The Public Trust

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WHAT ARE WE to make of the apparent decline in confidence in government across the Trilateral democracies? Why does it happen? Does it matter? I propose answers to these questions and speculate on their implications for democracy. Although there are probably many causal factors in any change this grand and widespread, I will focus on a related pair of changes in the nature of the policies faced by governments in the advanced industrial democracies. Their historical focus on economic issues—whether to use central planning or to rely on the market—has largely been settled in favor of the latter in a remarkable shift in global conditions over the past two decades or so. At the same time the range of policy issues at stake has grown more diverse and technically more complex, and therefore evidently harder to handle successfully.

Before turning to explanations and implications, I wish to address three conceptual issues of the uses and abuses of the terminology of trust. First, is trust in government analogous to trust in another person, or is it a very different notion? It clearly is not analogous to personal trust most of the time (Hardin 1998a). A personal relationship involving trust is far richer and more directly reciprocal than a citizen’s relationship to government. Hence, we should speak not of trust in government, but of confidence in government. It should be clear that this notion is a partial analogue of trust, as spelled out below. That is what licenses the loose vernacular use of the term trust even in the context of a citizen’s relation to government. But it is only a partial analogue, and much of the force of claims of trust does not apply to claims of confidence. For many writers, declining trust suggests a normative problem. Declining confidence does not so readily provoke normative concerns.

The second issue is that we should be concerned with trustworthiness rather than with trust (Hardin 1996), because if we wish to induce changes somewhere, it is most likely in the former. We do not commonly want to increase trust without first enhancing trustworthiness. If there have been changes in citizens’ propensity to trust government, the first supposition we should make is that those changes are rooted in changes in the trustworthiness of government and not in changes in our trustful-
ness, credibility, or basic psychological makeup (see Newton and Norris, this volume).

Finally, we should recognize that trust involves an expectation that the trusted has both the right motivations and the competence to fulfill the trust. Unless there is good evidence to suppose politicians have become less honorable in recent decades, we should probably focus our attention on problems of competence rather than motivation.¹

There is one other conceptual issue to be addressed: the nature of social capital, which is thought by some observers to be declining in the United States. If they are right, its decline might contribute to the loss of confidence in government in the United States, but not likely in most other Trilateral democracies.

Once these conceptual issues are out of the way, we can turn to explaining the apparent decline in confidence in government that shows up in surveys in many of the Trilateral nations. I will assume that responses to survey questions on trust are not evidence of mere credulity. Rather, they are evidence of belief that governmental performance is failing in some way relative to past performance. I will focus on one explanation of declining confidence in government in the section “Competence and Motivation.” Its consequences for politics and government will then be discussed under “Democratic Theory.” Government today may be no more nor less competent than it was two generations ago, but its agenda may have changed in ways that make it seem less competent relative to the problems it faces. In particular, the relatively simple conflict over whether to engage in central planning or let markets operate has largely been settled in favor of markets. The issues that now dominate political agendas in the advanced industrial democracies are much less systematically related to one another than these economic issues were, and they are often technically complex and beyond popular understanding. But because a failure to deal with them is often not beyond popular understanding, governments increasingly seem to be maladroit.

Trust in Government

Discussions of trust have become commonplace in the analysis of governmental responsiveness and citizen attitudes toward government (Bianco 1994), in efforts to understand differential economic success across societies (Fukuyama 1995), and in discussions of the relations between cli-

¹ I am inclined to assume with David Hume that many government officials are no more public-spirited than most citizens and that by far most of the success government has in achieving public purposes turns on incentives that guide individual officials in their actions (Hardin 1998b). Hence, it is unlikely that the public spiritedness of officials has declined markedly.

2 Niklas Luhmann (1980) speaks loosely of “system” trust, which is merely the confidence one has in the larger system of legal enforcement, monetary policy, and so forth. It is not trust in any useful sense of the word any more than my expectation that drivers will stay to the right in North America is a matter of trusting them to have my specific interests at heart.
Can typical citizens meaningfully trust government in the way that they do trust their friends and other associates? In general, no. For me to trust you, I have to know a fair amount about you. My knowledge might be wrong, and I might therefore mistakenly trust or distrust you. But in general, for me to trust you I must believe your motivations toward me are to serve my interests, broadly conceived, with respect to the issues at stake. I could believe this if I believed any of the following things. First, because you value our relationship enough to want to maintain it, you will want to fulfill the trust I place in you. Second, you value me enough to include my interests in your own, as a parent, lover, or close friend might do. Or third, you have such strong moral commitments to, say, fidelity that you will want to fulfill my trust. Although some officials might want us to believe that the second holds for them, only the first of these attitudes can plausibly be attributed to most government officials. But even that asks too much in the sense that few of us can know many government officials and their commitments well enough to judge whether they actually value their relationships with us. It is conceptually possible that someone might trust government or, rather, a government agency in this sense, but that would be very demanding epistemologically because it would require vast knowledge (Hardin 1998a and Hardin 1999a).

