



Confidence in Public Institutions: Faith, Culture or Performance?

Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris

Kenneth Newton,

Department of Government,
University of Essex
Wivenhoe Park, Colchester
Essex CO4 3SQ

T: 01206 872498 - F: 01206 872500

E: newtk@essex.ac.uk

Pippa Norris

Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy
John F. Kennedy School of Government,
Harvard University,
Cambridge, MA, 02138

T: (617) 495 1475 - F: (617) 495 8696

E: Pippa_Norris@Harvard.edu

<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/people/pnorris>

Abstract:

Is there a widespread loss of faith in the core institutions of representative democracy? Based on a comparison of 17 trilateral democracies this study examines institutional confidence from the early 1980s to the early 1990s then considers explanations based on the social psychology of trusting personalities, cultural accounts based on life experiences, and theories of institutional performance.

The study concludes that at national level, social trust and confidence in government and its institutions are strongly associated with each other. Social trust can help build effective social and political institutions, which can help governments perform effectively, and this in turn encourages confidence in civic institutions.

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Some 25 years ago, a report of the Trilateral Commission on *The Crisis of Democracy* (Crozier et al. 1975, 158-59) concluded that “*Dissatisfaction with, and lack of confidence in, the functioning of the institutions of democratic government have thus now become widespread in Trilateral countries.*” Since then, there have been periodic expressions of concern when other commentators have echoed this theme, using survey data to show that citizens are dissatisfied and disillusioned with the central institutions of representative democracy in the advanced industrial democracies (e.g., Miller 1974; Niemi et al. 1989; Dogan 1994; Dalton 1996, 268-69, Dalton 1999; Nye 1997, 1; Nye and Zelikow 1997; Norris 1999). A recent study of the United States presents extensive evidence drawn from different surveys showing that confidence in Congress, the federal government, the executive, and the presidency have all fallen since the 1960s and 1970s. In terms of public confidence, Congress, the White House, and the executive branch now rank very low on lists of fourteen or more public and private institutions (Ladd and Bowman 1998, 120-21, 142-45).

Like the authors of the Trilateral report before them, some analysts are most concerned about loss of confidence in the main institutions of democratic government: parliament, the executive branch, parties, the courts, police, the civil service, and the military (e.g., Orren 1997; Dalton 1999). Others are also worried about the erosion of public esteem for various private institutions, including major companies, the mass media, trade unions, and the church (Lipset and Schneider 1983), and suggest that the decline of public confidence in a wide range of central institutions indicates a problem extending beyond political life (Dogan 1994; Dalton 1996; see, however, Listhaug 1995). Another group of analysts focus on a loss of social trust among citizens as a significant indicator of social and political malaise (Putnam 1995a, 1995b; Dalton 1996).

An erosion of confidence in the major institutions of society, especially those of representative democracy, is a far more serious threat to democracy than a loss of trust in other citizens or politicians. Political leaders come and go with swings of the electoral pendulum, and trust in them may rise and fall with citizens’ evaluation of their performance in office. A wealth of evidence suggests that trust in leaders or particular administrations is subject to greater short-term fluctuation than confidence in institutions. However, institutions are large, impersonal, and broadly based, and the public’s estimation of them is less immediately affected by particular news items or specific events. Thus, loss of confidence in institutions may well be a better indicator of public disaffection with the modern world because they are the basic pillars of society. If they begin to crumble, then there is, indeed, cause for concern. Furthermore, many observers argue that in our large-scale and impersonal modern world, social and political stability and integration increasingly depend on confidence in institutions rather than trust in individuals, so vibrant institutions matter more to contemporary democracies than does the quality of interpersonal relations among citizens (Luhman 1988; Dunn 1984; Giddens 1990; Seligman 1997). For all these reasons, this chapter regards confidence in institutions as the central indicator of the underlying feeling of the general public about its polity.

Previous studies have debated whether or not there has been a significant or long-term erosion of public confidence in modern institutions across different societies (see Listhaug and Wiberg 1995, 298-322; Nye, Zelikow, and King 1997, 263-64; Dalton 1999; Newton 1999). Some assert that the figures show a mixed pattern, with no clear

trends for any given set of institutions, nations, or periods of time. In some instances, the confidence figures fall, but in others they rise, and in others still they are more or less constant. After examining public confidence in ten sets of public and private institutions in 14 Western European nations between 1981 and 1990, Listhaug and Wiberg (1995, 320) concluded: *“The data from the two European Values Surveys do not demonstrate that there has been a widespread decline in the public’s confidence in institutions during the 1980s.”* Although they observed a decline of confidence in “order” institutions, they noted that *“confidence in other political institutions is either stable, as in the case of the civil service and parliament, or, as with the education system, has become stronger.”*

Listhaug and Wiberg based their conclusions on data up to 1990. Newer evidence from a wider range of nations suggests that the world may have changed since then (Norris 1999). Klingemann (1999) demonstrates how support for parliaments suffered a marked erosion during the 1990s, while Inglehart (1999) has documented a decline in confidence in hierarchical and traditional institutions like the military and the church. Shifts of this type in public attitudes in the Western world since 1990 may have resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union, which made it easier for established democracies to be openly critical of themselves instead of closing ranks in self-defense, as they did during the chilly decades of the Cold War. The world also became more complex in the late 1980s and 1990s, not least for Trilateral democracies, which faced increasing difficulties due to international competition and the pressures of globalization. Perhaps things have changed enough since the long boom of the 1960s and 1970s and the end of the sharp division between East and West to make 1990 or thereabouts the start of a new political era.

The first task of this study is to use the most complete comparative data currently available to establish long-term trends of confidence in institutions in the Trilateral democracies. On the basis of that data, we then investigate the underlying causes of the patterns revealed and develop an explanation for them.

