CHAPTER 11

Trust in Government, Support for Institutions, and Social Capital

DURING SUMMER 2011, President Barack Obama and congressional leaders engaged in a long debate over raising the federal government's debt ceiling. It was not a pretty sight. Despite the severity of the issue (not raising the ceiling would have led to the government defaulting on its debts), negotiations extended over weeks and harsh words were launched from all sides toward their opponents. One of our five-year-old sons described the situation this way: "You know what they talk about a lot on morning radio? The debt ceiling. [pause] I hate the debt ceiling." The American public was less generous. When asked to describe the negotiations in one word, the most common responses were *ridiculous*, *disgusting*, and *stupid*. Not far down the list were *terrible*, *childish*, and *pathetic*.[1] After discussing a poll showing that 80 percent of the public were not satisfied with the functioning of the federal government, one newspaper columnist quipped, "The other 20 percent aren't paying attention."[2] Not surprisingly, evaluations of the president and members of Congress took a hit. Significant portions (one-third to 40 percent) of citizens said that they held less favorable opinions of President Obama, Speaker of the House John Boehner, congressional Democrats, and congressional Republicans as a result of the debt ceiling negotiations.[3]

One important feature of democratic public opinion is citizen assessment of government. Evaluations can be positive, yet negative assessments of government and leaders have been more common of late in the United States, and not only during the summer of 2011. Furthermore, democratic citizens are expected to not only evaluate their government and their political leaders but also have the means to enact change if they are dissatisfied. Citizens can hold elected officials accountable by voting for their opponents on Election Day. Severe dissatisfaction with the government could lead to calls for changing governmental procedures or even for replacing the structure of government with a new one. This type of citizen control is one key characteristic of democracies, as so clearly stated by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. "[W]henever

any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends [securing individual rights]," wrote Jefferson, "it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government."[4] Furthermore, a belief that the government is legitimate is related to citizen obedience to authorities and to laws, whereas alienation from government may suppress involvement in political activities.[5] Given its importance to democratic functioning, therefore, public opinion scholars have long been interested in whether citizens demonstrate support for their government.

There are, of course, many aspects of government toward which the public holds attitudes, including constitutional principles, day-to-day functioning, governmental institutions, governmental decisions, and the performance of elected and appointed officials. One useful way to categorize these diverse attitude objects was presented by political scientist David Easton in the 1960s.[6] Easton suggests there are two types of public support for political systems: diffuse support and specific support. **Diffuse support** refers to public opinions about the political system, such as contentment with the form of government and attachment to the norms and structure of the regime. In contrast to this broad attitude, the public also holds attitudes toward the performance of incumbent political leaders and governmental outputs, such as public policies. Easton calls this **specific support**. As for the relationship between the two, Easton has this to say: "one major characteristic [of diffuse support] is that since it is an attachment to a political object for its own sake, it constitutes a store of political good will. As such, it taps deep political sentiments and is not easily depleted through disappointment with outputs."[7] In other words, if citizens are unhappy with governmental policy decisions, specific support for the government will be low, but diffuse support can remain high.

In this chapter, we discuss attitudes tapping both diffuse and specific support for government. We first examine public trust in government, which encompasses characteristics of diffuse and specific support. We demonstrate that public trust in government has declined over time, present explanations to account for changing levels of trust, and discuss the implications of lower trust levels. Second, we examine confidence in particular governmental institutions: the executive branch, Congress, and the Supreme Court. Public faith in those institutions is also a function of both diffuse and specific support. We also demonstrate that attitudes toward the *members* of the institutions are distinct from attitudes toward the *institutions* themselves. In the final section, we move away from an assessment of public evaluations of government to explore citizen interaction with other citizens. Social capital, or the degree to which people connect with and trust other citizens and engage in civic activities, is related to both trust in government and support for government institutions. As we will see, however, social capital has other important consequences for the public and for democratic governments. Also, as with trust in government, the stock of social capital in America has declined of

late, a trend we examine. Finally, to help us think through the importance and implications of public trust in government, support for national institutions, and social capital, we turn to relevant democratic theories throughout the chapter.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Although a number of different definitions of **trust in government** have been proposed, scholars generally agree that trust refers to "the public's basic evaluative orientation toward the government in Washington."[8] As such, trust seems to be a measure of diffuse support for government. Consider, however, the more focused definition provided in the 1970s by Arthur Miller, a leading researcher of public trust: "the belief that the government is operating according to one's normative expectations of how government should function."[9] More recently, trust has been described "as a pragmatic running tally of how people think the government is doing at a given point in time."[10] These definitions suggest that public trust involves assessing the performance of government. The attitude of trust therefore can also be classified as a measure of specific support because it involves some evaluation of governmental outputs. The lack of trust is commonly referred to as cynicism or distrust.[11] Following from Miller's definition of trust, **cynicism** "reflects the belief that the government is not functioning in accordance with individual expectations of efficiency, honesty, competence and equity."[12]

