
Why Trust Matters

DECLINING POLITICAL TRUST AND THE
DEMISE OF AMERICAN LIBERALISM

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CHAPTER ONE

Why Political Trust Matters

Government cannot solve our problems, it cannot set our goals, it cannot define our vision. Government cannot eliminate poverty or provide a bountiful economy or reduce inflation or save our cities or cure illiteracy or provide energy. And government cannot mandate goodness.

—Jimmy Carter, State of the Union Address, 1978

Government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.

—Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address, 1981

The era of big government is over.

—Bill Clinton, State of the Union Address, 1995

SINCE THE LATE 1960s and especially since Watergate, not even those who head the federal government have had much good to say about it. Democrats like Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton expressed very little confidence in government, while Republicans like Ronald Reagan expressed outright contempt. Without doubt, their rhetoric reflects the public's antipathy toward government, but it also guarantees that such antipathy will continue. While scholars and commentators have focused considerable attention on declining political trust, they have focused much less on if, why, and in what concrete ways the decline matters. In fact, declining political trust has had such profound effects on American politics that, in many ways, it has defined American political landscape over the last several decades.

Political candidates have capitalized on this distrust, even catapulting themselves into the White House with it. In September 2000, George W. Bush's campaign was in terrible shape. Al Gore emerged from the Democratic convention like a house afire. His vice presidential selection of Senator Joseph Lieberman, a pro-business Democrat and the first Jewish candidate for national office, won high praise. The party successfully reengaged key elements of the Democratic coalition, namely women, union members, and racial minorities. And, perhaps most importantly, Gore finally seemed to find his voice during his well-received acceptance speech. Whereas Gore had consistently trailed Bush by up to 15 points in public opinion polls in the days before the Democratic convention, he roared out of it leading by 10.

While Gore was catching fire, Bush was losing it. The perception that Bush was intellectually lazy at best and not smart enough to be president at worst started to take its toll. Each campaign stop seemingly brought another gaffe, whether it was confusing billions with trillions in explaining how he would spend the budget surplus, or getting caught by a live microphone using vulgar language to describe *New York Times* reporter Adam Clymer.

Bush's campaign operatives were not doing much better. During the second week in September, the press hammered the campaign for allegedly inserting a subliminal message into a television advertisement. In what would become known as the "Rats" ad, the word "bureaucrats" tumbled from the top of the screen to the bottom, and, for less than a half second, the word "Rats" was frozen in the bottom corner. Democratic political operatives had a field day charging the Bush team with unethical conduct. Worse yet, at a press event in Milwaukee where Bush attempted to put the "Rats" flap behind him, he repeatedly mispronounced *subliminal* as "subliminable," casting further doubt on his intelligence.

By early October, however, Bush had righted the ship: By doing better than expected in the first presidential debate on October 3, Bush convinced many Americans that he belonged on the same stage as Gore. Indeed, according to data collected by political scientist James Stimson, Bush led Gore in the polls every day but one from October 5 through Election Day.¹

In addition to marking a decisive turn in the polls, October 5 is significant for another reason. It was the day that the Bush campaign debuted a very effective political advertisement. In this 60-second spot, Bush in effect made the claim that huge philosophical differences distinguished him from Gore. Bush's tagline summed up the contrast: "He [Al Gore] trusts government. I trust you." The campaign hierarchy judged the ad so effective that they ran it in each of the battleground states for the duration of the campaign and inserted the charge in numerous other ads that ran in the campaign's final month. In addition, Bush used this turn of phrase in all three presidential debates, and he made it a regular feature of his stump speech as well.²

Bush's tagging of Gore with the government was effective because so few people trust it. In 2000, 60 percent of Americans trusted the government to do what was right only "some of the time" or "never"; 60 percent thought it wasted "a lot" of money. Nearly twice as many thought it was run for a few big interests looking out for themselves as thought it was run for the benefit of all Americans.³ In short, people viewed the government as unethical, inefficient, wasteful, and unrepresentative. In this environment, Bush could increase his support by framing people's choice for

president as one between someone who trusts the people and someone who trusts the government.

Recent history supports running a presidential campaign against Washington. Since 1968, being identified with Washington has become political poison. The incumbent party has won only four of the last nine presidential elections, the worst showing for the ins since the days of Andrew Jackson. The only successful nonincumbent presidential candidate with recent Washington ties was George H. W. Bush, and he benefited handsomely from his opponent, Michael Dukakis, running perhaps the worst campaign of the last half-century.⁴ Vice presidents and former vice presidents such as Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, and Al Gore have been consistent losers, and senators like George McGovern and Bob Dole have fared no better. Indeed, prior to Bush in 1988, the last federal officeholder to win the White House was Senator John F. Kennedy in 1960.⁵ In contrast to much of American political history, it helps to be a former governor these days, as were Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush. When it comes to choosing a president, Americans' lack of trust in the federal government in a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate political culture matters profoundly.

POLITICAL TRUST AND PUBLIC POLICY

Even more importantly, declining political trust has played the central role in the demise of progressive public policy in the United States over the last several decades. My claim defies the conventional wisdom. In explaining why public policy has grown more conservative since the 1960s, pundits and political scientists alike tend to identify a conservative turn in public opinion as the cause. However, little evidence exists to support this explanation. There remains constant and widespread support for big government in areas where most Americans benefit. For example, almost everyone wants to maintain or increase investment in the vast majority of federal programs, such as Medicare, Social Security, education, highways, environmental protection, and the like. Had public opinion truly grown more conservative, support for these initiatives would have decreased because conservatives have a philosophical aversion to government.

Contemporary political rhetoric fuels this misunderstanding. By railing against "big government" in general, conservative and moderate politicians imply that people want less government across the board. However, public opposition to government is focused entirely on programs that require political majorities to make sacrifices for political minorities, such as antipoverty and race-targeted initiatives. In short, Americans continue to

support big government when they benefit from it, but they want limited government when they are asked to make sacrifices.

The massive deterioration in political trust that has occurred since the 1960s explains this disjuncture. Declining trust should not affect support for all things that government does. Indeed, people do not need to trust the government much when they benefit from it. Instead, people need to trust the government when they pay the costs but do not receive the benefits, which is exactly what antipoverty and race-targeted programs require of most Americans. When government programs require people to make sacrifices, they need to trust that the result will be a better future for everyone. Absent that trust, people will deem such sacrifices as unfair, even punitive, and, thus, will not support the programs that require them.

Judging by their anti-Washington media campaigns, politicians understand the power of political distrust. They have learned that among the surest ways to rally public opposition to a proposed government-sponsored initiative is to remind ordinary Americans that the federal government will be involved. This tactic proved effective during the health care reform debate of the early 1990s. When Bill Clinton ran for president in 1992, he promised to provide health insurance to all Americans, including the more than 30 million uninsured. With so many already lacking insurance and tens of millions of others struggling to afford it, the issue seemed electorally promising. Indeed, the top of Clinton's campaign hierarchy, James Carville and Paul Begala, knew its potential first hand. They had run Harris Wofford's (D-Pa.) successful U.S. Senate bid to fill John Heinz's seat after his untimely death in 1991. Although no one gave the politically obscure Wofford, the Pennsylvania labor secretary and former Bryn Mawr College president, much of a chance, he erased a 55-point deficit in the polls to defeat former two term Pennsylvania governor and sitting U.S. attorney general, Dick Thornburgh. Most observers believe Wofford won largely on the strength of his health care reform promise. In 1992, a relatively obscure Arkansas governor, Bill Clinton, enjoyed similar success.

Things changed markedly for Clinton over the next two years as he attempted to move health care reform from campaign promise to law. Although the secret meetings of the Health Care Task Force, the complexity of the final proposal, and the negative feelings that most Americans had about Hillary Clinton, the Task Force's leader, damaged the reform effort (see Johnson and Broder 1996; Skocpol 1996), the biggest problem was Americans' negative feelings toward government. At the time, only about 20 percent of Americans thought they could trust the government in Washington to do what was right "just about always" or even "most of the time," the lowest reading since polling organizations started asking the question in the 1950s. Moreover, 75 percent thought the government was run for a few big interests looking out for themselves. Such an opinion environment

makes it extraordinarily difficult for leaders to marshal support for a large federally administered program that might require many people to make sacrifices for others. Most Americans simply do not think government is capable of doing the job well enough or fairly enough to help the less well off at the same time it protects the interests of the better off.⁶

Things used to be much different. When political trust was high in the 1960s, John F. Kennedy promised Americans a New Frontier, and Lyndon Johnson promised a Great Society. Both trumpeted programs designed to aid historically discriminated-against groups and those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. With political trust today in much lower reserve, only the most resolute liberals even talk much about race and poverty, much less enact new policies to confront these problems.⁷ Instead, most left-of-center politicians search for a "third way" by splitting the difference between conservative and liberal ideas. They try to avoid using racial terms or making references to racialized programs, such as welfare and food stamps (Gilens 1999).

Centrists like Clinton and Gore have replaced liberals like Kennedy and Johnson because most Americans, whether conservative or liberal, do not trust the delivery system for most progressive public policy. Even if people support progressive policy goals, they do not support the policies themselves because they do not believe that the government is capable of bringing about desired outcomes. While almost all Americans would like to eradicate poverty and racial discrimination, most simply do not think the federal government is up to the task. As evidence, a 1995 poll by the *Washington Post*, Harvard University, and the Kaiser Family Foundation found that among those who were not willing to have "the federal government spend more to help low-income minorities," fully 59 percent said their opposition was based on the belief that "the federal government [could] not do the job right." In contrast, only 25 percent voiced a principled objection to spending in this policy area.⁸ Given such a dim view of the government's ability to solve problems, it should be no surprise that Republicans have dominated the last 35 years in American politics, which has been mostly characterized by low levels of public trust in government.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book is about the importance of political trust, a concept that has caused a great deal of scholarly debate about both its definition and its measurement. In chapter 2, I define political trust and detail scholarly concerns about its measurement. I review the scholarly and political explanations for fluctuations in political trust over time, and augment this understanding of why trust changes using a priming-based theory based on

post-September 11 data. Next, I track the pattern of trust's decay since the 1960s, and discuss the theoretical and normative importance of a lack of political trust in a democratic society.

I argue that declining political trust explains why the center in American politics has shifted to the right in recent decades. Although increasing conservatism is an alternative explanation, I demonstrate in chapter 3 that conservatism, by any number of measures, has remained constant. It, therefore, cannot explain why the policy agenda has become so much more conservative over this same period. Only increasing political distrust can. In this chapter, I detail an individual-level theory about the importance of political trust in generating support for programs that require either perceived sacrifice or entail some perceived risk, exactly the types of programs that have seen a deterioration in public support over time. In addition, I show that, in the aggregate, the pattern of policy liberalism implemented by the federal government follows the pattern of political trust over time. When the public is more trustful, the government responds with more liberal public policy, and when the public is more distrustful, the government responds with more conservative public policy. I also demonstrate that political trust is a more compelling aggregate-level explanation for variation in policy liberalism than other competing factors, most notably policy mood.

Chapter 4 details the changing causal dynamic between political trust at the individual level and support for specific public policies. My work challenges the scholarly conventional wisdom about the causal importance of trust. Most scholars have treated political trust as a dependent variable (e.g. Citrin 1974; Miller 1974a, 1974b), attempting to explain why it changes. While I demonstrate that this approach was appropriate in the 1970s, the contemporary information environment has transformed political trust into a potent causal force.

The next three chapters provide individual-level evidence that declining political trust undermines support for a range of progressive public policies. In chapter 5, I demonstrate that political trust helps bridge the divide in public opinion between distributive and redistributive issues. Americans have always been more supportive of spending for programs that benefit them directly, such as spending on highways, than programs for which most make sacrifices, such as spending on welfare or food stamps (Free and Cantril 1967). In fact, this gap has grown larger over the last 30 years. The reason is the decline in political trust. While support for distributive spending has remained constant, support for redistributive spending has ebbed and flowed with increases and decreases in political trust. My theory suggests that trust should be influential only when a program requires sacrifice or risk, which are both characteristics of redistributive spending.

Chapter 6 extends the theory to include racial policy. For whites, race-targeted policies require at least perceived sacrifices for a somewhat intangible outcome, greater racial equality. Hence whites should need to trust the government to support race-targeted programs. In fact, I demonstrate that this is the case. The results in this chapter have strong normative implications as well. Why do white Americans support racial equality in principle but not the programs designed to make equality a reality? The main reason is that they do not trust the government to administer race-targeted programs either well or fairly.

In chapter 7, I demonstrate political trust's importance in understanding the failure of the Clinton health care reform plan and the administration's subsequent turn to the right. While opponents attacked the plan in several different ways, I show that antigovernment appeals were decisive in explaining its defeat. Although trust in government had no bearing on support either before or after 1994, opponents made it a critically important component in 1994 by framing the debate in terms of sacrifice and clumsy government bureaucracy. Since trust reached its survey era low during 1994, the politicization of trust defeated Clinton's last major effort to add to the nation's social safety net. In addition, I show that political trust played a major role in congressional voting decisions in 1994, but not in other years, helping to usher in a different kind of politics that has further marginalized progressive public policy.

Chapter 8 discusses the implications of the findings. That Americans are more distrustful today rather than more conservative has important implications for the behavior of political elites. For example, the post-1994 Clinton administration governed consistently to the right on most issues, apparently believing that a fundamental reordering of ideological preferences had occurred. But, ideology had not changed, and, indeed, the public's preference for government intervention actually increased toward the end of his presidency. If Clinton had realized that increasing political distrust was the source of his problem in 1994, he might have charted a much more progressive route through the rest of his administration.⁹

In addition, the concluding chapter discusses larger normative issues. Since political trust is necessary to generate support for redistributive and race-targeted policies, low levels of political trust have a particularly negative effect on those who rely most on government programs, specifically the economically disadvantaged and racial minorities. For government to provide them adequate representation, political trust cannot be in short supply. Otherwise, the haves will be unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary to aid the have-nots.

CHAPTER TWO

Political Trust and Its Evolution

THAT AMERICANS HAVE lost faith in the federal government to implement and administer public policy is the key change in American public opinion over the last 40 years. While many have suggested that the ideological center has shifted to the right, this is not exactly correct. People do not want less federal intervention across the board, only in areas that demand sacrifices from most Americans. These are the areas where people will need to trust the government to support government policy. Thus, anti-Washington attitudes advantage conservatives, but they should not be confused with conservatism.

To the extent that Americans appear more conservative, it is because programs offered by progressives generally use the government to deliver services or ensure rights. If people do not trust the delivery system and, therefore, do not want it involved in providing policy solutions, it automatically limits the range of possibilities available to them. While the early to middle 1960s were perhaps anomalous in their high levels of public trust, they allowed policymakers great leeway in proposing and implementing federal solutions to America's problems. That leeway is now gone. As political trust has deteriorated, those tasks have become infinitely harder for advocates of an activist federal government.

This chapter provides the foundation for my argument. I discuss what political trust is and explore the role that it plays in normative democratic theory. I then turn to a discussion of how scholars have measured trust, and the controversies that issues of measurement have raised. Next I track changes in political trust over time to highlight the causes of political trust and to provide evidence that the often noted measurement issues are overblown. Finally, using data taken from the months before and after the September 11 terrorist attacks, I test a theory that suggests that what people are thinking about when they evaluate the government affects their trust in it. Specifically, it explains why political trust has been relatively high since September 11, and, more importantly, it also explains why people evaluate government more negatively today than they did 40 years ago. After the Great Society, people started to think about government in terms of unpopular redistributive programs instead of more universal programs, which caused them to express less trust in the federal government.

WHAT IS POLITICAL TRUST?

Political trust, in general, is a concept that people think they understand until they are asked to define it. Thus, it is not surprising that definitions are numerous in the scholarly literature. Some consider political trust a commodity that helps political actors achieve their goals (Luhmann 1979), while others conceptualize it as people's willingness to follow the political leadership of others (Warren 1999). Definitions like these are too instrumental to suit my purposes. They do little to explain the conditions under which individuals are more or less willing to follow political leadership, and hence, more or less willing to support public policy alternatives.