Confidence in Institutions During the 1980s

Most studies of confidence in institutions have been confined to Western Europe or North America, but we can compare public opinion in a wider range of advanced industrialized democracies included in both waves of the World Values Survey (WVS) conducted in the early 1980s (1981-84) and the early 1990s (1990-93).¹ These include almost 47,000 respondents in 17 Trilateral democracies (listed in Table 8.2). This group of nations comprises most of the established democracies in the world, and it is broadly representative because it includes both major economic powers like the United States, West Germany, and Japan and smaller social-democratic states like Belgium and Norway. These nations also possess a wide array of political systems and institutional structures, such as presidential versus parliamentary executives, federal versus unitary states, and consensus versus majoritarian systems, which is important if we are to be able to generalize about systematic variations in support.

Institutional confidence was measured in the World Values Survey with a four-point scale using the following question: “Please look at this card and tell me, for each item, how much confidence you have in them. Is it a great deal (4), quite a lot (3), not very much (2) or none at all (1)?” The survey compared public support for ten institutions, which can be divided into public-sector institutions, understood as those most closely associated with the core functions of the state (including parliament, the

civil service, the legal system, the police, and the army), and other institutions in the private and non-profit sectors (the education system, the church, major companies, trade unions, and the press).²

[Table 8.1 about here]

Table 8.1 shows the pattern of public trust when the data are pooled across all 17 nations under comparison. The most important finding is that during this decade, *all the public institutions examined suffered a significant (if varying) decline in confidence*. The sharpest fall (-15 points) occurs in confidence in the armed forces, which may reflect the military's reduced standing in the post-Cold War era or cultural shifts undermining support for hierarchical and authoritarian institutions (Inglehart 1999). During the 1980s, there was also a modest but significant erosion of confidence in the legal system and police as well as in the civil service and parliament. It is striking that confidence in legislatures, the main representative institution linking citizens and the state, is consistently ranked almost 30 points lower than confidence in the police.

The trends across institutions in the non-profit and private sectors are mixed and inconsistent: while confidence in the church declined, for example, trust in the education system remained stable, and public support actually increased slightly for major companies and the press. Thus, problems of confidence have been more pervasive in the public than in the private sector.

[Table 8.2 about here]

Given their importance as the key institution of representative democracy, concern has focused on low support for legislatures. We can examine how confidence in parliament changed from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, with trends in some countries updated to the mid-1990s on the basis of Klingemann's data (1999). Table 8.2 displays an even more mixed pattern than we have observed so far, with a far steeper fall of confidence in parliament in countries like Finland (-31 points) and Spain (-10 points) than in others like the United States and Canada. More important, there are significant cross-national variations during the 1980s: support for parliament actually *rose* in seven of the 17 nations under comparison, most notably Denmark, Iceland, and the Netherlands. The overall erosion of support for public institutions across the Trilateral region that we have observed therefore disguises some important differences among nations.

[Table 8.3 about here]

To explore the pattern further, we created two confidence scales, one for public and one for private institutions.³ Cross-national comparison on the basis of these scales (see Table 8.3) confirms a striking and important pattern: during the 1980s, *confidence in public institutions declined consistently, if in varying degrees, in all but one society* (Iceland). In contrast, the pattern of confidence in private institutions proved more mixed: it fell significantly in Finland, the United States, and Britain, but increased significantly in Spain, Italy, Denmark, West Germany, and France. Based on this evidence, we conclude that there are important cross-national variations in confidence in particular public and private institutions, as we would expect, in terms of both the level of confidence and the direction of trends over time. Although this shows clearly that there is no general loss of support for all social institutions in the Trilateral region, the evidence does indicate declining confidence in *public* institutions in

virtually all the Trilateral nations during the 1980s. The political and governmental problems that have been so widely discussed in the United States are not *sui generis*, but are evident to a greater or lesser extent elsewhere.

Theories of Trust and Confidence

What can explain this loss of public confidence in the central institutions of representative democracy? It is important that there has been a consistent loss of confidence in public institutions but not all private institutions. So too is the fact that the problem does not seem to spill over more generally into distrust of other citizens (Newton 1999). This makes the search for causes both easier and more difficult. It suggests that the problem is not a general malaise affecting all, or even many, aspects of modern life, but a specifically political and governmental one. Blame cannot easily be laid at the door of intensified global economic competition or the unemployment and slow economic growth these have produced in the Trilateral democracies. If economic hardship were the cause, then one might expect confidence in major companies to tumble, but it has not. On the contrary, the collapse of communism seems to have heightened faith in capitalism and business corporations. The limitation of the problem to specifically political and governmental institutions suggests that broad and general theories of social and economic crisis are inappropriate.

Nor does the much discussed tendency of the contemporary mass media to report scandal, corruption, and disaster provide an adequate explanation. Although the amount of time people spend watching television is associated with some indicators of political apathy and disaffection, viewing television news and reading newspapers is associated with civic mobilization and support for the political system (see Chapter 7). Indeed, general theories suggesting that contemporary society has become increasingly individualist, competitive, materialistic, fragmented, globalized, or impersonal do not get us very far because they should apply equally to social trust and to confidence in a wide range of private institutions, but they do not. Thus, we have to look elsewhere for plausible explanations. There are at least three schools of thought on how to explain the erosion of citizen confidence in public institutions: those that focus on the social-psychological features of individuals; those that look to the cultural environment of individuals, groups, and communities; and those that concentrate on governmental performance.

