

Why are there now lower levels of trust in government?

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There has been a significant decline in trust in governments throughout liberal democracies over the last decades and while scholars have presented various explanations it remains critical to repair this trust as it, in short, creates the environment that political leaders need to succeed (Hetherington & College, 1998). This assignment will argue that there are lower levels of trust in liberal democratic governments because of social developments, political scandals and shifts in the media- and political culture. Initially two arguments concerning social developments as contributors to lower levels of trust in liberal democratic governments are presented. Secondly this assignment will outline an argument regarding the effects of political scandals to lower level of trust in liberal democratic governments. Thirdly two causes based on shifts in media- and political culture will be offered. Finally, two opposing arguments regarding economic issues and government performance will be rebutted.

Firstly, the lower levels of trust in liberal democratic governments can be attributed to the rise of post-materialism and self-expression values. As citizens in many liberal democracies have evolved from being mainly influenced by materialistic values into post-materialistic beliefs, they have come to change their attitude and view upon their government (Inglehart & Welzel, n.d.). In the post-materialistic society, the public has renewed prospects on the democratic process where there is higher expectations of the government to solve issues besides physical and economic challenges and availability for them to play a more active role in politics (Bovens & Wille, 2008). The increase in self-expression values enhanced the general public's political efficacy and contributed to a greater impression of agency which influenced people to challenge the political elites (Inglehart & Welzel, n.d.). Furthermore, a general growing skepticism of institutionalized authority is a key ingredient in societies dominated by self-expression values. This directly develops into a skepticism and distrust of the government since the government in liberal democratic countries rely on the concept of representation, which transfers power from the people to institutionalized authority (Inglehart & Welzel, n.d.). As proven by Inglehart & Welzel the countries with the most significant increase in self-expression values have also seen the most substantial decrease of trust in parliament and government (Inglehart & Welzel, n.d.).

The lower levels of trust in liberal democratic governments are an effect of the general decline in social capital. The civic engagement in local communities, organizations and the nation combined with interpersonal trust between members of the public is the core in social capital (Keele, 2007).

There has been a massive decline in membership of local and national civic organizations which illustrates a wider retreat from our communities and a general decline in social capital (Putnam, 1995). As civic engagement declined people interacted less in communities and their interpersonal trust deteriorated (Keele, 2007). Furthermore, the increasing absence of interaction with government entities resulted in people feeling powerless and out of political influence which fueled a distrust towards the government (Keele, 2007). The extensive research done on decline of social capital and distrust of government in the US makes it a natural example of the general developments which can be seen in various societies (Putnam, 1995). The US has seen simultaneous massive reduction in memberships in major organizations such as the PTA, red cross, boy scouts and workers unions. Moreover, the social decapitalization is also seen in the less formal settings, such as loosening bonds with family members and declining connection and relation to their neighbors (Putnam, 1995). Meanwhile the US population retreats from civic engagement their trust in fellow Americans and the government drops considerably (Putnam, 1995). Consequently social decapitalization affects peoples skepticism and trust towards their government (Keele, 2007; Susan et al., 2000).

Individual scandals and political failures have too contributed to a low level of trust in liberal democratic governments. When exploring the low levels of trust in liberal democratic governments we must investigate the public's perception of those in power. There seems to be a strong linkage between shrinking confidence and trust in government as results of misconduct and scandals in office (Bovens & Wille, 2008; Chanley et al., 2000). In the case of the US this linkage seems apparent when looking at empirical data from trust in the US government from the mid 60's to the mid 70's. The data shows a decline from 77% of the US population *trusting the government in Washington always or most of the time* to 33% of the population (Pew Research Center, 2019). This sudden drop can be explained by a political failure and a major scandal, namely the effective loss in the Vietnam war which raised the question if the government knows what is best for the country, and Watergate demonstrating how far office holders will go to cover up its mistakes (Ashbee, 2020; Putnam, 1995). Furthermore, the scandals of individual political figures affect the public's perception and the amount of trust in the entire government (Bowler & Karp, 2004). This is witnessed in the UK where Bowler & Karp (2004) investigated the effects of individual scandals in the UK parliament. They found people generally trusted the legislative institutions and government less if they were aware of MPs being involved in scandals. Therefore, political scandals affect the level of trust in government by worsening the public's perception of those in power.

