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A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support

DAVID EASTON*

It has been said about the United States that it is now suffering 'a crisis of regime'. Europe, we have been told, is in little better condition: 'all over Europe the First World War broke up the structure of society which, before 1914, had provided the necessary basis of confidence between government and governed. There no longer exists, except in a few places such as Switzerland, that general acceptance of the conduct of national affairs that adds to the vigor of government and society alike.'1 These are the kinds of practical political problems to which the concept of political support, as found in systems analysis, has been directed.

In the last decade, as this concept has come increasingly to be used in empirical research, a variety of predictable issues has begun to emerge. These deal with such matters as the best indicators of the concept, measurement of fluctuations in support, the conditions under which supportive attitudes are transformed into action, and alternative models for explaining both the changing levels of support and their systemic consequences. Satisfactory inquiry into these issues, however, hinges on simultaneous efforts to resolve a logically prior problem. What meaning can be most usefully attached to the idea of political support itself?

In view of the considerable body of research now available about the input of political support, an effort at conceptual re-assessment seems particularly timely. Since, however, the concept is more complex than appears on the surface, it will be impossible in this paper to deal with all aspects – even all major aspects – of its meaning. I propose instead to consider only a few selected areas in which particularly troublesome questions have arisen about the application of the idea, drawn, as it has been, from systems analysis. These questions involve three matters. Can a valid distinction be made between specific and diffuse support? Ought support in either of these modes to be construed as uni- or multidimensional? To what extent, if any, might some of the presumed constituent elements of support be more usefully regarded instead as indicators, determinants or consequences of it?

One further restriction will be imposed on my remarks. Space permits special attention to be given to support for only two of the basic political objects: the political authorities and the regime. Ambiguities relevant to these objects are complicated enough to occupy most of our attention. Except in passing, therefore, I shall not devote any special effort to clarifying the ways in which support may

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1 The Economist, 23 March 1974, p. 12.
manifest itself for the political community. Either there is no issue about that basic political object, or the ambiguities are great enough that justice cannot be done to them within the limits of this paper.

THE GENERAL MEANING OF SUPPORT

In ordinary language, 'support' is a concept that refers more frequently to behavior than to attitudes, although as adopted in social science it has probably been as useful for its reference to attitudes as to action. Dictionary meanings are seldom decisive in developing the technical language of social science; yet in this instance they do provide a useful starting point. Webster defines support as upholding something by aid, countenance or adherence; the active promotion of the interests or cause of an object; defending something as valid, right, just or authoritative; or giving it assistance. The emphasis is clearly on overt behavior, such as action or advocacy.

Implicit in such overt behavior, however, are certain underlying attitudes. One person is unlikely to support another in the senses mentioned here unless at the same time he is favorably disposed towards him. In other words, the key attitude associated with support would be of an evaluative sort. If we now broaden the term to include negative as well as positive evaluations, we can describe support as an attitude by which a person orients himself to an object either favorably or unfavorably, positively or negatively. Such an attitude may be expressed in parallel action. In short, in its common usage support refers to the way in which a person evaluatively orients himself to some object through either his attitudes or his behavior.

There would seem to be little reason for refusing to incorporate the ordinary meaning into the technical language of social science. In effect, most of the research about political support consciously or implicitly does adopt this ordinary meaning. Yet, even though it is not a matter of serious contention, the consensus needs to be clearly recognized at the outset.

SPECIFIC AND DIFFUSE SUPPORT

Within the context of systems analysis, it has been important to discriminate between two kinds of support: specific and diffuse. The distinction is related to a universal and well-known political phenomenon. Typically, members of a political system may find themselves opposed to the political authorities, disquieted by their policies, dissatisfied with their conditions of life and, where they have the opportunity, prepared to throw the incumbents out of office. At times such conditions may lead to fundamental political or social change. Yet at other times, in spite of widespread discontent, there appears to be little loss of confidence in the regime – the underlying order of political life – or of identification with the political community. Political discontent is not always, or even usually, the signal for basic political change.

It is the unpredictability of the outcome of the relationship between political dissatisfaction and tension on the one hand and the acceptance of basic political arrangements on the other that constitutes a persistent puzzle for research. Transparently, not all expressions of unfavorable orientations have the same degree of gravity for a political system. Some may be consistent with its maintenance; others may lead to fundamental change.

One step on the road to a solution of this puzzle has seemed to me to require us to recognize that support is not all of a piece. The consequences for the system will vary with the differences. Some types of evaluations are closely related to what the political authorities do and how they do it. Others are more fundamental in character because they are directed to basic aspects of the system. They represent more enduring bonds and thereby make it possible for members to oppose the incumbents of offices and yet retain respect for the offices themselves, for the way in which they are ordered, and for the community of which they are a part. The distinction of roughly this sort I have called ‘specific’ as against ‘diffuse’ support. This distinction has represented an effort at a simple conceptual response to a practical but far from simple puzzle.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL STATUS OF SPECIFIC SUPPORT

Whether this division of support into specific and diffuse types is useful will depend on two things: its theoretical justification and its applicability in research. I have argued for its theoretical utility in earlier publications. This point has not been disputed in the literature so we need not re-examine the arguments here. The acceptability of the distinction will also depend, however, on whether it is possible to apply it empirically and to trace out the different consequences that the different types have for a political system. This has been challenged. We need, therefore, to examine the doubts about the feasibility of empirically separating specific from diffuse support.

The uniqueness of specific support lies in its relationship to the satisfactions that members of a system feel they obtain from the perceived outputs and performance of the political authorities. This kind of support is object-specific in two senses. It assumes that people are or can become aware of the political authorities – those who are responsible for the day-to-day actions taken in the name of a political system. This awareness does not mean that members of the system must be able to identify individual authorities. As we shall see, it is enough that the members have knowledge of the authorities as a class or undifferentiated group even if they cannot name names or describe functions. Specific support is a response to the authorities; it is only indirectly relevant, if at all, to the input of support for the regime or political community.

Specific support is object-specific in another sense. It is directed to the perceived decisions, policies, actions, utterances or the general style of these authorities.

4 W. F. Murphy and J. Tanenhaus in ‘Public Opinion and the United States Supreme Court’, Law and Society Review, 11 (1968), 357–84, carefully remove such awareness as a central condition for specific support of the Supreme Court.
Unless such behavior is apparent to the members, this kind of support cannot be generated.

Furthermore, the applicability of the concept depends on the validity of the assumption that people can be aware, however vaguely, of a relationship between their needs, wants and demands on the one hand and the behavior of the political authorities on the other. The relationship needs to be such that the members perceive, whether correctly in some objective sense or not, that the fulfilment of their needs and demands can be associated with the authorities in some way. Authorities include, of course, all public officials from chief executives, legislators, judges and administrators down to local city clerks and policemen, as well as the institutions, such as legislatures or courts, of which they are part.