Still others define political trust more broadly as a sense of shared moral community, both political and social, with an agreement on what values a society ought to pursue (Fukuyama 1995). This suggests that political trust originates outside the political sphere and is in large measure determined by how much people trust each other. Those living in more trusting societies tend to trust their government more than those living in less trusting societies. While attractive on one level, this definition conflates two separate concepts, political trust and social trust. In American life, one can easily identify people who trust other people but do not trust government, and, with a little more difficulty, one can also identify the reverse. Indeed, as an empirical matter, measures of political and social trust are positively but only weakly correlated, further suggesting vast conceptual differences (see Mishler and Rose 2001). In addition, social and political trust are related to different things. Robert Putnam (2000) and others have demonstrated that social trust affects whether individuals vote or participate more actively in politics, while political trust does not (see Citrin 1974).¹

A definition of political trust should incorporate both instrumental and normative aspects. I define political trust as the degree to which people perceive that government is producing outcomes consistent with their expectations (see Stokes 1962; Coleman 1990). One might think about it as a pragmatic running tally of how people think the government is doing at a given point in time. Morris Fiorina (1981) conceptualized party identification in much the same way. Economic evaluations were central to Fiorina's treatment, but they are only part of what people have in mind when they evaluate the government as a whole. Hence trust in government is necessarily broader in a conceptual sense. To ideologues, this running tally will be conditioned by who is running the government at a given point in time; conservatives will be more positive than liberals when conservatives run Washington and vice versa (Citrin 1974; see also Anderson and LoTempio 2002). But, for most Americans, policy ends are more important than policy means (Brody 1991), so political trust will be a reflection

tion of how positively citizens perceive government performance relative to their expectations.

A key term in my definition is *perceptions*. People's view of government is far different than its actual performance would predict. Haynes Johnson and David Broder (1996) point out this contradiction.

In those years of growing negativism [toward government], government actions brought about the greatest expansions of basic civil rights in the nation's history; a measurably cleaner, safer environment; a significant improvement in the health and well-being of senior citizens; and countless breakthroughs in science and technology that helped fuel the growth of an economy that was the envy of the world. That same government also trained and equipped the most powerful military forces in the world and led an international alliance that thwarted expansionary international communism, won the Cold War, and ushered in the peaceful liberation of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. With such a record of success, America was the model for all other societies to emulate.

Derek Bok (1997) provides further evidence that, while there are areas where it could improve, the federal government has done a reasonably good job in the administration and provision of services since the 1960s. Al Gore's Reinventing Government Commission actually turned up much less waste in the federal bureaucracy than most would expect, perhaps no more than 3 cents on the dollar.

Yet most people think that the majority of politicians pursue their own selfish interests rather than those of the country (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), and many believe that urban neighborhoods are full of Cadillac-driving "welfare queens" because government bureaucrats are too inept to stop them. Instead of the 3 cents turned up by the Gore commission, the average American perceives that the government wastes nearly 50 cents on the dollar (Langer 2002).² Such misperceptions are likely the result of, or at least reinforced by, a relentlessly negative news media (Patterson 1993; Orren 1997). Regardless, as is often the case in politics, the perception of government performance is more important than the reality.

It is also imperative to understand that my research focuses on Americans' trust in the *federal* government, not state or local governments. At least today, Americans generally trust their state and local governments significantly more than they trust the federal government because they view them as more responsive and more efficient (Blendon et al. 1997). As evidence, the 1996 National Election Study asked respondents which level of government would do the best job handling environmental, welfare, and anticrime programs. In all three cases, a plurality of respondents chose state government. When asked which level of government they had the most "faith" in, a plurality again chose state government (37 percent), with local government finishing second (33 percent) and the federal gov-

ernment last (30 percent).³ And, when asked which level of government they had the least faith in, the federal government (48 percent) was the clear winner, with local (34 percent) and state government (19 percent) lagging well behind. Although I sometimes write about government generically, I am referring to the federal government unless otherwise noted.

In understanding what political trust is, it is also useful to note what it is not. Political trust should not be confused with trust in a specific political figure. Political trust is a general evaluation of the entire government, while trust in a given figure is but one dimension of a more complete evaluation of that figure.⁴ This distinction is important. People can trust the government while, at the same time, distrusting the president and vice versa. Indeed, during the last six years of the Clinton presidency, Americans took an increasingly dim view of his personal trustworthiness while, at the same time, political trust increased markedly. Similarly, people might have trusted Jimmy Carter personally because he made his personal ethics an important part of his presidential persona, but most did not trust the government much during his term in office because it performed so poorly. More often than not, those who are trustful of the political figure tend to be trustful of the government, but the correlation is far from perfect.

POLITICAL TRUST AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

With very few exceptions, classical political theorists have taken a normatively positive view of political trust, describing it as "essential to a democratic community's well being" (Mara 2001, 820). To the extent that democratic theorists disagree over trust, they differ over why, not whether, it is positive. In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill (1982) notes the importance of deliberation in helping a society decide on a policy direction that will allow it to achieve the greatest good. Indeed, the number of conceptions of the "greatest good" covaries closely with the number of political parties in a political system. Since parties tend not to agree, they need political trust to provide the context to discuss, and ultimately arrive at, what is best for society (Mara 2001).

In democracies made up of political majorities and minorities, political trust is also a necessary ingredient to ensure the proper representation of all interests. When the interests of majorities and minorities conflict, the representation of minority interests requires that majorities be willing to make some sacrifices for the greater good. Race provides an example. Many whites might benefit materially from racial discrimination in hiring. If a white person has to compete only against other white applicants, it increases the probability that he or she will get the job because the talent pool will be shallower. Government can act to ban such discrimination.

For a white person to support the government's action, however, he or she must trust that the government is working in the nation's best interest, even if it is not in his or her personal self-interest (Gamson 1968). Absent that trust, minority interests are unlikely to be adequately represented.

In addition, since most democracies are representative in nature, their functioning depends heavily on public trust. Representation demands that people trust their individual representatives and the institutions they occupy. If people come to think that institutions are not working in either their or the nation's best interest, it is not clear why they would continue to follow the laws set by these institutions. In fact, there is ample evidence to suggest that those who do not trust government are significantly less likely to obey its laws. For example, distrusters are significantly less likely to pay their taxes than trusters (Scholz and Lubell 1998).

The founding of the United States provides a useful example of the desirability of public trust in government. The alternative to a representative form of democracy is one that emphasizes direct citizen control over policy decisions. Certainly, the Framers had little confidence that the unwashed masses had the wherewithal to manage the affairs of the day, fearing that mob rule would almost certainly result from direct mass participation. Mob rule would, in turn, produce politics driven by passion rather than reason. If people lost trust in representative institutions, it would likely lead to direct democracy, exactly what the Framers hoped to avoid. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that in contemporary America, the initiative revolution grew particularly strong during the 1970s, the period when political trust was in its steepest decline.⁵ Indeed, Jeffrey Karp (1995) demonstrates that low political trust was the root cause of the mass drive for more direct democracy in the 1970s and 1980s.

There are also less obvious, but still important, reflections of political trust's importance to the Founders. People commonly note that the Constitution suggests the understandable distrust that Americans had of government, given their experiences as colonists. The Framers, however, were more distrustful of power than of government itself. As a result, they created a system that fragmented power throughout the government such that it would be difficult for one person or one faction to capture its reins.

Was the Framers' concern about power born of concerns about the nature of human beings or the nature of government? People were clearly the stronger concern. The model of political abuse was the English monarchy. Hence the Framers wanted to avoid putting too much power in the hands of too few people. Madison believed that it was human nature to abuse power. In *Federalist* No. 10, he notes, "Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm," and, in *Federalist* No. 51, he argues that government would not be necessary if men were angels. Madison, therefore, proposed institutions disparate enough to curb the worst human instincts

while still sufficiently powerful to administer the affairs of the nation. While the Founders would have wanted people to be skeptical of government, because men would run it, government itself was not the target of their distrust.

Indeed, since the Founders wanted to frustrate the natural human impulse to aggregate power, it follows that they would have *wanted* ordinary people to trust the institutions designed to check the worst human ambitions. Government with strong public trust would do a better job than government without it. From the Founders' perspective, the public has more to fear from too much trust in the people running the government than from too much trust in the machinery of government. Hence they would likely be dismayed by the personalization of politics that has occurred during the television age (Hart 1994). Only as officeholders, such as Lyndon Johnson, came to see and present themselves as the government did too much trust in government become a problem, as it no doubt was in the mid-1960s. For example, as Johnson was preparing to board the wrong helicopter during one of his visits to Vietnam, a helpful young aide attempted to point Johnson in the right direction by saying "This is your helicopter, Mr. President." "Son, they're all my helicopters," Johnson replied.⁶ The concern might be extended to Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Tex.), the House Majority Leader, in 2003. When an employee attempted to dissuade DeLay from smoking a cigar on government property, the majority leader responded by shouting, "I am the federal government."⁷

This discussion is not to suggest that the represented ought to blindly trust those who represent them. Citizens must hold leaders and their institutions accountable for their mistakes if democracy is to function properly. Indeed, over the last 40 years government has made mistakes ample enough to justify a distrustful response from the electorate. The Gulf of Tonkin incident, continued official misinformation about the prosecution of the Vietnam War, failed economic policy in the 1970s, Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair, and Bill Clinton's serial problems with the truth all provide good examples (see Hardin 2002 for a discussion about legitimate distrust).

A problem develops, however, when people begin to reflexively respond to politics with distrust even when it is not justified, and that is what has happened in contemporary American politics. In this book, I demonstrate that the gap between perceptions of government performance and its actual performance matters profoundly, particularly for racial minorities and the poor. These groups lose the most from the hardened distrust that has developed about the federal government.⁸ That certain identifiable groups are disproportionately affected suggests that low levels of political trust have important implications for the representativeness of American democracy.

MEASURING POLITICAL TRUST

Measuring political trust has also proved elusive to scholars. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, researchers at the University of Michigan took a stab at the problem in their National Election Study (NES), and they developed the following set of measures, which I use throughout this book.

Trust. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

Waste. Do you think that people in government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it?

Interest. Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?

Crooked. Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?

These survey questions have come under a great deal of criticism, much of it justified. In fact, research on political trust essentially disappeared from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s due, in large part, to concerns over measurement. I readily admit that there are problems. First, some of the terms are losing meaning, particularly the word "crooked" in the last of the items. In the 1960s and 1970s, Richard Nixon might have seemed crooked, but in the 1990s, people would have been more likely to describe Bill Clinton as sleazy.

In addition, the two or three fixed options provided by the questions limit variation in responses. Surely, most ordinary Americans do not see the political world in the stark categories available to them. Indeed, since 1972, the most common response to each of these items has been the least trustful one. What do we make of this? Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, distrusted government, but surely a plurality of Americans does not share his attitudes. Responding that you trust the government only some of the time means different things to different people (Lodge and Tursky 1979).

Third, the NES measures do not measure institutional legitimacy, as many critics have argued. Typically, Easton's (1965, chaps. 11–13, 17–21; 1975) work on political support has framed these scholarly exchanges. Most relevant to these debates, Easton distinguishes between specific and diffuse support. Specific support refers to satisfaction with government outputs and the performance of political authorities, while diffuse support

refers to the public's attitude toward regime-level political objects regardless of their performance.

Some suggest the trust measure correlates only with specific support, so they believe that the decline of trust is of somewhat limited consequence (Citrin 1974; Citrin and Green 1986; Lipset and Schneider 1983). According to this view, an improvement in incumbent job performance should remedy low levels of political trust, although it has not done so thus far. In contrast, others suggest a connection between political trust and some measures of diffuse support (Miller 1974a, 1974b; Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring 1979; Miller and Listhaug 1990), implying that sustained low trust ultimately challenges regime legitimacy.

The distinction between specific and diffuse support is useful, but it obscures more important issues. As previous research has consistently suggested, the NES's trust measure contains elements of both types of support (e.g. Hetherington 1998). Indeed, because the government is largely composed of institutions operated by incumbents, the objects of support are difficult, if not impossible, to separate. Lost in this debate, however, is whether declining trust has had meaningful effects on variables of normative import.

Viewed in this way, declining trust can have long-term consequence even if it is not a measure of institutional legitimacy. For example, lower levels of political trust cause people to approve of the president less (Hetherington 1998). Since distrust causes disapproval and disapproval makes it more difficult for leaders to marshal resources to solve problems (Neustadt 1990; Rivers and Rose 1985), government will, on average, solve fewer problems when political trust is low. This, in turn, will cause more distrust and more disapproval, which, absent some exogenous change, will continue the cycle.

In fact, because it is not a measure of institutional support, the NES measure is actually more useful than one that is. Support for the basic structure of the American constitutional system has remained virtually unchanged during the survey era even as people have become increasingly dissatisfied with the people running the institutions (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Things that have not changed over time, such as institutional support, cannot explain things that have. If we want to understand what has changed about American politics, we should be interested in a measure that taps feelings that have varied over time, exactly what the NES measure of political trust does.

That said, researchers must use care in interpreting responses to the NES. If 75 percent of Americans say they trust the government only some of the time, we need not fear that government overthrow is imminent. But their response does mean that the president and Congress will be less popular (Hetherington 1998), a third-party presidential candidate may

find fertile ground (Hetherington 1999), people will be more supportive of antigovernment devices like initiative and referendum and term limits (Karp 1995), and, as I demonstrate in this book, government will produce less progressive public policy.

This slippage between the concept of political trust and the survey items used to measure it, which is called measurement error, is very common with survey data. The biggest problem with measurement error is that it reduces the correspondence between the concept to be measured and other attitudes and behaviors that might be correlated with it. For example, if I think political trust might cause people to be less supportive of government spending on welfare programs and I know that my measure of political trust contains some measurement error, then the correlation between my measure of political trust and my measures of support for spending on welfare programs is reduced. Hence, if I find any significant relationship, it is all the more impressive. It means that, were a better measure of political trust available, its relationship with support for welfare programs would be still stronger.

EXPLAINING VARIATION IN POLITICAL TRUST

To understand how political trust has changed American politics, it is first important to understand what makes trust increase and decrease. In general, scholars have found that political trust depends on a number of factors, including policy satisfaction (Miller 1974a; King 1997), economic evaluations (Citrin and Green 1986; Weatherford 1984), media negativity (Patterson 1993; Cappella and Jamieson 1997), major political scandals (Weatherford 1984), war (Parker 1995), the president's personal characteristics (Citrin and Green 1986), and the size and scope of government (Mansbridge 1997). The direction of these effects is rather obvious. In general, when people are satisfied with the policy direction that the country is taking, when the economy is growing, when the president has attractive personal characteristics, when the country is threatened, and when media criticism is relatively low, political trust increases. Major scandals and unpopular wars decrease political trust.

It is also important to note what political trust does not depend on. While one might expect disadvantaged groups to be more distrustful than advantaged ones, generally they are not (but see Abramson 1983). Table 2.1 compares levels of trust by different social characteristics. To measure political trust, scholars generally combine the four items outlined above to make an index. Although there are several ways to do this, I begin by arraying the responses such that the most trustful is always at the top of the scale. Next, the most trustful response to each of the items is assigned

TABLE 2.1
Differences in Political Trust by Social Characteristics, 1992

<i>Social Characteristic</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>
Gender		
Male	0.211	1,040
Female	0.220	1,204
Difference	0.009	
Race		
Black	0.226	287
Nonblack	0.214	1,957
Difference	0.012	
Age		
Below median	0.226	1,117
Above median	0.206	1,127
Difference	0.020	
Education		
Below median	0.227	1,151
Above median	0.203	1,037
Difference	0.024	
Income		
Below median	0.227	1,047
Above median	0.210	967
Difference	0.017	

Source: American National Election Study, 1992.

a 1 and the least trustful response a 0. If the question has three response options, as is the case for all the items except Interest, the middle option receives a score of 0.5. Finally, each person's score for the four items is totaled and the mean taken. Individuals can score anywhere from 0 (completely distrustful) to 1 (completely trustful). I employ this measure throughout the book.

Since the political trust scale is on a (0, 1) interval, the differences can be interpreted as the percentage difference between groups. All are substantively insignificant, with differences between 1 and 2 percentage points. Men and women share about the same levels of political trust, as do whites and blacks, the better and less well educated, those with higher and lower incomes, and older and younger people. While the data presented come from 1992 only, these insignificant differences have generally been the rule.⁹

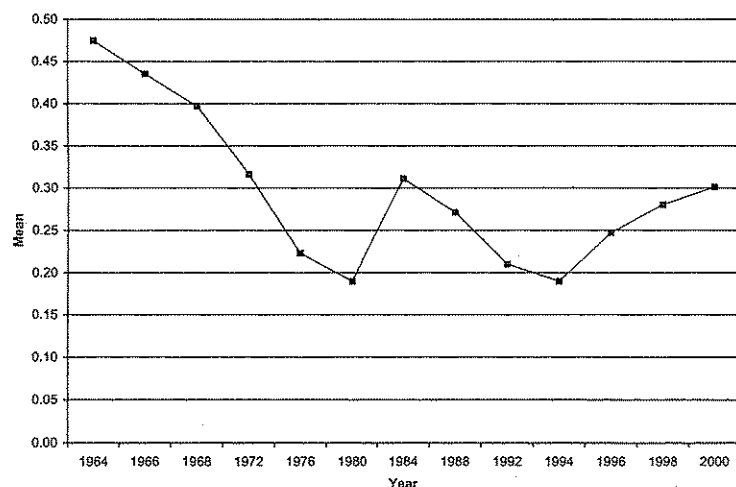


Figure 2.1. Changes in Political Trust, 1964–2000. Source: American National Election Study, Cumulative File, 1948–2000.