Social-Psychological Explanations

One school treats trust and institutional confidence (or distrust and lack of confidence) as basic aspects of personality types. According to Erikson (1950), feelings of inner goodness, trust in others and oneself, and optimism form a "basic trust" personality trait that is formed in the first stages of psychological development as a result of the mother-baby feeding experience. Basic personality traits, it is argued, are enduring and general, influencing many aspects of behavior (see Allport 1961; Cattell 1965). Early and seminal work of the social psychologist Morris Rosenberg (1956, 1957) also argues that alienation, trust in people, and beliefs that people are fundamentally cooperative and inclined to help others combine to form a single "trust in people" scale. Because of their psychological history and make-up, some individuals have an optimistic view of life and are willing to help others, cooperate, and trust. Because of their own early life experiences, others are more pessimistic and misanthropic. They are thus inclined to be guarded or alienated, more distrustful and cautious of others, and pessimistic about social and political affairs and about people and politicians in

general. In this regard, trust is an affective orientation that forms part of our basic personality and is largely independent of our experience of the external political world.

In a discussion of political trust, Gabriel (1995) highlights the assumptions of the social-psychology approach (without subscribing to them himself) when he observes that it contrasts “trusting people” and “cynics.” According to Easton (1965, 447), “the presence of trust would mean that members would feel that their own interests would be attended to even if the authorities were exposed to little supervision or scrutiny.” Similarly, Gamson (1968, 54) suggests that trusting people expect the political system to work as they wish “even if left untended.” In other words, there are trusters and there are cynics who carry their political perceptions around with them without much reference to the performance of the political system or its leaders.

The social-psychological approach has the obvious limitation that it is hard-pressed to explain changes in trust among large segments of a country’s population, but it must be taken seriously because of its importance in shaping the literature on trust. The current approach to trust and confidence is based less on the specific tenets of the social-psychological school than on an assumption growing out of it about how to interpret standard survey questions on the topic. Responses to such questions, many people assert, tell us something about the individuals who express the attitudes rather than about the world in which they live. Hence, studies of trust and confidence tend to concentrate heavily on the individual characteristics of trusters and cynics, and rarely on the social and political circumstances that are associated with levels or trends in trust.

If the social-psychology view is right about trust as a character trait, then one would expect a fairly close association at the individual level between social trust and confidence in public institutions. Any suggestion that there are different types of trust and confidence, that they can vary independently of one another, or that the same person can express one type but not another, challenges the theory.

The Social and Cultural Model

Posing an alternative to the social-psychological model, some social theorists hold that the ability to trust others and sustain cooperative relations is the product of social experiences and socialization, especially those found in the sorts of voluntary associations of modern society that bring different social types together to achieve a common goal. The theory goes back to Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill, both of whom emphasized the importance of voluntary associations and social engagement as training grounds for democracy. Many contemporary writers pursue the same theme, discussing society’s ability to inculcate “habits of the heart” such as trust, reciprocity, and co-operation (Bellah et al. 1985), emphasizing the importance of civil society in generating cooperative social relations (Coleman 1990; Inglehart and Abramson 1994; Sztompka 1996), or focusing on trust or civic culture as a basis for stable and peaceful democracy (Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart 1990, 1997a; Ostrom 1990; Rose 1994; Mischler and Rose 1997; Newton 1997; Rose, et al. 1998).

The social and cultural model essentially argues that individual life situations and experiences – especially higher education (Doring 1992), participation in a community with a cooperative culture, and involvement in voluntary activities (Geertz 1962; Ardener 1964; Williams 1988) – create social trust and cooperation, civic-mindedness, and reciprocity between individuals. This in turn helps create strong,

effective, and successful social organizations and institutions, including political groups and governmental institutions in which people can invest their confidence. Such organizations and institutions in turn help build trust, cooperation, and reciprocity, as well as confidence in other institutions. In short, there is a direct and mutually reinforcing relationship between the types of people who express trust and confidence on the one hand and strong and effective social organizations and institutions on the other. If this is true, we would expect to find that people who express attitudes of trust toward others are likely to express confidence in public institutions and to be well integrated into voluntary associations and other forms of cooperative social activity. This association should also be tested at the individual level.

The Institutional Performance Model

The third model, presented in the introduction to this book, focuses on the actual performance of government as the key to understanding citizens' confidence in government. Trust and confidence are regarded neither as personality traits nor as the direct products of social conditions that are associated with a democratic culture or well-developed social capital. Instead, because all citizens are exposed to government actions, confidence in political institutions is likely to be randomly distributed among various personality types and different cultural and social types (see Figure 8.1). Government institutions that perform well are likely to elicit the confidence of citizens; those that perform badly or ineffectively generate feelings of distrust and low confidence. The general public, the model assumes, recognizes whether government or political institutions are performing well or poorly and reacts accordingly.

This theory has three implications. First, given accurate sampling techniques, reliable research procedures, and sensible survey questions, responses to questionnaire items about institutional confidence are likely to be a good gauge of how well the political system is actually performing. In other words, confidence questions are likely to provide an accurate thermometer of public life. Second, there are significant implications for public policy. The theory suggests that if public institutions earn little public esteem, the remedy for political leaders lies in either lowering public expectations of performance (politicians can promise less) or in improving institutional effectiveness (politicians can deliver more).

Third, the model also posits a relationship – albeit an indirect one – between confidence in political institutions and social trust. While we would not expect to find a strong *individual*-level relationship between the two, we would expect to find a stronger set of relationships at the *aggregate* level of societies or nation-states. This is because confidence in political institutions is the product of governmental performance in much the same way that estimations of the trustworthiness of others, and willingness to trust them, are based on the experience of how others behave (Hardin 1996). Moreover, governmental performance affects individuals regardless of their particular personality or social type. Not all citizens are equally affected by government performance, but things like inflation, economic growth, government corruption, or foreign policy failures have an impact on all citizens to a greater or lesser extent. This explains why political trust and distrust tend to be more or less randomly distributed among people with different individual characteristics such as education, income, religion, age, or gender (Newton 1999).