At present, to my knowledge, no elected government official knows me at all. Although some have met me, I suspect that they have long since forgotten me. (Some have long since forgotten their mothers.) It is implausible that any of them is motivated by concern for my interests. True, many of them want my vote and the votes of people like me. But in this they may be merely self-serving and opportunistic, and they may just as soon not serve my interests when that will help them get elected. If I trust them in the trivializing, vernacular sense discussed above, that is what I trust them to do: act opportunistically. It would be silly for me to say I trust those officials the way I trust many of my associates.

Because there is no evidence that people actually trust government in the ways they do trust some persons, and because it is very difficult to see how they sensibly could, it makes sense analytically to speak of declining confidence in government rather than declining trust. We should therefore interpret all the survey data on the subject to be about confidence, not trust, in government. Being confident in an agency might be epistemologically easy as a mere generalization from its past behavior without any genuine knowledge about anyone in the agency.

Finally, there is a widely held view that government needs the trust of citizens if it is to work well. This view is perhaps a variant of the claim of Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons that social order rests on shared normative commitments (Parsons 1968, 89–94). This is not the place to quarrel with that extraordinary and virtually unresearchable claim. But the more recent view of the role of trust can make sense only if by trust is meant essentially confidence and, perhaps, some element of cooperativeness. Government might need this much if it is to gain citizen compliance with sometimes hard laws, such as those concerning taxes and conscription (Levi 1997). If government needs trust in the strong sense in which our personal relationships need trust and trustworthiness to prosper, then it has been failing us throughout the history of modern democracy and virtually must fail because most citizens simply cannot trust government that way.

**Trustworthiness**

The point of wanting more trust in personal relations is that trust facilitates cooperation, but it is hard to see why more trust per se is wanted. We want As to trust Bs to do Xs (Hardin 1991). When we think of the problem in this unpacked form, we immediately focus on specific devices to get the Bs to do Xs; that is, we focus on the trustworthiness of the Bs. For example, the massive system of contract enforcement in any flourishing market society serves agents who do not genuinely trust each other with respect to anything in particular—who, indeed, need not even know each other well enough to be trusting without backing from the law. Nevertheless, the system enables them to enter into very complex cooperative relations that are mutually beneficial. The very specific confidence in compliance with a legal contract is grounded in the system of contract enforcement. Or, as is true in many ongoing business relations, it is iterated or repeated interaction that gives the parties an incentive to behave well now because they want the relationship to continue in the future. For example, if I regularly supply your firm with some input and you object that the quality of one of my shipments is poor, it will be in my interest, if possible, to make the shipment right regardless of the terms of our contract because I will want to keep your business. I could insist on the letter of the contract, but then you might find an alternative supplier for your future needs.

Although contemporary writings commonly posit trust as the relevant variable in explaining differential success in cooperation, the crucial variable is typically the trustworthiness of those who are to be trusted or

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3 We may refer to this reason for trusting as encapsulated interest; that is, my trust in you is encapsulated in your interest to fulfill my trust (Hardin 1991, 1992).

4 One cannot sensibly be thought to have a moral commitment to fulfill trusts save count. If I did, and you happened to trust me to do something I would and should never do, then the fact that you trusted me to do so would morally bind me to some extent. Nevertheless, some writers actually suppose one is morally obligated to fulfill trusts.
relied upon. If popular assessments of government—as measured by responses to such vague questions as “How much do you trust government to do what is right?”—suggest declining confidence, we should similarly suppose that the problem to be explained is declining performance or responsiveness on the part of government. If we think there are problems inherent in declining trust, we might attempt to address them by encouraging more trust or, alternatively, attaining greater trustworthiness. Clearly, if a person, such as your child, were distrustful, you would want to encourage that person to be more trusting only if trust were justified, that is, if the people to be trusted were trustworthy. If we can tell at all accurately from our experience with them whether particular people are apt to be trustworthy in certain circumstances, we will then trust them as much as their trustworthiness merits.

How should we interpret responses to standard questions on trust in government? It is not plausible to treat them as articulately responsive to any reflective sense of trust, of what trust is and how it works. But they presumably do reflect people’s real experiences. Hence, they are implicit assertions about the trustworthiness or reliability of relevant others. Again, if there are changes over time or differences across contexts in the level of trust that people express in responding to survey questions, we should look to changes or differences in the behavior of those who are supposedly trusted for an explanation. Hence, if confidence in government is declining, we should address that problem by enhancing government competence.

