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Government Without Trust

Russell Hardin

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Government Without Trust

RUSSELL HARDIN

New York University

Over the past decade or two trust has become a major worry of many scholars and pundits.[1] The reason for their concern is the widely accepted view that trust and social capital are in decline in the United States and in several other advanced democracies, including Canada, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (but see Ladd 1996; Portes and Landolt 1996). Many scholars think that the trends in large survey data show both declining trust in government and in our fellow citizens as individuals. It would be perverse to find declining trust in governments of nations that were formerly fascist or otherwise autocratic and widely abusive of their own peoples, and indeed the trends in Italy, Germany, Japan, and East Europe do not mirror those in the North Atlantic community.

[1] This discussion draws on Hardin 2006b.

In this growing literature, there are three causal accounts of trust. Oddly, none of these can be made readily to apply to trust in institutions or government. All of them are grounded in the knowledge that one has about another person or actor, knowledge that suggests that the actor is trustworthy toward oneself with respect to some matter, either small or large. I can suppose you are trustworthy because you are committed to maintaining a trustworthy character; because you have a strong moral commitment to fulfilling trusts that you have taken on in some sense; or because you have a good reason to want to maintain a good relationship with me. The last of these implies that you encapsulate my interests to some extent; that is to say that you actually take on my interests as your own. The first two of these are unlikely to apply to institutions as actors because institutions are unlikely to have relevant character or moral commitments. Hence, in a discussion of trust and government, we must generally be concerned with trust as encapsulated interest.

Much of the current wave of work on trust in the advanced democratic societies has been directed at understanding apparent changes in trust over time (see, for example, Pharr and Putnam 2000; Sztompka 1999). The urge is to explain at the margin. In some ways, the work of John Locke, David Hume, Adam Smith, and James Madison, among the most important inventors of liberalism, is at the core of how society works rather than about marginal changes. They were concerned with the foundations of a working society with good government. The argument in contemporary debate is roughly as stated by Geraint Parry (1976, 134): “Political trust is an epiphenomenon of social trust [which is trust between individuals]. Where consensus is lacking, social trust and consequently political trust will be lacking and the political system will be less stable.” Although it is often asserted, this claim of the *spilling over* of trust at one level to trust at other levels is not well demonstrated or even much addressed empirically. A version of it was articulated by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1965, 228): “Belief in the benignity of one’s fellow citizen is directly related to one’s propensity to join with others in political activity. General social trust is translated into politically relevant trust.”

One can at least imagine that a populace among whom there is fairly strong distrust could nevertheless have confidence in their government or that people who are quite optimistic about each other would distrust their government. Indeed, the former seems to be the finding of Almond and Verba (1965, table on p. 229) from survey research in Germany and Italy. It would also seem to be the virtually self-evident fact of Madison and many of his associates that they trusted each other fairly extensively even while they constitutionally distrusted the government that they created and would soon staff. Indeed, one might well argue that wariness toward government could enhance the development of personal trust relationships, as in the world of Samizdat in the Soviet Union.

It is common to assert that citizens in a democracy should trust their government or that democratic government requires the trust of its citizens if it is to function well. Both of these claims are likely false for the simple reason that citizens generally cannot meaningfully be said to trust government. To go beyond the banal excesses of these claims, we might argue for two limited conclusions. First, citizens might actually constrain their government by distrusting it within reason. Second, by cooperating with their government — also within reason — citizens generally enhance the effectiveness of the government.

An elitist response to widespread distrust by the populace is to suppose that participation should not be encouraged so that the better educated and more politically active citizens, who tend to be much more trusting, run the government. (Mill ([1861] 1977) seems to have held a version of this view.) On Russell Neuman's (1986, 3-4) account, those who know enough to be able to judge much of the government trustworthy might be only about five percent of the American electorate. (The fraction must be higher in Israel and perhaps intermediate in several European nations.) Orlando Patterson (1999, 185) says that this small group, who are attentive and active, "accounts for the vibrancy and integrity of the democratic system in America." If so, a few activists go a long way toward making democracy be responsive to the much larger number of those who are distrusting. That would be a possible but also an odd result. It is also odd to think that Madison and his peers distrusted government in principle, while the masses today, who evidently distrust government, may well distrust it because it is elite. Hence, the elite salvation of government might in fact be the elite capture of government.

Parry (1976, 136) concludes sensibly that it is possible "that political trust is not so much rooted in social attitudes as consequent upon the effective performance of certain political institutions." Arguably, this view fits the contemporary American experience of apparently declining confidence in government (see various contributions to Pharr and Putnam 2000; Hardin 2002b). Perhaps it also fits recent changes in Eastern Europe, especially the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. During the decade after 1989 for example, Poles went from euphoria to distress as the effects of the transition were at first fairly harsh economically, and then back to optimism as the reforms, both political and economic, began to work positively (Sztompka 1999, 151-90). It should be no surprise that an initial transition from central to market allocation is costly in the short run because it undercuts systems that did produce and deliver goods, even if inefficiently. Getting new institutions for the market in place cannot be instantaneous. The change could also not seem entirely certain to work, so that people might tend to game the changes in the short term, making profits where they can. This fits Sztompka's and liberal theorists' concern with stable expectations. It takes time to develop stability and in the interim people have weak grounds for confidence that is grounded in expectations of reliability. Several of the eastern nations now have reason to harbor relatively optimistic expectations.