At the same time, there may be a significant indirect relationship between social trust and confidence in political institutions. If social trust helps build social

capital and social capital, in turn, helps strengthen political institutions, then governmental performance may improve, inspiring citizens' confidence. Conversely, if social trust declines and stores of social capital diminish, then political institutions will perform less well, governmental performance will suffer, and citizens' confidence in government will fall. Although effective political institutions do not guarantee good governmental performance, they can help. It is possible to imagine a government performing unsatisfactorily in spite of good institutions; it is difficult to imagine satisfactory governmental performance without effective institutions for making and implementing policies.

The institutional performance model is neither a psychological nor a social-cultural one, but a *systemic* one to be tested with aggregate data for nation-states. It does not predict a very strong relationship between social trust and confidence in institutions at the individual level. On the contrary, it leads us to expect that the relationship will be non-existent at the individual level yet important at the aggregate level.

Testing the Models

If the social-psychological model is correct and trust is a personality trait that people do or do not display, then we would expect to find a strong association at the individual level between social trust and confidence in public institutions. Table 8.4 displays simple correlations between the measures of social trust and institutional confidence in the World Values Surveys when data for all 17 Trilateral democracies are pooled. Because this includes data on many countries in each wave with at least a thousand individuals in each national sample, the total number of individuals surveyed is very large (around 47,000). What matters, therefore, is less the statistical significance of the correlations than the substantive strength of the coefficients. The first column demonstrates that social trust is indeed positively related to confidence in public and private institutions (except for the education system); people who trust each other also do tend to have more confidence in public and private institutions. It should be stressed, however, that the association, while statistically significant, is generally very weak. These results are consistent with previous research that found weak correlations between social trust and confidence in political institutions on the individual level (Wright 1976, 104-10; Craig 1993, 27), and they confirm Kaase's (1997: 15) conclusion that *"the statistical relationship between interpersonal trust and political trust is small indeed."*

[Table 8.4 about here]

According to the social-cultural model, trust in people and confidence in institutions are associated with characteristics related to an individual's social position, cultural identity, and personal life experiences. In particular, we would expect to find that those citizens who are most active in voluntary organizations and community associations would develop the social trust and cooperative habits that lead to confidence in public institutions. Table 8.4 also allows us to examine the simple association between voluntary activism (as measured by membership in a range of 16 different types of groups such as churches, sports groups, and arts associations) and institutional confidence. Once again, the correlations prove to be statistically significant but quite weak. The exception is confidence in the church. One possible explanation is that people who are most active in their local community are often

strong supporters of the church, so religious organizations may play a special role in this relationship.

To explore these relationships in greater depth, we used a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. Consistent with the classic “funnel of causality” logic, we first entered the social background variables that are most commonly associated with social and political attitudes (i.e., gender, social class, and age); then the cultural variables of social trust and voluntary activism; and finally measures of satisfaction with life, left-right self-identity, and political interest. We regressed these eight independent variables on confidence in public and private institutions in 17 Trilateral nations with the World Values Survey data pooled across waves. As with the earlier analysis, given the size of the pooled data source, we need to pay as much attention to the substantive strength of the coefficients as to their statistical significance.

[Table 8.5 about here]

As shown by the adjusted summary R^2 coefficient, the regression models in each case explain only a limited amount of variance in institutional confidence. The overall pattern by gender, class, and age displays a consistent but weak relationship across each model: institutional confidence tends to be marginally higher among women, the middle classes, and older people. As revealed by the simple correlations, social trust is significantly but weakly associated with institutional confidence even after controlling for social background. Contrary to many cultural accounts, the link between social trust and institutional confidence was not strongly or consistently mediated by voluntary activism, however. Membership in voluntary organizations proved to be an insignificant predictor of institutional confidence in three of the models, and a significant but weak predictor in three other models. Regarding confidence in the military, the relationship actually proved to be negative. In other words, being a member of a voluntary group was associated with less, not more, confidence in the armed forces. Among the remaining attitudinal variables, the respondent’s position on the left-right self-placement scale proved to be the strongest predictor of institutional confidence, with those people reporting themselves to be furthest to the left reporting the least trust.⁴

It is clear from these regressions that people’s confidence in public institutions is only weakly associated with social trust, and its association with voluntary activism is even weaker. Whatever voluntary associations may or may not do for social capital, they seem to hold little importance for political capital. In contrast, the only political variable in the equation – the left-right measure – is fairly consistently the best predictor of confidence levels. Moreover, many of the standard social and economic variables so often used in the social sciences to explain individual attitudes and behavior, like age and class, provide little leverage for this analysis. It appears that institutional confidence is fairly evenly distributed within different social and economic groups in society, supporting the hypothesis that confidence in public institutions is the result of specifically political factors rather than general social or economic circumstances.

As a whole, then, these results offer little support for either the social-psychological or cultural theories of institutional confidence. On the contrary, the correlations and regression coefficients in Tables 8.4 and 8.5 are generally so weak that they suggest the need to look elsewhere. We will therefore turn our attention to political explanations related to institutional performance.