COMPETENCE AND MOTIVATION

In conceptual work on the subject, it is commonly assumed that trust has two quite distinct dimensions: competence to perform what one is trusted to do and motivation to perform. For example, I could distrust you to baby-sit for my child because I think you are incompetent or because I think you would be malevolent toward the child. Unfortunately, these two dimensions are often not separated. For example, the main survey questions on trust in government in the United States (in the National Election Studies series) do not separate them. Other data suggest that citizens think that neither the integrity nor the competence of officials is in decline, and there are also data that point in opposite directions on both these issues. The data on declining confidence in government seemingly entail that citizens think that at least one of these factors is in decline. Or perhaps, as discussed below, there is another background factor that leads to declining confidence in government despite the continuing integrity and competence of officials.

Because the dimensions of competence and motivation are indepen-
pares economics today to medicine about a century ago. The Flexner Report, whose impetus came from the medical educational group of the American Medical Association, concluded that sometime around the beginning of the twentieth century, going to an American doctor was finally more likely to benefit patients than to harm them (Flexner 1910). Similarly, Mueller supposes, following the advice of economists today, is, at last, more likely to benefit than harm economic performance. Much of that advice in many nations is now to leave the economy alone to a substantial degree and to let the market work. It is, of course, a corollary of letting the market run its course without massive intervention that government escapes the burden of being judged for the success or failure of its economic planning. Economic policy was once the major cleavage between parties in many democratic societies, whether the Republican and Democratic Parties in the United States or the Conservative and Labour Parties in Britain. Today it is increasingly economic policy on which they concur.

**Social Capital**

Although the changes in agenda that might undercut confidence in government are a problem for all advanced industrial democracies, a decline in social capital is perhaps unique to the United States. It does not merit extended treatment here, but it might be useful to see how it could matter (for a critical discussion and survey of views of social capital, see Hardin forthcoming b). Social capital is defined as “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action” (Putnam 1993, 167). If a decline in confidence in government in the United States partly results from a decline in social capital, the central element of the notion at issue is participation in various public-spirited and social-group organizations. Such participation seems to be declining in the United States (Putnam 1995a), but not in other Trilateral democracies.

To keep this discussion tightly focused, I will refer to ‘organizational’ and ‘network’ capital rather than to the more inclusive and amorphous ‘social’ capital. Although there is a tendency to speak of social capital as though it were a particular kind of thing that has generalized value, as money very nearly does, it must vary in the sense that what is functional in one context may not be in another. Consider an example. Teenagers network in two quite different ways (Heimer 1990). In many communities they come together by coordinating on one spot—the local square where there might be cafés or other points of teenage interest, the local park, or the outdoor basketball court of a local school. In other communities, especially well-off and suburban ones, they come together by mak-

ing deliberate arrangements over the telephone. Perhaps both groups create and use a kind of social or network capital, but the two kinds are quite different. Moreover, the skills involved in one kind might be more widely useful. In particular, deliberate organization via telephone calls might be good practice for the kind of organizing adults must do in typical bureaucratic settings, in neighborhood politics, in managing the lives of their children in a school system, and so forth. Although coordinating on a spot for meeting is quite generalizable in principle, in actual practice it is likely to be of relatively little use. Incidental investment in developing the one kind of network capital may have much larger payoffs in the long run than does investment in the other kind.

Investment in network capital through participation in socially directed organizations—that is, organizations with relatively collective purposes, such as some of those that Putnam (1995a, 1995b) discusses—may be displaced by more deliberate investment in networking for personal advantage. Indeed, people with political aspirations might participate in socially directed organizations in order to benefit personally from the network ties and reputational advantages they gain from such activity. In the end, there might therefore be no overall decline in network capital, but specific forms of capital might well decline. Because this may follow simply because people’s goals have shifted, it would be wrong to conclude prima facie that a decline of network capital in socially directed organizations leads to changes in goals.

Note that organizational and network capital provide two quite different values. First, the organizations and networks can be directly enabling; they themselves can be the vehicles we use to accomplish various purposes. For example, I may use my network to prompt my son’s school to be more responsive to him. Second, they can be an arena in which we develop particular forms of human capital; they can teach us how to do things that might be more generally valuable outside the context in which we learn them. For example, after I learn how to run a meeting or organize a group of people to participate in a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), I might use those skills in other contexts. It makes sense to reserve the terms *social*, *organizational*, and *network capital* for the first of these, for organizations and networks as vehicles for accomplishing our purposes. In a sense the organizations and networks are instances of social capital. The second value, the development of individual capacities, is clearly important, but it is more a matter of human capital as traditionally discussed by Gary Becker (1975) and others.