Extreme distrust in a society is said to favor hegemony (Dahl 1971, 150-2). One might sooner claim that hegemony, especially autocratic hegemony, favors extreme distrust between citizens even as a matter of deliberate policy in order to keep them from coalescing into oppositional groups. Such individual level distrust was a chronic symptom of Soviet life under Stalin. Distrust of government seems to be a better way to go. Parry says "it is still open for someone to hold, with Hume, that such distrust is an excellent working hypothesis in politics" (Parry 1976, 139). This appears to be Parry's own view, as suggested by his criticisms of the many authors who seem to deplore distrust in government. I think it is a correct working hypothesis, largely for Hume's reasons of risk aversion where the downside of misplaced trust is disastrous, while the loss from distrust cannot be anywhere near as disastrous. (For individual-level trust, this asymmetry is not likely to be true in general. Indeed, in a relatively decent society, distrust will likely cost more through lost opportunities than misplaced trust would cost from losses through deception [see further, Hardin 2002b, chapter 5].) In the past century, it seems likely that no polity believed in its government more than Soviet

citizens did for the decades of Stalin's rule and that no large industrial polity has been more abused by its government. For epistemological reasons, trust in government probably cannot be justified even when the government is a good one, but distrust can commonly be justified (Hardin 2006b, chap. 7).

Locke held 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 imployed for their good, and the preservation of their Property" (Locke [1690] 1988, §171, p. 381). Locke's vision has not held sway over either theorists or practitioners. But there are widely-held views 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. Arguably, James Madison and other federalists designed the US Constitution on the contrary principle that government should be distrusted and must therefore be constrained in many ways to prevent it from abusing citizens.

Against the Lockean thesis even at a conceptual level, it is relatively clear that, if it is not possible for most people to claim in a strong sense that they trust major organizations, then they also cannot claim in that sense to trust government. Most of us cannot sensibly claim to have the knowledge required for establishing the trustworthiness of government officials, agencies, or government generally. Therefore, we cannot trust them. We might learn specific bits of knowledge that seem sufficient to distrust particular officials and whole agencies (Montinola 2004), but we cannot so readily amass the body of knowledge necessary to trust very many, if any, of them.

Democratic Government

Let us begin with a background political theory, or rather a theory of how government works and how citizens react to it.[2] Hume's account is richly grounded in coordination and convention. He thinks that utility or interest is a major part of what motivates us in general and especially with respect to government. We might elevate this concern to the moral theory of utilitarianism, but Hume need not do so and does not do so in his explanatory accounts that are grounded in our psychological motivations. The result is a wonderfully spare baseline political theory. If it can plausibly work, no rich morality is necessary for explaining the partial success of government.

We may be uncomfortable to believe with Hobbes and Hume that our "allegiance" is merely acquiescence under some potential for duress if we do not acquiesce. But if we think how we would behave under radically different governments, we must recognize that acquiescence under duress would often be the only plausible story. It is probably the main story for the overwhelming bulk of all mankind throughout the history of civilization. Hume supposes that even tribal allegiance to a chieftain in the early stages of the rise of government was merely acquiescence.[3] Political theory is not a morally uplifting inquiry.

A grand claim in our time is that we need "civil society" in order to have successful liberal, democratic government. The presumed elements of civil society are varied, but they commonly include some variant of a normative consensus, the existence of intermediary groups that help to integrate individuals into the political order while helping them maintain their relatively particular identities, and — commonly within the

[2] See Hardin, *Hume*, conclusion of chapter 6.
[3] Hume, "Of the Original Contract," 469.

intermediary groups — opportunities for discourse over social and political issues. Let us unpack this assumption. First consider the logical flaw at its heart.

The Fallacy of Composition in Group Motivation

A common move in social explanation is to attribute to collectivities the motivations or capacities of individuals (see further Hardin 2001). Sometimes, this move is merely shorthand for the recognition that all the members of a group are of the same mind on some issue. For example, a group of anti-war marchers are of one mind with respect to the issue that gets them marching. There might be many who are along for the entertainment, to join a friend or spouse, or even to spy on the marchers, but the modal motivation of the individuals in the group might well be the motivation summarily attributed to the group. Very often, however, this move is wrong. It is an instance of the philosopher's fallacy of composition. We commit this fallacy whenever we suppose the characteristics of a group or set are the characteristics of the members of the group or set or vice versa.

It would be a trivially obvious fallacy of composition for a mathematician to assert that a set of triangles must be triangular, and one can hardly imagine making such a mistake. Yet social theorists and commentators regularly make analogs of just this mistake. One of the now best known fallacies of composition in social theory was the central assumption of the long tradition of interest group theory from Arthur Bentley (1908) to David Truman ([1954] 1971) and others before Mancur Olson's (1965) *Logic of Collective Action*. The invalid but implicit assumption was that, if we have a group-level interest in supplying ourselves some collective benefit, then we have an individual-level interest in contributing to the provision of the benefit.[4] In many familiar contexts even these group theorists must well have understood that this argument is fallacious. For example, they presumably knew and understood such slogans as "Let George do it." But as theorists, they fell victim to the commonsense fallacy of composition.