Institutional Performance: Social Trust and Voluntarism

Much of the work that has focused on social trust implies the existence of a significant relationship among levels of social trust, voluntary activism, and confidence in public institutions. Although the relationship between social trust and confidence in government has been of central interest, membership in voluntary associations is also thought to be important. The reasoning is that voluntary and community groups bring people together to work on local problems and public affairs, so high social trust should be associated with a dense and vibrant network of social capital. Social capital, in turn, is thought to lead to effective public institutions that are responsive to public needs and demands. The groups and organizations of civil society mediate between citizens and the state. As noted, this theory focuses not on individual-level data, but rather on national-level data. Thus, we can analyze the correlation between levels of social trust and institutional confidence aggregated at the national level. The World Values Survey data are pooled so that we can compare 34 cases (the 17 nations at two time points).

[Table 8.6 about here]

Most strikingly, the results presented in Table 8.6 do indeed confirm a strongly positive and significant relationship at the national level between social trust and confidence in four out of the five public institutions being compared. The exception is the armed forces; this may be because the military is the only public institution whose performance can be expected to operate and be evaluated according to standards different from those of civic life. The aggregate-level correlations are far stronger than the individual-level ones observed in Table 8.4, suggesting that there is an important systemic effect. The correlations between social trust and non-profit/private institutions are also generally fairly strong, although the number of countries included in the pooled data is relatively small and the figures do not meet tests of statistical significance. A comparison of the top and bottom halves of Table 8.6 suggests that at the national level, social trust is more closely related to confidence in public institutions than to confidence in non-profit and private ones.

The positive associations between social trust and confidence in the police ($R=.61$) and the legal system ($R=.51$) are particularly strong, which may have important implications for citizens' willingness to obey the law. When people trust each other, they also tend to have faith in the authorities who enforce the law. This relationship is shown more clearly in a scattergram (see Figure 8.1), which shows that in countries like Norway, Denmark, and Canada, high social trust is accompanied by considerable public confidence in the police. Most of the Nordic nations in particular tend to be clustered in the top-right corner of the graph. In contrast, countries like France, Belgium, and Italy display the opposite tendency, with suspicion of other citizens going hand-in-hand with minimal confidence in the police. Most countries, such as Japan, the Netherlands, and Britain, are predictably scattered along the middle of the diagonal. Similar patterns are found for confidence in the legal system.

[Figure 8.1 about here]

Figures 8.2 and 8.3 show a similar but slightly weaker relationship at the national level between social trust on the one hand and confidence in parliaments and the civil service on the other. Again, the scattergrams confirm that most countries fall into a fairly predictable pattern, with Italy at one extreme, in the bottom-left corner with little inter-personal trust or confidence in the institutions of representative

democracy, and many of the Scandinavian nations located at the opposite end of the spectrum.

The overall pattern confirms our hypothesis that the relationship between social trust and institutional confidence operates largely at the societal rather than at the individual level. The reason for this association remains a puzzle, however, particularly in light of our findings that the relationship between social trust and institutional confidence is not mediated by social capital. As Table 8.6 showed, the national-level relationships between levels of voluntary activism and institutional confidence were not significant except for confidence in the church and trade unions; there was no significant link between membership in voluntary associations and confidence in key public institutions: parliament, the civil service, and the legal system. The association between social trust and institutional confidence clearly needs further exploration. A number of chapters in this volume offer possible explanations for the relationships, but further research is obviously required. Case studies comparing countries like Norway and Italy or aggregate-level cross-national models of policy performance would help illuminate this relationship.

[Figure 8.2 and 8.3]

Conclusions

The central institutions of the Trilateral democracies witnessed declines in public support in the 1980s. The available survey evidence suggests that social trust is not experiencing a long-term, secular decline in the Trilateral nations, although it certainly seems to be in some (Newton 1999); neither is there an across-the-board loss of confidence in all the major institutions of society. The evidence presented in this chapter (especially Tables 8.1, 8.3, and 8.6) suggests that public and private institutions have been regarded in rather different ways by the general public. While confidence in non-profit and private institutions remained fairly constant or in some cases increased during the 1980s, confidence declined in public institutions – in parliament, the legal system, the armed forces, the police, and the civil service.

Even so, confidence in parliament did not fall in all Trilateral countries. In this sense, the nature of the problem is far more specific than some alarmist claims about a general crisis that affects the whole of Western society. At the same time, if we are correct that confidence in institutions is a good thermometer of malaise, then declining confidence in public-sector institutions is a serious matter. Although it may not herald a crisis, it surely is cause for concern.

What is the source of this loss of confidence in public institutions? We find little evidence that trust or confidence is a feature of basic personality types. Social trust is not strongly associated with measures of confidence in institutions at the individual level; socially trusting people are not necessarily politically trusting, and vice versa (Newton 1999). Nor is confidence in public institutions at all well explained by the social and economic variables usually associated with attitudes and behavior. Life satisfaction, education, income, gender, age, and membership in voluntary associations explain little of the variance in confidence in parliament, the civil service, or the police. These findings lead us away from social-psychological models as well as from social and cultural explanations of loss of confidence in public institutions. We also find little support for general theories that explain what is ailing the Trilateral democracies in terms of problems like heightened economic competition, post-modern society,

increasing individualism, declining levels of social trust, or the disintegration of social and community life. Instead, our research provides substantial support for theories that focus on the performance of governments and political institutions to explain citizens' declining confidence in them.

Beyond this general finding, our research sheds light on a topic at the center of a maelstrom of debate in recent years, namely the complex relationship between social trust on the one hand and confidence in government and political institutions on the other. As we and others have demonstrated, the two are significantly but only weakly related at the individual level. This finding, however, is wholly consistent with the position adopted by most of the authors in this volume that it is primarily governmental performance that determines the level of citizens' confidence in public institutions. Political trust and confidence are more or less randomly distributed among various personality and social types in a given country because, after all, government policies and performance affect everyone, even if they do not necessarily affect everyone equally. Few people can escape at least some of the consequences of national economic failure, foreign policy disasters, government corruption, or increased taxes. In this sense, "the rain falls on the just and unjust alike," so disillusionment or, alternatively, satisfaction with government is likely to be widespread among people, independent of whether they are high or low in social trust.