How do network and organizational capital benefit us? Do they benefit us by what they can do, that is, by what the network or organization can do? Or do they benefit us by what they enable us to do by means of the human capital we develop in networks or organizations? If there is a
decline in the social capital represented by such groups as the PTA or bowling leagues, that might reduce both the human capital for managing other people in spontaneous contexts and the availability of actual organizations and networks to help us accomplish various things.

Francis Fukuyama argues that participation in such networks and organizations prepares us psychologically for the demands of working in modern firms. As a consequence he supposes that social groups are good for the economy indirectly through the human capital they produce (Fukuyama 1995). Let us try to unpack this idea. The argument is that spontaneous sociability leads us to join various social organizations; participation in these organizations prepares us psychologically for working in large firms. This argument might seem to apply to a developing nation or to a subpopulation, such as immigrant groups or ghetto poor, that has not been incorporated into the economy. But how are these groups different from the new labor forces that staffed the Industrial Revolution? The nascent industries of Europe and North America evidently created their own human capital. It seems unlikely that much of the necessary human capital was created in voluntary social organizations. Once underway, the developing economies of our time should also generate the human capital they require.

Perhaps the kinds of human capital needed today are different and are likely to be produced in social organizations such as local political groups and sports clubs. Or, more plausibly, some variant of Fukuyama’s argument might apply to the special kind of human capital or psychology peculiar to the entrepreneurs who are needed in the drive to develop a market economy. If this is the essence of his idea, it does not seem important to most of the Trilateral nations, in which capitalist enterprises are alive and well and in which the generation of relevant human capital is handled by universities and business schools, experience on the job, and entrepreneurial families, whose offspring tend to be much more enterprising than the average person. The entrepreneurs who have made the biggest difference to the exploding computer and information industries have included youngsters such as Steve Jobs and Bill Gates.

So what is to be said of the somewhat anomalous case of North America, where the social capital embedded in voluntary social group organization seems to have declined sharply over three decades? If this decline is problematic, it could be because we will have fewer such organizations to use for political and other ends, or because such organizations will produce less of the human capital that might be needed in the polity and economy. These effects may not both be important. Indeed, one of the plausible explanations for the decline of voluntary groups is that dual-career marriages reduce the time available for participation in such groups. But dual careers might at the same time give both partners many opportunities to learn how to manage people, even how to organize them for action. Hence, the decline in opportunities for developing such human capital through participation in voluntary social groups might be offset—or surpassed—by opportunities to learn these skills in professional life. If so, then the main loss attributable to declining organizational capital is the loss of available social organizations that can be used for wider purposes, whether political or otherwise.  

In sum, we want to know two quite different things about the apparent decline in organizational capital in North America. Does it disable us politically by reducing access to voluntary and social organizations that are useful for furthering our political goals? And are we individually disabled by our declining participation in such organizations? For the first question, there are two quite different issues at stake in the two quite different kinds of organizations in which participation is apparently declining. Voluntary political organizations, such as neighborhood action groups, would seem to be much more useful in helping us achieve political goals than are social organizations such as choral groups and bowling leagues. Yet the data on declines in these two broad classes of groups are quite similar (Putnam 1995a). Their decline evidently has much less to do with their purposes than with the characteristics of participation in them, as is suggested by many of the explanations proposed for their decline. We are not dropping out of specifically political organizations, but out of voluntary organizations in general.

**Democratic Theory**

Communitarians assert that people have become more skeptical of government because the social organization of our lives has changed (Etzioni and Dipre 1979). There may be an element of truth in this claim (but see Newton and Norris, this volume). Other observers contend that politicians’ styles have changed, as in the shift from traditional campaigning to the marketing of candidates, especially via television. As noted earlier, I wish to concentrate on a different causal nexus to argue that the underlying political issues have changed in ways that reduce confidence in government.

There have been two mutually exacerbating changes. The first is a big system shock: the essential end, at least for the near term, of the focus on economic distribution and of the management of the economy for pro-

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5 The supposition that the production of relevant forms of human capital—forms that might be especially important in our political lives—is increasingly handled through our professional experiences in organizations may be false. Perhaps we are increasingly in deficit, relative to earlier generations, in developing such politically relevant human capital. It will not be easy to resolve this question empirically.
duction and distribution. The second is the slow and steady rise during the postwar era of often complex issues that are unrelated to one another. Together these two changes now preclude the organization of politics along a single left-right economic dimension. Those citizens coming of political age over the past generation in the Trilateral democracies might not recognize the political organization that prevailed for generations—and even centuries—in many of these countries. Their concerns are a hotchpotch of unrelated issues that are not the obvious domain of any traditional political party. The era of a simple, widely acknowledged, main political issue has passed.