Discussions of democracy often seem to trade on the fallacy of composition at the heart of the older group theory, which was, after all, a theory of politics in a system of democratic pluralism. Implicit in the idea of democracy is that collective interests and wishes will be furthered by government to a substantial extent. In part, they are furthered simply through representative electoral bodies, which typically represent major groups and their interests. At a minimum, Robert Dahl (1956: 3) says, "democratic theory is concerned with processes by which ordinary citizens exert a relatively high degree of control over leaders." This is only part of the political story, because many other devices are available to citizens for accomplishing collective purposes and because representative systems introduce their own complications. All of these devices commonly involve aggregation problems that, themselves, might involve fallacies of composition, just as the very notion of majoritarian or democratic determination of political outcomes does.

Speaking of trust in a group or an institution or a government may similarly be a fallacy of composition. To make sense, trust must be applied at the level of individuals or intentional actors. Some organizations, such as say a sports team, might be very nearly intentional with respect to playing a game. But even the relatively disciplined

[4] When stated explicitly, as here, the assumption almost immediately seems wrong, but leaving it implicit has allowed many scholars and perhaps huge numbers of ordinary people to misunderstand the nature of collective action.

core members of the administration of the younger George Bush are not plausibly seen as single minded enough for us to speak of trusting the administration on anything other than maintenance of that administration in office through the re-election of Bush in 2004. Oddly, however, although we cannot trust an administration, on the standard accounts of trust we might be able to distrust it. For example, we can know that many of its goals are against our interests and therefore we know that the administration and its individual officers do not encapsulate our interests. This fact is fundamentally important in the history of liberal politics.

Liberal Distrust

The beginning of political and economic liberalism is distrust (see further Hardin 2002b). This claim is clearer for economic liberalism than for political liberalism because it is overtly foundational in economic liberalism, which was directed against the intrusions of the state in economic affairs.[5] Those intrusions typically had the obvious purpose of securing economic advantages for some by restricting opportunities for others, although some of them may have been merely capricious or ignorantly intended. The hostility to such economic intrusions led to the form of the American constitution with its principal purpose to restrict government and its actions in the economy or, in the lexicon of the time, in commerce. James Madison saw the creation of an open economy or untrammeled commerce as the main achievement of the new constitution.

That creation was essentially dependent on the simple Commerce Clause, which blocked actions by states to interfere — for the benefit of the states, their agents, or particular interests with preferred access to political power — with interstate commerce in the United States and to control international trade (Hardin 1999a, 241-8 and passim). Madison wanted to lodge commerce powers in a national government; and to block that government's abuse of its power, he wanted it to be generally weak. Indeed, the greatest strength of the national government in its beginnings was the power to reduce the power of the individual states, especially to block their intrusions into commerce. The massively powerful state we know today bears almost no resemblance to the government designed by Madison's generation, many of whom thought that the newly designed government would itself be far too powerful and therefore loathsome. As with the European Union today, the overall result initially was the reduction of the economic power of government on the whole, counting both state and national governments together. Commerce was freed from both of them and the result was a more dynamic economy with much freer flow of commerce.

Why distrust? Because the experiences both of England for centuries before the US constitution and of the thirteen states during their brief union under the Articles of Confederation were rent by government actions to control the economy in often destructive ways. Often there were identifiable beneficiaries of the controls. Hence, given power to intervene, one could be fairly sure that governments would often do so. The straightforward incentives of government agents were to arrange benefits for themselves through impositions on others. Such incentives are a recipe for distrust in the sense that those on the wrong end of the interventions could see that their own interests were sacrificed for others merely because someone had the power to intervene.

[5] This is a large part of Smith's concern in *The Wealth of Nations*.

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Even before Madison and his arguments for the US constitution, the recognition that governments were prone to abusing people in such ways was a central part of the development of liberal thought, especially in the work of Locke, Hume, and Smith. The original contributions of Madison to this long tradition were, first, to create a government that was hemmed in by itself so that it could not easily overreach its authority and, second, to give that government very little authority while also diminishing the authority of the individual states.

A side benefit of the new European state is that, in addition to bringing greater liberalism in commerce, it has also brought dramatically greater freedom to individuals in their activities and movements in Europe. This may be an especially clear case of the interaction between economic and political freedoms.

Perhaps the most theoretical among the opponents of European government have in mind not what is currently on the agenda but rather the possible logic of the longer run future of that government. For this concern, of course, the US experience is not promising for those who value relatively weak government. The US government is probably still weaker domestically than the governments of many other industrial states. Its seeming power to various critics may be more nearly the effect of its massive and innovative economy. But that government is almost inconceivably powerful in comparison to what Madison and the Philadelphia conventioneers thought they were creating. To win the argument over whether Montesquieu-like small republics or large and diverse states are the better defenders of liberties, both economic and political, probably requires a discussion of more than merely domestic arrangements. The question is whether life in North America would have been harsher if it had been carved into small republics. The view of early leaders of the European movement, such as Jean Monnet, was clearly that peace and prosperity depended on transcending small states' interests by merger of those states into a European supra-state. If, as seems likely, economic and political liberties interact so that securing either helps to secure the other, then the European Union may be generally liberating even in such ways as to undercut the current wave of quasi-communitarian sub-nationalist movements.

The typical citizen cannot know enough about government officials in general to be able to trust them on any of the three standard theories of trust, all of which depend on assessments of the trustworthiness of the agent to be trusted or distrusted (see, e.g., Hardin 2006a). That issue is compounded by the problem of power differentials that are an obstacle to trust. Large power differences undercut motivations of trustworthiness to act on behalf of another. For most of us most of the time, the most powerful agency we face is government, especially national government in a state with a powerful government. Liberal distrust of government is historically distrust of its use of power.