Finally, it is not enough that members perceive this connection. They must interpret it in such a way that they are likely to attribute causative force to the behavior of the authorities. The relationship between felt wants and articulate demands must be such that the members can lay the blame or praise at the door of the authorities, such as given legislators or the legislature. Without this causal tie being made, the performance of the authorities would have little probability of influencing the level of support directed towards them.

Sources of Specific Support

Given these definitions and assumptions, we may expect evaluations of the authorities to arise in two different ways. In the first place, people may seek in a rough and ready way to match perceived outputs to their articulated demands. These demands may have been put into the system by a member himself directly or by others on his behalf (as when an organizational representative voices demands in the name of his membership or an opinion leader speaks in the name of an unorganized constituency). The authorities will be evaluated according to the extent to which these demands are perceived to have been met.

Specific support arising in this way can be of considerable significance for the stability or change of a system. Conceivably a person may have little trust in the political authorities and may not even believe in their legitimacy. But, if he perceives that his demands have been met, he may be prepared to extend limited support to the particular incumbents in office. Such support would be circumscribed by the extent to which the individual was aware of political outputs and did indeed view them as pertinent to his demands. I shall return to this matter in a moment. The point here is that members are probably capable of engaging in reality or in a certain rational calculus testing about the relevance to their own needs and demands of actions taken by the authorities. Evaluations of the authorities are likely to be shaped in some degree by experiences of this sort. This represents one of the forms that specific support can take.

In the second place, positive or negative evaluations may also be stimulated not by explicit actions on the part of the authorities but by their perceived general performance. This will occur only in those cultures in which the members feel

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free to praise or blame the authorities for general social conditions. Even if members are unable to see their present conditions as a product of identifiable actions (or lack of actions) by the authorities, they may nonetheless be predisposed to hold the government responsible for their plight. They may be satisfied or dissatisfied with the kind of people the authorities are, their style of behavior, the kinds of social conditions they are thought to have permitted to come into existence, and so on. Especially in large-scale societies, where the nexus between social cause and effect is almost impossible even for the professional social scientist – let alone the average person – to unravel, great freedom in allocating blame and responsibility is afforded to everyone. Evaluations may therefore turn on the assessment of the perceived general performance of the authorities. This support is still of a specific kind since its extension or withdrawal is contingent on the authorities' presumed behavior.

Briefly then, specific support has the following properties. It is directed towards the political authorities and authoritative institutions. It assumes that members have sufficient political awareness to be able to associate satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the perceived behavior of these authorities, whether the behavior is in the form of identifiable actions or some attributed general performance. Specific support is possible only under conditions in which the culture permits the members to entertain the notion that the authorities can be held responsible for what happens in the society. Finally, this kind of support varies with perceived benefits or satisfactions. When these decline or cease, support will do likewise.

Objections to Specific Support: Cognitive Incapacity

Objections to the division of support into specific and diffuse types take a number of different forms. In the main, they constitute empirical arguments against one traditional theory of democracy: that democracy is government based on the consent of the governed, a consent that is contingent on popular demands being expressed and explicitly satisfied through the representative process. In this vein, one of the strongest points made has been that, even in those democracies with a relatively high degree of literacy and participation, members are not likely to develop sufficient political awareness to connect their wants and demands with political outputs.

According to this position, findings in American electoral studies reveal that the average person lacks the cognitive capacity to be able to relate his own political attitudes or actions to the behavior or policies of the authorities. Most people are not involved enough to make demands, there is little by way of ideology or stable attitude sets among the masses to guide them in evaluating the authorities, at best their policy preferences are vague and uniformed. The ordinary person

6 See D. Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Society (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1958) where peasants prefer to blame fate or the weather rather than some vague eminence over the hills.

is not likely to know the name of his own elected representatives and may not even be aware of who creates outputs. He seldom knows the policies for which political leaders stand, what his representatives are doing in the legislature, or how to go about influencing them. People are likely to be attracted to candidates more because of their personality or party identification than because of the stands they take on issues. It appears that even the presumed policy differences among party candidates themselves are less likely to influence political outputs than the level of economic development.8

The folklore that has gradually emerged from the American electoral studies about the cognitive capacities of the average person suggests, therefore, that it makes little sense to talk of members matching unknown outputs to unarticulated or non-existent demands. On this basis, it would seem wrong-headed to argue that members could be offering or withholding varying degrees of support because of satisfactions or dissatisfactions with the authorities and their actions.

This class of criticism would not seem to be decisive however. In the first place, the attitudes and the knowledge of American voters are not necessarily characteristic of all electorates. As has been pointed out for the British system, ‘all members of an interview sample were able to identify the governing party, party stands on various issues were clearly perceived, the parliamentary election was regarded as a choice between parties for control of government.’9 And even for the American population Murphy and Tanenhaus have found that close to 50 per cent of those interviewed about the input of specific support for the Supreme Court in 1966 were able to mention at least one policy and could evaluate it in terms of their preferences.10 Under circumstances when issues appear to be more directly related to the felt interests of the population concerned, issues do seem to influence candidate preferences markedly.11

In addition, as the systemic significance of the electoral studies now begins to be reinterpreted by a new generation of scholars, the absence of issue orientations in voting behavior takes on a different, less ‘irrational’ meaning. Data would now seem to suggest that people are far more interested in specific policies and the specific actions of authorities than their lack of knowledge about electoral issues would seem to imply. Verba and Nie, for example, argue that ‘where one finds rather ill-developed means-end calculations – as in relation to voting – the source may lie in the nature of the electoral system itself at least as much as it lies in the incapacity of the average voter.’12 They point out that the very nature of the electoral process provides a ‘relatively uncongenial setting for participation

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8 T. R. Dye, Politics, Economics and the Public: Policy Outcomes in the American States (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966) and the voluminous literature around the issues raised in that book.


oriented toward dealing with issues one considers important.\textsuperscript{13} For those issues that touch the individual directly, he is more likely to initiate his own efforts, to contact persons among the authorities seen as most likely to bring about the desired change, and to attempt in that way to obtain gratification of his political demands. This ‘contact mechanism’, as it is called,\textsuperscript{14} represents an important means different from the usual ‘electoral mechanism’ for enabling members to bring their influence to bear, in a direct manner, on the authorities. For reasons specified, the voting mechanism is likely to depress issue interests and actions, the contact mechanism to stimulate and reward them.\textsuperscript{15} We might therefore expect that the electoral studies would indeed ‘find’ that members of democratic systems tend not to be issue-oriented. It is clear, though, that from these findings we cannot conclude that in other areas members tend not to relate the behavior of the authorities to their demands.