Perhaps the fundamental problem we face is therefore an ongoing re-definition of democratic politics and participation. When democracy shifted from small to larger societies and therefore had to become representative, when it shifted from the selection of representatives by lot, as in Venice, to selection procedures that turned politicians into a professional class, and when it shifted from more or less free-for-all elections to party-dominated contests, there were reasons to rue the changes as somehow sad or tending toward less democracy. But at some level it would be hard to say any of these moves was a mistake because they were virtually necessitated by social circumstances.

We may have entered another transitional era, with democracy shifting from coherent, party-dominated contests to free-for-all elections of a new kind in which citizens’ competence to judge candidates and issues may be in decline (even, perhaps, in their own view) because the complexity and diversity of issues makes them extremely difficult to understand and package. Citizens’ reduced confidence might not be worrisome, however. To some extent, we are losing confidence in government precisely because we no longer think we need it in the important realm of the economy. We evidently had more confidence in government when it was trying to manage the economy, but arguably without much success.

The Focus of Politics

For virtually the entire history of modern democracy, politics has been organized around economic issues. Indeed, the central worry of many of the authors of the U.S. Constitution, the first system of broad democracy, was the threat that genuine democracy posed to property and its privileges. Previously, the economic conflict took a fairly specific substantive form in support for particular interests against others, such as landed estates or plantations versus manufacturing and urban interests. It eventually became a more abstract conflict between the state and the market (especially in Europe) or between business in general and other groups (especially in the United States). Postwar Japan has been an anomaly with its near consensus on mercantilist management of the economy for the benefit of industry and agriculture and its lack of an anti-statist party. Its peculiarly deep and lasting economic difficulties in the 1990s may derive primarily from its past mercantilist policies and the incapacity of its virtually hegemonic statist party to jettison those policies and reduce the role of the state in the economy.

The economic conflict had both a domestic and an international form: greater equality versus untrammeled liberty, communism versus the free market. The institutional form of the domestic issue was central planning versus laissez faire. The issue was never quite that simple, of course. The typical corporation wanted regulatory, subsidy, and tariff policies that would specifically benefit it against a fully free-wheeling market; industrial workers wanted job and wage protection; professional groups wanted restrictive licensing and regulation; farmers wanted subventions, some variant of price supports, and protection against imports of food; and all of these groups wanted more competition among the other groups. Ex- tant corporations may now have to endure more laissez faire than they ever wanted because upstart corporations often thrive in competition with older ones. The general movement toward laissez faire has not been equally quick in all of the Trilateral nations, but, in part because of the globalization of corporations and the loosening of trade restrictions, the trend is similar everywhere except perhaps Japan.

Now, however, we seem to be in an era in which the economic division is no longer crucial because we have reached near-consensus on how to handle the main economic problems: we generally handle them by letting them handle themselves. With the passing of the division over economics, there is no similarly cogent, simple dimension on which to organize political contests. We may have to deal with economic crises in the future, and we may disagree over how to do that, but we seem to have accepted (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the country) a basic reliance on the market and have increasingly given up on central planning to organize our economies.

The former left-right antagonism has been reduced to a very short spread from those who prefer more generous welfare programs to those who prefer somewhat less generous programs, and the difference between the two positions represents a very small fraction of national income. Radical reorganization of the economy to achieve some degree of equality or fairness is now virtually off the agenda. Perhaps because the causal relations are not well understood, the split over welfare policy often seems to be as much a matter of tone as of content. For many people it is a difference that is easily outweighed by formerly minor concerns such as items on the social agenda and regional preferences. The odd result is that politics may be noisier and seemingly more intense and even
bitter, but it is less important. The rise in volume may be a temporary, transitional phenomenon. We will not know for sure until we have lived with the politics of marginal issues for a longer period of time. Just possibly, people now have the social capital as well as the leisure time to organize intensively over marginal issues.

The European story is more sharply drawn than the North American because it hangs very much on the fact that socialist and even communist parties enjoyed wide support in Europe. These parties were somewhat tarnished by the economic failure of communism in the East. That failure was itself a consequence of government incapacity to plan and run an increasingly complex high-tech economy, in which entrepreneurial creativity seems to be crucially important. That part of an economy evidently cannot be run from the top down—how can one command young people to go out and create a new industry the way Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and others did?—but must be allowed to run on its own if it is to prosper. With their former central agendas essentially dead, European parties of the left may follow the lead of the American Democratic and Republican Parties to become politically vague and opportunistic. Such leaders as Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder may follow Clinton's path of unsystematic policy despite rankling older socialists.

Citizens

Citizens may be justified in lacking confidence in government's ability to handle many of today's important issues. Yet citizens who supposed that they could do better than their governors have voted in U.S. referenda to adopt policies with unexpected, grim consequences. In many cases of policy-making by referendum, citizens are arguably misled—or they mislead themselves—to believe the issues are far simpler than they are, and they vote simplistically. Consider two examples, one very briefly because it is funny and another at greater length because it is depressingly grotesque.

