

# **PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR**



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## **INTRODUCTION**

Public confidence in government has become more important as opinion polls have indicated a constant decline public trust in government, in Australia and overseas (Papadakis, 1999; Orren, 1997; Pharr, 1997). Declining confidence in public institutions has been considered an indicator of fundamental problems in the nature of democratic political systems (Papadakis, 1999: 78). If governments and the institutions associated with government lose popular legitimacy, the capacity of systems of government to command authority, especially through voluntary compliance, may be under threat. Furthermore, there is a danger that participation in political and policy-making process will become more unrepresentative of the population (Nye and Zelikow, 1997: 277). Public confidence will affect the extent to which the public contribute to work of government especially through taxation, and enter into the public domain including working for the public sector (Nye, 1997: 4). Government and the public sector are central institutions in maintaining a civil society. Public confidence is an important influence on the capacity of these institutions to discharge their responsibilities. It is also important because of the impact on representative democracy (Burstein, 1998).

This discussion focuses mostly on the factors attributed to the post war decline in public confidence in government. The distinction between public confidence in executive government and public confidence in the public sector is difficult to determine from the literature dealing with this issue, although it is reasonable to assume that differences exist. For example, Lam notes that the Hong Kong civil service has been able maintain high levels of public confidence (32% compared to an international average of around 10%), at times when confidence in the ruling government is low (Lam, 2000: 4).

However, the literature dealing with confidence in government usually fails to distinguish between executive government and the public sector. Accordingly, the following analysis uses the literature dealing with the more general issue of government, and attempts to determine the issues that are likely to be relevant to the public sector, such as service delivery, accountability and public participation. Here, the focus of attention is mostly on those considerations that might be within the ability of the public sector to influence public confidence in the public sector.

## **THE NATURE OF THE ISSUE**

There is a considerable literature dealing the issue of public confidence in government, although it mostly emerges from the United States. The Australian literature is much less developed and opinion polls tend to focus on the popularity of a particular government or leader rather than the more generic issue of public confidence in the institutions of government (Papadakis, 1999 is an exception). The empirical support for declining public support for government is mostly gathered through

opinion polls although other evidence such as cases of excessive government regulation have been used to support notions of declining public confidence in government (for example, Stonecipher, 1998).

Here, there is an important issue concerning the extent to which opinion polls are able to accurately capture public mistrust or confidence in government. Interpretations of these results also tend to be ideological, supporting notions of either bigger or small government (for example, Stonecipher, 1998; Eckersely, 1998). Polls are limited in their capacity to capture public beliefs on these issues since results are subject to variations in questions and sampling procedures and a broad range of contextual influences such as military threats, economic conditions and public information (Nye, 1997: 5). Bok (1997: 56) identifies three main problems associated with relying on public opinion to determine the performance of public institutions.

- declining public confidence in government is also associated with declining confidence in other major institutions;
- confidence is a function of both expectations and performance. It is likely that public expectations with respect to government have also increased throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- public opinion is concerned with perceptions rather than fact. These perceptions are influenced by a range of factors such as the media and the opinion of others.

The context of declining public support for a wide range of institutions is central to concerns over declining public support for government. It implies that declining public support for government is related to broader public scepticism of most major social institutions. For example, Nye (1997: 1) notes that public confidence over the past three decades has halved for many institutions including:

- universities from 61% to 30%;
- major companies from 55% to 21%;
- medicine from 73% to 29%; and
- journalism from 29% to 14%.

Indeed, some categories of public servants are considered to have high standards of ethics and honesty in comparison with employees in the private sector. For example, Table 1 indicates that school teachers, police and university lecturers are trusted more by the public than bank managers, business executives and lawyers. Trust in these categories of public servants has improved over the past two decades. More recent polls indicate that confidence in the ethical and honesty standards of teachers (71%), police (60%) and university lecturers (57%) continues to improve, according to opinion polls (Roy Morgan Research Centre, 1998).