Political Trust from Johnson through Clinton

Tracing changes in political trust since the four-item index debuted in 1964 provides evidence for what affects it. Figure 2.1 illustrates Americans' average score on the political trust index for all presidential years and a couple key off years between 1964 and 2000. The trend line shows that political trust has deteriorated greatly since the 1960s, but there have been increases during the period as well. That trust follows such a pattern over time bolsters the validity of the measure. It drops when one would expect, as with the deepening morass in Vietnam after 1968 and the Watergate scandal in 1974, and it rises when one would expect, as with the major economic expansions of the early 1980s and late 1990s.

Its high point is 1964, the first year the NES asked this particular battery of questions.¹⁰ The mid-1960s were a good time for the government. Although U.S. involvement in Vietnam was on the rise, public opinion was still solidly behind the war. In addition, economic prosperity had returned after a relatively deep recession in the late Eisenhower and early Kennedy years. The political leadership of the era was important as well. John F. Kennedy provided tremendous optimism about what government might accomplish. Certainly the country has not seen a more forceful spokesperson for progressive, government-sponsored programs since his

assassination in November 1963, except perhaps his successor, Lyndon Johnson. Unlike politicians today, Kennedy and Johnson unabashedly articulated their belief that government could solve social problems.

Rhetorical support of "big government" has important implications for public opinion. When people receive information from elites on both sides of an issue, they can choose the side that they find most persuasive. John Zaller (1992) refers to this as a two-sided information flow. Usually, ordinary Americans attempt to match their opinions with those of elites with whom they identify. While conservatives like Barry Goldwater in the 1960s criticized government intervention in antipoverty policy and race as beyond its purview, Kennedy and Johnson argued that federal involvement would produce a better America. It follows that public trust was high in this period, since the most popular leaders of the day supported big government.

The information environment has changed radically since. It is rare to find a prominent elected leader who advocates government solutions to social problems. Although most of the 2004 Democratic presidential hopefuls promised big government programs like universal health insurance, they assiduously avoid mentioning what role government might play in accomplishing this goal. Indeed, even though many experts believe the most cost-efficient system would be one run by the government, most candidates propose plans that will ultimately cost more money but provide government a smaller role in the administration of service because they know how unpopular government is in the public's eye. In 1992, Bill Clinton took the same tack on this issue. Since a progovernment position is not well represented in the political discourse, while critics of government are both numerous and voluble, ordinary Americans will naturally tend toward the more prominently articulated view that government is incapable, incompetent, and thus unworthy of their trust. Thus, it is no surprise that people began to trust the government less as government friendly voices exited the political stage.

Over the 16 years following Johnson's election in 1964, political trust experienced a freefall. While most observers point to dramatic events like Vietnam and Watergate as causes, the decline began before opinion turned against the war, with the first hints of trouble occurring in 1966. Indeed, declining trust in government in the United States was part of a larger trend also affecting much of Western Europe during the middle to late 1960s (Lipset and Schneider 1987).

Although empirical evidence is thin, the most plausible explanations for the pre-1968 decline are public dissatisfaction with an expanding welfare state coupled with social problems that persisted (Mansbridge 1997). When politicians promised that they could solve problems that had previously been beyond the government's reach, it naturally raised the pub-

lic's expectations about what government might accomplish. No longer was it sufficient for the federal government to provide peace and prosperity to maintain the public's trust; now it had to end poverty, solve racial discord, and protect the American family. While politicians promised solutions, these problems did not abate overnight. Indeed, the race riots of the late 1960s suggested that government policy was causing more, not less, racial discord.

It is also of consequence that this increase in the government's involvement occurred in an area in which most people could not directly evaluate performance. Most Americans neither benefited directly from the government's antipoverty efforts nor knew people who did. All they knew was that they were paying taxes to help the poor, a group that many felt just needed to work harder (see Kinder and Sanders 1996). While great strides were, in fact, made during the 1960s, it would be difficult for most Americans to receive tangible evidence of progress. Without evidence of success, it would be reasonable to conclude that government was wasting money. This interpretation of the American case is consistent with the simultaneous declines in political trust occurring in western Europe, which also coincided with sizable increases in the size and scope of their welfare states (Lipset and Schneider 1987).

Federal efforts to include the non-South in implementation of racial policy almost certainly contributed to the decline. A major cause of the seeming public consensus regarding New Deal, New Frontier, and Great Society issues was the ability of political leaders to submerge race, which was evident in Franklin Roosevelt's approach to Social Security, John F. Kennedy's reluctance to take an active stand on civil rights, and Lyndon Johnson's using West Virginia, not a major city, as the backdrop for his declarations on the War on Poverty (Wilson 1987). The North was no bastion of racial liberalism. In the 1940s and 1950s, normally solid Democrats in cities like Detroit voted for conservative Republicans when blacks started to move into white neighborhoods and competed for their jobs (Sugrue 1996). Nonsoutherners could embrace the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 because until the 1970s they pertained only to the South, allowing northerners to dismiss race as a regional problem. As the 1960s came to a close, however, events caused that consensus in the non-South to erode.

It was during this period that urban race riots rocked nonsouthern cities like Detroit and Los Angeles, the media replaced the rural white face of poverty and antipoverty programs with a less popular urban black one (see Gilens 1999), and Lyndon Johnson signed the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which applied to the entire nation, not just the South. During the Nixon presidency, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) brought a series of school segregation lawsuits against non-

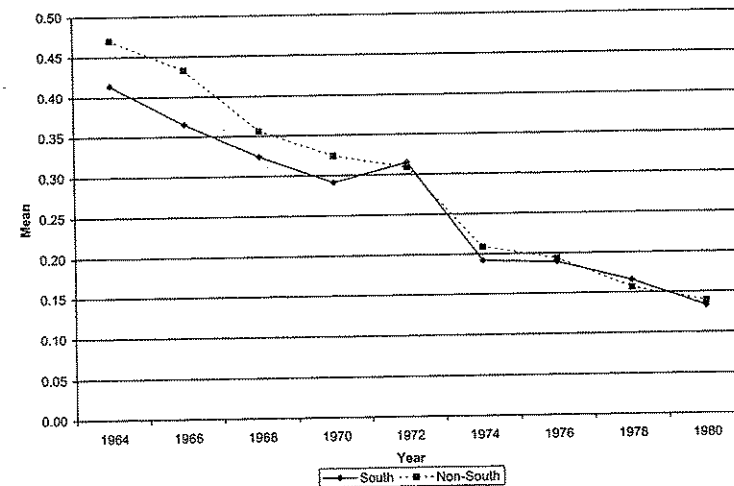


Figure 2.2. Political Trust among Whites, South versus Non-South, 1964–80. Source: American National Election Study, Cumulative File, 1948–2000.

southern school districts, which led, starting in 1971, to forced busing plans in cities such as Denver, Detroit, Boston, and Los Angeles. That the nationalization of implicitly and explicitly racial policies was a root cause for the drop in political trust in the late 1960s is evident from the data in figure 2.2. It traces change in political trust between 1964 and 1980, comparing southern whites with whites from outside the South. From 1964 to 1970, when the reach of civil rights legislation was largely confined to the South, southerners were less trustful of the federal government than nonsoutherners, although the gap had begun to close by 1968.¹¹ By 1972, with progressives no longer able to submerge the race issue outside the South, trust levels among southerners and nonsoutherners became indistinguishable. When race policy confronted Jim Crow laws and voting discrimination *in the South*, northerners and westerners felt they could trust the government. When the federal courts, in particular, made race policy a national issue, nonsoutherners began to trust the government less.

Although the rate of decay in political trust was greater for nonsoutherners than for southerners from the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, these data demonstrate that trust was dropping rapidly for both. The more universal explanations for the decline in political trust during this period are easy to identify. It had become increasingly clear that the United States was not on the verge of winning the war in Vietnam and that government

officials had been misleading the public for years. In early 1968, the Tet offensive exploded the myth of imminent American victory for Walter Cronkite, and thus the nation as a whole. Soon after, Americans were treated to the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, Soviet tanks rolling into Czechoslovakia, the tumultuous Democratic National Convention in Chicago, and the racist presidential candidacy of George Wallace. In succeeding years, "America's Century" appeared at a premature end. The prosperity of the 1960s turned into chronic bouts with inflation and unemployment in the 1970s. Since people's evaluations of the economy are paramount in understanding how much people trust the government (Citrin and Green 1986), this economic downturn was a severe blow (Weatherford 1984). Through the early 1970s, the situation in Vietnam continued to deteriorate no matter the number of troops committed or bombs dropped, ultimately leading to the embarrassing withdrawal of U.S. troops. Americans seeing the poignant images of servicemen clinging desperately to helicopters leaving Saigon could not help but notice that things had changed significantly since the United States won World War II, and not for the better.

The Watergate scandal provided another blow. Not only did Nixon knowingly mislead the public for nearly two years about his involvement in the cover-up of the break-in at the Democratic National Committee in 1972, other unsavory details about his use of executive power against his personal and political enemies came to light.

Things only got worse during Jimmy Carter's presidency, as trust reached its lowest point yet. During Carter's successful run for the White House in 1976, he raised expectations about government ethics by assuring voters that he would clean up Washington, promising that he would never lie. But his administration was quickly wracked by scandal, with the forced resignation of his budget director, Bert Lance, for past misdeeds and, ultimately, lying to the public.

Beyond the ethics problems, most Americans viewed the country's performance during the Carter years as quite poor, including Carter himself. His "Malaise Speech," which identified a crisis of national confidence as a root problem in American life, confirmed that the nation's faith in political institutions had eroded under his watch. In stark contrast to Kennedy's optimism, Carter failed to make people believe that government could play a valuable role. Indeed, his securing the presidency by running against government all but precluded a restoration of such belief. In addition, economic success eluded the Carter administration, as the United States experienced both high unemployment and high inflation, with prime lending rates exceeding 20 percent.

Things were even worse abroad, with events in Iran providing the clearest glimpse of national weakness. In November 1979, students loyal to

the Ayatollah Khomeini seized 52 hostages at the U.S. embassy in Iran. With Carter unable to secure their return by either diplomatic or military means, Americans were forced to acknowledge that the country had been brought to its knees by a group of students.

As figure 2.1 shows, Ronald Reagan returned trust to levels not seen since the late 1960s. Jack Citrin and Donald Green (1986) suggest that this happened for two reasons. First, economic performance improved. After 1982, at least, unemployment and, particularly, inflation dropped markedly and change in gross domestic product (GDP), a leading measure of economic growth, skyrocketed. Second, Reagan exuded confidence and optimism about America, often using patriotic symbols to his advantage. The public often rewards optimistic presidents, like Kennedy, Reagan, and Clinton, with increasing levels of political trust (Nelson 2001). Moreover, Reagan accomplished quite a lot. He kept his early agenda very simple: tax cuts, defense spending increases, and a balanced budget. In going two for three, his batting average was significantly higher than his predecessor's.

The increase in trust did not last long, however. It began to decline during Reagan's second term, coinciding with Senate hearings into the Iran-Contra scandal. In addition, Arthur Miller and Stephen Borelli (1991) demonstrate that people became concerned about the country's ideological direction. The gap between where people saw themselves on the issues and where they saw the government started to grow, which is not surprising given Reagan's unabashed conservatism and the public's consistent desire for moderation. This disparity caused political trust to drop as well.

Trust continued to deteriorate through the George H. W. Bush years. Despite victory in the Cold War and Gulf War, Americans' evaluations of government did not improve. This was likely the result of the persistent recession that stretched from late 1990 into 1992. Without doubt, economic difficulties trumped foreign policy successes during the Bush years, as his defeat in the election of 1992 shows.

During Clinton's rocky first two years in office, trust reached its survey-era nadir. This likely owed, in part, to scandals like Whitewater, the misuse of FBI files, and the firing of the White House travel office. The public also came to see Clinton as ideologically extreme. During his first two years in office, he became linked to the far Left on cultural issues like gays in the military and abortion policy. As David King (1997) shows, the pattern of policy dissatisfaction in the 1960s had been inverted by the 1990s. Whereas Arthur Miller (1974a) suggested that centrist politics were to blame for low trust in the 1960s, polarized politics are to blame today. In other words, those in the political center—the majority of Americans—are now less likely to trust the government because they see the

parties as too far from ordinary people and too close to the ideological poles (see also Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

After the Republicans swept to power in Congress in 1994 and the economy continued its rapid expansion, political trust increased for the rest of the decade. Improved perceptions of government effectiveness and improved evaluations of Congress' job performance fueled the increase between 1994 and 1996 (Hetherington 1998) and probably beyond. In addition, the election of the first Republican Congress in 40 years provided the public with an increased sense that the political system could respond to citizen discontent. Once in office, the minor but well-publicized institutional changes that Congress adopted in early 1995 contributed to the improvement as well. That these changes were institutional in nature is noteworthy, given the continued unpopularity of congressional leaders like Newt Gingrich and some congressional decisions like the government shutdown (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

That the increase in political trust continued throughout the 1990s even with the constant scandals experienced by Bill Clinton and others in his administration is testament to the importance of economic performance. Indeed, had it not been for Kenneth Starr's prosecution of the Lewinsky matter, there is every reason to believe that political trust would have been quite a lot higher. According to the NES's cumulative data file, Americans' perceptions of the nation's economic performance in the past year, which is the most politically relevant measure of economic performance (Kinder and Kiewit 1979, 1981), were more favorable in 1998 than at any time since the NES debuted these questions in the 1970s.¹² The increase in trust in the late 1990s despite the constant media focus on scandal allows us to generalize Stephen Weatherford's (1984) claim that poor economic performance during the mid-1970s affected political trust during that period more than did the Watergate affair. Both scandal and economic performance matter, but it is increasingly clear that the economy matters more.

WHAT ARE PEOPLE THINKING ABOUT?

A small amount of scholarly literature on political trust has also explored what precisely people are thinking about when they answer the NES's standard battery of questions (Lodge and Tursky 1979). This deserves more attention. The federal government is a large amorphous entity, and certain parts of it and certain things it does are more popular than others. Hence understanding the criteria that people use to evaluate government at any given point should also help explain its relative popularity.

Information-processing theories tell us that the criteria most accessible in memory when someone is asked a survey question will carry the most weight in the answer given (Krosnick 1988). By determining what will be accessible, the mass media has a disproportionately large influence in making certain things seem more important. Since people tend to think that what they have heard most recently is most important (McCombs and Shaw 1972), recent information becomes the criterion that people use to evaluate leaders and institutions (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). This is called *priming*.

Importantly, the various potential criteria for evaluating government differ in popularity. Hence what people happen to be considering at different points in time can influence their overall evaluation of government. Regarding the three branches of government, specifically, John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (1995) demonstrate that people feel more warmly toward the Supreme Court and the president than they do toward Congress. Not surprisingly, given the unpopularity the federal government has registered over the last 30 years, scholars have demonstrated that political trust is more closely associated with feelings about Congress than the other branches (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Feldman 1983; Hetherington 1998; Williams 1985), although there is also strong evidence that people consider the president as well (Citrin 1974). As one might expect, political trust among Democrats tends to increase to some degree when a Democrat occupies the White House, and vice versa (Citrin 1974).

Many Americans also likely have in mind "typical politicians" when they evaluate the federal government. John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (2002) cite the fact that Americans tend to believe that politicians care more about their personal ambitions than the greater good as the key reason for people's distaste for Congress. More generally, they argue that Americans hate government because they overwhelmingly believe that congresspeople are playing them for suckers, lining their own nest with big salaries, taxpayer-funded trips, and other perquisites while ignoring the needs of ordinary people. Consistent with this view, when the Kaiser Family Foundation asked Americans why people do not trust government, the most commonly cited reason was that leaders say what they think will get them elected, not what they really believe.¹³

Of course, the federal government is more than just the president, Congress, and Supreme Court. It also includes myriad executive branch departments and agencies, not to mention the institutions linked to them. Some of these entities and the programs they administer are more popular than others. For example, people do not seem to have much problem with parts of the government that might provide them direct benefits. You do not hear much complaint about federal spending on the interstate highway

system, except maybe from Hawaiians. While some states with well-placed members of Congress surely get more, everyone gets some. Similarly, the 2000 presidential campaign reminds us that all Americans want to see Social Security and Medicare well funded because they will more than likely benefit from these programs in the future. In fact, the major party presidential candidates featured traditional New Deal programs in a higher percentage of their ads than in any election in the television era (Geer 2003). When the information environment focuses on these programs and the agencies that administer them, trust, other things being equal, will be higher.

Executive branch offices responsible for redistributive programs are another story. Before the 1960s, most government programs distributed benefits more widely, making it hard to argue that a relatively small number of people were taking advantage of the system and that government was doing a poor job stopping them. The burgeoning number and reach of antipoverty programs designed during the Great Society years changed that. An overwhelming percentage of Americans did not benefit directly from these programs; the problems these programs were intended to solve did not go away quickly; and the people receiving the benefits were not held in very high esteem.