Indeed, it appears from the Verba and Nie analysis that 30 per cent of their sample of the American population contact officials about some issue or problem as one kind of political participation. In a 1973 survey, data from which have not yet been published, similar items probing in the same area revealed that 42 per cent engage in some form of contact.\textsuperscript{16} If this interpretation withstands further testing, it would seem likely that the kinds of favorable or unfavorable orientations we are describing as specific support could be generated about some authorities under these circumstances. Whether these direct contacts lead to the generalization of attitudes so formed to the authorities as a whole would of course open up a different set of questions.

A final point may be made. Even if it were to turn out that members are incapable of asserting demands and relating them to the outputs of the authorities, this need not undermine the validity of the idea of specific support. Support of this type does not depend exclusively on the capacity of members to identify each output or policy action of individual authorities. Demand satisfaction of this direct kind is only one possible source of support, and it is certainly of major interest. However specific support has other origins. It may arise from perceptions of the behavior of the authorities in the aggregate, from the patterns of outputs as they emerge over time.\textsuperscript{17} This experience may generate the feeling of being well governed and may continue to evoke support as long as that feeling remains. We are assuming, in effect, that in some systems members expect to be well governed. If they so perceive themselves, their expectations are fulfilled and increasing

\textsuperscript{13} Verba and Nie, \textit{Participation in America}, p. 116.
\textsuperscript{14} Verba and Nie, \textit{Participation in America}, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{15} Verba and Nie, \textit{Participation in America}, Chap. 7, ‘The Rationality of Political Activity: A Reconsideration’.
\textsuperscript{16} For the Verba and Nie finding, see \textit{Participation in America}, pp. 36–7, Fig. 2–3: Example 1, Circle D (‘Contact’–15 per cent; ‘Both’–15 per cent). The ‘42 per cent’ figure is drawn from a study of political attitudes and behavior conducted in 1973 at the National Opinion Research Center by N. H. Nie, S. Verba, A. Greeley and J. Petrocik, and is cited here with their kind permission.
\textsuperscript{17} Easton, \textit{A Systems Analysis}, p. 399.
support is extended; if not, they withdraw some support. Hence the support is specific in character.

Muller has developed the most refined conceptualization of the idea that support may be a *quid pro quo* not only for the satisfaction of specific demands but also for meeting expectations about such general performance by the authorities. He has proposed that

the most useful conception of specific support is not that its distinctive characteristic is demand-satisfaction, but simply that it involves members' evaluations of the *performance* of political authorities. Some of the least attentive members may feel that the government (perceived as a monolithic whole) is handling domestic or foreign problems well, and thus extend a form of specific support, without actually entertaining any concrete policy demands, and without being able to identify particular authorities or groups of authorities as referents for their evaluations.18

Muller proposes three types of performance – instrumental, expressive and extraneous – to which members may respond by evaluating the authorities positively or negatively. Members may derive satisfaction or dissatisfaction from efforts to meet their policy preferences (instrumental performance). They may offer or withhold support because of symbolic behavior through which the authorities are 'reassuring to the members in a political context',19 authorities being favored because they are viewed as generally qualified persons (expressive performance).20 Finally, even when members have little knowledge of the authorities, the latter may be perceived simply as being likeable (a residual category called 'extraneous performance').21 Although the typology itself may occasion debate, the point here is that it is possible to construct indicators to measure that support which is based not on concrete outputs but simply on the authorities' general performance. This is a useful counter-balance to any over-emphasis on demand-satisfying outputs as a stimulus to specific support. It adds an important dimension to our understanding of the varied bases of this type of support.

In summary, then, it is clear that research and continued analysis lend some plausibility to the operational potential in the notion of specific support. Even though electoral research has pointed us in the direction of denying the cognitive capacity of most ordinary people to relate their demands to the behavior of authorities, this may well be largely an artifact of the nature of the electoral

18 Muller, 'Representation of Citizens', p. 1152, italics in original.
19 Muller, 'Representation of Citizens'.
21 Muller, 'Representation of Citizens', p. 1156. It may be interesting to note that, if this typology is sustained, diffuse support which Murphy and Tanenhaus define as 'the degree to which people think a court carries out its overall responsibilities in an impartial and competent fashion' ('Public Opinion and the United States Supreme Court', p. 370) becomes just a variety of specific support in Muller's terms. This is an important consideration in the interpretation of their findings by Murphy and Tanenhaus as they themselves would probably be the first to recognize (see their fn. 20). If they are in fact testing for specific rather than diffuse support, this would help to account for the unexpectedly high correlation between their measure and policy issue clusters.
process as a means for expressing this kind of relationship. If we look, rather, for
the kinds of particular contacts that many members do indeed seem to have, or for
their expressions of gratification or discontent with the general performance of a
given set of authorities, we may find greater justification for the idea of specific
support than would at first appear reasonable.

Objections to Specific Support: Measurement Barriers

A second major argument against efforts to separate specific from other kinds of
support is that it creates formidable measurement barriers by forcing us to look
for underlying motivations. To establish the presence of specific support we need
to discover whether members do feel satisfied with perceived governmental
outputs or performance. This kind of sentiment, it is argued, is difficult to elicit
from a large population. As Loewenberg has phrased it, 'the distinction between
diffuse and specific support raises what would appear to be insuperable problems
of measurement... It is a distinction resting on differences of motive for sup-
portive behavior which it would be extraordinarily difficult to distinguish empiri-
cally.'\(^\text{22}\) To remedy the difficulty the proposal is that we free ourselves from
the need to measure motivation and abandon the distinction between types of
support. We could then consider support simply as a single homogeneous
phenomenon subject to one set of measures.

One's response to this need not be complicated. In the first place, the measure-
ment of motives does not in fact represent the insurmountable barrier suggested
here. Innumerable studies have already put standard survey techniques to use in
assessing the distribution and intensity of the two different kinds of support.
Whether the best indicators have been devised is as always a debatable point in the
evolution of research. But the feasibility of such research is now difficult to
question.\(^\text{23}\)

In the second place, more than technical capacity is at stake. Is it desirable
theoretically to abandon the distinction? Without discriminating in some way
between specific and diffuse support, could we explain adequately the occurrence
of extreme political tension, conflict and discontent in some systems, especially
democratic ones, without all these giving rise to serious threats to the stability of

Davidson and Parker share this point of view when they write that 'the distinction Easton makes
between specific and diffuse support is based on the underlying motivation for support... Clearly such motives would be difficult to detect empirically... We have chosen to avoid such
an empirical problem by regarding support as 'an aggregate characteristic of the population' - a
strategy which eliminated the need to measure individual motives for supportive actions.' R. H.
Davidson and G. R. Parker, 'Positive Support for Political Institutions: the Case of Congress,'
*Western Political Quarterly*, xxv (1972), 600--12, p. 602.