**Table 1 Percentage Rating of an Occupation “High” or “Very High” for Ethics and Honesty**

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>1976</i>	<i>1986</i>	<i>1997</i>
Bank managers	66	61	32
Doctors	62	63	66
Dentists	62	62	60
School teachers	56	55	64
Police	52	56	55
University lecturers	47	51	52
Lawyers	43	38	29
Business executives	22	22	16
State MPs	21	16	9
Federal MPs	19	15	9
Newspaper journalists	12	13	7
Union leaders	9	8	12
Advertising executives	9	9	8
Car salespeople	4	3	3

Source: Eckersley (1998), p. 10.

The distinction between politicians and public servants is clear in these opinion polls. While politicians enjoy the trust of less than 10% of those surveyed (more recently only 7%), other public servants such as police and teachers appear to have the trust of over 60% of the public (Morgan Research Centre, 1998). These data reinforce previous observations that public confidence in executive government needs to be considered differently from confidence in the public sector. It also implies that there is a public perception that public servants behave differently, if not independently, from political spheres of activity.

The issue of public perception and fact is also an important consideration in debates surrounding public confidence in government. The role of the media is central to influencing these public perceptions. Blendon *et al.* (1997: 214) note that 72% of Americans get their impressions of government from the media while only 18% reported that their impressions were formed by personal experience, and 8% from family and friends. Trust in government does not appear to vary much according to the media source (television, radio or newspaper) (Blendon *et al.*, 1997: 215), but these data suggest that the media is the most powerful influence in shaping public perceptions of government.

#### *The magnitude of the problem*

Table 2 summarises levels of public confidence in some of Australia’s main institutions. These data allow confidence in the public sector to be separated from executive government and other

political actors in Australia's system of government. This table indicates that confidence in the public sector has been in decline in Australia over the period 1983 to 1995, but is still considerably higher than confidence in the federal government and political parties, and somewhat higher than confidence in the parliament. Confidence in the public sector is similar to confidence in other public institutions such as the legal system, but there appears to be a large distinction between confidence in the public sector and specific areas of public sector delivery such as teaching and law enforcement (police). While levels of public confidence in the public sector appear to be in decline, the level of confidence, reported in Table 2, is still high by international standards. For example, public confidence in the Hong Kong civil service is around 32%, while the worldwide average for public confidence in the public sector is around 10% (Lam, 2000: 4).

**Table 2 Levels of public confidence in institutions, Australia, 1983 and 1995 (%)**

	<u>1. Great deal/ a lot</u>		<u>2. Not much/ none</u>		<u>Change in</u>
	<u>column 1.</u>				
	<i>1983</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1983</i>	<i>1995</i>	
Parliament	n/a	30.5	n/a	69.5	
Federal government	55.3	26.1	44.7	73.9	-29.2
Political parties	n/a	15.7	n/a	84.3	
Public service	47.3	37.9	52.7	62.1	-9.4
Armed forces	66.8	67.6	33.2	32.4	+0.8
Church	56.2	42.5	43.8	57.5	-13.7
Police	80.4	75.8	19.6	24.2	-4.6
Legal system	60.5	34.7	39.5	65.3	-25.8
Press	16.4	16.4	71.4	83.6	-12.2
Television	n/a	25.3	n/a	74.7	
Trade unions	24.1	25.6	75.9	74.4	+1.5
Ecology movement	n/a	55.6	n/a	44.4	
Women's movement	n/a	43.1	n/a	56.9	
Major companies	79.3	58.5	20.7	41.5	-20.8
United Nations	n/a	50.4	n/a	49.6	
APEC	n/a	44.3	n/a	55.7	

Source: Adapted from Papadakis (1999), p. 76.

In the United States, public confidence in government is around 25% (Nye, 1997: 1) although there are clear differences between public confidence in government in comparison to Congress and the Executive where public confidence in the 1990s has been around 10% (Blendon *et al.*, 1997: 207). However, there are also important differences between public confidence in federal governments in comparison to state and local governments in the United States. Public confidence in local and state government is higher than confidence in the federal government (Nye, 1997: 1).