If we need or want to cooperate with someone or with a commercial entity, typically we have choices or options available. If my experience with you is not good or if your reputation is not good, I can most likely find someone else to deal with. We commonly do not have such choices with respect to government and its agents. To get choice, we might even have to emigrate. For example, if we earn a living in the United States we have to deal with the Internal Revenue Service or in the United Kingdom with Inland Revenue. The mere impossibility of switching to alternative partners gives those we deal with greater power over us than is suggested merely by their roles (Emerson 1962, 1964; Cook and Emerson 1978). The fact that we are forced to deal with this single agency for certain important matters means that it has power over us; we do not

have even vaguely similar power over it, so that we suffer from power dependence. This means that we cannot trust these powerful institutions or that at least the possibility of trusting them is severely undercut, especially in the encapsulated-interest sense of trust, because my power dependence undermines any hope I might have to get you reciprocally to cooperate with me (see Cook, Hardin, and Levi 2005, chapter 3; Farrell 2004).

This is not the theory of Madison, but it fits his theory. Had he articulated this problem, his own theory might have been better grounded, but he clearly enough saw the implications of governmental power, as anyone should be able to see them. In the power dependence account, however, the impossibility of trust is built into the unequal relationship and there is nothing we can do to make governmental agents entirely trustworthy with respect to their roles over us. Some of them may be imbued with the spirit of public service and they might, if we only knew it, be trustworthy in their dealings with us. Even these agents cannot be trusted by most citizens in the sense of any of the three standard theories of trust. For the encapsulated interest theory, they do not encapsulate our interests; they merely work according to the norms of their roles. They know little about any of us and we know as little about them. For the moral and dispositional accounts of trustworthiness, these agents could be relatively trustworthy, but you and I are not likely to be in a position to know that.

Because of the intensity of the debates at the time of the US Constitution and the high quality of the exegesis of opposing sides in the *Federalist Papers* and in the writings of the Anti-Federalists, it is possible that the American populace of that moment better understood the grounds of liberalism than they have at any other time, before or since. The exciting debates in East Europe for a few years beginning in 1989 may similarly have educated more people in these societies to a good understanding of these issues than in any other society since the era of the constitutional debates in the US.

One might suppose it would be good to have such understanding in other times as well. But that is a far too demanding hope, because the intensity of debates around 1787 and 1989 necessarily depended on the fact that the debates were potentially going to affect how we organized our national lives. In most eras, this is simply not true in any such significant way. In a sense therefore, the constitutional generation's wisdom and understanding dies with it. Indeed, it probably already dies in the politics of the new institutions once these are in place, as in a sad sense it did for Madison himself. After the new government was in place, Madison became foremost a pragmatic politician focused on the issues of the day and on the machinations that could best secure quotidian victories for his side. Several of the charismatic liberals of East Europe have suffered even sharper declines in their own apparent understandings once new or reformed institutions were put in place. For the peoples of East Europe, it is already politics as usual — even though there had not been such "usual" politics for generations before 1989.

What residue of the constitutional debates is left as a live political force or idea? In the US, perhaps primarily the aura of distrust in government. Any failure of major policies is almost instantly attributed to the incapacity of government to overcome petty interest-group or individual incentives. The Vietnam war, for example, demolished half a generation's expectations that government might be both benign and sensible. The partial failure of programs on poverty and racism are viewed cynically as

the naturally low expectation of government will and capacity, even though for a brief period government action on these problems was seen as admirable. Anthony King (2000) supposes that distrust of government is a peculiarly American phenomenon. If King is right, there may be no such aura of distrust of government in Europe, although change may be on the way. The increasing antipathy to the growth of the European Union in England, and in some other nations more sporadically, sounds very much like the American distrust of government.

In the United States, as in the United Kingdom, deep distrust of government has more consistently characterized conservative than liberal thought. Ironically, however, conservatives have been very quick to trumpet the merits and commitments of governments under Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, and George W. Bush. As the war in Iraq has seemingly demonstrated the relative incompetence of government to carry out its ambitious program there, conservatives have been slow to return to their usually critical stance. John Tierney (2004) asks, "How … did so many conservatives, who normally don't trust their government to run a public school down the street, come to believe that federal bureaucrats could transform an entire nation in the alien culture of the Middle East?"

Democracy in Decline?

The claim of communitarians and many others is that the people have changed and are therefore more skeptical of government because the social organization of our lives has changed (Etzioni and Diprete 1979). There may be some element of truth in this claim (but see Newton and Norris 2000). Others suppose that styles of politicians have changed, as in the shift from traditional campaigning to the marketing of candidates, especially via television (Manin 1997). I will focus on a quite 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 in the nature of public policy issues in recent decades. The first is a systemic big shock: the essential end, at least for the near term after Reagan and Thatcher, of the central focus on the management of the economy for production and distribution. The second change is the slow and steady rise during the post war era of often complex issues that are systematically unrelated to each other. Together, these two changes entail that the organization of politics along a roughly left-right economic dimension is no longer compelling. Those coming of political age over the past generation in the advanced democracies generally might not recognize the political organization that prevailed for the preceding 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 fundamental simplicity in the statement of the main political issue has passed, at least for now.