Many democratic theorists agree that public trust in government is important for democratic societies. Citizens place governing duties in their elected representatives and appointed officials. Given their distance from government and their lack of knowledge regarding the many complex policy matters that leaders must address, citizen trust in leaders and governing institutions is a salient feature of democratic decision making.[13] If citizens trust their government, they will accept and comply with its decisions, leading to a stable democracy. If, on the other hand, citizens do not trust their government, it will be difficult for government to enforce the law, leading to political and social disruption.[14]

Proponents of participatory democracy and related variants, such as deliberative democracy, further emphasize that citizen trust in government reacts to the political environment. Trust can increase the more that government procedures are transparent and the more that citizens become involved in debating issues. "Deliberative arenas . . . provide opportunities to explain oneself, one's group, one's problems," leading to greater understanding of the views of others and perhaps engendering trust in others' motives.[15] An obvious extension of this view is that declines in public trust could be indicative of too little involvement of the public in decision making.

Elite democratic theorists have a more nuanced view of trust in government. One key feature of liberal democracy, a theoretical precursor to contemporary elite democracy, is a presumption that citizens should distrust the people in government.[16] After all, the Federalists designed the complex checks and balances of the

U.S. political system with the presumption that political leaders would not pursue the public good but would, rather, look out solely for their own interests. Yet the founders wanted citizens to trust the representative institutions of government so that people would not feel it necessary to pursue direct democracy, which was anathema to the founders.[17] Thus, elite democrats would expect the public to place less trust in government leaders than in the institutions and procedures of government that were established to hold leaders in check.

Measuring Public Trust

To measure public trust in government, survey researchers working on the American National Election Studies (ANES) developed four specific questions in the early 1960s.[18] These questions are the ones most commonly used to examine trust, so it is worth considering the content of the survey items in detail. The complete wording of these questions appears in Table 11-1. The first question asks respondents directly how often they trust the national government. The next two items query people about the behavior of politicians, specifically whether they waste taxpayer money and whether they work for "the benefit of all the people" or only a "few big interests." The final question requires respondents to assess whether politicians are crooked.

What specific criteria were these four items intended to assess? Donald Stokes, one of the creators of the questions, points, to "the honesty and other ethical qualities of public officials" as well as "the ability and efficiency of government officials and the correctness of their policy decisions."[19] To be sure, these are varied criteria. Despite this, Stokes's analysis indicated that public responses to the individual questions correlated strongly with each other to form a general evaluation of government, usually referred to as the **trust in government scale.**

Table 11-1 Assessing Public Trust: Survey Questions from the American National Election Studies

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

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

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

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

Source: American National Election Studies 2008 data file.

Although the ANES questions are often used by scholars, many acknowledge they are not perfect measures of trust. The first item, with its explicit focus on trusting "the government in Washington," most closely resembles the notion of trust as a characteristic of the political regime. The other items, however, appear to tap specific attitudes toward politicians (whether they are crooked), their motives (whether they represent all of the people), or their actions (whether they waste taxpayer money). Because of this, argued Jack Citrin, an early critic of the ANES measures, the survey questions register "mere disapproval of incumbent political leaders" rather than "alienation from the political regime."[20] This seems especially likely because the attitude objects that are the focus of these questions alternate between the general government and politicians ("the government in Washington" versus "the people running the government," for example). In place of these survey items, Citrin preferred questions asking respondents whether they favored changing the form of government or whether they were proud about the form of government. For Citrin, such questions better tap individuals' views of the political regime than do the ANES items. In contrast, because the ANES questions specifically mention politicians, Citrin viewed these as measures solely of specific support. Unlike Citrin, however, most public opinion researchers recognize that the ANES items tap a combination of diffuse and specific support.[21]

In response to Citrin, Arthur Miller presents a forceful defense of the ANES trust measures. Recall that Miller defines trust as matching one's expectations for government to the actual functioning of government. Elaborating on this definition, Miller discusses what distrust in government means for citizens. Some who distrust government might prefer that a new political system replace the current one, but for other people distrust might "be associated with the partisan hopes of 'voting the rascals out'; for others, it may indicate a sense of enduring inequities in government decisions and outputs."[22] Miller's view of trust is thus broader and more complex than Citrin's, encompassing not only an assessment of the political system but also evaluations of how responsive politicians are to the public. Because the ANES measures tap these two aspects of people's attitudes, they are, for Miller, valid assessments of public trust. It is clear that Citrin and Miller disagree over what the ANES items seem to be measuring based on the content of the questions. Perhaps more important, as we see later in this chapter, they also disagree over how to *interpret* public attitudes toward government measured using these survey questions.

Decline in Public Trust

One benefit of the ANES trust questions is that they have been asked of the American public since 1964, allowing us to examine levels of public trust over more than forty years. The graph in Figure 11-1 displays public responses to the four ANES items in presidential election years since 1964. The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from this figure is that public trust has declined considerably over the