The differences in public confidence between these tiers of government are considerable and imply that public confidence is strongly influenced by the extent to which citizens are able to identify with or have experience of government. For example, one 1997 poll indicated that confidence in the United States federal government was 22% while confidence in State governments was 32% and confidence in local governments was 38% (Nye, 1997: 1). Similarly, 1993 public perceptions of governments providing value for money indicated that local governments were considered to provide the most value for money by 38% of those surveyed, while 23% favoured the federal government and 20% favoured the state government (Orren, 1997: 83). These same 'level of government' differences are not reflected in the Australian data on confidence in federal and state members of parliament (see Table 1).

A final issue relating to the data on public confidence is that there are differences in perceptions and attitudes between nations. These differences suggest that types of political systems are an important influence on public confidence in government. For example, 1976 comparative data indicate that levels of public trust were high in countries such as Germany, Netherlands and Austria (around 60% to 70%) while confidence was low in countries such as Japan, United States and Italy (between 20% and 30%) (Pharr, 1997: 238).

More recent data indicates that the decline in public confidence in government since the war is most rapid in countries such as the United States, Japan and Italy and least rapid in countries such as Britain, Canada, Australia, Austria, Denmark and Finland (Economist, 1999: 49). These differences are probably a reflection of a wide range of social, economic, political and cultural factors influencing the nature of society within these countries, including the important influence of political culture. Political culture is concerned with knowledge of, and participation in the political system, and the values of the society.

For example, systems of government that appear to have maintained the confidence of citizens also appear to have societies where mutual trust between citizens is a feature of the society. Polls in Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Finland in the 1990s indicate high levels of trust of people (Inglehard, 1997: 231), while these countries also appear to enjoy participative democracies where politics is discussed and citizens engage in political processes (Inglehard, 1997: 234-235).

## **FACTORS AFFECTING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN GOVERNMENT**

There are several levels at which public confidence in government can be analysed and attributed. Common themes in the literature include macro analysis that tends to focus on broad socio-economic and international forces that have contributed to public dissatisfaction with government. Another level of analysis is concerned with national systems of government and power relationships that provide a framework within which government operates. Finally, there is a level of analysis that deals with the performance of government institutions and their relationship with citizens. The

following analysis provides an overview of factors within these three levels of analysis that might be considered to be important in contributing to public confidence in government. This analysis will focus mostly on the second and third levels of analysis since it is more likely that public sector agencies and government can influence these levels rather than the broader macro factors that are often considered to be beyond the control of national institutions.

### **Macro influences on confidence**

Macro factors affecting public confidence in government are usually understood to include issues such as prosperity resulting from national economic performance, changing social conditions affecting citizen satisfaction with society or the changing nature of the relationship between citizens and institutions of authority. The research dealing with these issues tends to suggest that influences such as dwindling social capital, economic performance or personal financial circumstances are unlikely to explain “shifts in political trust over time” (Orren, 1997: 85). Indeed, Orren argues that

*All the usual suspects – those demographic, psychological, social and economic factors that at first seem to offer convenient explanations for declining trust in government – can be dismissed or at least deferred until a more conclusive correlation can be proved (1997: 85).*

The research appears to mostly support this view. For example, analysis of American public confidence in government and the economy identifies important methodological weaknesses in the argument including uncertainty in measuring economic performance, appraising public perceptions of economic well-being and linking government policy to economic performance (Lawrence, 1997: 111-112).

Indeed, this analysis of public confidence in the United States also highlights several important empirical weaknesses in linking public confidence to economic performance. These weaknesses include (Lawrence, 1997: 112):

- the absence of a correlation between periods of poor economic performance and public dissatisfaction with government. Indeed, public confidence in government sometimes rises in periods of economic crisis.
- there is international evidence indicating that confidence in government has been high despite poor economic performance.
- declining confidence in government is found across all sections of American society despite economic position as measured by income, educational level or occupation (also see, Blendon *et al*, 1997: 206-210).