As a result, redistributive programs and the agencies administering them became targets for attack from media sources and officeholders alike. Americans growing up in the television era have been fed a steady diet of stories about the urban poor buying liquor with food stamps, Cadillac-driving "welfare queens," and teenage mothers intentionally having more children to increase the size of their welfare checks, all while inept bureaucrats did nothing. Ronald Reagan, in particular, was fond of telling these, most often apocryphal, stories to public audiences. This publicity places such programs on tops of people's heads when they are asked to evaluate the government's trustworthiness. Indeed, the tendency to think about government in terms of redistributive policies is so ingrained in the public mind that, when people hear references made to government spending in general, they think about redistributive spending specifically (Jacoby 1994). Since this type of spending is less popular than spending on programs that distribute benefits widely, the trend toward increasing government distrust after the proliferation of redistributive federal programs makes perfect sense.

Perhaps the main reason that Americans think about government in terms of redistributive programs is that they wildly overestimate how much government spends on them relative to the more universal ones. In the 2002 fiscal year budget, nearly a quarter of federal spending was directed toward Social Security (the largest federal outlay), one-sixth went to national defense, and Medicare received just over a tenth of federal

spending. These percentages of the federal budget are typical. In contrast, redistributive programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), when it still existed, and food stamps programs combined to receive about 5 percent of the budget. Foreign aid received between 1 and 2 percent.

The public perceives a markedly different picture. In a January 1995 poll taken by the *Los Angeles Times*, more than 40 percent of respondents identified either foreign aid (22 percent) or welfare/aid to families with dependent children (21 percent) as the programs or areas receiving the most federal spending. Only 6 percent correctly identified Social Security.¹⁴ Instead of the 5 or so percent of the budget that was spent on AFDC and food stamps at the time, a CBS News–*New York Times* poll taken in April 1995 showed that three-quarters of Americans mistakenly believed that welfare programs accounted for more than 10 percent of the federal budget, and nearly half pegged the amount above 20 percent.¹⁵ The largest misperceptions involve foreign aid. Whereas these outlays make up between 1 and 2 percent of the budget, an April 2002 poll sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that 63 percent of Americans thought that the federal government spent more money on foreign aid than on Social Security even though Social Security receives ten times the funding. Only 14 percent correctly identified Social Security as the costlier program.¹⁶ If people so wildly overestimate federal involvement in these areas, it follows that they will weight these considerations more heavily than is warranted in their overall evaluations of government.

And, in fact, the evidence suggests that people make just this mistake. Table 2.2 presents the results from a regression analysis that estimates the effect that feelings about a range of different people, institutions, and groups have on feelings about the federal government. Regression is a tool that allows researchers to estimate the independent effect of a range of explanatory variables at the same time, while holding constant all the others. For example, whether someone votes for a Democrat or Republican will depend on both a person's party identification and ideology. Even though these two explanations are correlated (that is, Republicans will tend to be conservatives and Democrats liberals), regression allows us to sort out what independent influence each has on vote choice, controlling for the other.

In this analysis, I use a number of the NES feeling thermometer questions, on which people rate things from a cold 0 degrees to a hot 100 degrees. Respondents are instructed to provide higher scores to groups that they feel positively about and lower scores to groups they feel negatively about. If people have neutral feelings about a group, they are instructed to give it a score of exactly 50 degrees. In a handful of recent presidential election years, the NES has asked people to rate their feelings

TABLE 2.2
Feelings about the Federal Government as a Function of Feelings about a Range
of People, Institutions, and Groups, 1996

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Parameter Estimate (SE)</i>
Constant	-10.068*** (2.355)
Congress thermometer	0.434*** (0.026)
Supreme Court thermometer	0.160*** (0.026)
Clinton thermometer	0.198*** (0.018)
People on welfare thermometer	0.094*** (0.022)
Older Americans thermometer	0.004 (0.030)
Military thermometer	0.050* (0.023)
Blacks thermometer	-0.008 (0.026)
Whites thermometer	-0.034 (0.027)
Conservatives thermometer	-0.000 (0.025)
Liberals thermometer	0.060** (0.025)
Labor unions thermometer	0.092*** (0.020)
Big business thermometer	0.097*** (0.024)
Poor people thermometer	-0.028 (0.028)
Adj. R^2	.54
N	1,297

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. One-tailed test.

Source: American National Election Study, 1996.

toward "the federal government." I am interested in what people are thinking about when they are asked to evaluate it. If feelings about institutions, people, and groups are significant predictors of feelings about the federal government, it must be the case that they are on people's minds when they evaluate the federal government. I present the results from 1996 NES data, although the results from the other years prior to September 11, 2001, in which the federal government thermometer appears (1988, 1992, and 2000) are substantively the same.

Since all the variables are on a 0–100 scale, the estimated effects can be compared to get a sense of which variables are most and least influential. If a variable has an estimated effect of .10, it means that, moving from the coldest to the warmest evaluation of that object would increase feelings about the federal government by 10 degrees, or, 10 percent of the dependent variable's range. My analysis confirms that Congress is the main element that people have on their minds when they are asked about the federal government. Its effect is more than twice as large as any other variable. Feelings about the Supreme Court and about Bill Clinton, the sitting president, are also very influential. In addition, feelings about "Big Business," "Labor Unions," "Liberals," and "the Military" are on people's minds when they are asked to rate the federal government.

Most important for my purposes, however, is the fact that feelings about "People on Welfare" inform people's view of the federal government while feelings about "Older People" do not. Specifically, the estimated effect for "People on Welfare" is positively signed and statistically significant, meaning that the more warmly they feel about people on welfare, the more warmly they feel about the federal government and vice versa. However, their feelings about older people have no bearing on their feelings about the federal government. This is true despite the fact that programs that directly benefit older Americans, such as Social Security and Medicare, make up more than 35 percent of the federal budget, whereas traditional welfare programs make up less than 10 percent. Of course, people think welfare programs make up more of the budget than they do, which places these less popular programs and their recipients on the tops of people's heads when they think about the federal government.¹⁷

Taken together, this evidence paints a problematic picture. Americans express much less trust in the federal government today than decades ago in part because they are now evaluating the government based on their feelings about redistributive and foreign aid programs rather than more universal programs like Social Security, defense, and Medicare. They do this because they mistakenly believe that redistribution and foreign aid make up a much larger part of the federal budget than they really do. In fact, most Americans think these programs make up more of the budget than the true budget elephants. Hence, as was the case for misperceptions

of government wastefulness, it seems that at least some of the decline in political trust between the Johnson and Clinton years is based on misperception of what government really does.

Evidence for the Priming Theory: Political Trust after September 11, 2001

Of course, news reporting and, therefore, the criteria that people use to evaluate political leaders and institutions changed fundamentally after Al Qaeda's September 11, 2001, attack on New York City and Washington, D.C. Consistent with the rally-round-the-flag literature (e.g. Mueller 1973), the public rallied behind George W. Bush. Bush's approval numbers jumped from 51 percent, as measured by Gallup in the days just prior to the attack, to 90 percent on September 22, the highest rating ever achieved by a president in the survey era. Bush, moreover, maintained his higher approval ratings longer than other rally beneficiaries because the public remained focused on foreign affairs and domestic security for an extended period of time (Hetherington and Nelson 2003).

Less widely noticed, support for American political institutions also shot up after September 11, with the percentage of people providing trusting responses to the standard political trust question increasing from 30 percent in the last survey taken before the attacks to 64 percent in the first survey taken after. This enormous spike encouraged polling organizations to ask the standard trust-in-government question more often than usual, which allows a test of the priming theory explicated above. Figure 2.3 tracks the percentage of people answering either "just about always" or "most of the time" (as opposed to "only some of the time" or "never") to this question (Trust) between November 2000 and July 2003.¹⁸

It is remarkable how closely the pattern of trustful responses mirrors changes in the information environment. As the criteria on which we might expect people to evaluate the government change, the level of public trust in government changes. A big dip in political trust occurred between the NES's 2000 postelection study and January 2001. Two major events took place during this period that likely account for the drop. First, the court proceedings following the election fiasco in Florida, which culminated in the Supreme Court's ending any further recounts, took center stage in the news media. Most Americans were unhappy with all the legal wrangling. Since Americans do not like to see contentious political processes played out in public (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, 2002), it follows that people's evaluations of government suffered.¹⁹

Second, economic news turned sour in the weeks leading up to and immediately following George W. Bush's inauguration, which suggests the enduring importance of performance evaluations in understanding trust in government. The following headlines about the economy provide

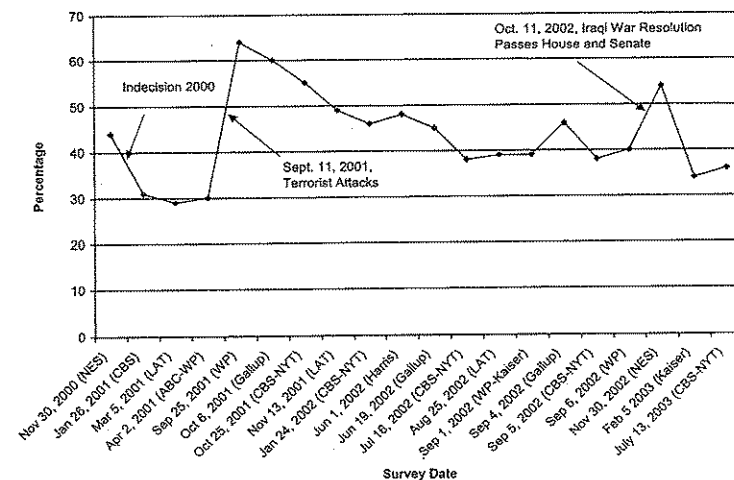


Figure 2.3. Changes in Trust in Government, 2000–2003.

a sample of front section *New York Times* reporting: "Consumer Confidence Plunges to Two-Year Low" (December 29), "Roots of a Slowdown" (January 13), and "Many Sense Good Times Slipping Away" (January 18). In early January, the Federal Reserve cut the discount rate half a percentage point in an effort to help what was consistently described in the press as a lagging economy drifting into recession. Given the importance that scholars have attributed to economic performance in explaining trust in government (e.g. Citrin and Green 1986), it is likely that the focus on a deteriorating economy contributed to the 15-percentage-point drop in trust between November 2000 and April 2001.

Data on trust in government are scarce for the first nine months of 2001. The last survey with a trust question before September was in early April 2001, and only 30 percent of Americans provided trusting responses. By early September, it is likely that trust had slipped even further. In a Gallup poll taken on April 6, Bush's approval rating was 59 percent, but it had dropped to 51 percent just before September 11. Since trust and presidential approval often move in tandem (Citrin 1974; Hetherington and Globetti 2003), the September 11 surge depicted in figure 2.3 is probably understated. Either way, in the weeks after the attacks, trust in government numbers rebounded to highs resembling the mid-1960s.

Although trust levels remained high relative to the last 20 years, they started to erode quickly, even during the successful military campaign in

Afghanistan in October and November 2001. These data are a reminder that rallies do not last forever. Moreover, the reason rallies do not last forever is noteworthy. People had started to think about things different from the event(s) that caused the rally. An ABC News poll taken on January 9, 2002, provides some evidence. Rather than just asking the general trust-in-government question, this poll prefaced it with two different phrases. In one, people were asked, "When it comes to handling social issues like the economy, health care, Social Security, and education, how much of the time do you trust the government . . ." In the other, people were asked, "When it comes to handling national security and the war on terrorism, how much of the time do you trust the government . . ." When primed to evaluate government on social policy, only 38 percent of Americans provided trusting responses, not that much higher than the 29 percent recorded in March 2001. When primed to evaluate the government based on the war on terrorism, however, 69 percent provided trusting responses, almost identical to the 65 percent in the *Washington Post* poll taken right after the attacks. As the shock of the attacks began to ebb, people started to think more about the usual things.²⁰

In June 2002, with the September 11 attacks nine months in the past, trust in government dropped to the same level recorded in the 2000 NES. In the spring and early summer of 2002, the news media turned its attention away from foreign entanglements and domestic security to stories of corporate malfeasance, the resultant negative effect it had on investor confidence, and the persistent weakness in the broader economy. In mid-June, the media covered the guilty verdict handed down by a federal jury against the accounting firm Arthur Andersen for obstruction of justice in helping Enron in its illegal accounting schemes. In July, reporting turned to Congress's efforts to pass legislation aimed at restoring public confidence in financial markets. Much of this reporting focused heavily on the chummy relationship that many of the corporate wrongdoers had with President Bush, members of his administration, and both Republicans and Democrats in Congress.

It should come as no surprise, then, that a CBS News–*New York Times* poll taken on July 16, 2002, showed only 38 percent of Americans providing trustful responses to the standard political trust question. Hence, between the September 25, 2001, *Washington Post* poll that showed a return to 1960s trust levels and this July 2002 CBS News–*New York Times* poll, trust in government had dropped by fully 26 percentage points. Between July and early September 2002 trust held steady. Without a major change in the information environment during the summer of 2002, people continued to evaluate the government on these relatively unfavorable grounds.

Things soon changed. Between September 6, 2002, and the 2002 NES postelection survey, administered in November, trust shot up by 14 percentage points. During this period, the media turned its attention to the congressional debate of a resolution that would allow the president to take the country to war with Iraq. With strong bipartisan support, the resolution passed both houses on October 11, 2002. The focus on Saddam Hussein's threat to the world continued to be a hot topic through the 2002 midterm elections. This was the case for much of late 2002 and early 2003. By February 2003, however, the information environment changed again, and, along with it, so did political trust. Renewed emphasis on the economy, exemplified by such headlines in the *New York Times* as "Hiring in Nation Hits Worst Slump in Nearly 20 Years" (February 6) and "Greenspan Throws Cold Water on Bush Arguments for Tax Cut" (February 12) left only 34 percent of Americans trusting the government a month before the war in Iraq.

Gary Langer (2002) shows that, in 2001–2, trust covaried with the percentage of people identifying war, terrorism, or national security as the nation's most important problem. For example, in the April 2, 2001, ABC News–*Washington Post* survey, only 1 percent of Americans chose war, terrorism, or national security as the most important problem, and only 30 percent of Americans provided trusting responses to the standard trust question. When the late September 2001 *Post* survey showed 64 percent with trusting responses, a Gallup poll taken around the same time showed 64 percent of Americans identifying war, terrorism, or national security as the nation's most important problem. But by January 2002, only 35 percent of Americans identified war, terrorism, or national security as most important, and trust dropped to 46 percent.

This analysis can be extended to include all the polls with a trust question between October 2001 and November 2002.²¹ For the surveys taken after the September 11 attacks, when people first started to think about domestic security and the war on terrorism, the correlation between the percentage of trusting responses to the trust question and the percentage of people answering war, terrorism, or national security to the Gallup most-important-problem question is a remarkably high .78. When people think the nation's safety is most important, they trust the government more. When their attention turns elsewhere, trust drops.

Why Concerns about Terrorism Increase Political Trust

This analysis leaves unanswered a fundamental question. Why would the public's focus on the nation's increased vulnerability after September 11 have such a salutary effect on trust in government? Indeed, it seems that such feelings might cause people to feel less warmly about government.

There are two complementary explanations. First, foreign crises generally cause rallies for both the president and institutions (Parker 1995). Hence both threats and rhetoric about threats will cause Americans to rally around the flag. Second, Americans today think increasingly well of the military. If people connect their feelings about the military with their feelings about government, government should be more popular.

Ample evidence exists to support this second point. Since the NES started asking its feeling thermometer questions in 1964, the military has never been as positively evaluated as it was in 2002, with a mean score of 75 degrees. By way of comparison, the mean score in 1980 was 65 degrees. Data on the military gathered by the Gallup organization tell a similar story. In 2002, fully 79 percent of Americans expressed either a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the military, compared with only 58 percent in 1975. This increase in positive evaluations of the military runs in stark contrast to evaluations of other institutions. Over the same period, for example, the percentage of people providing positive evaluations of organized religion and Congress fell by 23 and 11 percentage points, respectively, according to Gallup.²²

Moreover, the median correlation between the military feeling thermometer and trust in government in the 13 NES studies between 1964 and 2002 in which both appear is .09. Most of the correlations range between .06 and .09.²³ In 2002, however, the correlation jumped to .23, more than twice the median.²⁴ Only the constant media focus on the lead-up to war in Iraq in November 2002, when the NES surveys were taken, can explain such an increase. In sum, concerns about terrorism and domestic security cause people to think about the military. This, in turn, boosts trust in government.