Perhaps the fundamental problem we face is therefore an ongoing redefinition of democratic politics and participation. Democracy has been recreated in new forms many times. When democracy shifted from small to larger societies it therefore had to become representative instead of direct democracy. Later, representative democracy shifted from the selection of representatives by lot, by random choice, as in Athens and Renaissance Venice, to elections. Choice by election has long since turned politicians into a professional class (Manin 1997; Calhoun [1853] 1992). At about the same time democracy shifted from more or less free-for-all elections to

party-dominated contests. There were reasons at the time to think each of these changes was somehow bad and tended toward less democracy. But at some level, it would be hard to say that any of these moves was a mistake because they were virtually necessitated by social circumstances. A nation of 200 million adults cannot be run the way a small city state, such as Athens or Venice, was run.

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 the competence of citizens 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. Yet citizens' reduced confidence might not be worrisome. 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. It was ideology, not science, that gave us confidence.

In the US, national party commitment to social libertarianism has also passed. One of the most dramatic changes in party definition in all of US history is suggested by the Republican Party's nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964 and its nomination of George W. Bush in 2000. Goldwater was perhaps the most firmly social libertarian candidate ever selected by any major party, although he was only more socially libertarian in degree than most twentieth-century Republican choices.[6] Bush is one of the most anti-libertarian major-party candidates in American history. He is possibly rivaled by William Jennings Bryan, who was also a determined Christian. In Tennessee's infamous Monkey trial Bryan argued the case for the prosecution of the high-school teacher, John Thomas Scopes, who had taught the theory of evolution. But Bryan was nominated by the Democratic Party, which — at least since the Civil War — has never been centrally concerned with social liberties. Similarly, Bush gave support to the radical religious forces in Dover, Pennsylvania, who wanted to teach so-called intelligent design as an alternative to Darwinian evolution.[7] The change from Goldwater to Bush must be utterly demoralizing to any social libertarian, whether in the tradition of John Stuart Mill or Immanuel Kant.

There appears to be much sharper ideological debate now when there is also broad agreement on what used to be the central divisive issue: letting the economy more or less run itself. In the US neither Democrats nor Republicans and in the UK neither Tories nor Labour seriously want to attempt central control over the economy. In earlier times, the party of business wanted mercantilist control of the economy on behalf of business with high tariffs to block competition from imports; today it wants something closer to laissez-faire, although particular industries and firms would be happy to receive government-mandated benefits so long as these do not go to everyone but only to, for example, steel or agricultural products. Earlier, the Democratic Party wanted far-reaching control over the economy; today it works for modest welfare programs that can be funded from the gains of a fairly free-wheeling economy. It is an interesting question why the American national parties have become so ideological just now when the old

[6] One might make a strong case for William Howard Taft.
[7] He urged that schools teach the controversy.

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basis of their ideological split is no longer an issue, but that is another story. The death of social libertarianism in the Republican Party is only part of that story.

The Focus of Politics

In 1910 the American Medical Association released the Flexner Report about medical education (Flexner 1910). Along the way, the report concluded that sometime about the beginning of the twentieth century, going to an American doctor was finally more likely to benefit someone who was ill than to harm them. (This poses an odd thought. George Washington and several British kings may have been killed or at least hastened to death by their doctors when they bled the great men to remove evil humors from their bodies. The people who did not have access to doctors in their time might, other things equal, have lived longer than those who did have access.)

The political scientist John Mueller (1999) argues that economic theory has reached a similar state as that of medicine in 1900. Going to an economist might now generally more often be helpful to governmental policymakers than harmful. The main advice of economists today in many nations is 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 government planning of economic growth and distribution that government escapes the burden of being judged for the success or failure of its economic planning. Of course, while this may be true at least in principle, the public may not get the point. Although economic performance was once the main dimension on which the major parties divided in many democratic societies, today it is increasingly a dimension on which they agree. They disagree about various welfare programs, but these are a small part of the national budget.

If Mueller is right, this sounds like a beneficial change. Governments are getting at least this main economic issue roughly right. But at the same time *many other political issues have changed* in ways that reduce confidence in government.

For most of the history of modern democracy, politics has been organized around economic issues. Indeed, the central worry of many of the authors of the first system of broad democracy, under the US Constitution, was the threat that genuine democracy posed to property and its privileges. In earlier periods the economic conflict took fairly specific substantive form in support for particular interests against others, such as landed estates and plantations against 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). Japan has been an anomaly with its near consensus on essentially mercantilist management of the economy for the benefit of industry and agriculture with no anti-statist party. Its peculiarly deep and lasting difficulties in the 1990s arguably derive primarily from its past mercantilist policies and the incapacity of its virtually hegemonic mercantilist-statist party to jettison those policies and reduce the role of the state in running the economy.

The economic conflict had 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, because, for example, a 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 everywhere have wanted

subventions, some variant of price supports, and protection against imports of food; and all of these groups have often wanted more competition among the other groups. Extant corporations may now have become more laissez faire than they ever would have wanted, because upstart corporations often thrive in competition with the older ones. The general movement to increased laissez faire has not been equally quick in all of the advanced democracies, but the trend is generally similar in all but perhaps Japan, in part because of globalization of firms and loosening of trade restrictions.

Now 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 on economics, there is no similarly cogent simple dimension on which to organize the contest for political leadership. We may have to deal with economic crises in the future and we may disagree on how to do that. But, to a lesser extent in some of the advanced democracies than in others, we seem to have accepted basic reliance on the market and have increasingly given up on central planning to organize our economic prospects.