There appears to be slightly stronger support for linkages between changing social and cultural values and norms, and public confidence in government. It has previously been noted that decline in confidence in government is also associated with declines in trust in other private and public institutions. Some analysis suggests that new issues and problems arising from changing social and

cultural conditions have increased expectations in the capacity of traditional institutions to find solutions. Thus, new sets of social and cultural problems have both raised expectations in the capacity of government to solve these problems, and presented a new set of problems not previously experienced by government (Mansbridge, 1997: 133). This phenomena is referred to as governmental overload whereby

*Citizens ask the government to solve problems it cannot solve, ask the government to do more things (and more incompatible things) than it can do, and ask the government to solve problems without being willing to sustain the taxation adequate to finance efforts that would produce a solution (1997: 133-134).*

These changing social and cultural conditions have been linked to a decline in civic engagement and, more generally, a decline in trust within society. Thus, some authors have linked a decline in 'social capital' with the dislocation of citizens from institutions and other citizens, and a decline in social trust (Putnam, 1995; Papadakis, 1999: 88). However, the extent to which changing social and cultural conditions impact on levels of trust, varies across nations (World Values Study Group, 1999).

### **The influence of systems on confidence in the public sector**

At this level of analysis, there are established authorities, processes and norms that influence the relationship between citizens and the public sector. These systems of governance have changed over time and may provide an explanation of changing levels of trust and confidence between government and the public. These systems provide a framework within which institutions operate. The two primary systems considered in this analysis are the public sector management framework and the changing nature of the political system.

#### *Public sector management framework*

It is in this area that the debate surrounding confidence in government becomes most ideological. A common theory is that confidence in the public sector has diminished as the size of government has increased. Here, the implication is that confidence in the public sector will be restored as the balance of private and public activity is shifted towards a smaller public sector. For example, Stonechipher argues that public distrust of government is a direct function of the "massive proliferation of rules and procedures – across all levels of government" (1998). However, this view does not appear to be supported by the weight of evidence or analysis of the issue.

During periods of rapid growth in the size of the American public sector, government remained popular. Indeed, new government intervention in areas such as social security, health services, environmental protection and health and safety regulations enjoyed, and continue to enjoy popular public support (Nye, 1997: 6-7). With respect to government in the United States "there is little

evidence that [the public] wants government to withdraw from spheres in which it is now involved, or to downsize simply for the sake of downsizing” (Bennett and Dilulio, 1997: 27).

There are strong arguments that many features of new market-orientated public sector management practices have contributed to the decline in public confidence and increasing mistrust of government. New public sector management practices have emphasised competition, efficiency and individual responsibility. These values appear to be removed from young Australians, at least, where there is considerably more emphasis on community, family, cooperation and the environment (Eckersley, 1998: 10). The suggestion is that the values being promoted in recent management practices are fundamentally different from broader social values “where the emphasis is on cooperation, community and family, more equal distribution of wealth, and greater economic self-sufficiency” (Eckersley, 1998: 10).

Other analysis of public trust also implies that the business-orientated, market approach to public administration contributes to declining trust between government and the public. Thomas’s (1998: 184-186) analysis of factors contributing to declining trust between government and the community provides important insights into the ways in which market-orientated modes of public management may have contributed to a decline in the confidence of the public in the public sector.

First, trust is diminished “through the extensive use of contracts detailing the precise responsibilities of each party in the event of remote or unlikely contingencies” (Thomas, 1998: 184; also see Macaulay, 1963). Contractual relationships are a central component of new public sector management practices. Contracts and performance agreements are used to define relationships between ministers and their senior executive officers (Johnston, 2000), between government agencies and community organisations (Ryan, 1999), and between CEOs and their department (Ryan *et al.*, 1998). Contracts come in the form of service agreements, employment contracts and performance indicators, and have become a defining characteristic of new modes of management in the public sector. It seems likely that the new public sector contractualism is an important influence on redefining the relationship between the public sector and citizens.