Although the level of political trust recorded in 2003 was the lowest since the September 11 attacks and even a little lower than when Bill Clinton left office, it was still surprisingly high, given just how bad people's perceptions of the economy were in early 2003. In late January 2001, when barely 30 percent of respondents provided trusting responses to the standard trust question, nearly 70 percent of Americans said they thought economic conditions were either good or excellent. In February 2003, with trust at about the same level as January 2001, only 24 percent of Americans said they thought economic conditions were either good or excellent.²⁵ Such pessimistic views of the economy would ordinarily cause people to trust government much less. It is clear that continued concerns about the war on terrorism and national security, even if somewhat diminished from late-2001 highs, have kept trust from going into freefall.

This analysis suggests that, unless foreign and domestic security permanently takes center stage in the coming decades, trust in government is unlikely to remain very high. Indeed, in the first two years after September

11, political trust has generally held steady around Clinton-era levels, which is higher than most of the prior 20 years but hardly a return to Great Society times. While trust has jumped in response to dramatic events, such as the attacks themselves and the lead-up to the war in Iraq, it has always quickly receded. Absent another military engagement, there will be no natural rally effect, and the correlation between people's feelings about the military and their trust in government will drop back toward its median. Even though the military will likely continue to be popular in a world that it now dominates as never before, the weaker correlation between people's feelings about it and the government means that these positive feelings will contribute less to evaluations of government as a whole. The elements that people typically use to evaluate the government, such as traditional welfare state programs, will again take center stage, which will almost certainly lead to lower sustained levels of political trust absent another exogenous shock.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have defined political trust and discussed some of the merits and shortcomings of the measure that survey researchers use to tap it. Certainly the former outweigh the latter. I have also tracked changes in political trust over time, identifying the factors that have caused it to vary. While most tend to think that political trust started its downward movement due to the deepening morass in Vietnam, I show that this is not the case. Instead, the higher expectations created by the expansion of government's reach in the early Great Society years is a more plausible root cause. The priming theory outlined in this chapter suggests that the redistributive programs created and expanded during the Great Society have become the new criteria that people use to evaluate the government. Since these programs are not particularly popular and people overestimate their cost, government has become less popular. Consistent with the theory, the federal government became more trustworthy to the public after September 11 as the criteria used to evaluate it turned to foreign and domestic security.

Perhaps most importantly, political trust's decline over time has been substantial. Between 1964 and 1994, trust had dropped by more than 30 percent. This provides some evidence that the change in trust has been large enough to effect a fundamental change in public policy outcomes between the 1960s and 1990s. While this review of trust's causes is important, it leaves unanswered an even more important question: what does it matter? I devote the balance of this book to understanding what effect declining political trust has had on American politics since the 1960s.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Political Trust and the Demise
of Health Care Reform

ON AUGUST 9, 1994, Minority Leader Bob Dole (R-Kans.) took to the Senate floor to debate Bill Clinton's health care reform plan. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) had recently forwarded to Dole a constituent letter, and Dole read from it at length.

Recently my 10-year-old son was the victim of a near-drowning. Thanks to the intervention of people at the scene, he survived the initial incident and was transported to a nearby hospital where he received superb care and treatment, was stabilized and then sent to Children's Hospital in Boston, about an hour away from where we were. With God's help and the outstanding care and treatment that he received in the intensive care unit at Children's, my son is awake, alert and sitting up in his room, surviving with virtually all his physical and mental faculties intact.

After the initial crisis had passed, I sat in quiet reflection over the entire episode, and it dawned on me with chilling clarity that had the Clinton health plan been in effect, the outcome could have been drastically different. In the scheme of things that the president proposed, we would not have been able to send our son to Boston. We would have been relegated to some other hospital, if any. And the penalty for going against the plan would be a \$10,000 fine and possible jail sentence.

I have no feelings of rancor; just fear that events could have been taken out of my control and put in the hands of some unseen, uncaring, bean-counting bureaucrat whose only concern was compliance to a government policy that only leads to mundane mediocrity.

The choice comes down to a simple question. If you were in my place, would you want the freedom to determine your child's care and outcome, or would you rather be forced to accept what the government will give you?

Dole concluded his remarks by asserting that politics in Washington boiled down to this decision. How intrusive would an incompetent government be in the lives of ordinary Americans? When presented this way, it is little wonder Clinton's health care plan met with a decisive defeat in Congress and, soon after, the Republicans assumed the majority in both houses of Congress for the first time in nearly 50 years.

As an opponent of the Clinton plan, Dole was smart to couch his objections in antigovernment terms. In doing so, he caused people to think about health care reform in terms of how they felt about government. And, in 1994, those feelings were particularly negative, with political distrust at its highest point since public opinion polls began tracking it in the 1950s—even higher than during Vietnam, Watergate, or Jimmy Carter's crisis of confidence. Dole's statement was neither partisan, nor ideological. It was simply anti-Washington. Carried out by "[u]nseen, uncaring, bean-counting" bureaucrats, policies featuring government involvement inevitably lead to "mundane mediocrity." Moreover, these allegedly poorly administered, wasteful policies often demand that citizens who are content with the status quo make large sacrifices for others. Such policies demand that the public have at least a moderate amount of political trust. Given the opinion environment in 1994, the Clinton proposal was doomed to failure.

In this chapter, I track how public opinion turned against health care reform and outline the various modes of attack used against it. I demonstrate that the key to its defeat was that the public came to identify it too closely with the federal government. I next show which strategies used by opponents caused people to think about health care reform in this way. Many attempted to paint the plan as ideologically extreme or too closely identified with a flawed president, but such attacks did not work. Instead, appeals tying the reform effort to people's distrust of government drove public perceptions of the plan outside the mainstream. Moreover, not only did decreasing political trust defeat health care reform, it was instrumental in bringing about the Republican sweep of the House just months later, which, in turn, fundamentally changed elite dialogue about what government might hope to accomplish.

ATTACKING HEALTH CARE REFORM

Bob Dole, of course, was not alone in attacking the Clinton health care initiative by attacking Washington. Most notably, the Health Insurance Association of America, a trade association representing the interests of the nation's health insurance providers, spent more than \$10 million on their Harry and Louise television ads, using themes similar to Dole's. Harry and Louise were two 40-something white yuppies who apparently spent their days studying and discussing the potential effects of the Clinton health care reform initiative.

In March 1994, the following ad began airing, mostly on CNN and in large eastern media markets.

Setting: A living room. Louise is on the couch reading a paperback version of an early draft of the Clinton plan. Harry has just sent teen son Matt off to do homework after a basketball game.

Harry: Health care reform again, huh?

Louise: This plan forces us to buy our insurance through these new mandatory government health alliances.

Harry: Run by tens of thousands of new bureaucrats.

Louise: Another billion-dollar bureaucracy.

Harry: You know, we just don't need government monopolies to get health coverage to everyone.

Like Dole's letter, this ad attacks inefficient government bureaucracy. Worse, according to Harry and Louise, Clinton-style health care reform would increase by tens of thousands of new employees the size of what most Americans perceive to be an already bloated federal bureaucracy.

A second Harry and Louise spot, which invoked both bureaucratic incompetence and the need for sacrifice under the Clinton plan, began airing about the same time.

Announcer: The government may force us to pick from a few health care plans designed by government bureaucrats.

Louise: Having choices we don't like is no choice at all.

Harry: They choose.

Louise: We lose.

Even if they regularly choose the same options, Americans still love their choices whether it be McDonalds or Burger King, Coke or Pepsi, or a menu of potential doctors. By advising viewers that those presently happy with their coverage might forfeit the right to make such choices, Harry and Louise make clear that some people will have to make sacrifices under the Clinton reform plan. According to my theory about political trust and policy preferences, this tactic should make how much people trust the government very influential in deciding whether they support or oppose this new government initiative, good news for Clinton's opponents, with trust at its lowest point ever.

Although most Americans never saw these ads when they aired because media buys were concentrated in the Washington–New York corridor, they learned of them through the news media. After Hillary Clinton assailed the ads as “cynical distortions,” they became fair game for review, providing them added publicity. Similar to George Bush's Willie Horton ad in 1988 and Lyndon Johnson's Daisy ad in 1964, both of which aired infrequently (the Daisy ad only once), Harry and Louise received most of their attention through discussion by political elites. Such elite-level

discussion not only provides the ads free air time, it also increases their credibility (Jamieson 1992).

The Harry and Louise ads were only a small part of a bigger effort to discredit health care reform. By one estimate, opponents spent more money attempting to defeat the Clinton plan in 1994 than all three major presidential candidates did running for election in 1992 (Johnson and Broder 1996). These efforts were stunningly successful. Prior to the campaign against the Clinton plan, taxpayer-funded systems of various sorts consistently registered better than 55 percent support from the public and often higher than 60 percent (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). The Clinton plan, specifically, enjoyed 60 percent support when launched in September 1993, maintaining similar backing as late as February 1994. Harry and Louise came on the scene in March, and, by July, support had dried up considerably, with only 40 percent supporting the Clinton proposal. As one might expect, the percentage of Americans expressing opposition also jumped during this period, from 33 percent in September 1993 to 56 percent in July 1994 (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000).

While the numbers clearly demonstrate that the attacks took their toll, less clear is *why* these attacks worked so well. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the attacks, many Americans began to perceive that the core problem with health care reform was an overreliance on government. Larry Jacobs and Robert Shapiro (2000) show that, in the first months of 1994, 40 percent of Americans feared it would involve government too much. By April, this percentage had increased to 47, an enormous change in such a short period. Although survey organizations stopped asking this question in April, this number likely jumped much higher as the summer progressed and support waned.

In short, concerns about big government appear to be the root cause of public dissatisfaction with Clinton-style health care reform. As opponents framed their attacks in antigovernment terms, people began to evaluate the president's plan in terms of their negative feelings about the federal government. The defeat of health care reform is a textbook example of how to use public distrust of government to undermine public support for a new government-run program.

THE HEALTH CARE REFORM DEBATE OF 1994

While political trust was important in the attack on the Clinton plan, opponents did more than bash the government. Amy Fried and Douglas Harris (2001) analyzed the debate about health care reform in the *Congressional Record*, finding that attacks were essentially three-pronged. The most common set of criticisms involved big government, including refer-

ences to "health care bureaucrats," "Washington bureaucrats," and "government-run health care." Opponents implied that big government had proven in other areas to be more a hindrance than a solution, so its involvement in health care might jeopardize the availability and quality of present services.

Moreover, opponents using the antigovernment approach suggested that those who were satisfied with their insurance would have to make sacrifices. For example, the Harry and Louise ads said that, under the Clinton plan, people would face a limited choice of providers and might not be able use their present family doctors. Others claimed that the Clinton plan would ration health care, such that services would at best be delayed and at worst denied. Based on my theory about the importance of trust when people are asked to make sacrifices, such attacks should make political trust influential.

According to Fried and Harris (2001), the second prong of the attack was ideological. Opponents used terms like "socialized medicine," "a socialistic system," "overly liberal," "embarrassingly liberal," and various derivatives to criticize the plan. Those employing this approach commonly likened the Clinton plan to the British and Canadian systems.

Critics using this tack were trying to take advantage of what they perceived to be a conservative turn in the public's ideology. Given the success of George H. W. Bush in 1988 and subsequent Republican candidates who saddled their opponents with the liberal label, engaging ideology seemed like a winning strategy as well. Even if Americans were not becoming significantly more ideologically conservative, opponents could still be successful if they could increase the importance of ideology in people's minds. Ever since the NES started asking the public about ideology in 1972, conservatives have always outnumbered liberals, so simply activating conservatism could potentially defeat the Clinton plan.

Finally, the third prong of the attack attempted to tie Bill Clinton's personal unpopularity to the reform effort. By painting Clinton as personally flawed, opponents hoped that people would view his plan as flawed. This approach made good sense, too. Although presidents usually enjoy a honeymoon period that lasts several months at the beginning of their presidency, Clinton was less popular than his predecessors from the time he took office. In the months between the introduction of the health care reform package in September 1993 and its defeat in September 1994, Clinton's average monthly approval rating from the Gallup Organization never rose above 55 percent. Worse, every month after the public met Harry and Louise, it fell below 50 percent. Since Clinton was less popular than his reform plan was originally, tying him to it could also erode support for it.

TABLE 7.1

Perceived Position of the Democratic Party, Democratic Presidents, Democratic Presidential Candidates, and People's Self-Placement on NES Health Insurance Scale, 1970-96

	<i>Democratic Party</i>	<i>Democratic President</i>	<i>Democratic Presidential Candidate</i>	<i>Self-Placement</i>
1970	3.17			3.87
1972	3.14		2.77	3.87
1976	2.90		2.98	3.95
1978	3.17	3.40		3.86
1984				3.98
1988	3.30		3.12	3.84
1992			3.40	
1994	2.71	2.26		4.00
1996		2.91	2.91	3.95

Source: American National Election Study, Cumulative File, 1948-2000.

This avalanche of negative rhetoric about the plan had the desired effect. One manifestation was that people began to perceive Bill Clinton as strongly favoring government involvement in health care, a striking change relative to the recent past. Table 7.1 tracks where Americans, on average, perceived the Democratic Party and their standard-bearer on national health insurance from the question's introduction in 1970 through 1996, along with where they placed themselves on the issue. The text of the question used by the NES is the following:

There is much concern about the rapid rise in medical and hospital costs. Some people feel there should be a government insurance plan which would cover all medical expenses for everyone. Others feel that all medical expenses should be paid by individuals, and through private insurance plans like Blue Cross or other company paid plans. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?

People are asked to place themselves and relevant political actors on a seven-point scale ranging from 1, a government insurance plan, to 7, a private insurance plan. Unfortunately, the NES failed to ask this question about either Clinton or the Democrats in 1992.

In the early 1970s, George McGovern's very liberal campaign clearly moved perceptions of Democrats to the left. In fact, public perceptions of the Democratic Party moved just over a quarter point toward the liberal pole of the scale between 1970, the election year before McGovern won the presidential nomination, and 1976. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, however, Americans saw the Democratic Party and its presidential candidates as only slightly left of center, just as they do for most other issues. The key word here is *slightly*. Not once during this period did the public view either a Democratic president, a Democratic presidential candidate, or the Democratic Party itself as much as a single point from the scale's midpoint.

This all began to change in the early 1990s. In 1994, Americans, on average, perceived Clinton at 2.26 on the scale, nearly a full point more progovernment than they perceived Dukakis in 1988, when he ran, in part, on a platform advocating universal health insurance. In fact, the public viewed Bill Clinton as a half point more liberal than they did George McGovern in 1972. Given that the average American's opinion on health insurance was exactly at the midpoint in 1994, perceptions of the president as extremely progovernment represented terrible news for his health insurance reform plan.

Public opinion about Clinton's position on health care is even more striking when viewed relative to perceptions of other presidents on other issues. Since 1970, the NES has asked respondents regularly where they perceive the president on a range of seven-point issue scales including defense spending, cooperation with the former Soviet Union, a woman's proper role in society, aid to blacks, the proper level of government services and spending, and, of course, health insurance. According to the NES Cumulative File, only Ronald Reagan on defense spending in 1982 and 1986 registered perceptions as far from the scale's midpoint as Bill Clinton did on health insurance in 1994.

Why did people see Clinton as so progovernment? Just like Reagan and defense spending, part of the explanation is grounded in reality. Clinton's plan did, in fact, provide the government with a more important role in the provision of health care than it presently had. However, private insurance companies would have continued to play a central role, much to the dismay of those on the left. The Clinton plan was certainly not a centralized health care system modeled on the Canadian or British system. Moreover, Americans are notoriously bad at correctly perceiving political reality. For example, only 40 percent of Americans knew that Republicans had the majority in both houses of Congress in 1995.

More important than reality is what people perceive reality to be. Attacks on the health plan were designed to cause people to perceive reality in a certain way. Whether it was by calling it too bureaucratic, too liberal,

or too closely identified with an unpopular president, opponents were trying to paint the Clinton plan as outside the mainstream. And, of course, they succeeded.

HEALTH CARE REFORM AND POLITICAL TRUST

Rather than causing people to change their opinions through the sheer force of argument, political rhetoric is more often designed to make certain attitudes more salient when people are forming their opinions. This, in turn, affects the opinions that they ultimately arrive at. Since elites know that people carry around certain political predispositions in their heads, they use rhetoric to encourage them to think in terms of the predispositions most advantageous to their cause.

For example, consider the 1992 presidential election. Since he presided over the end of the Cold War and victory in the first Persian Gulf War, George H. W. Bush would have been greatly advantaged if the public evaluated the race in terms of defense and foreign policy. With the economy battling to emerge from recession, he would have been disadvantaged if the public evaluated the race in terms of economic growth. In the end, the economy became a more salient consideration to voters than was foreign policy, leading to Bush's defeat.