But when we step back and look at a nation as a whole, the story is quite different. At this aggregate level, social trust and confidence in government and its institutions are strongly associated with each other. Social trust can help build effective social and political institutions, which can help governments perform effectively, and this in turn encourages confidence in civic institutions. Thus, Trilateral nations that enjoy a high level of social trust also tend to enjoy a relatively high level of confidence in political institutions. Conversely, countries with low levels of social trust are less likely to build the kind of vibrant civil society that spurs strong government performance, and the result will be low citizen confidence in government and public institutions. It may also be possible, as Donatella della Porta's chapter suggests, that the relationship also runs in the opposite direction: poor government performance as manifested, for example, in rampant political corruption, may create a cycle that contributes to widespread social distrust. However, this question along with the important question of which measures of government performance matter most to citizens in determining their confidence levels lies outside the scope of this inquiry.

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TABLE 8.1.
Confidence in Public and Non-Profit/Private Institutions in the Trilateral Democracies

	EARLY 1980s	EARLY 1990s	CHANGE	COEFFICIENT OF ASSOCIATION (SIG.)
PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS				
Police	74	70	-4	.10**
Legal system	61	55	-6	.13**
Armed forces	61	46	-15	.28**
Parliament	48	43	-5	.10**
Civil service	46	43	-3	.06**
NON-PROFIT/PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS				
Education system	63	64	+1	N/s
The church	54	50	-4	.09**
Major companies	44	48	+4	.08**
The press	38	40	+2	.04**
Trade unions	39	38	-1	.03**

Source: World Values Survey 1980-4, 1990-93.

Note: The proportion of respondents in 17 advanced industrial democracies who replied that they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in these institutions. The coefficient of association and significance is measured by gamma. *p>.05 **p>.01 N/s = Not significant.

TABLE 8.2.
Confidence in Parliament in the Trilateral Democracies

NATION	EARLY 1980s	EARLY 1990s	MID-1990s	CHANGE: EARLY 1980s TO EARLY 1990s
Finland	65	34	33	-31
Norway	77	59	69	-18
Spain	48	38	37	-10
France	55	48		-7
United States	52	45	30	-7
Canada	43	37		-6
Ireland	52	50		-2
W. Germany	51	50	29	-1
Italy	30	30		0
Sweden	47	47	45	0
N. Ireland	45	46		+1
Japan	28	29	27	+1
Britain	40	44		+4
Belgium	38	42		+4
Denmark	36	42		+6
Iceland	48	54		+6
Netherlands	45	53		+8

Source: World Values Survey 1980-84, 1990-93, 1995-97.

Note: The percentage of respondents in 17 advanced industrial democracies who replied that they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in parliament. The coefficient of association and significance is measured by gamma. Data for the mid-1990s are drawn from Klingemann, Hans-Dieter (1999) "Mapping Political Support in the 1990s: A Global Analysis", in Pippa Norris, ed., *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

TABLE 8.3.
Confidence in Public and Private Institutions in the Trilateral Democracies

NATION	PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS CONFIDENCE			PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS CONFIDENCE		
	EARLY 1990s	SCALE CHANGE 1981-90	SIG.	EARLY 1990S	SCALE CHANGE 1981-90	SIG.
Finland	12.69	-1.61	**	11.96	-0.74	**
Norway	13.69	-0.90	**	12.91	+0.03	
Spain	11.80	-0.90	**	12.35	+0.40	**
United States	13.36	-0.69	**	13.16	-0.38	**
Ireland	13.58	-0.50	**	13.23	-0.12	
Sweden	12.78	-0.50	**	12.07	+0.14	
Belgium	11.67	-0.42	**	12.36	+0.06	
Canada	13.03	-0.41	**	12.85	-0.09	
Britain	13.57	-0.41	**	11.55	-0.43	**
Italy	11.33	-0.40	**	12.24	+0.82	**
Denmark	13.54	-0.36	**	12.34	+0.20	*
Japan	11.96	-0.34	**	11.16	-0.16	
W. Germany	12.61	-0.25	**	11.66	+0.15	*
Netherlands	12.49	-0.23	*	11.92	+0.10	
N. Ireland	14.01	-0.20		12.59	-0.36	
France	12.41	-0.07		11.99	+0.27	*
Iceland	12.69	+0.73	**	12.62	N/a	
ALL ABOVE	12.57	-0.62	**	12.31	-0.01	

Source: World Values Survey 1980-84, 1990-93.

Note: Mean confidence in five public and five private institutions in 17 advanced industrial democracies. The significance of the difference in group means is measured by ANOVA. * $p > .05$
** $p > .01$ N/s = Not significant.

TABLE 8.4.
Individual-Level Correlations Between Social Trust, Voluntary Activism, and Institutional Confidence

	INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL CORRELATIONS WITH SOCIAL TRUST	SIG.	INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL CORRI WITH VOLUNTARY AC
PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	.09	**	.03
Parliament	.09	**	.07
Legal system	.09	**	.03
Police	.07	**	.03
Civil service	.06	**	.04
Armed forces	.01	*	-.03
NON-PROFIT/PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	.06	**	.04
Education system	-.04	**	-.02
The church	.07	**	.46
Major companies	.03	**	.01
The press	.06	**	-.01
Trade unions	.06	**	.06

Source: World Values Survey 1980-84, 1990-93. N = 46,502.