Second, trust can be lost through organisational instability and ambiguity in the roles of organisations. Thomas (1998: 185) argues that “reorganizations are likely to generate distrust”. These factors have been features of public sector management in Australia and other liberal democracies as governments have sought to redefine the nature of the public sector. The role of the public sector has become increasingly ambiguous as private sector objectives and management models have been transposed into the public sector (Orchard, 1998; Yeatman, 1998). The public sector has been constantly reorganised throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with many of its functions being redefined in terms competitive markets (Ryan *et al.*, 1998) or being provided by the private sector having uncertain relationships with the public (Wettenhall, 2000; Administrative Review Council, 1998).

Finally, trust is diminished by a lack of professionalism and complacency within the public sector. Thomas argues that “public trust in professions depends on self-criticism within the profession” and “constant peer review” (1998: 186). However, another feature of new models of public sector management is stronger executive control of the public sector and limiting of the capacity of the public sector to act independently. The public sector is expected to discharge decisions of the executive (Keating, 1999) with new management practices such as short-term employment contracts and performance agreements being used to limit the capacity of the public sector either to provide critical or independent advice (Johnston, 2000). A critical, professional public sector has been diminished in favour of stronger political control of the public sector. Public trust between the public sector and the public is likely to diminish as the public sector is increasingly identified as an extension of party politics, rather than a professional institution acting in the public interest.

### *The political system and political processes*

The research seems to indicate that the political system is not a major determinant of public mistrust of government. In the Australian context, Papadakis found that “there is modest association between views on the democratic system and confidence in the national government, political parties and parliament” (1999: 83). This research also provides some evidence that knowledge and interest in politics and public affairs tends to increase confidence in government and the institutions associated with government (87).

Political processes appear to present greater challenges to public confidence in government than does the political system. Political rhetoric and political debate has played an important role in introducing mistrust of the public servants and mistrust of politicians into mainstream politics. Politicians have promoted the public sector as being inefficient, too big, dysfunctional and distant from citizens, as part of political agenda to promote downsizing, contracting-out, and privatisation (for example, South Australian Liberal Party, 1997; Troeth, 1998). Indeed, some political parties developed anti-politician campaigning strategies (for example, Hanson, 1997).

Neustadt refers to these phenomena as the politics of mistrust whereby “our [United States] politicians routinely blame ‘the government’ for causing the problem, whatever the problem may be.” (1997:199). His historical analysis of politics in the United States indicates that political campaigns promote and encourage distrust of all institutions of government. Characterisations of politicians, public servants and other public officials as being untrustworthy and dishonest is considered to be part of normal election processes.

There is also some statistical evidence that partisanship is related to trust in government. Citizens with strong partisan beliefs are more likely to trust government even if the executive government is *not* their preferred political party. More importantly, the more polarised and removed from centralist politics political parties become, the less citizens trust government. Thus, as policies and political

positions become more extreme, the public has tended to have less trust in government and politics (King, 1997: 175-177).

Other analysis has suggested that the politics of government has impacted on the integrity of the whole of government. The professionalisation of political processes through scientific sampling, political consultants and management of media relations has, not only alienated the public (Neustadt, 1997: 183), but also become deceptive as “political debate has too much ‘spin’ and too little straight talk (Binder, 1997: 115). Here, the argument is that political campaigns have become inherently dishonest as information is managed as a means of avoiding public scrutiny and analysis.

The core of this issue is that public distrust of government has increased as information has been manipulated to deceive and mislead, suggesting that these processes challenge the integrity and reliability of government and political processes. Secrecy and concealment are considered to be other forms of manipulating information, resulting in a loss of confidence between government and citizens (Thomas, 1998: 186).

Here, the dilemma for government is that open systems with free access to information may result in public dissatisfaction with performance but closed systems that conceal or manipulate information are likely to contribute to a long-term decline in public trust in government institutions as knowledge of these deceptions becomes apparent.

### **Interactions between government and citizens**

These influences on public confidence in government refer to the experiences of citizens with government, and how these experiences impact on perceptions of government institutions. This level of analysis is concerned with personal experiences and relationships between government institutions and the public. The two issues considered here relate to confidence in government in relation to experiences of the performance of the public sector, and extent to which the public sector is considered to be alienated from citizens.