To the degree that attacks against the health plan were effective, then, it is because opponents placed the desired predispositions on the tops of people's heads when they responded to Clinton's health care reform plan. References to the problems of big government were designed to raise the importance of political trust, thus increasing its weight in evaluating health care reform. References to hyperliberalism and socialism were designed to make people think in ideological and partisan terms, causing people to weight them more heavily. And attacks on Clinton personally were designed to make personal assessments of the president more influential. To the extent that these things happened or failed to happen, a given strategy was more or less effective. I show below that the ability of opponents to make people think about health care reform in terms of how they felt about the federal government was the key to defeating the initiative.

EXPLAINING PERCEPTIONS OF BILL CLINTON ON HEALTH INSURANCE

While it would be ideal for a survey organization to have asked people in September 1994 whether they supported or opposed the Clinton plan, how much they trusted the government, how conservative they were, how

Republican they were, and whether or not they approved of the president, no such survey exists. I have to rely on the 1994 NES, administered mostly in November, to assess the effect of each of the rhetorical strategies.

The NES did not ask people specifically whether they supported or opposed the Clinton plan. Instead, they asked people where they perceived Clinton on the seven-point health insurance scale described above. Specifically, respondents were asked to place Clinton between “a government insurance plan” at the one pole and “a private insurance plan” at the other. Since his plan failed because people came to see it as relying too much on government (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), I need to explain why people came to identify Clinton so closely with a government run insurance plan. Hence, the dependent variable for this analysis is how far from the midpoint of the scale that people perceived Bill Clinton on health care. I calculate this by taking the absolute value of 4 minus people’s placement of Clinton. There were a handful of people who placed Clinton to the right of center on this issue. Since they did not view Clinton as too progovernment, I code them as 0. This means that larger numbers correspond to more progovernment perceptions of Clinton.

Political trust should help explain these perceptions. I use the same political trust measure that I have used throughout the book. Similar to previous chapters, I must also account for other potential explanations, so as not to provide trust with too much credit. Since Fried and Harris (2001) suggested that many of the attacks on the plan were ideological, I include conservatism in the model as well. Moreover, since most of these attacks came from Republican partisans, I include the usual measure of partisanship. Conservatives and Republicans should both be more likely to view Clinton as more progovernment than liberals and Democrats, respectively.

Opponents also attacked Clinton personally. Hence, whether or not someone reports approving of the president should also be influential. Those who disapprove should be more inclined to respond to the charges against the plan and, hence, perceive Clinton as more progovernment than those who approve. In addition, I include a variable that asks people whether or not they believe they can afford health insurance. Those who do not feel that they can afford insurance may be more sympathetic to the Clinton plan and, as a result, see him as less progovernment.

I must also account for cognitive ability and social characteristics. Much research demonstrates that those who know more about politics tend to place political figures toward the poles of seven-point scales (e.g. Krosnick 1991). The reason is simple. Those who do not know much about politics tend to choose the midpoint rather than saying they do not know, whereas those who know more about politics realize that political figures generally have a position different from the midpoint. I also include the same battery of social characteristics used in the previous chapters to make the

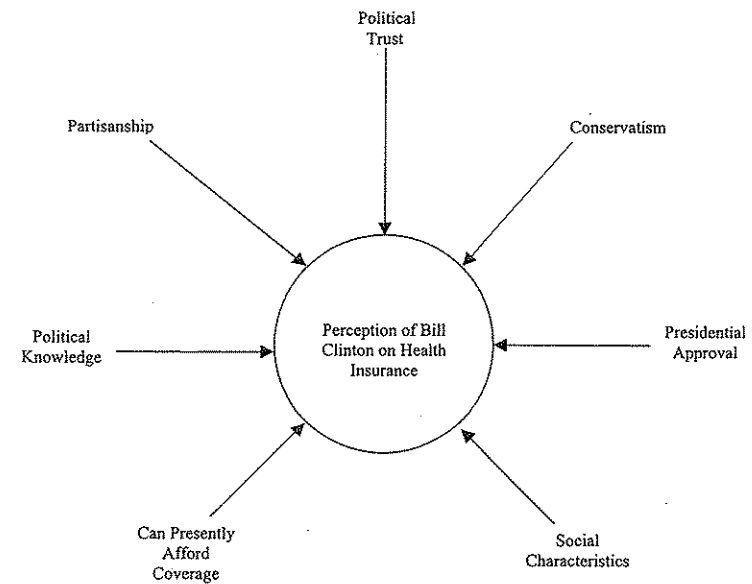


Figure 7.1. Perceptions of Bill Clinton on Health Insurance as a Function of Political Distrust, Other Symbolic Attitudes, Ability to Afford Health Insurance, and Social Characteristics.

estimates of the substantive variables more secure. Figure 7.1 summarizes the model graphically.

As I have done throughout, I map all the variables onto (0, 1) intervals to simplify the interpretation of the effects. So as not to confuse the reader, doing this means that a one-point change on the seven-point health insurance scale described above corresponds to a change of .166 (1/6) points after I have mapped it on a (0, 1) interval.

DATA

I use data gathered by the NES in 1988, 1994, and 1996. I am most interested in the 1994 data. These will bear most strongly on the reasons that the Clinton plan failed, given that the surveys were administered only two months after the plan’s demise. To assess how 1994 was different, I use data from the most recent NES survey before 1994 that asked respon-

TABLE 7.2
Difference in Mean Perception of Democratic Standard-Bearer's Position on Government-Sponsored Health Care by Political Trust, 1988, 1994, 1996

Year	At or above Trust Midpoint	Below Trust Midpoint	Difference (below - above)
1988	.408	.411	.003
1994	.552	.673	.121
1996	.442	.486	.044

Source: American National Election Studies, 1988, 1994, 1996.

Note: Figures are means.

dents to place prominent Democrats on the health insurance scale (the 1988 study) and the one soonest after (the 1996 study). If one variable is particularly influential in 1994, but not in the other two years, it explains why opinion about Clinton was so different in 1994 from opinions about Democrats in other years.

RESULTS

I have argued that opponents tapped into Americans' distrust of government when they attacked Clinton's health care plan and noted the sacrifices inherent in it. The results in table 7.2 provide some preliminary evidence for my argument. I again divide the samples into two groups, those scoring at or above the political trust midpoint and those scoring below it. In 1994, there is a large difference between trusters and distrusters in how progovernment they viewed Clinton to be on the issue. On average, those scoring below the midpoint perceived Clinton at .673 on the scale, whereas those scoring at or above the midpoint perceived him at .552. I find no such differences in either 1988 perceptions of Dukakis or in 1996 perceptions of Clinton. Political distrust may have increased perceptions of Clinton as progovernment in 1994 but had no effect in other years, suggesting that opponents' antigovernment charges against the plan, which were present in 1994, but absent in other years, worked.

This evidence would be more compelling if the differences between trusters and distrusters persisted after accounting for other factors. Table 7.3 presents the results from the model depicted in figure 7.1. To review, the dependent variable here is how far from the midpoint people perceive the Democratic standard-bearer, Michael Dukakis in 1988 and Bill Clinton in 1994 and 1996, on health insurance. The results in the first and

TABLE 7.3
Perceptions of Clinton's Position on Government-Sponsored Health Care as a Function of Political Trust and Other Variables, 1988, 1994, 1996 (parameter estimates)

Variable	1988	1994	1996
Intercept	0.075 (0.047)	0.295*** (0.049)	0.130* (0.069)
Political trust	-0.030 (0.023)	-0.191*** (0.047)	0.070 (0.046)
Partisanship	0.104** (0.036)	0.092** (0.035)	0.080* (0.040)
Conservatism	0.180*** (0.058)	0.226*** (0.054)	0.237*** (0.061)
Presidential approval		-0.015 (0.023)	-0.095*** (0.028)
Age	-0.016 (0.056)	-0.003 (0.045)	-0.058 (0.048)
Race	-0.020 (0.035)	-0.062* (0.034)	0.049 (0.035)
Gender	-0.013 (0.023)	0.047** (0.020)	0.058** (0.021)
Education	-0.095* (0.049)	0.122*** (0.043)	0.052 (0.045)
Income	0.059 (0.050)	-0.020 (0.044)	0.037 (0.042)
Political knowledge	0.429*** (0.053)	0.295*** (0.043)	0.232*** (0.045)
Can afford health insurance		-0.001 (0.022)	
Adjusted R ²	.13	.14	.10
N	1,077	1,361	1,294

Source: American National Election Studies, 1988, 1994, 1996.

Note: Standard errors are given in parentheses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. One-tailed tests.

third columns of table 7.3 demonstrate that political trust did not contribute to people's perceptions in 1988 or 1996.

In 1994, however, political trust has a very large effect. Specifically, the negative sign means that the less trustful people are, the more progovernment they perceive Clinton to be, other things being equal. The estimated effect of .191 means that a person who is most distrustful perceives Clinton as 19 percent further from the center than someone who is most trustful.

Trust's effect is noteworthy for two reasons. First, its magnitude is large. Recall that a one-point change on the seven-point scale corresponds to a .166-point change on the (0, 1) scale, so an effect of .191 is quite substantial. Second, and more importantly, political trust only has an effect in 1994. This means that the antigovernment attacks did place political trust on the tops of people's heads when they were asked to think about Clinton and health insurance. When such rhetoric was absent from the information environment in 1988 and 1996, trust had no effect on perceptions.

In contrast, the other relevant variables generally exert about the same weight in each year under study. Take conservatism, for example. Its effect in 1988 was .180, in 1994 it was .226, and in 1996 it was .237. Since the 1994 effect is not much larger than in other years—indeed its effect was largest in 1996—the attacks stressing the plan's "extreme liberalism" or "socialistic" character failed to increase the weight that people placed on ideology. The personal attacks on Clinton were similarly ineffective. In fact, presidential approval is statistically insignificant in 1994 but significant in 1996, exactly the reverse pattern that one would expect if the personal attacks on Clinton had worked. In short, only the antigovernment messages had the desired effect.

In sum, by making political trust an important part of people's thinking at a time when Americans held the government in such low esteem, opponents of health care reform caused people to see Bill Clinton as a progovernment extremist. This, in turn, turned opinion against the initiative, ultimately leading to his most spectacular first-term defeat.

Trust and Perceived Sacrifice

Building on the theory and results presented in previous chapters, I argue trust exerts its influence among those who perceive that a government program will require sacrifice of them, but trust is less important among those who perceive that they will benefit. As a further test, I need to identify a characteristic that distinguishes those who perceived that the Clinton plan would require them to make a sacrifice from those who perceived they would benefit from it.

Fortunately, the NES asked people in 1994 whether or not they could afford health insurance. The Harry and Louise ads targeted people who

TABLE 7.4

Perceptions of Clinton's Position on Government-Sponsored Health Care with an Interaction between Political Trust and Sacrifice, 1994

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Parameter Estimate (SE)</i>
Political trust	0.007 (0.082)
Can afford health insurance	0.050 (0.028)
Political trust × Can afford health insurance	−0.289** (0.098)

Source: American National Election Studies, 1994.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. One-tailed tests.

believed they could afford it under the present system. If they could be convinced that they would have to make sacrifices under the Clinton plan, such as a reduction in services or choice or an increase in costs to help pay for the presently uninsured, their support would likely decrease. In contrast, those who say they cannot afford insurance are more likely to perceive themselves beneficiaries. At a minimum, they should be unlikely to perceive that they would need to make a sacrifice because they are not particularly happy with the present situation. Political trust should influence perceptions among those who say they can afford insurance (those making the sacrifice), but not among those who say they cannot (the potential beneficiaries).

To test this hypothesis, I add to my model an interaction between political trust and the respondent's statement on whether s/he can afford health insurance. If the sacrifice hypothesis is correct, the effect of political trust alone should be insignificant, indicating that it has no effect among those who cannot afford health insurance under the present system. However, the interaction between trust and whether a person can afford health insurance should be negatively signed and statistically significant, indicating that trust's effect is large among those who say they can afford it.

The results in table 7.4, which are presented graphically in figure 7.2, confirm my expectations.¹ The line reflecting those who say they can afford health insurance is quite steep and negatively sloped, meaning that progovernment perceptions of Clinton decrease markedly as people become more politically trustful. For example, a person who scores most distrustful on the political trust scale perceives Clinton as 28 percent closer to the government-run health care pole than a person who scores most trustful, which is more than a quarter of the scale's range. In contrast, the

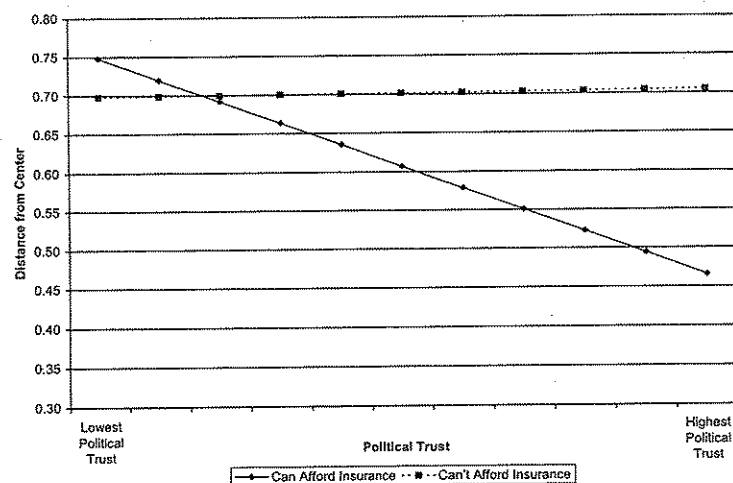


Figure 7.2. The Effect of Political Trust on Distance People Perceive Clinton from Center on Government-Sponsored Health Insurance, 1994.

line reflecting those who say they cannot afford health insurance is flat. Among these people, political trust tells us nothing about where they perceive Clinton.

I should also note that the effect of political trust among those making a sacrifice is enormous compared with the other variables. Trust's estimated effect in table 7.3 is .191, but this is an average effect for everyone in the sample, both those who perceive they will be making a sacrifice and those who perceive they will benefit. Since trust should only influence the opinions of the sacrificers, the average effect for the entire sample understates its effect for the sacrificers because the average includes the effect for beneficiaries as well, which is 0. When one focuses only on the sacrificers, trust's effect of .289 is far larger than any of the other variables in the model except for political knowledge, a remarkable finding.

The Implications of Health Care Reform's Defeat

Politics changed fundamentally after the effort to reform health care died. As Theda Skocpol (1996, 6) observed,

Within weeks after the demise of health care reform the Democratic Party—legatee of the very New Deal whose achievements Clinton had hoped to imitate

TABLE 7.5
The Effect of Political Trust on Congressional Voting, 1992 versus 1994

	1992		1994	
	<i>Below Trust Midpoint</i>	<i>At or Above Trust Midpoint</i>	<i>Below Trust Midpoint</i>	<i>At or Above Trust Midpoint</i>
Voted for Democratic House candidate	58.37%	63.76%	41.11%	61.54%
Voted for Republican House candidate	41.63%	36.24%	58.89%	38.46%
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: American National Election Studies, 1992, 1994.

and extend—lay in shambles. Voters went to the polls on November 8, 1994, and registered widespread victories for Republicans running for state legislatures, for Republican gubernatorial candidates, for Republican Senate candidates, and—most remarkably—for Republican House candidates, who took control of that chamber after four full decades of continuous Democratic ascendancy. . . . The breadth and depth of the Republican victories seemed to render President Clinton an irrelevant lame duck for the remaining two years of his first term.

In addition to defeating health care reform, political trust was also a key element in the Republican sweep of the House. The results in table 7.5 make this clear. In 1992, whether or not a person trusted the government told us very little about how s/he voted in that year's House races. Those scoring below the trust midpoint provided 58 percent support to Democratic candidates while those scoring at or above the midpoint provided 64 percent support, a difference of only 6 percentage points. The distribution is markedly different in 1994. While better than 62 percent of those with a lot of government trust still voted for Democratic House candidates, only 41 percent of those with trust scores below the midpoint did. In other words, Republican support among distrusters was a whopping 21 percent higher than among trusters. Since the vast majority of respondents score below the trust midpoint, the advantage Republicans enjoyed because of the politicization of political trust was enormous.

Furthermore, the Republicans who rode the health care debacle to office were not old-style northeastern moderates. They were firebrand conservatives molded in the image of Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and his Contract with America. As a result, "[C]ongressional and public debates about government moved sharply to the right. Debates henceforth fo-

cused on *how* to reduce federal spending and balance the budget, whether to eliminate or merely sharply cut social programs. The focus of attention is no longer on how to create or even sustain national guarantees of security for the American citizenry" (Skocpol 1996, 7).

The campaign dialogue from the 2000 presidential election reflects the change. Democrat Al Gore was the deficit hawk, promising fiscal prudence over the expansion of government programs. Although the budget surpluses produced by the Clinton years provided great opportunities for activist government, Gore promised substantial tax cuts, albeit not as large as those proposed by George W. Bush. Though the health care problem increased unabated through the 1990s such that more than 40 million Americans had no medical insurance, Gore stopped well short of promising universal coverage, offering instead an incremental plan that would have initially covered only children. In fact, he painted his primary opponent, Senator Bill Bradley (D-N.J.), who advocated full coverage for all Americans, in much the same colors that the insurance industry painted Bill Clinton six years earlier.