\(^{23}\) See for example S. C. Patterson, J. C. Wahlke and G. R. Boynton, 'Dimensions of Support in
Legislative Systems' in A. Kornberg, ed., *Legislatures in Comparative Perspective* (New York:
McKay, 1970), 282--313 at p. 297 where the authors state that 'specific and diffuse support are not
strongly related'. See also the numerous other references there to research and publications in
which the same authors have participated. G. R. Boynton and G. Loewenberg, 'The Development
of Public Support for Parliament in Germany 1951--59', *British Journal of Political Science*, iii
(1973), 169--89, p. 172.
the regime or political community? As I have suggested, this is a transparent and universal phenomenon the explanation for which is not intuitively known. It is not enough to say that support is at times of low level or intensity and of short duration as though these were the only two properties we need to take into account. The effort to distinguish specific from diffuse support suggests rather that there are two classes of support each of which may vary independently. They are therefore likely to have independent determinants as well as different consequences for the functioning of a system. If we were to assimilate support for all political objects into a single type, we would have to handle this problem of negative orientations in one political sector and positive in another – with differential results for stability and change – by means of more cumbersome and as yet unspecified conceptual tools. On theoretical grounds, the costs of combining specific and diffuse support into a single category would be rather high.

**DIFFUSE SUPPORT**

I have tried to demonstrate that there is some theoretical justification as well as empirical evidence for maintaining a distinction between specific and diffuse support. We have noted possible dimensions to be included within the idea of specific support itself. These are two major steps towards decomposing the general concept of support into its more specific meanings. The way is now open for an approach to the final issues: clarification of diffuse support and its separation from other terms in its connotative neighborhood.

The briefest way of describing the primary meaning of diffuse support is to say that it refers to evaluations of what an object is or represents – to the general meaning it has for a person – not of what it does. It consists of a ‘reservoir of favorable attitudes or good will that helps members to accept or tolerate outputs to which they are opposed or the effects of which they see as damaging to their wants.' Outputs and beneficial performance may rise and fall while this support, in the form of a generalized attachment, continues. The obverse is equally true. Where support is negative, it represents a reserve of ill-will that may not easily be reduced by outputs or performance.

*Properties of Diffuse Support*

Diffuse support, so defined, can be expected to display the following properties. First, as was just intimated, it tends to be more durable than specific support. This does not mean that such generalized attachment to political objects never changes or that it may not occasionally even fluctuate within short intervals. But because of its sources, as we shall see in a moment, this type of evaluation tends to be more difficult to strengthen once it is weak and to weaken once it is strong. Another and more precise way of stating the same thing is to say that the level of diffuse support will normally be independent of outputs and performance.

24 D. Easton, *A Systems Analysis*, p. 273. For one of the most direct applications of the concept of diffuse support as positive or negative evaluations, undifferentiated into subdimensions, see J. Dennis, 'Support for the Party System in the Mass Public', *American Political Science Review*, LX (1966), 600–15.
in the short run. Typically such support, representing as it does attachment to political objects for their own sake, will not be easily dislodged because of current dissatisfaction with what the government does. For example, members may rate the performance of Congress very low yet not call for any fundamental changes in it or in the Constitution.

Important qualifications need to be introduced to this hypothesis, however, because of the complicated relationship between outputs and diffuse support. On the one hand, if discontent with perceived performance continues over a long enough time, it may gradually erode even the strongest underlying bonds of attachment. On the other hand, there may be instances, not so rare as they might seem, in which the sudden frustration of expectations can so jolt the deeper loyalties of the members of a system that their diffuse support falls into a precipitous decline. The literature on frustration and aggression induced by relative deprivation suggests that this is a real possibility.

This is not to say, of course, that a system will be unable to sustain itself on specific support alone. Where diffuse support is low if not virtually non-existent, beneficial outputs may be able to provide a sufficiently favorable base until a reserve of goodwill accumulates. Characteristically regimes that come into existence in a seriously divided country will seek to win over unreconciled opponents through policies calculated to appeal to their immediate goals and interests.

Second, not only is diffuse support normally more durable, but it can be considered basic in a special sense. Whereas specific support is extended only to the incumbent authorities, diffuse support is directed towards offices themselves as well as towards their individual occupants. More than that, diffuse support is support that underlies the regime as a whole and the political community. In short, we are here drawing attention to support given to, or withheld from, those political objects that, for the understanding of political systems, have a theoretical significance very different from support for the incumbents of political offices alone. 'Basic', therefore, is an adjective that distinguishes the different theoretical status of diffuse as against specific support.

The third and final noteworthy property of diffuse support is that it typically arises from two sources: from childhood and continuing adult socialization, and from direct experience. It is clear that supportive sentiments may at times be stimulated in ways not associated with perceived benefits from the performance of the authorities. As I have pointed out elsewhere,

25 For some discussion of the relationship see Patterson, Wahlke and Boynton, 'Dimensions of Support in Legislative Systems', p. 297.
26 See my interpretation of the forced relocation of the Japanese-Americans during World War II in the U.S., in 'Theoretical Approaches to Political Support', in manuscript.
28 See Boynton and Loewenberg, 'Development of Public Support for Parliament in Germany', and also their 'Sources of the Growth of Public Support for the Federal Republic in Postwar Germany' (manuscript, 1973); and Muller, 'Representation of Citizens', Table 2 ff. and pp. 1163--5 where he demonstrates that instrumental and expressive performance are associated with legitimacy, one form of diffuse support.
to some extent these sentiments may be the product of childhood socialization. Considerable evidence already demonstrates that, if what is learned in childhood does carry over into later life, such socialization would have positive or negative bearings on the level of support for such objects as political institutions and norms. In addition, however, we know that in each culture adults as well as children continue to be exposed to what Merriam has called the miranda and credenda of power. The special status of those in positions of authority, the rituals surrounding their selection and accession to office, the official ceremonies on formal political occasions, the symbols of office, the affirmation of faith on patriotic days, and pervasive ideological presuppositions have long been presumed to contribute in one or another way to the reservoir of more deeply rooted [sentiments].

Diffuse support may also, however, derive from experience. If only because this is a source usually associated with specific support, its significance for diffuse support may easily be overlooked or underemphasized. Members do not come to identify with basic political objects only because they have learned to do so through inducements offered by others – a critical aspect of socialization processes. If they did, diffuse support would have entirely the appearance of a non-rational phenomenon. Rather, on the basis of their own experiences, members may also adjudge the worth of supporting these objects for their own sake. Such attachment may be a product of spill-over effects from evaluations of a series of outputs and of performance over a long period of time. Even though the orientations derive from responses to particular outputs initially, they become in time disassociated from performance. They become transformed into generalized attitudes towards the authorities or other political objects. They begin to take on a life of their own.