#### *Performance of the public sector*

Opinion polls in the United States indicate that perceived inefficiency and waste are among the main reasons why citizens do not have confidence in government (Nye, 1997: 1). These issues are directly related to the performance of government, and the public sector, in particular. However, these perceptions are more likely to be formed through attention to opinions expressed in the media rather than from personal experience (Blendon, *et al.*, 1997: 214; Orren, 1997).

It has been noted that the extent to which citizens are satisfied with the performance of the public sector is a function of both perceptions of government and expectations of government (Orren, 1997: 88). Perceptions will be influenced by personal assessments of the actions of the public sector, satisfaction with directions in policy, assessment of the integrity of processes and leaders, and public characterisations of the public sector. Expectations will include the desire for policy, programs and services, and anticipation of the outcomes of these actions (Orren, 1997: 88).

Public perceptions of performance are not necessarily related to poorer (actual) performance of the public sector over time but rather influenced by expectations of the capacity of government to solve current problems. This implies that there have been increasing expectations with respect to government solving the social and economic problems confronting contemporary society. Furthermore, there is an increasing divergence of expectations with respect to the role of government (O'Connell, 1996; Glassop, 1998) and measures of the performance of government (Alford and Baird, 1997; Orren, 1997: 90).

Issues surrounding the performance of the public sector appear to be focussed mostly on changing perceptions and improved knowledge of problems within the public sector. Audit reports, performance reports, freedom of information and new institutions of public accountability (Wanna, *et al.*, 1992) provide the public with more information concerning the performance of the public sector. Indeed, analysis of the performance of the public sector over recent decades suggests that there is little evidence to suggest that the performance of the public sector is actually worse than in times when public confidence in government was high (Bok, 1997: 61-65; Ackroyd, 1995).

#### *The distance between the public sector and citizens*

Another factor believed to affect public confidence in government is the distance between government and its citizens. It has previously been noted that public confidence in government in the United States increases the more localised the level of government (Nye, 1997:1), and the closer the personal relationship between government and citizens. The distance between government and citizens is believed to influence the extent to which citizens have confidence that governments reflect their beliefs and values. Furthermore, personal contact between citizens and government influences tolerance of the mistakes of government (Nye, 1997: 9). Thus, confidence in government is influenced by perceptions of alienation and isolation from the processes of government.

The link between the capacity of citizens to influence public policy and public confidence in government is also supported by Australian research. This research tests the proposition that profound cultural and social shifts in Australian society have resulted in public policy being captured by a new political elite. This 'new politics' is dominated by the educated and wealthy with the cognitive competence, education and mobility to be able to dominate processes of government (Papadakis,

1999: 87). The evidence suggests that there is a correlation between the capacity of citizens to participate in this 'new politics' and confidence in government. Also, those with a strong interest in politics and government, and participate in the processes of government and public policy are more likely to have confidence in government (Papadakis, 1999: 89). As the processes of government have become more sophisticated, contact between government and citizens have diminished, resulting in a decline of public engagement in the processes of government.

The extent to which citizens engage in human contact with government has been reduced by technological and managerial developments designed to capture mass sentiment, but possibly alienating people from the processes of government. These developments include scientific sampling, electronic media, media management and engagement of specialist political or policy consultants (Neustadt, 1997: 183). As the processes of government have become more technical and professionalised, citizens have less opportunity to engage in public policy processes, limiting their capacity to develop personal trust relationships with government. Indeed, there is evidence in the United States that public opinion polls were a central driver of public policy throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Munroe, 1998).

Thus, there appears to be strong evidence in Australia and the United States that confidence in government is strongly influenced by public perceptions of the relationship between citizens and government. The stronger the perception that the values and beliefs of citizens influence policy-making, the greater the confidence of the public in government. This issue has important implications for models of the relationship between government and the public. In recent years, the relationship has been increasingly defined in terms of a customer model where government provides services to citizens (McGuire, 1997). This model focusses on "production in the operation of government: how well it works, and how well it delivers" (Smith and Huntsman, 1997: 311).