The two examples are peculiarly American; indeed, they fit the view of many people in other nations that American politics is uniquely bizarre.

California's Proposition 3 in 1998 was intended to correct a blunder that would prevent the state's delegates from being seated at national party conventions. An earlier law had opened the state's primaries, but the national parties sensibly do not permit delegates chosen in open (that is, nonparty) primaries to vote in their conventions. Unfortunately, the proposition to correct this blunder was too intricate for voters, who killed it, although it seems implausible that a majority of voters meant to deprive themselves of a voice in the national conventions that select presidential candidates. State officials now hope to thwart the supposedly popular will by distorting the process in ways that will let California delegates be seated in the conventions of the year 2000 (New York Times, November 15, 1998). At some level, this was not even a difficult choice, but it was complicated by a blunder in the writing of the proposition.

Let us now turn to a deplorable and very important example. According to Susan Estrich (1998), the California referendum that introduced the clumsy and destructive "three strikes and you're out" policy for dealing with repeat felons was grossly misconceived, yet it was enormously popular. That law requires mandatory longer prison sentences for felons with at least one prior conviction for a serious or violent felony. "The result of mandatory laws and punishment by slogan," Estrich observes, "is that we spend more and more money locking up less and less violent people." In an early case to which the new law was applied, a pizza thief was sentenced to a term of 25 years to life for his petty theft, with no possibility of parole before serving at least 20 years (New York Times, March 5, 1995).

The California law was a response to the kidnapping and murder of a young girl, Polly Klaas, by Richard Alan Davis, a recently released kidnapper. The public outcry over that murder led to a referendum requiring longer sentences for felons with at least one prior conviction for a serious or violent felony. Although Polly's father initially pushed that referendum, the text of the law that was put to voters was so stupid that Klaas withdrew his support. In particular, the law does not require that the new crime be violent, and it bars judges from assessing the dangerousness of the person committing the crime. The law lumps minor felons and kidnap-murderers together as people who should live out much of their lives in jail in order to protect society.

Ironically, Davis was originally serving a mandatory, maximum 16-year sentence for a prior kidnapping. He was released after only eight years under a California law that halved the sentences of all those convicted already in jail in order to make more room for newly convicted offenders, the largest number of whom were probably petty drug offenders. The law did not distinguish among convicts on the basis of the violence of their crimes (Massing 1998). Of course, the three-strikes law that was adopted by referendum increased the problem of prison overcrowding that prompted the release of Davis, which led to Polly's murder.

Governor George Pataki of New York has dealt with similar problems by sensibly releasing minor drug offenders to make more room for violent offenders. He has done this quietly, perhaps because punishment by slogan would trum

Although these two referendum issues were relatively simple, they were too complicated for voters to grasp. This is not surprising if we suppose, as rational choice theorists since Anthony Downs (1957) have done, that voters have little incentive to vote and therefore even less incentive to figure out how to vote their interests (Hardin forthcoming). As policies become more complex and the electorate grows, these considerations weigh more heavily, and they militate against citizens’ voting intelligently. Moreover, as issues become more diverse, there is little hope of parties’ aligning as coherently as in the formerly neat division between economically conservative and economically liberal, and the accountability of elected officials becomes increasingly murky. Governmental failures—as in many Great Society programs or the Vietnam War in the United States, elaborate welfare programs in Europe, and complicated supports for farmers almost everywhere—but, are relatively clear even to ill-informed voters. Hence, even if voters may not know enough to vote well, they may often have compelling reasons to think that government is incompetent.

If an individual behaved as incoherently as the electorate and legislature of California in the three-strikes example, we would probably deride that individual as hopelessly irrational. Here is a brutally brief summary: because a kidnapper was released after only eight years under one cavalierly ill-conceived law, a pizza thief was incarcerated for at least 20 years under an even more cavalierly ill-conceived law.

The problems of cyclic preferences analyzed by Kenneth Arrow (1963) and C. L. Dodgson may become increasingly common in an era when political issues are as diverse as they seem to be now. Such issues as the environment, safety, and the social agenda of the religious right do not fit easily into the agendas of traditional political parties. The association of environmental policy with the left, at least in the United States, happened for the accidental reason that the initial targets of environmental regulation were such corporations as electric utilities and steelmakers. But environmental protection is not inherently contrary to the interests of individuals at any point on the economic spectrum, and it is therefore natural that it should be championed by a separate party under Germany’s system of proportional representation rather than by the traditional parties of the left or right.

A similar story can be told of automotive safety equipment. While American auto makers long opposed the introduction of airbags, other, especially German and Swedish, manufacturers have made the same systems part of their sales appeal. It is very hard to see safety as a left-right issue. If anything, one might suppose that the less affluent, who are traditionally associated with the left, might be less inclined to favor such innovations than the more affluent. Indeed, as is also true of the less developed nations, the poor typically view environmental and safety regulations that raise costs to be less in their interests than do the well-off (Hardin 1999d).