Note: Individual-level correlations between social trust, voluntary activism, and confidence in institutions in industrial democracies with pooled data for both waves of the WVS. Significance: **p>.01 *p>.05

Social trust: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted (1), or that you can't be dealing with people (0)?"

Voluntary activism: Whether respondent belonged to any of a range of 16 voluntary organizations such as unions, groups, or religious organizations. Scale ranged from 0 to 16.

Institutional confidence: See Table 8.1 for details.

TABLE 8.5.
The Effects of Social Background and Political Attitudes on Institutional Confidence at the Individual Level

	ALL PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	PARLIAMENT	CIVIL SERVICE	LEGAL SYSTEM	POLICE
Gender	-.03	N/s	-.04	-.02	-.04
Class	.06	.02	.06	N/s	.05
Age	.14	.08	.10	.05	.12
Social trust	.08	.07	.05	.08	.06
Voluntary activism	N/s	.03	.02	N/s	N/s
Life satisfaction	.13	.07	.09	.08	.13
Left-right self- placement	.20	.09	.09	.10	.17
Political interest	.04	.10	.02	.05	N/s
Adjusted R ²	.10	.04	.04	.03	.08

Source: World Values Survey 1980-84, 1990-93. N = 46,502.

Note: The figures represent standardized (Beta) coefficients using OLS regression models. Both waves of the pooled. All coefficients are significant at the .05 level or higher.

Gender: Male (1)/Female (0).

Class: Nine-point scale based on the respondent's occupational group from employed/manager with 10+ emp worker (9).

Age: Years.

Social trust: "Generally speaking would you say that most people can be trusted (1), or that you can't be too (0)?"

Voluntary activism: Whether respondent belonged to any of a range of 16 voluntary organizations such as unions, churches, etc. Scale ranged from 0 to 16.

Life satisfaction: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life on the whole these days?" Ten-point scale.

Left-right self-placement: Ten-point scale.

Political interest: Four-point scale.

TABLE 8.6.

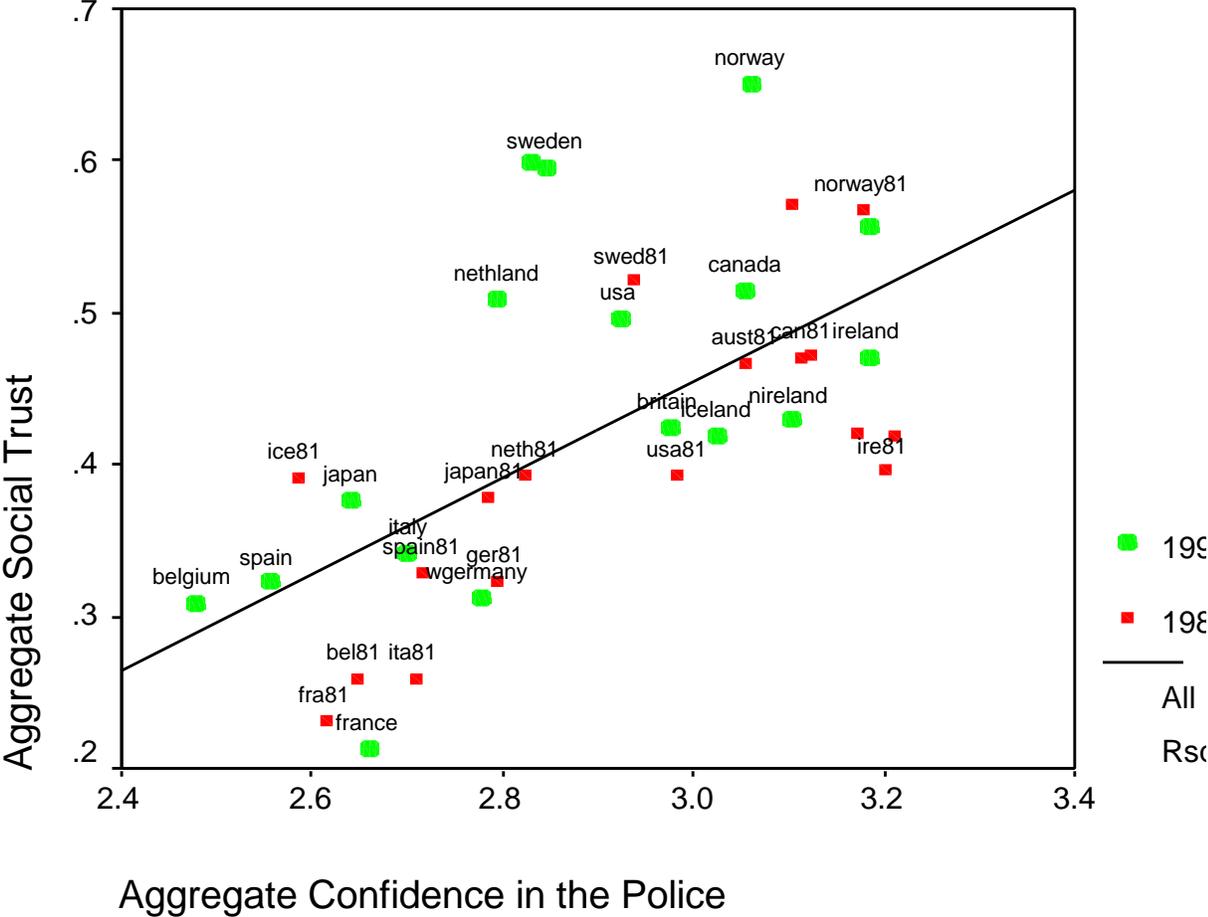
National-Level Correlations Between Social Trust, Voluntary Activism, and Institutional Confidence