Ideological commitments, for example, may represent such a set of orientations. Insofar as the adoption of an ideology or vision of the future may be the product of a rational calculation about current political arrangements, goals and institutions, we have an experiential source of disaffection from, or attachment to, existing political objects. Such beliefs about what is fundamentally right and proper in politics need not have their origins in what we have inherited from others early in the life but in our own assessment of general political circumstances. Diffuse support of this kind, grounded in direct experience, would vary independently of both individual outputs and socialization.

The Dimensionality of Diffuse Support

Although diffuse support may be described at the outset in terms of its general properties, such support is not homogeneous enough to permit us to stop at this point. It has in fact proved to be a comprehensive term difficult to deal with empirically except by means of what appear to be a number of different component meanings. There is little agreement as yet about the nature of these meanings. The continuing uncertainty is revealed only too clearly in the variety of measures that have been introduced to assess the level of diffuse support. If these measures

30 Easton, 'Theoretical Approaches to Political Support'.
suggest little else, they do at least suggest that diffuse support is best interpreted multidimensionally.

As with specific support, this conclusion about diffuse support has important explanatory consequences. It means that we may ultimately have to search for differing determinants of each of the components that go to make it up. In addition, we can expect that the consequences of such support may vary depending upon the dominant constituent elements. In all, by fractioning the concept into its components, we provide the basis, ultimately, for broadening our explanation of fluctuations in diffuse support and enriching our understanding of its systemic consequences.

One further prefatory remark is necessary. With diffuse support, we are faced with an additional problem over and above that of extricating its various component meanings, one not encountered in our discussion of specific support. The latter's theoretical status dictates that we use it to identify evaluations of outputs and general performance on the part of political authorities. The elements constituting diffuse support, however, will vary to some extent with the object towards which the support is directed. For example, diffuse support for the political authorities or regime will typically express itself in the form of trust or confidence in them. But for the political community the same kind of diffuse attitudes may appear as a sense of we-feeling, common consciousness or group identification. To some extent, the political object will govern the mode of expression of diffuse support. Hence the sub-meanings dominant in any consideration of the term will depend partly on the political object that is the focus of attention. But, since my analysis does not include special attention to the political community, this problem need not engage us further.

Diffuse support for the political authorities and regime will typically express itself in two forms: first, in trust as against cynicism (or what is often ambiguously and, I shall propose, misleadingly called alienation) and, second, in belief in the legitimacy of political objects. I shall consider these in turn.

Trust

Trust may be defined in Gamson's terms as 'the probability . . . that the political system (or some part of it) will produce preferred outcomes even if left untended. In other words, it is the probability of getting preferred outcomes without the group doing anything to bring them about. They or others may do things to influence this probability . . .'.

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. For the regime, such trust would reveal itself as symbolic satisfaction with the processes by which the country is run. As some have found, it may not be the results of authoritative actions that count so much as the processes which lead to such results.

On theoretical grounds it may be argued that no set of incumbent authorities in modern mass societies could for long assume the responsibilities of making and

31 W. Gamson, Power and Discontent (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey, 1968), p. 54.
32 As reported in Wahlke, 'Policy Demands and System Support', p. 288.
implementing day-to-day decisions in a political system except under conditions of trust. Without some diffuse support of this kind, they would have to govern through coercion exclusively, and few systems are able to survive for long by that means alone. Normally the authorities must be able to count on the freedom to commit a society without, in each instance, having to obtain the prior consent of those who control the necessary resources.33

It does not seem unreasonable to assume that this trust may be gained in part through processes of socialization. By this means, trust may be converted into the deeper socially approved feeling that it is part of one's civic duty to have confidence in incumbent authorities. Simultaneously members may be encouraged to believe that the regime's goals, rules and structures (arrangements of authority roles) can be trusted to provide outcomes equitable for all. In this way, trust as a sentiment about both incumbents and their offices is in some degree sheltered from conflict and may survive the actions of particular occupants of authority roles.34

In addition to its source in socialization, however, we can also expect that trust will be stimulated by the experiences that members have of the authorities over time. The outputs and performance of incumbent authorities may slowly nourish or discourage sentiments of trust. In time, such sentiments may become detached from the authorities themselves and take the form of an autonomous or generalized sentiment towards all incumbent authorities and perhaps the regime as well.

If experience is indeed in this way a possible base for trust, we are confronted immediately with an interpretative problem. This conclusion would seem to fly in the face of an earlier major point: namely that, where members express generalized satisfaction with the activities of the incumbent authorities, this is to be considered a form of specific support. When we now speak of trust generated by experience of the same incumbents over time, have we not simply stumbled upon the same phenomenon? Have we not succeeded in erasing the previously asserted distinction between diffuse and specific support? More precisely, are we able to distinguish conceptually between trust and cynicism on the one hand and those positive and negative orientations flowing from evaluations of performance on the other?

From a theoretical point of view, I shall seek to show, there can be little question but that we are speaking about two distinguishable phenomena. Empirically they may well shade into each other at some point; but, except at the margins, their differences ought to be readily visible.

In the case of specific support, we are seeking to identify the extent to which satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a given set of authorities can be traced directly


34 Socialization studies have explored the level of trust that has been generated in the United States and other democratic regimes, both in young people and adults. As an alternative to direct studies of socialization, W. Murphy and J. Tanenhaus are proposing the use of a learning model to account for variations in diffuse support for the Supreme Court. Patterns learned early in life are conceived to be intervening variables in adult responses to the behavior of the Supreme Court.
to the perceived policies or general performance of those authorities. We would expect the rise or fall of this kind of support to be conditional on how the members of the system in fact respond to these activities. Observable measures of the reaction by members might be, for example, their voting behavior or rallies for or against specific policies, expressions of blame or praise for various public officials, compliance with or disobedience to specific laws, and the like.

In many systems, however, satisfaction with the authorities may be of sufficient duration and of sufficient intensity to breed a more generalized feeling that the authorities – meaning by this a succession of different sets of authorities as well as any current incumbents of offices – can normally be trusted to take care of one’s interests. Alternatively, members in a system may be so discontented with successive sets of authorities that they normally have little confidence in any of them and will accept them only insofar as they are in fact perceived to produce beneficial results. The role itself comes into question. Occupants of the authority roles begin to lose their moral authority to commit the resources of the system, and the process may prove to be cumulative. In time, disaffection may occur not because of what each succeeding set of authorities is perceived to have done but simply because they are perceived to be authorities – and authorities are no longer thought worthy of trust. In this sense diffuse support for them will have diminished. Loss of specific support for political authorities – the incumbents of roles – has thereby become converted into a decline in support for one part of the regime: the authority roles.