Finally, the Republican Party’s embrace of the social agenda of the religious right in the United States might seem natural today, but it would have seemed unlikely to an earlier generation who regarded the Democratic Party as populist and the Republican Party as more libertarian. William Jennings Bryan, one of the most grotesque of the populist backers of an early part of the social agenda, was a Democrat who, admittedly, had long since outlived his intelligence when he argued the case against teaching evolution in Tennessee schools in the notorious Scopes Trial. Teddy Roosevelt, who was not quite a free-thinker and maybe not sophisticated enough to know whether he was a libertarian but who was still an individualist, was a Republican. The Republican Party may have mortgaged its soul to the religious right in order to win votes in the South after Lyndon Johnson, a southern Democrat, fought for civil rights.

In the face of such issues we will not be able to hold public officials accountable except for oddly assembled packages of positions on seemingly unrelated issues. As a result we may conclude that our officials are incompetent and therefore untrustworthy because they cannot handle such complexity. Admittedly, the politics of issue X are more perverse in the United States than in most nations, but the current agendas of all the Trilateral democracies are messy and no longer fit the left-right economic dimension of the past.

The success of today’s economic policy, if it holds, may mean that citizens have less reason to believe that parties capture their interests in a summary way. Hence, they have one less clue for deciding how to vote intelligently. It would be a saving grace if government policy mattered less now. If the economy can perform well without government tinkering, and if we do not face other major crises, perhaps government will seem less important than it once did. But even then its tasks may be so diverse and complex that it must often fail in dealing with them, so that citizens will continue to find it incompetent and will lack confidence in it.

In the most sanguine scenario, the government of the next decade or so might enjoy the credit, falsely, for economic performance for which it has little responsibility. Once the reasons for economic prosperity are more fully understood, however, national leaders may no longer be able to win credit for that prosperity, as Bill Clinton and some leaders of Japan’s Liberal Democratic Party in the 1980s have done. Leaders will then be judged by their supposed successes or failings on other issues.

What we face now is a transition to a way of aggregating the ill-articulated preferences of citizens who cannot take the time to understand the
issues being decided in their names well enough even to know their own preferences. We want representatives to represent us in the sense of serving our interests (Hardin forthcoming), but we want them to do that for us even in the face of the sad fact that we ourselves do not know what would serve our interests, and we might judge them harshly even for happening to serve us well merely because we do not realize that they are doing so.

Politicians

The two most popularly successful politicians of our time have been Helmut Kohl and Ronald Reagan. Reagan escaped much of the burden of complexity because he predated the events of 1989 and took partial credit for them. In keeping with traditional political divisions, Reagan stood with Margaret Thatcher for a smaller government role in the economy. In dealing with the more complex issues of his time, he was the Great Simplifier. If we could get rid of some of those polluting trees, we could reduce smog in Los Angeles; if we could get the welfare queens with their Cadillacs off the welfare rolls, we could balance the budget; and if we could end the threat of nuclear devastation with Star Wars, life would be lovely. Such ideas ranged from the silly to the fatuous, but they were wonderfully simple, and they helped give Ronald Reagan a virtually free ride as president.

Kohl was the one major leader who handled the events of 1989 well enough even to profit from them, while the response of George Bush, for example, bordered on stolid stupidity. Kohl’s ideas were as simple as Reagan’s, but they happened to be politically important and even profound rather than silly. They were to unify Germany and to unify Europe, two of the most constructive international political moves of the second half of the twentieth century and rivaled only by Mikhail Gorbachev’s ending of the Cold War and demolition of the Soviet empire. The details involved in carrying out Kohl’s ideas may be complicated and difficult, but what George Bush in his dreadful abuse of English called “the vision thing” was clear and simple in each of these ideas. The striking thing about Kohl’s success, which must be envied by leaders in other democratic nations, is that it was grounded in genuinely simple, focused ideas that deeply mattered. In this respect he was historically lucky. Few leaders face such simplicity and clarity of purpose. Those few have mostly been in times of war and massive economic failure. Kohl had the extraordinary luck to face two creative and positive goals, and he had the political sense to grasp them.

Barring such luck, politicians can no longer focus their campaigns on issues as simple as the economic division that served through the time of Reagan and Thatcher. Declining confidence in the capacity of elected officials to handle policies on diverse, complex issues coupled with the fact that these issues cannot be defined systematically as party issues, pro or con, may push candidates for public office in opposite directions. Many political aspirants may attempt to enhance their appeal by adhering more rigidly to policy commitments on well-defined issues, such as environmental protection or, in the United States, the social agenda of religious values. Other candidates may follow the lead of Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Gerhard Schröder and avoid association with very much at all. They can rise not merely above party; they can rise above issues. They can campaign on almost nothing beyond personal appeal and the promise that they will serve us well no matter what issues may arise.