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 in the two positions is 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. Often, perhaps because the causal relations are not well understood, the split on welfare policy seems to be as much a matter of tone as of content. For many people, it is a difference that is easily trumped by formerly minor concerns such as items in 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 first live with politics over marginal issues for a longer period. Just possibly, people increasingly have the social capital as well as the leisure time to organize intensely on marginal issues.

The European story is somewhat more sharply drawn than the North American because it hangs very much on the fact that there had been socialist and even communist parties in Europe. These were partly 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 well by central authorities; it must be allowed to run on its own if it is to prosper. How can one tell teenagers to go out and create a new industry as Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and others did? With their former central agendas essentially dead, the European parties of the left may follow the lead of the American Democratic and Republican Parties and become politically vague and opportunistic rather than clearly directed. Such leaders as Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder personally have followed Clinton's path of unsystematic policy, often at the cost of rankling the older socialists of their parties.

Citizens

Two oddly contradictory claims are made of citizens' actual trust in government. They are said not to trust government in general but typically to trust the individual agents of government with whom they personally have dealings (Klein 1994).

Contrariwise, they are said to think all politicians are scoundrels but nevertheless to think government works well for them. The latter view fits with Hume's ([1742] 1985) point that we design government to work even if it is staffed by knaves. The former fits any conception of trust that holds that it depends on ongoing relationships. These two contradictory claims are largely subjective, and the survey data that lie behind them suffer from a weakness that is probably inherent in survey research on relatively complex issues. We would first have to explain how they should think of trust or we would have to ask relatively complex questions that, in sum, could get to a stable and meaningful notion of trust. As in the problem of assessing whether there has been a decline in trust over the past several decades, these claims about citizen trust of government are severely under-articulated.

The relation of citizens to government in general is not a relation of trust or distrust. At best, much of the time it is a relationship of inductive expectations and acquiescence (Hardin 1999a). Obviously, what citizens must want of government is that it be trustworthy — even though citizens cannot know that it is, at least not in a strong enough sense for them to trust it. In a democracy, citizens can vote from their limited knowledge of government and can therefore affect what it does. Such control can be important even without citizen trust in government.

In the end, trust may still be crucial to the success of government, but in one way that has been discussed almost not at all, and in another way that has not been a main focus in the trust-and-government literature. First, trust *within* the government might be far more important in government by junta than in democratic government. Second, those most attentive to government will also be those most likely to know enough about governmental actions and structures to know whether the government and 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 fundamentally 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.

Unfortunately, if this is the role of trust in supporting government, there is little reason to think that the interests of those knowledgeable enough about certain agents or agencies of government to judge them trustworthy would correlate with the interests of most citizens. Trust within the government might make cooperative policy efforts easier, but that is independent of citizen trust of government, and the efforts it might make easier could be awful for most citizens.

Citizens perhaps justifiably lack confidence in government to handle many of the issues of importance today. Yet, citizens who supposed they could do things better than their governors did them have voted, in US referendums, to adopt policies with unexpectedly grim consequences. In many cases of policymaking by referendum, arguably the citizenry are misled or they mislead themselves to believe the issues are far simpler than they are, and they vote simplistically. In one case, the California referendum that brought in the clumsy and finally very destructive three-strikes policy on dealing with repeat felons was grossly misconceived, and 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," Susan Estrich (1998, 74) observes, "is that we spend more and more money locking up less and less violent people."

On the relatively technical issues here we should be less confident of the people than of the government. Referendum issues, though often relatively simple, are too hard for voters to understand them well. This is not surprising if we suppose, as rational choice theorists since Anthony Downs (1957) do, that voters have little incentive to vote and therefore even less incentive to understand how to vote their interests (Hardin 2006a). As the complexity of policy increases, and as the electorate grows larger, these considerations weigh more heavily and militate against the expectation that the electorate will vote intelligently. Moreover, as issues become in many ways more diverse, so that there is little hope of a coherent party alignment as in the formerly neat division from economically conservative to economically liberal, the accountability of elected officials becomes increasingly murky. Governmental failures — as in many goals of the Great Society programs or in the Vietnam War in the United States, elaborate welfare programs in Europe, and complicated supports for farmers almost everywhere — however, are relatively clear even to generally ill-informed voters. Hence, voters may not know enough to vote well but they may often have compelling reason to think government is incompetent.

Such issues as the environment, automobile safety, and the social agenda of the religious right do not fit easily with the traditional political parties. The association of environmental policy with the left, at least in the United States, has followed for the accidental reason that the initial targets of environmental regulation were such corporations as electrical utilities, oil refineries, auto-makers, and big steel. But there is nothing inherent in the issue of environmental protection that is contrary to the interests of individuals from all points on the economic spectrum. It is natural therefore that environmental issues are attached to a separate party in the proportional representation system of Germany rather than to the traditional left or right parties.

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

Finally, the attachment of the social agenda of the religious right to the Republican Party in the United States might seem natural today. But it would have seemed quite unlikely to an earlier generation who more readily saw the Democratic Party as populist and the Republican Party as far more nearly libertarian. William Jennings Bryan, one of the most grotesque of the populist backers of an early version of the social agenda, was a Democrat who, admittedly, had long since outlived his intelligence before he participated in the notorious Scopes monkey Trial. Teddy Roosevelt, not quite a free-thinker and not likely sophisticated enough to know whether he was a libertarian, but still an individualist, was a Republican. The Republican Party may have mortgaged its soul to the religious right in order to gain political success in

the South after Lyndon Johnson, a southern Democrat, fought for civil rights for black Americans.