	NATIONAL-LEVEL CORRELATIONS WITH SOCIAL TRUST	SIG.	NATIONAL-LEVEL CORRI WITH VOLUNTARY AC
PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	.56	**	.13
Police	.62	**	.21
Legal system	.51	**	.06
Armed forces	.24		-.12
Parliament	.38	*	.25
Civil service	.40	*	.27
NON-PROFIT/PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS	.37	*	.29
Education system	-.30		.04
The church	.11		.53
Major companies	.22		.26
The press	.09		-.09
Trade unions	.51	**	.41

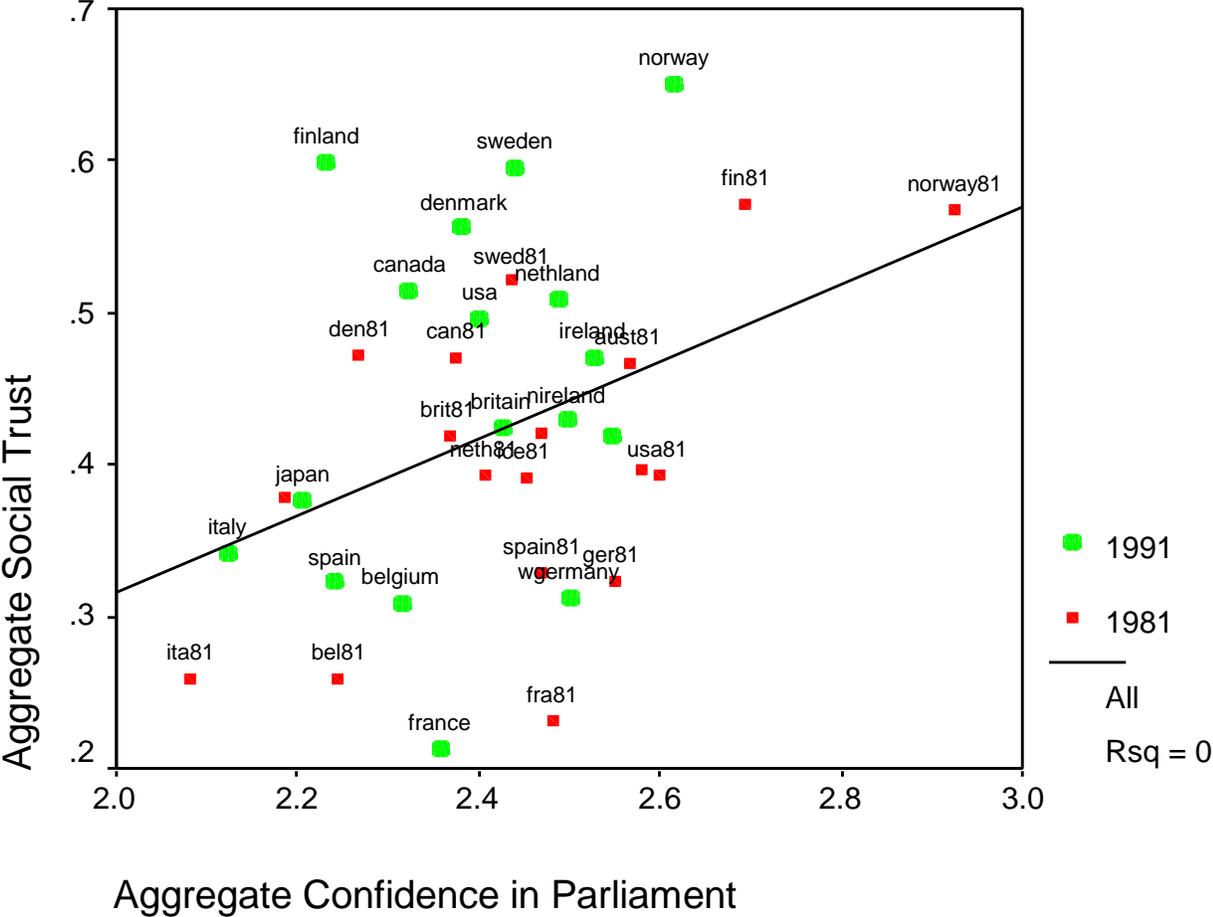
Source: World Values Survey 1980-84, 1990-93. N = 34 societies.

Note: National-level correlations between mean social trust, voluntary activism, and institutional confidence industrial democracies with data pooled for both waves. Significance: **p>.01 level *p>.05.

Confidence in the Police



Confidence in Parliament



Footnotes

¹ To produce a consistent universe for comparison over time, we dropped countries like Australia and Switzerland that were included in only the first or second wave. For consistency, we also excluded East Germany from the comparison and dropped all countries in the World Values Survey outside the Trilateral region.

² As previous studies have suggested (Lipset and Schneider 1988), it should be noted that the precise dividing line between state and non-state institutions is not clear-cut. The education system is often largely but not exclusively within the public sector, for example. In the same way, established churches can be seen as part of the state. This study nevertheless distinguishes between those institutions that can be regarded as most closely associated with the functions of the state and those in the non-profit and public sectors.

³ The measures of confidence in the ten institutions were summed to form two consistent 20-point scales measuring confidence in public institutions and confidence in private institutions. These scales proved suitable for analysis because the separate items were highly intercorrelated, producing scales with a normal and non-skewed distribution with high reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = .77 for the confidence in public institutions scale and .66 for the confidence in private institutions scale).

⁴ It is worth noting that the poor results in Table 8.5 are not due to the fact that national data are pooled or that the figures represent the results from two surveys. The same analysis was carried out for separate countries in the same survey year with almost identical results. Not only were the R²s very low in each country (less than 2 percent), but no independent variable was closely associated with institutional confidence or consistently significant in a majority of nations.