In short, trust may result from experience over time. Typically this is what is hoped for in newly formed systems, but it applies to all systems whatever their age. In this sense, evaluation of outputs and performance may help to generate, and probably at all times will help to sustain, confidence in the authorities (or distrust in them, as the case may be). In ongoing systems, of course, we would expect the processes of socialization as well to contribute significantly to this sentiment of diffuse support. On the other hand, performance and output satisfaction, as the major element of specific support, can emerge from experience alone. It is confined to assessments of what particular sets of authorities are perceived to do within narrower limits of time. It is clear, therefore, that trust as an aspect of diffuse support may have its roots in experience but that that aspect needs to be kept separate, conceptually, from the constant evaluations of the overall performance of a given set of incumbent authorities.

The difficulty of maintaining the necessary conceptual distinction between specific support and trust, grounded as both may be in experience, seems to lie behind some of the questions about whether we can ever hope to find, in any population, such a set of attitudes as diffuse support. The implication seems to be that all we are likely to uncover is satisfaction or dissatisfaction with particular

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35 It is precisely this stage that, many argue, we are about to reach in the United States today. Watergate has threatened not only confidence in a given President but in the office of the presidency itself. Is the United States moving from an unwillingness to trust one or another president or administration to a distrust of all presidents or administrations? The verbal shift may be small but the attitudinal leap can be traumatic for a system.
authorities. Therefore, variations in trust can refer to no more than specific support.

Citrin and Elkins, for example, imply as much in their findings from British data. There trust, as they have measured it, seems to vary with perceptions of the performance of public officials. They have difficulty in discovering underlying attitudes of trust which vary independently of what occupants of offices are seen to do. Not unreasonably, they conclude that trust ought not to be considered a basic attitude as required by the concept of diffuse support.36

It is not clear, however, that their findings are necessarily inconsistent with the idea that trust is in fact a dimension of diffuse support. We might wonder whether what we have here is some ambiguity that arises from neglecting to distinguish trust for the particular incumbent authorities - a form of specific support - from trust for authority roles as a class. When we search for the source of this ambiguity, we find that it could easily be a function of the items measuring trust that both they, in their research in Britain, and others in the United States have tended to use.

Citrin and Elkins have selected items for their trust/cynicism scale that probe for assessments largely of 'politicians'.37 But we are given no reason for believing that their respondents would necessarily interpret the notion of 'politicians' in anything but concrete terms, as the incumbents of governmental offices. Even the American research that the authors call on to buttress their arguments tends to speak of trust 'of the government in Washington'.38 It could easily be that research using items such as these does not really test attitudes towards basic roles. Such items may simply be picking up evaluations of the general performance of various incumbents, who are vaguely called to mind by the collective term 'politicians' or 'the government'. Until we have additional evidence about the content attributed to these terms, these findings should not compel us to believe that trust is largely a mode of specific support.

That we may and do encounter difficulty in empirically isolating differences between trust and specific support cannot be denied. But we ought not to allow this difficulty to obscure the theoretical differences between the two and their significance for understanding the functioning of political systems. The task of research is to provide the ingenuity for discovering appropriate measures for theoretically significant, even if at times subtle, distinctions. The fact that we have not yet found a way to measure a difference ought not to be allowed to deny the reality of that difference.

**Legitimacy**

Diffuse support typically expresses itself in a second major way, through a belief

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36 'Mistrust of government has a "political" basis; people are cynical of public officials when they disapprove of what they are doing.' Also, measures of political trust 'are strongly colored by evaluations of incumbent authorities'. J. Citrin and D. J. Elkins, 'Political Disaffection in Great Britain: Some Data from Student and General Population Samples', in manuscript at p. 60.

37 Citrin and Elkins, 'Political Disaffection in Great Britain', pp. 25 and 32.

38 Citrin and Elkins, 'Political Disaffection in Great Britain', pp. 10–11.
in the legitimacy of political objects. Given its long and venerable history as a central concept in political science, legitimacy has yet to receive the attention it merits in empirical research. If additional analytic clarification of a concept is a normal dividend from efforts at application, this poverty in research limits the extent to which existing theoretical analysis can be amplified or improved.39

Legitimacy I have previously defined as the conviction ‘That it is right and proper . . . to accept and obey the authorities and to abide by the requirements of the regime. It reflects the fact that in some vague or explicit way [a person] sees these objects as conforming to his own moral principles, his own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere.’40 It is not unreasonable to assume that, where we consider a state of affairs morally proper or right, we are likely to view it in highly favorable terms. This positive nature of the belief in legitimacy usually carries with it the implication that we have an obligation to accept the acts of those considered legitimate to be binding on us. The converse is equally probable. With regard to those considered to rule illegitimately, we are relieved of all obligation; support is considered to be totally withdrawn or to be withdrawable.

Legitimacy is a kind of supportive sentiment that may be directed to any one of the three political objects. There is little question that it is appropriate to speak of a belief in the legitimacy of a regime and its authorities. But the notion is even applicable to political communities. Separatist ethnic and linguistic groups typically consider morally unacceptable (and untrustworthy) those political communities in which they are reduced to a subordinate, disadvantaged status.

For the authorities and the regime, I have identified three separate sources with which a belief in their legitimacy might be associated. These lead to the subclassification of legitimating support into three types: ideological, structural and personal. Rather than repeat the analysis here, I shall merely reproduce the schematic representation of these types in Table 1 overleaf.41

Included within the notion of legitimacy is a meaning that has sometimes been raised to the level of a dimension separate from both trust and legitimacy. This is the complex of attitudes involved in commitment to an institution. Commitment is defined as a willingness to maintain and defend the structures or norms of a regime even if they produce unfavorable consequences.42 It represents those kinds

39 See Easton, A Systems Analysis, pp. 278–310, for an extended discussion.
40 Easton, A Systems Analysis, p. 278.
41 For the table and its analysis, see Easton, A Systems Analysis, p. 287 ff. For an application of this typology about legitimacy, see Muller, 'Representation of Citizens', p. 1163 ff.; 'Correlates and Consequences of Beliefs in the Legitimacy of Regime Structures', Midwest Journal of Political Science, xiv (1970), 392–412; and 'A Test of a Partial Theory of Potential Political Violence', American Political Science Review, lxvi (1972), 928–59. It is also instructive to examine the way in which a belief in the legitimacy of the Supreme Court is defined and measured by W. F. Murphy and J. Tanenhaus in The Study of Public Law (New York: Random House, 1972) and in many other publications by them about support for the courts.
42 G. R. Boynton, S. C. Patterson and R. D. Hedlund, 'The Structure of Public Support for Legislative Institutions', Midwest Journal of Political Science, xii (1968), 163–80, p. 169 and the publications of J. Dennis with others on public support for political parties and regime norms. See also Wahlke, 'Policy Demands and System Support', p. 285; Boynton and Loewenberg, 'Development of Public Support for Parliament in Germany', at p. 171; and Patterson,
of feelings held by people about political rules and institutions that go beyond the particular satisfactions they realize from them at the moment.