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

The success of economic policy, if it holds for much longer, may mean that citizens have less reason to suppose parties capture their interests in a summary way. Hence, they have one less clue on how to vote intelligently. It would be a saving grace if governmental policy matters less now than it once seemed to matter. If the economy can perform well without supposedly wise tinkering by government, 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 so complex that it must typically often fail in them, so that citizens continue to find it incompetent and, therefore, lack confidence in it. In the most sanguine scenario, governments of the next decade or so might enjoy the credit, falsely, for economic performance for which they have 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 a string of leaders of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party have done. Leaders would 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 those who cannot take the time to understand the issues being decided in their names well enough even to know their own preferences. We would want representatives to represent us in the sense of serving our interests (Hardin 2000). But we must want them to do that for us even in the face of the sad fact that we do not know what would serve our interests and we might judge our representatives harshly even for happening to serve us well merely because we do not understand that they do so.

Politicians

The two most successful politicians of recent times have been Helmut Kohl and Ronald Reagan. Reagan escaped much of the burden of complexity because he pre-dated the events of 1989 and partly took credit for them. In keeping with traditional political divisions, Reagan stood with Margaret Thatcher for a lesser role for government 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 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 to give Ronald Reagan a virtually free ride on the presidency.

Kohl was the one major leader who handled the events of 1989 well enough even to gain from them, while the response of, for example, the elder George Bush bordered on stolid irrelevance. 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 latter half of the twentieth century — rivaled only by Mikhail Gorbachev's ending of the Cold War and his demolition of the Soviet empire. The details involved in working out Kohl's ideas may be complicated and difficult, but what the first George Bush, in his often comic 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 mostly have been in times of war and massive economic failure. Kohl had the extraordinary luck to come to face two essentially creative and positive goals and he had the political sense to grasp them.[8]

Barring such luck as Kohl had, 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 failure of systematic party definitions of those issues, may push candidates for public office in essentially opposite directions. Many may attempt to strengthen their appeal by more rigidly adhering to policy commitments on well-defined issues, such as environmental issues or the issues of the social agenda of religious values in the United States. Others may follow the lead of Bill Clinton, Tony Blair, and Gerhard Schroeder and avoid association with very much at all. They can not merely rise above party; they can rise above issues. In our era of audience democracy (Manin 1997), they can campaign on almost nothing beyond personal appeal and the promise that they will serve us well no matter what the issues are.

In the United States, the next most successful politician after Reagan would have been Bill Clinton, if he had been able to control the adolescence of his libido. His brilliant political move was to put party definition of positions in the past, to blur the old distinctions. Or maybe it was not a brilliant move but merely the product of his character. Even here, Reagan had led the way by running the largest deficits in peace-time 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 extreme wing of the Republican Party, Clinton might have ridden 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 be the model for many successful politicians for the next generation.

We need not suppose that candidates will now necessarily choose one of these strategies — focusing on the social agenda or practicing generalized vagueness — but only that those who do follow these strategies will have a greater tendency to get elected. It is clearly easier to go with a social-agenda focus in the amorphous, decentralized US system than in systems in which national parties are more substantially in control of the agenda and of candidates. Hence, in the latter, generalized vagueness may be the choice of national parties and successful candidates.

Concluding Remarks

In general, it appears to be difficult for citizens to judge their governments as

[8] Unfortunately for his long-term reputation, he did not have the political sense to avoid corruption.

trustworthy — at best they can judge that a government seems to be competent and that it produces apparently good outcomes (Hardin 2002b, chapter 7; Ullmann-Margalit 2004). Hence, citizens can be more or less confident in government. Although they cannot be said to trust in any strong sense of that word, as spelled out in the three standard conceptions of trust, they can develop generalized distrust in response to seeming failures (Montinola 2004). At that point, they could say that government is either incompetent or badly motivated, but they might not have evidence to decide which of these is the problem. (It would be seen as badly motivated if, for example, its policy was thought to be a response to payoffs or to special interests.) If either incompetence or bad motivation is true of some area of government regulatory effort, however, citizens can distrust the government with respect to that area. In such contexts distrust and trust are asymmetric. Mere confidence, however, may not be as sharply asymmetric because it can be based simply on evidence of how well government does its jobs without any real understanding of how it does the job within its agencies.

If government handles crises and disasters well, it can be given credit for its seeming competence even while it is held accountable for failing to prevent the crisis or disaster. For example, the US government received widespread praise for its initial handling of the Al Qaeda terrorist organization after September 11 but has been heavily criticized for its prior failures to follow up leads that might have prevented the disastrous attacks that day and for deflecting its purpose into the Iraq quagmire. Similarly, urban citizens can do little more than react to government failures that might set up disasters and then react to its immediate handling of the crisis. Evidence that it has failed can often be glaring and inescapable and can lead to distrust. Lack of evidence of government failures, however, is not sufficient to conclude in favor of generalized trust in government in many regulatory areas.