For his part, Clinton never again proposed a government program of significant scope directed toward those near the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Instead, he seemed content to bolster his personal popularity by picking off some of the Republicans most politically popular ideas, such as supporting school uniforms, the V-chip to allow parents to block television shows with mature themes, and putting tens of thousands of new police on the streets.

Hoping to shore up his reelection prospects in 1996, Clinton also took his most decisive step, backing a welfare reform effort considered draconian by many on the political left. Although Clinton promised to "end welfare as we know it" in his first run for the White House, liberal Democrats surely did not think he would go as far as he did. The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 terminated AFDC as a federal program, with typically less generous state governments left in charge of deciding benefit levels. Among the provisions, able-bodied recipients of public assistance would be removed from the rolls after five years (individual states can mandate a shorter period if they choose) whether or not they had young children. Even single parents with children under six were required to have a 20-hour per week job within two years of receiving assistance, with the work requirement increasing to 30 hours per week in fiscal year 2000.² Clinton-style welfare reform can only be considered a serious assault on Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

Likely thinking that public opinion had turned to the ideological right, Clinton himself turned to the right. A quick jog to the right would have been sufficient to bring policy in line with the low levels of trust that characterized this period. But as the economy grew, political trust in-

creased through the rest of the 1990s. With conservatism constant and trust increasing, Clinton did not have to continue his move to the right. The leeway that higher levels of trust provide would have allowed him to pursue a more progressive public policy course during his second term. Since he and his advisors misinterpreted the change in public opinion as ideological, Clinton missed this golden opportunity.

CONCLUSION

I have shown in this chapter that a key reason for the failure of Bill Clinton's health care initiative was that people came to see him as too liberal on the issue. Of even greater consequence, people came to perceive him as too liberal because opponents of health care reform caused people to think about the Clinton plan in terms of how much they trusted the government. In 1994, but not in other years, those who were more distrustful perceived Clinton as more progovernment than those who were more trustful. While opponents also tried to engage people's ideology and their feelings about Clinton, they were only successful in engaging their distrust. With trust so low in 1994, however, this was sufficient to seal the fate of health care reform.

Providing further evidence for the theory presented throughout the book, trust was particularly influential among those who were relatively satisfied with the present medical insurance system. In 1994, political trust had a larger effect on this group's opinions than any other substantive variable. Also consistent with my theory, political trust had no effect among those who thought they might benefit from a new health care initiative. People only need to trust when they are making the sacrifices, not reaping the benefits.

These results are significant because Bill Clinton took a significant turn to the right after health care reform died in Congress. He had good reason to think that a right turn was a good idea, especially after his party lost control of both houses of Congress little more than a month after Sen. George Mitchell (D-Maine), the majority leader and major Clinton proponent on health care reform, declared the effort dead. There is no question that perceptions of Clinton's excesses on health care reform led to the sweeping Republican victory in 1994. As I have shown in this chapter, the main reason that people came to perceive Clinton as excessive on health care was because opponents of the reform effort activated the public's low levels of political trust.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Political Trust and the Future
of American Politics

IN THE MID-1960s, most Americans supported government programs designed to benefit those who were the object of racial discrimination and the less well off and believed the programs would work. According to a September 1964 poll taken by Gallup, twice as many Americans approved of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as disapproved.¹ In August 1965, a solid plurality of Americans believed that the Johnson administration's War on Poverty would help wipe out poverty in the United States.² Americans trusted that the federal government would make judicious use of their tax dollars and be fair in its efforts to end discrimination between the races. Although support for redistributive spending and race-targeted policies was far from universal even in the Great Society years, it was sufficiently robust that Lyndon Johnson could pursue one of the most progressive public policy agendas in the nation's history.

Over the last 40 years, Americans have come to trust their government less, a change that has had far-reaching consequences. Most importantly, it has placed enormous constraints on progressives. In the aggregate, I have shown an impressive fit between how much Americans trust government and the liberalness of policy enacted by political elites. Politicians over the last 40 years have shown an uncanny ability to match how much government they give people with how much government people want, as manifested in their trust in government. Political trust provides a useful shorthand for elites because ordinary Americans have a much easier time articulating their feelings about government than their complicated and often contradictory ideological predispositions.

In addition, I have shown how this mechanism works on the individual level. Many liberal public policies require that the many make at least perceived sacrifices for the few. From the perspective of those making the sacrifices, moreover, such programs may carry perceived risk as well, such as when the sacrificers do not think highly of the beneficiaries of a government program. When the public does not trust that government will implement such policies efficiently or fairly, people will prefer that government not be involved. That is why political trust is only important in explaining the policy preferences of individuals who perceive that a policy requires a sacrifice or entails risk. This is important because programs that

many perceive require sacrifice of them are the only ones for which public support has dried up considerably over the last 30 years.

Decreasing trust in government over the last two generations has undermined public support for federal programs like welfare, food stamps, and foreign aid, not to mention the entire range of race-targeted programs designed to make equality between the races a reality. Even though almost all Americans would like to rid the country of poverty and achieve greater racial equality, many do not trust the government enough to support the programs designed to realize these goals.

Even initiatives like health care reform, which are less obviously redistributive and certainly not as racialized, require trust in government to maintain support. At least this is true when opponents argue that reform will mean more government and will require sacrifice of those satisfied with the present system. Although a significant revival in political trust between 1994 and 2002 has put this issue back on the agenda for the 2004 presidential election, the failure of the Clinton reform effort suggests little or no change will occur in this or other similar policy areas unless the post-1994 increase in trust can be maintained. Given that both health care costs and the number of uninsured continue to grow, the fact that people will not support reform efforts that include government as a major player may become a problem of great consequence.

While most political commentators attribute the move to the right in American politics to a conservative turn in public opinion, this is not so. No matter the measure of ideology, I find no evidence of an ideological right turn. Moreover, if the public's ideological preferences had moved to the right, it would have caused increased support for limited government in almost all areas, something that has simply not occurred. While widespread public distrust favors the policy agenda of conservatives, it should not be confused with conservatism.

It should be troubling that at least part of the decline in political trust rests on misperceptions of political reality. While the federal government certainly wastes some percentage of tax dollars (the best estimates are below 5 percent), the percentage does not approach the average of nearly 50 percent that the public perceives. A relentlessly negative news media, which focuses far too heavily on the anomalous cases of waste, fraud, and abuse, bears much of the blame for this set of circumstance (see, for example, Patterson 1993; Capella and Jamieson 1997). Unfortunately, journalistic norms about what makes a good story ensure that this type of reporting will continue in the future.

More troubling is the degree to which Americans misperceive what government does, which also has a deleterious effect on political trust. Even though foreign aid and classic welfare programs combine to make up less than 10 percent of the federal budget, nearly half the public believes that

one or the other is the single biggest item. Fewer than 15 percent of Americans correctly identify Social Security as the costliest federal program. These misperceptions have important consequences. I demonstrated in chapter 2 that, when asked to evaluate the federal government, people have on their mind "people on welfare," who receive relatively little from the government, but not "older people" or "the elderly," who receive quite a lot. Since most people would rather help older people than people on welfare, trust in government would increase markedly if the news media, in conjunction with political leaders, made a concerted effort to educate the public about what the government actually spends its money on. Support for redistributive, racial, and foreign aid programs would increase markedly as a result.

It is also interesting to note how inextricably political trust is tied to race. The results from chapter 2 and chapter 4 demonstrate that declining political trust in the late 1960s and early 1970s was, in part, the result of Americans' dissatisfaction with specific racial policies like busing and the government's more general efforts to integrate public schools and to provide aid to blacks. Thirty years later, trust and race are still joined, but in a different causal way. Now, in addition to low levels of trust undermining public support for race-targeted policies among whites, the results in chapter 5 demonstrate that antiblack stereotypes increase the negative effect that political trust has on whites' support for racialized redistributive programs, such as welfare and food stamps. If all whites thought well of African-Americans, political trust's effect on support for redistribution (and also the range of explicitly race targeted policies) would be minimal, which would increase support for these programs substantially in this environment with low political trust.

These results carry normative weight as well. In the case of poverty and race, for example, no institution or set of institutions other than the federal government has confronted these issues in a sustained and meaningful way. Perhaps in a perfect world, churches, volunteer organizations, and private enterprise could end poverty. But, in twenty-first-century America, none have the resources, or are willing to commit the resources, to even begin to play such a role. Similarly, some of the progress on school integration that was made between the 1960s and 1980s has been lost in the past decade. Although Americans express increasing concern about school integration, they are not particularly supportive of the federal government playing a role to ensure it. Since the recent return to segregation has been centered in the South and in the suburbs, it seems unlikely that any institution other than the federal government is positioned to confront this problem. Given that easily identifiable groups are disproportionately damaged by the present antiredistribution, anti-race policy political agenda—an agenda that has been fueled by declining political trust—the loss of

political trust since the 1960s presents a threat to the representativeness of American political institutions.

POLITICAL TRUST AND POLITICAL ELITES

While this study has focused on mass behavior, declining political trust's effect on elite behavior is important, too, because it will further influence mass attitudes. When trust in government was high, progressives like John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, and Robert F. Kennedy were willing to lead public opinion on initiatives that benefited racial minorities and the poor. Their leadership was critically important. As Carmines and Stimson (1989) demonstrate, public support for civil rights increased most steeply *after* the Democratic Party signaled to its identifiers that they should support it. It is rare for the public to embrace a policy course that a solid core of elites does not first embrace.

As people's opinions of the federal government have soured, opinion leadership for progressive ideas has started to carry greater risk. Elites know that their support of government and its programs will draw the fire of opportunistic opponents. By advocating "big government" solutions, they will find themselves on the defensive, fighting an uphill battle to convince people that the institutions that they find untrustworthy are, in fact, trustworthy. Hence it is politically risky to tell Americans that government can play a constructive role in solving the country's social ills. Political elites too closely identified with government may pay for it with their jobs.

The rhetorical differences among Democrats of the last 40 years provide evidence that they realize these constraints. In his 1964 State of the Union Address, Johnson said, "This administration today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America." It is clear that the federal government will play a central role. In stark contrast, Jimmy Carter, in his 1978 State of the Union Address, said, "Government cannot eliminate poverty or provide a bountiful economy or reduce inflation or save our cities or cure illiteracy or provide energy." By arguing that government is incapable in a range of important tasks, Carter both reflects the extraordinary decline in public trust over the previous 15 years and reinforces it.

With hostility toward government and its social programs even higher in 1992 than it was in 1978, Bill Clinton ratcheted up the Democrats' rhetorical hostility during his first run for president when he promised to "end welfare as we know it," suggesting that he believed federal efforts to fight poverty had been a failure. Political elites on the left who once could be counted on to offer and support government efforts to aid those at the

bottom of the socioeconomic ladder had made a decisive move toward extricating the federal government from the poverty-solutions business.

Such a rhetorical shift has profound consequences. Even people who might be inclined to support the federal government's efforts will have a hard time finding elites to legitimize their position. If elites fail to express confidence that government can solve social problems, then ordinary Americans will reflect this lack of confidence. The cycle is difficult, if not impossible, to reverse. As political elites perceive less public trust in government and less support for government programs, they talk less positively about them. In fact, they may find it politically advantageous to attack them. Other things being equal, public support will deteriorate further, as potential supporters find it increasingly hard to locate an elite voice to legitimize their belief that government can play an effective role. Indeed, even the most dynamic economy of the last 50 years followed by the galvanizing effect of the September 11 terrorist attacks only increased political trust to levels consistent with the Nixon years, not the Johnson years.

In that sense, declining political trust has both a direct and an indirect effect on support for progressive public policy. I have demonstrated that lower levels of trust directly undermine public support for specific programs. But the indirect effects might be equally important. Fearing reprisal from the voters, elites do not have the courage to advocate aggressive federal involvement in social policy. Since the public does not receive many strong messages in support of federal social programs, it will support them less as well. Absent some exogenous shock that has a sustained effect on the political system, both political trust and support for government-sponsored social programs are likely to remain low, at least relative to the Great Society years. Although the jury is still out on the post-September 11 environment, the consistent decreases in trust soon after a threat or military action has ended suggests that it will not provide such a sustained change.

WHAT THE RIGHT SHOULD LEARN

The findings presented in this book provide generally good news for those on the political right. With concerns about foreign threats so intense and feelings about the military so favorable in a post-September 11 world, it is clear that political elites can increase political trust simply by focusing on foreign affairs and domestic security. In 2001–2, survey researchers recorded a spike in political trust right after the terrorist attacks and again right after the passage of a congressional resolution authorizing war in Iraq. Political trust also increased markedly in the months after the first Gulf War got under way in early 1991 (Hetherington and Nelson 2003).

These higher levels of trust can be of political consequence as well. Conservative hawks can use this reservoir of good feeling toward government to press their aims abroad. In 2002, the NES asked respondents whether they favored or opposed going to war with Iraq. Among those with trust scores at or above the midpoint, 72 percent favored military intervention, compared with only 57 percent among those with trust scores below the midpoint. Moreover, it is not just the greater public anxiety caused by September 11 that explains this relationship. Back in 1990, just before the beginning of the first Gulf War, the NES asked Americans whether they thought that President George H. W. Bush's decision to send troops to the Persian Gulf was the right thing to do. Again, trust in government was important in understanding opinions. Of those scoring at or above the trust midpoint, 72 percent supported Bush's decision, while only 45 percent of those scoring below the trust midpoint did.³ More trust increases support for military intervention.

The short-lived nature of the political trust rallies after September 11 and the second Gulf War suggests that the connection between trust and the welfare state will reemerge in the future, causing trust to drop again. Even so, a low-trust environment is still advantageous for those who want government to do less. While a conservative revolution would be better from the perspective of conservatives, a distrustful one is not bad. The Right has long fought against federal efforts at redistribution, has long argued for local control of racial matters, and has long opposed other efforts like the Clinton health care plan to extend the social safety net. Widespread political distrust aids these causes.

However, it is important that conservatives realize that political distrust does not advantage them in their efforts to trim all government programs. If they fail to connect government programs with the requirement that many people will have to make sacrifices for them, they will engage only conservatism. Since the majority of Americans are not conservative, such efforts will most often end in defeat.

The Republicans' mixed record after winning both houses of Congress in 1994 is instructive. In the months immediately after their victory, they did exceedingly well with the public, rendering President Clinton irrelevant in the eyes of some political commentators. They did this by implementing good-government reforms and railing against government excesses with a particular emphasis on redistribution. They lost their traction when they began to advocate things like eliminating the Department of Education, eliminating funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and slowing the growth of popular programs like Medicare. While former House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and his followers surely saw their stock rise among conservative ideologues, the politically distrustful became concerned that the Republicans would cut programs that they or

their parents would ultimately benefit from. Although most Americans do not want to spend tax money on welfare mothers, they do not mind paying for *Sesame Street*. As the outcome of the 1996 presidential election clearly demonstrated, the Republicans lost the battle when they moved to public policy areas on which distrust had no bearing.

George W. Bush's brand of "compassionate conservatism" provides a good mix for a politically distrustful electorate. Bush is certainly no friend of redistribution, having advocated and signed into law three sets of deep tax cuts that disproportionately favor upper-income Americans. These cuts greatly increased the size of the budget deficit, thereby reducing the amount of money government can spend on federal social programs. But he supports an increased government role in other areas where political trust has no effect on the public's policy preferences. For example, Bush proposes a larger federal role in education, especially in mandating that states impose achievement standards and testing regimes. In addition, rather than argue that Democrats are wrongheaded to advocate a prescription drug benefit for senior citizens, he proposed and actively worked to pass his own plan, albeit one less generous than Democratic initiatives and one that relies much more on the private insurance industry. In areas where the benefits of government programs will be distributed universally or nearly universally, Bush has generally supported at least the same amount of federal intervention. The one glaring exception is on the environment, an area where his administration received its most intense public criticism, especially in its early months.

A centerpiece of compassionate conservatism, Bush's faith-based initiative fits particularly well in a politically distrustful world. During the 2000 presidential campaign, Bush offered a plan to use federal money to help fund private, nonprofit, and church-based charitable services. Implicit in the plan is the notion that government has failed in its efforts to help those in need, whereas churches and community organizations have proven far more capable. Bush argues that, by using federal dollars, these types of organizations could increase their reach and effectiveness, doing more to solve social problems than government alone could.

The public has responded very favorably. Despite significant criticism from groups concerned about church and state separation, a solid majority of Americans continues to support faith-based antipoverty programs. For example, in July 2001, Opinion Dynamics asked a national sample the following question: "Based on what you know, do you support or oppose allowing government funds to be used by faith-based organizations, such as churches and synagogues, to deliver services to the needy?" Sixty-one percent of Americans registered support, and only 33 percent were opposed. Most Americans are so disenchanted with government that they are willing to move social services away from it, even if that might mean

violating constitutional restrictions on the relationship between government and religious organizations.