There is no reason why we cannot add such a notion to our inventory of component meanings of diffuse support. Economy and elegance, however, call upon us to try to maintain the minimum number of dimensions compatible with exploring in depth and comprehensiveness the attitudes in question. In the present instance, it does appear that commitment to an object – one that leads a person to overlook its immediate unacceptable consequences – includes a moral element. In normal usage commitment would seem to indicate a conviction that one ought to support the object in question because it is morally appropriate and correct to do so. If moral principles do in fact go to the core of this attitude, it expresses little more than a deep belief in the legitimacy of an object. In other words, it would be convenient and conceptually correct to consider scores on a commitment scale to represent a refined measure of sentiments towards the high end of a more inclusive legitimacy scale. In that event we would not have to add a third dimension, over and above trust and legitimacy, to the idea of diffuse support.

Wahlke and Boynton, ‘Dimensions of Support in Legislative Systems’, p. 292. For the way in which structural commitment may emerge in the processes of socialization, see P. R. Abramson and R. Inglehart, 'The Development of Systemic Support in Four Western Democracies', Comparative Political Studies, 11 (1970), 419–42, esp. p. 421. For the moral or value component likely to be found in the idea of commitment, see H. S. Becker, ‘Notes on the Concept of Commitment’, American Journal of Sociology, lxvi (1960), 32–40, p. 39; also E. Abramson, H. A. Cutler, R. W. Kautz and M. Mendelson, who in ‘Social Power and Commitment: A Theoretical Statement’, American Sociological Review, xxiii (1958), 15–22, at p. 16 write: ‘Committed lines, unlike open and closed lines, are sequences of action with penalties and costs so arranged as to guarantee their selection. . . . The penalty, whatever its nature, is brought to bear on the actor for any action other than the one recognized as legitimate. The legitimacy of action lies in previous commitment or inner compulsion to follow only certain lines of action.’

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<th>Sources of Legitimacy</th>
<th>Regime</th>
<th>Authorities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Ideological Legitimacy</td>
<td>Moral convictions about validity of regime</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structure</td>
<td>Structural Legitimacy</td>
<td>Independent belief in validity of the structure and norms</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal qualities</td>
<td>Personal Legitimacy</td>
<td>Overflow from belief in the validity of the incumbents of authority roles to the authority roles (structure and norms of regime) themselves</td>
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In effect this inclusion of commitment as an element within legitimacy itself has already occurred, even if unobtrusively. Dennis and McCrone, for example, in an inquiry about the origins of what they call ‘the legitimation of political parties’ interpret their empirical objectives as seeking an answer to the question: ‘What are the factors contributing to rising and falling levels of mass commitment to the partisan institution, factors that contribute to its preservation or decline?’ Similarly, their study of democratic orientations inquires into ‘the meaningfulness and degree of commitment among pre-adults to democratic expectations’. In effect this represents a study of the acceptance as legitimate of various regime norms: participation, freedom and competitive party systems. The basis of this kind of commitment appears to be a learned belief in the rightness of a particular norm or institution. It would seem to be a needless proliferation of dimensions not to subsume this attitude under legitimacy itself.

If diffuse support can in fact be sensibly confined to two major components – trust and legitimacy – it becomes of some importance to recognize clearly the distinction between them. We can expect them to vary independently of one another even though it is very likely that those who consider a system legitimate will also have considerable confidence in it. Nonetheless, people may lose their trust in the ability of authorities to run the country yet not be prepared to deny the authorities in general the moral right to rule and to expect obedience to outputs. There is likely to be a wide abyss between feeling distrustful or cynical about authorities in general and refusing to accept outputs as binding. Yet both sentiments – trust and legitimacy – are alike in that they represent a kind of support which it is theoretically important to view as independent of attitudes towards immediate outputs.

Dimensions Excluded from Support

In proposing that diffuse support for the authorities and the regime be defined mainly by sentiments of trust and legitimacy (and their negative forms), we are automatically omitting other attitudes. We may appreciate better what is intended by diffuse support here if we glance briefly at some of these excluded meanings.

Compliance, for example, is a variable that has at times been proposed as a basic element of diffuse support. Compliance refers to the likelihood that

45 Muller, for example, in ‘Correlates and Consequences of Beliefs in the Legitimacy of Regime Structures’ considers trust to be a synonym for personal legitimacy.
members of a system will behave in conformity with decisions made by the political authorities and with the rules of the regime. Compliance has two facets, one attitudinal, one behavioral. Members may report that they feel that they ought or ought not to obey the decisions of the political authorities. Members may also act in such a way as to obey or violate decisions and rules.

Whether or not compliance ought to be included as a component of diffuse support depends on our theoretical judgement about the intimacy of its connection with such support. When we measure willingness to obey or actual compliance, can we expect that we will automatically obtain an indication of the extent to which a person is favorably oriented towards the authorities or regime? If we can expect to find such a relationship, then we have identified another mode through which diffuse support expresses itself.

The probability of discovering so close an association is, however, very low. It would appear that, as far as support is concerned, the significance of compliant feelings and actions will depend upon an interpretation of the context in which they occur. Not all compliance need reflect supportive sentiments; not all violations of rules need be non-supportive. A number of permutations and combinations is possible.

Although it is certainly true that the 'reservoir of good will which constitutes diffuse support really involves a high degree of commitment to an institution and compliance with its decisions', the converse is not necessarily true. Compliance need not involve diffuse support. For example, a person may obey a law out of fear alone. He may distrust the authorities and consider the regime illegitimate. Compliance here would signify little if any diffuse support for either object. Alternatively, a person may disobey a law which he considers evil. Yet he may not generalize this aversion so as to include all laws; nor need he consider the regime itself unworthy of his support. The prohibition amendment in the United States and its implementing legislation was a case in point. The numerous violators of these laws did not thereby intend to attack the legitimacy of the Constitution as a whole. Similarly, much of the opposition to American policies towards Vietnam was directed against the incumbent authorities, not against the regime. There is even some question about the extent to which many of those who went so far as to withdraw from the country rather than comply with the draft laws were expressing distrust in the regime.

Patterson, Wahlke and Boynton, 'Dimensions of Support in Legislative Systems', p. 292.