A significant part of the cause of apparently declining confidence in government may simply be an expression of intolerance of ambiguity.[9] The clarities of an earlier era are gone. People who do not like ambiguity may trick themselves into seeing political issues as clear by simply focusing on a single clear issue and neglecting the large array of other issues. Forget the impossible ghetto or immigrant community; save whales or stop abortions. They might still lose confidence in government because they might suppose government does not share their correct concern with issue X. Those who can handle ambiguity easily might be comfortable with ill-defined candidates and parties that may do little more than look good.

The significance of contemporary domestic political issues in the advanced democracies may be less than it once was and yet conflict over current issues may be more fractious — not necessarily more heated or deeper but merely more fractious. Oddly, the earlier problems may have been fundamentally more difficult, but it was relatively clear what the issues were.

In 1840 John Stuart Mill ([1840] 1977, 175) wrote that America had few outstanding public leaders for the enviable reason that “America needs very little government.” He wrote before the Civil War, two world wars, the Great Depression, and the Cold War, when a bit of government might have been useful. But perhaps now, nearly two centuries later, his quip may begin to apply not only to America but also to other advanced democratic nations. If there had been far less government during the younger Bush’s first six years, America and the World would be better places. We may

[9] Extreme religious views are commonly associated with intolerance of ambiguity.

begin to think of memorable public leaders not so much as people who accomplished anything for us but as people who could maintain themselves in office with great success. And we may praise them, as people do Clinton today, not for their policy accomplishments but for their talents in mastering their roles. We will lack confidence in government, but if we are lucky it will not matter that government is incompetent to handle our marginal but complex issues very well.

The US Constitution, as designed principally by James Madison, was intended to get in the way of government, not to enable government. Because of the federal nature of the nation it was to create, the government it was especially designed to block was state government, because the often petty state governments stood in the way of economic life and development at the end of the eighteenth century (see further, Hardin 1999a, especially chapter 3). What Madison ideally wanted, however, has in some respects come to pass only recently with the slow building down of the statist regime that was put in place in the 1930s, largely to deal with economic failure and the over-reaching power of business. If the social agenda crowd, the mercantilist-statist right, or the socialist-statist left were to win control of government, a Madisonian would think that a disaster. In Madison's view, the people need government for order but they do not need it to run their lives, as any of these groups would want it to do.

We may finally be in an era when government can be incompetent to manage many of its problems and *it does not matter* very much. It does not matter just so long as there are no massive crises to manage and the government does not go back to Hamiltonian desires for mercantilist management of industry or socialist desires for central planning. What we have done to a large extent is back down from 1930s statism in the United States, from Bismarckian and socialist statism in Europe, and from mercantilist statism in Japan.[10] The move in much of Europe and Japan may be slower than in the United States and, indeed, Japan continues to be remarkably mercantilist despite the fact that Japanese firms have been extraordinarily successful in world competition and probably do not need the protections the state still enforces.

The remarkable feature of all of this intellectually is that the former statist vision seemed to be very good and even necessary. Now it seems wrong-headed. Maybe the reason for the change of view is not that we were wrong before but that conditions have changed out from under the earlier view. The economy is finally close to free-standing, as pockets of it always have been. But the free-standing pockets in the past were usually in minor industries and, often, local areas, or in innovative activities. Now it 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 it once might have because we do not need such strong government

[10] Outside the advanced democracies, many other nations have also backed down from socialist-communist statism, both in the former Communist bloc and in the Third World (except for the Arab-Islamic world, which is almost everywhere still mired in statist control of economic and social policy, typically under the control 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 adherence, roughly, to socialist-statism. For example, Jawaharlal Nehru's autarkic statism doomed two generations of Indians to at best halting progress in overcoming massive poverty and illiteracy.

to stand against business tendencies to push for mercantilist advantage. In some ways, the rise of statism was an antidote to politically ruthless business and we may no longer need it. The dread of corporate power that was once commonplace (Dewey [1935] 1987) is virtually past in the advanced economies.

The nearest equivalent to Madisonian theory in the twentieth century has been Austrian economics, as represented by F. A. Hayek (1960) and others. Theirs is ostensibly an economic theory, but in fact its most cogent insights are essentially of broad social theory. An especially odd aspect of the current hegemony of Austrian and Madisonian views, even if without those labels attached, is that the Austrian and Madisonian views were almost purely theoretical — there was no way to test them on the ground. But now they have been and are being tested and they seem to be doing very well. Madison himself was not willing to practice his theory once he got in office and perhaps Hayek et al. would not have been either. But the comparison of the Soviet world, admittedly a bad version of socialist statism, and the severely trammeled markets of the more prosperous West give us a chance to see a crude, perhaps second-best test of the Austrian-Madisonian views played out. China and India may now be providing self-contained evidence within single nations that these views are roughly right.

This assessment, made in medias res, might turn out to be grossly optimistic, a mere extrapolation from the most constructive parts of current changes. But for the moment, the Austrian school and Madison seem to have the right vision. That is a stunning turn, perhaps more stunning to those on the traditional left than to Millian libertarians. Its most impressive implication is the reversal of the long historical trend toward the increasing hegemony of the state 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, the contemporary worries about declining state capacity may be a concern grounded in understandings of the past that may be irrelevant to the present and near future. Declining confidence in government may well be evidence of a trend toward the declining role of government in certain activities that it was not wise enough to handle anyway, often because incumbents could gain opportunistic short-run advantage from manipulating the economy. For the time being, Madison and the Austrians and the theory of liberal distrust may return to favor and we may welcome distrust in government.

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