generally happen to people; they are not a matter of choice. I come to believe that you have lied to me because the evidence tips the scales against you. But for some hotly debated public issues, we often may simply be inclined to credit one source more than another. We accept some bit of putative knowledge on the weight of the authority of expertise after weighing the authoritative expertise rather than the bit of knowledge itself.

Nevertheless, democratic choice and the search for scientific understanding are confused already for relatively simple problems, such as the evaluation of a new treatment for AIDS. Because there are interests at stake, as in the controversy over AIDS drugs, tobacco, school busing, and virtually all policy issues, we finally cannot trust supposedly independent agencies genuinely to be independent. Moneyed interests have deliberately created agencies to pursue particular political lines rather than to seek truths. Not even a citizen who agrees with the judgments of the American Enterprise Institute or Americans for Democratic Action can seriously believe that their judgments are not tainted by, or even driven by, interests rather than by a concern for truth. It would be foolish to suppose they do not deliberately seek out expert analyses that reach the right bottom line. At some level, we might not be able even to trust ourselves to reach good judgments over issues in which we might have a personal stake. For example, a liberal might finally come to believe that welfare programs do not work partly because they cost the liberal too much. People who readily trust the judgments of many nonpolitical agencies, such as encyclopedias, heavily discount virtually every agency involved in political judgments.

**Concluding remarks**

Again we may ask: How can we make sense of “trusting an organization” if such trust is conceived on analogy with trusting an individual? It is commonly implausible that we could trust enough individuals in the organization, each in the relevant ways, to do what they must do if the organization is to live up to our trust. For many cases, including most governmental organizations, scale factors make this epistemologically virtually impossible. And it is implausible that most people could know the design of the roles and their related incentives to get role-holders to do what they must do if the organization is to live up to our trust. In this case, the individual role-holders might be broadly interchangeable, and we need know few if any of them, as is typically true of, say, banks, which we may confidently expect to handle our money reasonably well and honorably. But it is not plausible that many governmental organizations have such simple tasks as banks have.

Alternatively, we might not trust the organization but might depend on its apparent predictability. I may not be able to break down the organization into roles whose occupants I can judge, and I may not be able to figure out the functional relation of the various roles to the things I want or expect from the organization. But I still can possibly know enough about the history of the organization to have strong expectations of how it will respond to my query. This device formally raises David Hume's problem of induction, although at the street level this may not be an obstacle to belief. But it does eliminate concern with trust. Again, I think this is likely the most compelling claim for the relationship of citizens to government in general. It is not a relationship of trust or distrust. At best, much of the time it is a relationship of inductive expectations.

How does the account here fit the current thesis that there is declining trust by citizens both in their government and in each other? In the current discussions, there is often a focus on how to get citizens to be more trusting. This would make sense under the common thesis that trust is per se good because it enables us to enter relationships that will be beneficial. But that thesis is false as a general thesis, because it is generally beneficial to trust only those who are trustworthy — not everyone, including the patently untrustworthy. If there is declining trust, the reason seems most likely to be that there is declining trustworthiness. There are at least two ways in which this might be true. First, there may be increasing exposure to or need to deal with less trustworthy people. Second, there may be declining trustworthiness of any given person or kind of person.

Consider the first of these. Data from various sources suggest that individuals trust each other less today than a few decades ago in the United States. Unfortunately, anyone trying to explain this trend or interpret its significance faces serious ambiguities in the data. It is plausible that comparing what people are saying at the different times is encumbered with an ecological fallacy. Those who trust people less today may be speaking of more people than those who trusted people more a generation ago. Why? Our lives today are typically more complicated with larger numbers of people with whom we interact. It is virtually a logical implication

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3 This is, unfortunately, the natural way to read Luhmann (1979).
of such a change that we cannot trust more people now as much as we trusted fewer people then.

Now consider the second way trustworthiness may be declining. The apparent changes might simply reflect the quasi-Hobbesian thesis that effective government is needed for citizens to trust each other. Perhaps government today is less effective at protecting citizens from each other than it was a generation ago. This could be true for technological, demographic, political, or other reasons. Hence, we genuinely do trust each other less because the backdrop of reliable sanctions against poor behavior is increasingly fraying.

Note, however, that neither account suggests any merit in attempting to address trust or declining trust directly. Indeed, both suggest that declining trust makes eminently good sense. It is a sound first principle of political analysis to suppose that people are behaving sensibly and to try to figure out the sense of their actions before first supposing they are behaving senselessly. People who sustained as high levels of trust after such changes as they had before the changes would be irrationally oblivious of their conditions. If levels of trust are declining, we should first take seriously accounts that make this a sensible response to the world. The second of the accounts immediately above suggests problems of governance, possibly even substantial failings of government. Some of the contemporary commentary focusing on the citizens whose trust is reputedly in decline suggests the character of Bertolt Brecht’s (1976: 440) lampooning of the East German government in the 1950s. He wrote a short poem that the government, having lost faith in the people, had decided to dissolve the people and elect a new one. That, of course, misses the point of having government. Similarly, some current analyses of declining trust may miss the point of trust.

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