It is true Boynton, Patterson and Hedlund, in 'Structure of Public Support for Legislative Institutions' do find a compliance factor in a principal component analysis. However this discovery is not inconsistent with my comments. In the first place, as in all such analyses, one gets out of them what is put in and the survey items were predisposed to permit such a cluster to emerge. In the second place, the factor could be expected to present itself. The investigators had under study circumstances in which, in the absence of coercion, compliant responses could correctly be interpreted as reflecting a favorable evaluation. If the Iowa legislature had passed a law that was vehemently opposed and honored in the breach, negative responses to the survey questions could not necessarily have been interpreted to mean low diffuse support for the legislature.
To assess the impact of compliant or non-compliant attitudes and behavior on the input of diffuse support, we need information going beyond the fact itself. We need to know something about the motives or intentions behind the conformity or violation. For example, we can imagine circumstances in which compulsory obedience to laws may ultimately breed a habit of compliance. This in turn may gradually encourage a belief in the legitimacy of political institutions. Every new regime that is born through force hopes for just such a sequence. Under these special but not infrequent conditions, compliance would be an important determinant of support. Conversely those systems in which legitimacy has been well established should have little difficulty in obtaining a high level of compliance. Here compliance is a resultant of support and might be used merely as an indicator for it.

With these considerations in mind, it does not seem appropriate to adopt compliance as a necessary ingredient of support. Rather, it can be more usefully conceived as a variable whose relationship to support needs to be established through interpretation of the context in which the relevant attitudes and behavior appear. On occasion, assuming appropriate contextual information for interpretative purposes, it may help to reinforce other measures of supportive sentiments. Compliance is perhaps more appropriately construed as a determinant, consequence or possible indicator of support rather than as one of its dimensions.

Another attitude often assigned the role of a dimension of support, on its negative side, is alienation. In fact, trust and alienation are usually paired in research as though they were at opposite ends of the same scale. In this use, alienation appears to be a virtual synonym for the withdrawal of support. We are now in a position to raise the question about whether alienation as a synonym for low diffuse support represents the best use of our conceptual resources.

The enormous literature and wide variety of connotations which have accumulated around the idea of alienation bring home at least one point. If there are references to support-related attitudes hidden in the term, they are buried so deeply among other separate meanings that only an arbitrary and inflexible definition would permit us to pre-empt the use of alienation as a negative form of diffuse support. We might be able to make out a good case for alienation as a synonym if we were to use it unambiguously to refer to two ideas only: that a person feels disassociated or estranged from an object; that simultaneously he rejects the object and therefore evaluates it negatively. Were we free to leave the term at that, we would have little difficulty in adopting it as the polar opposite of positive support.

If the intricate discussions in the literature tell us anything about the term, however, it is that alienation refers to numerous other subjective states. Among these, such negative evaluations need not loom large, if indeed they appear at all. For example, in an unusually suggestive analysis of political alienation, Finifter has proposed four subordinate sentiments as central components: political

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powerlessness, normlessness, meaninglessness, and isolation.\textsuperscript{50} If, as it appears, these subjective states are intended to define alienation, then it is clear that this phenomenon goes well beyond what might usefully be incorporated in the idea of support. In fact, if alienation does consist of these kinds of sentiments, it might be more reasonable to consider it as one among a number of significant determinants of support.

For example, a person may feel powerless, apathetic and indifferent to politics, as many do in contemporary industrialized democracies; yet he may not reject the regime or lose his trust in the political authorities. There may be some association between the two but there is no necessary connection. Inability to exert political influence on outputs or inputs is different from unwillingness to approve of the authorities or the regime. Indeed, in some instances those who feel most politically concerned and efficacious, such as members of a growing anti-regime party, may be least supportive of existing political objects. Citrin and Elkins appropriately make the point that a sense of political inefficacy might signify low support only if members value efficacy and if they put the blame for their feelings of powerlessness on some political object.\textsuperscript{51}

Further, a person may perceive widespread normlessness around him – that the ‘norms or rules intended to govern political relations have broken down and that departures from prescribed behavior are common.\textsuperscript{52} Yet he may feel alienated in this respect not from any lack of love for the regime, say, but precisely because of his attachment to the regime’s rules and because of his despair at seeing them violated. Similarly, feelings about the meaninglessness of political decisions in the sense of their unpredictability\textsuperscript{53} may flow from some kind of disappointment with the breakdown of the regime, not from any discontent with it. The same point can be made about the implications of feelings of political isolation.

Political alienation or estrangement might be better reserved to describe special kinds of circumstances in which people find themselves, as suggested by these examples. Members may continue to be drawn to a system but conditions of life may be such that they feel left outside and uninvolved. To attempt to convert alienation into a synonym for lack of support would deprive us of a suitable concept to identify those members who do feel powerless, isolated and the like and yet who may not have been driven to the point of political disaffection.

A more useful conceptual strategy, one that would probably create far less confusion and difficulty, would be to reserve the idea of alienation as a major potential determinant of diffuse support. This would salvage it for use in the study of support. In that event we would expect that, as people come to feel politically powerless or inefficacious, perceive politics as normless or feel isolated and estranged, they will also become prime subjects for acquiring negative


\textsuperscript{51} Citrin and Elkins, ‘Political Disaffection in Great Britain,’ pp. 7–8.

\textsuperscript{52} Finifter, \textit{ Alienation and the Social System}, p. 191.

\textsuperscript{53} Finifter, \textit{ Alienation and the Social System}.
sentiments about basic political objects. We may even go further and speculate that there is a high probability of significant mutual interaction and reinforcement between diffuse support and alienation. Not only may alienation stimulate the loss of support; the very decline in support, as manifested, say, in a lack of greater political goals with which to identify, may lead people in turn to succumb to feelings of alienation.

The same point may be made about many other attitudinal variables that in one way or another have been used as cognate terms for, or as components of, support. Feelings of relative deprivation, oppression, loss of dignity, discontent with the unresponsiveness of political authorities, 'systemic frustration' \(^{54}\) and the like are not identical with or direct expressions of support for political objects. Rather, they are more profitably construed as conditions that may be associated with fluctuations in the level of diffuse support, as determinants or as consequences, sometimes as both.

In conclusion, my purpose has been to continue the task of exploring ways to reduce ambiguities in the meaning of support as a central political concept. The varieties of content imputed to the term are not unusual in the social sciences; they are even less unusual when a term is as recent in origin as that of support. And even here we have been able to touch on only a number of salient issues. As I indicated at the outset, space has not permitted the needed attention to the cognitive aspects of support: the objects towards which these attitudes are directed, especially the political community.

Conceptualization at the present stage could be brought into still sharper focus if we had at hand a number of explanatory models from which to choose. How we wish to explain things influences in subtle ways the selection of meanings for our terms. For example, a decision in favor of a summative, saliency, combinatorial, sequential or other model of systemic consequences occasioned by variations in support would help to resolve some doubts about meanings to be attributed to our concepts.\(^{55}\) But if conceptual clarification logically precedes explanation, once each process has begun both are intertwined in what should be a mutually nourishing feedback process. We are just about on the threshold of this stage in the study of political support.


\(^{55}\) See Easton, 'Theoretical Approaches to Political Support', in manuscript.