The change in media character and the degree of scrutiny politicians are subject to have had a negative effect on trust in liberal democratic governments. Versions of the media such as talk radio and 24-hour news channels created an ever-present media where politicians and politics became subjected to increasing scrutiny (Ashbee, 2020). While there being no substantial evidence that politicians are any better or worse than previously the *mean world effect* described in the work of Newton (2006) argues that the new character of the media has affected our attitude towards politicians and the government. The rise of attack journalism focusing on conflict and constant investigation and surveillance of politicians and their motives and style instead of their policies have led to a much more negative coverage and provoked cynicism among the public (Bovens & Wille, 2008; Cappella & Hall, 1997). This was the case in the US where Cappella and Hall (1997) discovered through experiments that the aggressive character of the media led people to greater cynicism towards their government. Thus, as the nature of the media changed, people were exposed to much greater negativity towards their government which lowered their trust in it.

A shift towards polarized and conflict dominated political culture is another factor resulting in lower levels of trust in liberal democratic governments. Studies have shown that the public generally supports governments where the political elites are in agreement rather than in conflict, and that uncivil political debates have damaging effects on political trust (Gross et al., 2004; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). These effects are seen in the case of the Netherlands, where a change in political culture was followed by a substantial decrease in political trust. The Netherlands had a long period of political accommodation and consensus politics where the focus of politicians and the people were to reach compromises (Bovens & Wille, 2008). However, when the Netherlands's political culture experienced a dramatic change in discourse towards fierce personal attacks and polarizing policies the mistrust of those in power grew (Bovens & Wille, 2008). Furthermore, data gathered by the SCP (2005) indicates that the decline of trust in government was attributed to the manner in which politics was conducted (Bovens & Wille, 2008). In sum, if political culture steers toward uncivilized conflicts and polarization the public tends to trust both politicians and government institutions less.

An opposing viewpoint emphasizes economic issues as the main source of low levels of trust in liberal democratic governments. Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn argues that the publics expectations for the future economy is key in explaining the level of trust in government. They assert that if people have an optimistic and positive outlook on the future of the economy, their trust in government will increase (Chanley et al., 2000). However, what the economy argument neglects are multiple periods of economic growth with simultaneously no decrease in trust in government. This was the case of the in US, where one of the largest declines in governmental trust happened in the high-growth decade from 1964-1974 (Susan et al., 2000). Furthermore, the trust in government increased during the recession of the beginning of the 80's in the US. This trend in not unique to the US, as most liberal democratic governments have seen a substantial economic growth, but with continuous decline in trust in government (Bovens & Wille, 2008). Therefore, it seems unlikely that economic issues are the key contributor to the lower levels of trust in liberal democratic governments.

Other scholars contend that deterioration of Government performances is the crucial factor behind low levels of trust in liberal democratic governments. This is a point of view mainly presented by Kenneth Newton and Pippa Norris, who argues that disappointing performances of both government policies and the institutions that implement such policies are responsible for low public trust in government (Newton & Norris, 2000). Nevertheless, the approach presented by Newton and Norris (2000) has been heavily criticized as more and more research appear proving no causal connection between rating of government performance and trust in government. Indeed, when Goodsell (2004) investigated multiple countries, he found that the opposite pattern, that people were often both satisfied with government performance and still had a mistrust towards the government. Furthermore, the theory of government performances disregard the fact that there has been a pattern of decrease in trust in government in almost all liberal democratic governments which makes it unlikely that individual government performance can explain the low levels of trust (Dalton, 2005).

In conclusion there is lower levels of trust in liberal democratic governments mainly because of, shifts in the culture behind both the media and politics, individual and government scandals, and social developments. This paper has presented a few of the social developments, being decline of social capital and the rise of self-expression values. Furthermore, it has outlined that the culture change in both the media and politics towards polarization and conflict have provoked mistrust among the population. The impact of political scandals both individual and governmental have also been

presented. A notion to be made of this assignment is that lower levels of trust in liberal democratic governments does not stem from one single factor. The perception and trust of those in power is an accumulated measure of several aspects. Further research that could expand knowledge on trust in general and how it is restored could contribute to both explaining why governments in general have lost trust, but also how they might regain trust among their population.

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