In the United States Bill Clinton would have been the next most successful politician after Reagan if he had been able to control his adolescent libido. His brilliant political move was to relegate party definitions of positions to the past, blurring the old distinctions. Or maybe it was not a brilliant move, but the product of his character. Even here Reagan had led the way by running the largest peace-time deficits in American history, contrary to his supposedly deeply held Republican convictions. If it had not been for the related rise of the social agenda and its happenstance attachment to the Republican Party, Clinton might have sailed through his presidency with the ease displayed by Reagan. Despite his partial disgrace, however, the seemingly deliberate lack of much systematic content in his views may still provide the model for future politicians.

Candidates will not necessarily choose one of these strategies—a single-issue focus or generalized vagueness—but those who do are likely to enjoy greater success. It is clearly easier to get elected with a single-issue focus in the amorphous, decentralized U.S. system than in political systems in which national parties have more control over the agenda and candidates. Outside the United States, then, generalized vagueness may be the choice of national parties and successful candidates.

Concluding Remarks

Much of the apparent decline in confidence in government may simply express intolerance of ambiguity. The clarities of an earlier era are gone. People who do not like ambiguity may think they see politics clearly by focusing on a single, unambiguous issue and neglecting all the rest. Forget the impossible ghetto or immigrant community—save the whales or stop abortions. These citizens might still lose confidence in government if they believe that it does not share their justifiable concern with issue X. People who can handle ambiguity might be more comfortable with ill-defined candidates and parties that may do little more than look good.

Although the significance of current domestic issues in the Triilateral nations may be less than it once was, conflict over these issues may be more fractious—not necessarily more heated or deeper, but merely more fractious. Earlier problems may have been fundamentally more difficult, but at least it was relatively clear what the issues were.
that Japanese firms have been extraordinarily successful in world competition and probably do not need the protections their state still provides.

The remarkable intellectual feature of all of this is that the statist vision that once seemed to be good and even necessary now seems wrongheaded. Maybe we were not wrong before, but the preconditions of our earlier view no longer apply. The economy is finally close to free-standing. Although pockets of it always have been, these pockets were usually in minor industries, local areas, or innovative sectors. Now the economy is free-standing even in standard core activities. Perhaps even more important, business no longer seems to want to control government, which, in many nations, it has learned it does not need for its own management. Hence, the weakening of government does not matter as much as it once would have because we do not need strong government to resist the tendency of business to push for mercantilist advantage. The rise of statism was in part an antidote to politically ruthless business, but we may no longer need it. The dread of corporate power that was once commonplace (Dewey 1935) is virtually gone in the advanced economies.

The nearest equivalent to Madisonian theory in the twentieth century has been Austrian economics as represented by F. A. Hayek among others. Although theirs is ostensibly an economic theory, its most cogent insights are of broad social theory. An especially odd aspect of the current hegemony of Austrian and Madisonian views—even without those labels attached—is that they were almost purely theoretical: in the past there was no way to test them on the ground. But now they have been and are being tested, and they seem to be acquitting themselves very well. Madison himself was not willing to practice his theory once he was in office, and perhaps Hayek et al. would not have been either. But the monitory example of the Soviet world, admittedly a bad version of statist socialism, and the severely trammelled markets of the more prosperous West gave us a chance to see a crude, perhaps second-best test of the Austrian-Madisonian views.

This assessment, made in medias res, might turn out to be grossly optimistic, a mere extrapolation from the most positive aspects of current changes. But for the moment the Austrian and Madisonian schools seem to have the right vision. That is a stunning turn, perhaps even more stunning to those on the traditional left than to Millian libertarians. Its most impressive consequence is the reversal of the long historical trend toward increasing state hegemony over the economy and, potentially, all else when the state fell into bad hands, such as Stalin’s or Hitler’s. But for that very reason contemporary worries about declining state capacity may be grounded in understandings of the past that are irrelevant to the present and near future.

Outside the Trilateral democracies, many other nations have also backed away from socialist statism, both in the former communist bloc and in the Third World (except for the Islamic world, which almost everywhere remains mired in statist control of economic and social policy, typically at the hands of men utterly ignorant of any social or economic theory, or even devoid of ideas entirely). The development of the Third World now appears, retrospectively, to have been massively hampered by its rough adherence to socialist statism, which must rank among the great historical disasters for the harms it has brought. For example, Nehru’s autarkic statism doomed two generations of Indians to at best halting progress in overcoming massive poverty and illiteracy.