It is also important for conservatives to realize that their leadership prospects are, to some degree, limited by their own success. When people perceive that government is doing its job well, political trust tends to rise. But as I have shown throughout this book, increasing political trust increases the public's desire for liberal public policy, which is exactly the opposite of what conservatives want to offer. This public demand for more government is most often translated into an increase in the amount of liberal public policy enacted by officeholders. Indeed, even Ronald Reagan was forced to the left in his second term as political trust, and with it a liberal policy mood, increased.

George W. Bush and the 107th and 108th Congresses have pressed a very conservative policy course despite increasing levels of political trust. This carries a certain amount of risk. These higher levels of trust have led to more demand for government spending in many areas where Republicans are unlikely to want to spend. Between 2000 and 2002, the percentage of Americans who wanted to increase spending on federal welfare programs and on initiatives to aid blacks increased by 4 and 5 percentage points, respectively. Even more dramatically, the percentage who wanted cuts in these areas fell by 18 and 10 points, respectively. It is unclear whether conservative Republicans can continue to dominate the national government in the face of this opinion environment without at least a tack to the left to satisfy the public. Furthermore, any efforts to privatize programs like Medicare and Social Security are clearly risky initiatives. Support for both programs as they are presently administered has remained uniformly high over time. And even if political trust falls to never-before-seen lows, it will have no bearing on support for these universal programs. Should trust remain higher than it has through most of the last three decades and should conservatives continue to pursue a diminished role for the federal government, widespread voter anger and a backlash against the Right could be the result.

WHAT THE LEFT SHOULD LEARN

If progressives desire a change in the post-Watergate policy direction, they must start by finding a way to resuscitate the federal government's image. Although Americans are not well informed about politics, they do know enough to realize that the federal government is the root of federal programs. Hence, if they do not trust the federal government, they will want to limit the number, size, and scope of its programs. The key for the Left, then, is to take necessary steps to effect a sustained increase in political

trust. To do this, progressives must make efforts to redefine what government means in the public mind, have the courage to praise the things it does well, and fight the urge to criticize its unpopular elements for political gain. This is not to suggest a halt to criticism; such a strategy would neither be credible nor embody the progressive tradition. However, progressives should launch them judiciously because of the knowledge that such attacks will, at some level, undermine progressive policy goals in the future.

As I have noted, William Jacoby's (1994) work suggests that Americans do not associate government with many of the popular New Deal and Great Society programs. Instead they think about government in terms of unpopular redistributive programs like "welfare." This is because people wildly overestimate how much government spends on these programs. Those on the left must change this perception. The best way to do this is to redefine what "big government" means. The priming theory explicated in chapter 2 suggests that the criteria that people use to evaluate the government can change (see also Lock, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1999). The war on terrorism and the war in Iraq have recently imposed such a change. With a concerted effort, progressives can alter the criteria gradually over time onto the most favorable footing possible.⁴

If progressives provide an alternative vision of government as one that takes care of older Americans, protects the environment, builds highways, and the like, Americans will trust that version of government more than one that cannot police welfare cheats. By causing people to evaluate government on friendlier terms, political trust will increase, which, in turn, will increase support for social spending and race-targeted policies, too. In short, progressives need to change the information environment. They must provide some counterweight to, or perhaps even replace, Ronald Reagan's vision of government as something that spends most of its resources on welfare programs.

In addition, the increase in political trust caused by the greater emphasis on the military after September 11 should teach progressives that embracing patriotic symbols and a strong military is also helpful. Although social spending will have to compete with the military for scarce budgetary resources, connecting the government to the latter will almost certainly increase support for the former with the military now so popular. Indeed, the marked increase in support for various types of social spending recorded in the 2002 NES provides evidence. Progressive hawks have been few and far between since Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson's (D-Wash.) death in 1983. Progressives would benefit from such a symbolic attachment.

Consistent with this approach, progressives must also raise the profile of government's successes. Government efforts to aid older Americans provide an excellent example. No one would argue that programs like Social Security and Medicare have been anything but stunningly success-

ful in reducing poverty among the elderly. For example, a study performed by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that 47.6 percent of older Americans in 1997 had incomes below the poverty line before factoring in their Social Security benefits. With Social Security benefits included, however, only 11.9 percent fell below the poverty line. In terms of numbers of people, the study estimated that Social Security lifted 11.4 million out of poverty.⁵ Medicare has had similar benefits. Most consider these programs to be efficiently run, and they make up an enormous chunk of the budget. Proponents of an activist federal government should identify them as such. Moreover, such an effort would not be a cynical distortion. Progressives simply need to educate the public about what government really does. New Deal and Great Society programs actually did have some positive effects.

Recent Democrats have been too frightened to tell this story. Al Gore's presidential campaign provides a particularly fitting example. Recall that George W. Bush's most effective charge against the vice president was that Gore trusted the government while Bush trusted the people. It was a perfect chance for Gore to respond that he, too, trusted people more than government, but, of equal import, he believed that government accomplished a range of important tasks that almost all Americans support. In 1960, when Richard Nixon labeled John F. Kennedy a liberal, Kennedy defined what liberal meant by saying,

If by "liberal" they mean, as they want people to believe, someone who is soft in his policies abroad, who is against local government, and who is unconcerned with the taxpayer's dollar, then the record of this party and its members demonstrate that we are not that kind of "liberal." . . . If by a "liberal" they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people—their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties—someone who believes that we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad, if that is what they mean by a "liberal," then I'm proud to say that I'm a "liberal." (Dionne, November 1, 1988, A27)

Al Gore was no John Kennedy. Rather than defining what government meant to him, Gore attempted to counter Bush's charge by talking about how much more efficient he had made government through his Reinventing Government Commission. However, just as Republicans cannot argue that they care more than Democrats about the plight of the poor, Democrats cannot credibly argue that they are as opposed to government waste as Republicans are. Instead, the Left must associate government with popular, large-constituency programs in the public mind. The Right is much better at this kind of thing, successfully redefining global warming as climate

change and Social Security privatization as personal retirement accounts. Regarding what government is, the Left needs to play the same game.

Shmuel Lock, Robert Shapiro, and Lawrence Jacobs (1999) provide some empirical evidence that positive affect toward government might increase if the criteria for evaluation changed. They asked a random sample of Americans, first, how much confidence they had in the federal government in general, and followed this question with a battery of questions about people's confidence in the government's ability to run several specific programs, such as the military, Social Security, the environment, Medicare, and aid to poor families. In addition, they asked a different random sample the same set of questions, but they started by asking people's assessments of the government's ability to run the specific programs and, after that, asked the question about confidence in the government in general.⁶

When people received the question on general confidence in government first, the distribution of responses basically mirrored the question on confidence in running programs for poor families. In other words, when people are not primed, they think about programs designed to benefit the poor when they evaluate the government in general. However, when respondents were first asked about specific programs like the military, Social Security, and the like, people rated the government in general more positively than when the general question was asked first.⁷ This tendency was strongest among Democrats, which suggests the Left could shore up its core constituency by connecting government in general with popular government programs (see Lock, Shapiro, and Jacobs 1999 for more details).

Progressives must also be careful about the way they talk about Washington. Since most people tend not to trust government, gaining office and solidifying personal support by attacking it is a very attractive strategy. Indeed, even when Democrats controlled both houses of Congress, Democrats, including incumbents, were nearly as likely as Republicans to use antigovernment rhetoric in their Senate campaigns (Globetti and Hetherington 2000). Although such language clearly wins votes in a low-trust environment, progressives should fight the urge to use it unnecessarily because it comes with a cost. At a minimum, such antigovernment attacks solidify the conventional wisdom that government is untrustworthy, and they might even intensify already existing feelings of distrust. Jimmy Carter's experience should remind office-seekers that they will have little success making government work for them if they owe their election to running against it.

This is a particularly sticky situation for the Left during the period on which my analysis rests, with Republicans typically occupying the White House. Obviously, the out party must campaign against the government to convince voters that it should be the ruling party. Placing constant focus on government failures, however, will almost certainly cause people

to trust government less. Hence, in their efforts to return to power, Democrats are necessarily forced to damage their future governing prospects. Their attacks will undermine political trust, which, in turn, will decrease the amount of liberal policy the public will want in the future. This certainly turned out to be the case for Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton as they attempted to follow Republican presidents. When Clinton attempted to press a more liberal policy agenda in 1993–94 despite the low levels of political trust that he helped create, the voters repudiated his party in the next election. Perhaps worse, if the Republicans maintain control despite the attacks, they will face less public pressure to do things that conservatives would rather not do anyway. Indeed, such an environment may encourage the rollback of government services. Either way, Democrats face unique obstacles in an environment of low political trust.

Therefore, it is important for Democrats to tailor their attacks to target specific officeholders when possible. The late 1990s taught us that the public's perception of the president's trustworthiness and the government's trustworthiness do not necessarily move in tandem. As personal attacks on Bill Clinton's character intensified during his second term, the public came to see him as personally less trustworthy. At the same time, however, the nation's strong performance, particularly on economic matters, caused trust in government to increase. To the extent that the Democratic presidential hopefuls in 2004 can target President Bush's personal credibility and his personal policy decisions, those on the left will be better off. While such attacks will almost surely damage trust in government to some degree, the damage will be less than if people come to think that both the Republican president and the government as a whole cannot be trusted.⁸

Other avenues might increase political trust as well. Supporting good-government initiatives like campaign finance reform make good sense. At least part of the public's antipathy toward government is born of concern that it is run for the benefit of special interests or, worse, the personal interests of officeholders rather than ordinary people (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Measures that can change this perception should increase political trust. Although many argue that the elimination of soft money under the McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform act will damage the Democrats electorally, the long-term benefits caused by increasing political trust should eventually offset the short-run costs. Virginia Chanley, Thomas Rudolph, and Wendy Rahn (2000) demonstrate that increasing trust will cause a more liberal policy mood. As Robert Erikson, Michael MacKuen, and James Stimson (2002) demonstrate, a more liberal policy mood will cause more progressives to be elected. And as I have shown in chapter 3, the combination of high political trust, a liberal policy mood, and progressives in the House and Senate explains almost all the variance in the amount of liberal public policy implemented

over time. Trust is the catalyst. Increasing it will have the largest effect on increasing all the others.

The need for progressives to increase public trust in government is particularly strong given the demographic changes occurring in the United States because they present a unique opportunity. According to the 2000 census, the nation's fastest-growing racial and ethnic groups are Latinos and Asian-Americans. In addition to growing through a steady stream of immigration, both have higher birthrates than either whites or African-Americans. In fact, in 2003, Latinos passed African-Americans as the largest minority group in the United States. Since both Latinos and Asians now identify disproportionately with the Democratic Party, Democrats have an opportunity to dominate the next generation of American politics (Judis and Teixeira 2002).

The recent political history of California provides evidence of the opportunity at hand. From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, Republicans did very well with Asian voters and were making significant inroads with Latinos, especially on social issues like abortion and school prayer. As a result, Republicans regularly dominated statewide elections, winning four straight gubernatorial races between 1982 and 1994. However, the anti-immigrant campaign waged by Republican governor Pete Wilson during the early 1990s, particularly his championing of Proposition 187, which eliminated a range of government services for legal and illegal immigrants, undermined Republicans' support from these minority groups. With Latinos and Asian-Americans making up an increasingly large part of California's population, no Republican has won a major statewide office since the Proposition 187 fight, with the exception of Arnold Schwarzenegger's quirky 2003 recall victory. Richard Nixon's and Ronald Reagan's home state has become a safe Democratic haven in presidential elections as well.

Unless conservatives can make significant inroads with racial minorities, the Democrats' electoral fortunes should improve as the non-Anglo population grows. The increasing non-Cuban Latino population in Florida will make it harder for Republicans to win there in the future. If California and New York continue to vote for Democrats, three of the four largest states may move largely beyond Republican control. In addition, the immigration of both Latinos and Asians into many Deep South states is worth watching. States like Louisiana, Georgia, and Texas might not be the Republican locks on the presidential level that they seem today.

But will more progressive public policy necessarily follow from Democratic electoral victories? If a large percentage of Americans continue to distrust the federal government, Democrats will not be able to accomplish much once in office. Recall that Bill Clinton came to Washington with solid Democratic pluralities in the electorate and in both houses of Congress, but his most lasting policy legacy will be welfare reform rather

than comprehensive health care reform. A distrustful public defeated the latter but embraced the former, something that will surely repeat itself if people's feelings about the federal government do not improve. Without a strongly progressive spirit, which is impossible to maintain without significant public trust in government, the Democratic Party will look increasingly like the Rockefeller wing of the Republican Party in the 1960s. In fact, the Rockefeller Republicans might start to look relatively more progressive.

POLITICAL TRUST AND REPRESENTATION

The notion that people stand by the government even when it does not act in accordance with their self-interest or their policy preferences is particularly important to political minorities and those with limited resources. As E. E. Schattschneider (1960) has famously noted, the pressure group system sings with a decidedly upper-class accent, so the government will be particularly responsive to those with greater means. But in a democracy, the government should ideally represent all interests, not just well-heeled ones. For Schattschneider, strong political parties were important to provide voice to those who were not adequately represented by the pressure group system because parties were better able than any other political institution to socialize, or widen, the scope of conflict. If conflicts between people or interests remain private, the more powerful will always win the battles. For example, if a fistfight between Mike Tyson and me remained private, I would certainly lose. But if I could expand the scope of conflict to bring Lennox Lewis to fight on my behalf, I might fare better. Only when the scope of conflict is widened to include more people or interests can the less powerful succeed. The federal government is the ultimate arena for conflict socialization. If people do not trust it, few conflicts will be broadened to this level, which will be most damaging to the political interests of the weak.

An excellent illustration of Schattschneider in practice, and the importance of political trust along with it, is the civil rights movement. Following Reconstruction, the balance of power between whites and blacks in the states of the former Confederacy was one-sided. In terms of both raw numbers and political clout, whites could dominate blacks in any private conflict. Civil rights leaders achieved success by widening the scope of conflict to include northern activists, media elites, the Democratic Party, and, ultimately, the federal government. Only when the conflict was socialized, taking political decisions out of the hands of racist southern state governments and placing them into the hands of the federal government, did conditions for blacks change markedly.

Viewed in this light, widespread distrust of the federal government is problematic. At the root of Schattschneider's reasoning is that minority interests can use the federal government to help redress concerns. The results presented in this book suggest that a lack of public trust in government makes the federal government a less viable option. If the federal government is not a viable option, what institution will perform its role? Regarding race, for example, the federal government has done more to ensure fair outcomes for racial minorities than any other institution. Had the power of the federal government not been brought to bear on civil rights issues, it is unclear what other social force might have intervened to end segregation and obstacles to voting.

This is a truly troubling set of facts. What would have happened to the civil rights movement had political trust in the 1950s and 1960s been mired at levels like those of the late 1970s or the early 1990s? The federal courts might have still produced decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education* to end school segregation, but without Congress passing and the president signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, no mechanism would have been in place to enforce the Court's decision. In fact, in 1963, fully nine years after the *Brown* decision, Alabama public schools were still completely segregated (Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield 2003). Whites are much more likely to support race-targeted policies when they trust the government more, and their support affects what policymakers do. All this suggests that had the civil rights movement taken place when political trust was low, it would have been significantly less successful.

In a society comprised of majorities and minorities, it is impossible to represent minority interests fairly unless majorities are willing to make sacrifices for minorities when their interests do not overlap. Trust in governing authorities makes it easier for majorities to support such sacrifices. Even if the sacrifice is not real, only perceived, as is the case for most whites and affirmative action (Bowen and Bok 1998), trust in government helps build support for initiatives that assist minority interests. In fact, how much people trust the government is important not just when controversial policies such as affirmative action are at issue. It is important even when whites are deciding whether the federal government should ensure school integration and equal treatment in hiring for blacks.

The findings presented throughout this book reflect how determinative political distrust is in the current political climate. Though skepticism toward politics and politicians has always been a part of American political culture, it seems to have overwhelmed that culture today. With the news media fixated on government ineptitude and malevolence, the candidates themselves attacking Washington, and icons of popular culture lampooning political actors on a daily basis, citizens have come to evaluate political objects through this lens. Such attitudes undermine the govern-

ment's ability to deal with poverty, protect minority rights, and extend the social safety net to areas that might require sacrifices of some Americans, such as health care.

Lyndon Johnson produced the Great Society in the mid-1960s, and Bill Clinton, a man in so many ways similar to Johnson, began to dismantle it in the mid-1990s. The most compelling explanation for this change in policy course is that Americans trusted the government when Johnson was president, but they no longer did when Clinton was in office. That change in public opinion has made created a much different country.