This model assumes that citizens are passive consumers of government services, interacting with government through transactions, surveys, opinion polls or complaints. It assumes that citizens are motivated mostly by self-interest, changing the way in which the public evaluates the performance of the public sector (Smith and Huntsman, 1997: 311-12). Here, new 'customer' models of the relationship between government and citizens may have contributed to changes in public confidence in government, as the public is encouraged to review its relationship with government in simplistic commercial terms. The customer relationship encourages citizens to be passive consumers of government services, rather than participants in the development of public policy (also, Cope, 1997). Other models of government provide greater capacity for citizens' participation in the processes of government, and for capturing the value-added role of government beyond service provision (for example, Smith and Huntsman, 1997: 312-313.).

## Discussion

This paper has examined most of the main theories regarding factors that may have influenced declining public confidence in government over the past couple of decades. As applied to the United States context, these factors are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3: Hypotheses about the decline in Confidence in Government (Analysis is for US)**

<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Rating</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1. Scope grown too fast (as measured by GDP).	Low	Scope increased from 3% to 20% but largest growth in programs that are popular. Does not explain other institutions.
2. Scope grown too intrusive (measured by new subjects)	Low/mixed	Divided views on cultural issues. Popularity of environment and safety regulations. 40% say “interfering too much”. Does not explain other institutions.
3. Performance has weakened.	Low/mixed	81% say “wasteful and inefficient,” but Bok disputes net change; also does not explain decline in other institutions.
4. End of cold war.	Low	Largest decline is 1964-74
5. Vietnam and Watergate	Mixed	Fits with onset but needs auxillary hypothesis to explain persistence. May affect all institutions.
6. Word War II effects.	High	1950s seems abnormally high. May affect all institutions.
7. Political realignment and polarization of elites.	High	Fits timing of onset. Explains growth of conservative coalition. Does not explain other institutions.
8. TV effects on politics (party decline, negative marketing).	High	Fits timing and persistence. Distancing of elites.
9. Changed role of the media.	High	Fits timing of onset and persistence. Fits other institutions.
10. Increased corruption and dishonesty.	Mixed/low	Little evidence of increase, but perception grows and Vietnam, Watergate, and aftermath had effects.
11. General economic slowdown.	Mixed	Some variation with unemployment and inflation, but does not fit timing of onset.
12. Rising economic inequality.	Low	Does not show variation by winners and losers.
13. Globalisation and loss of control.	Mixed	Affects general mood, but affects indirect and timing unclear.
14. Third industrial revolution.	High	Explains changes in the economy and communication, but direct causal links unclear. Fits other institutions and transnational.
15. Decline of social capital (measured by voluntary groups).	Low	Evidence in dispute;

causal links to government unclear.

16. Decline in social capital (measured by family cohesion). Mixed Timing about right regarding onset and persistence, but causal link is somewhat indirect. Unclear relation to other institutions and countries.
17. Authority patterns and postmaterialist values, particularly since 1960s. High Fits all institutions and countries. Does not explain all variations.

*Source:* Nye and Zelikow (1997), p. 269 & 270.

The Australian research on confidence in government is much less developed, and more tentative, but there is some United States research that could, reasonably, be applied to the Australian situation. Certainly, Australia is following similar public sector management practices and models to those being pursued in the United States, and it is reasonable to assume that public processes are becoming equally technological, professional and elitist in Australia as the United States. Similarly, political debate in Australia has encouraged distrust of the public sector as political rhetoric has promoted private delivery of public sectors, or reductions in the size of government.

It appears from the preceding analysis that systems and relationships provide the best explanations of declining public confidence in government in Australia. New public sector management frameworks appear to have an important impact on trust between government and citizens, and the nature of the relationship between government and citizens. In addition, political debates have focussed on perceived failures of public administration, possibly distorting the extent and nature of weaknesses in the public sector. These weaknesses appear to be exaggerated as expectations with respect to government have increased in accordance with new social, economic and cultural problems evolving over time.

There appears to be problems with linking macro issues such as declines in the economy or diminishing social capital with public confidence in government, although it is clear that declining public confidence in government corresponds to declining public confidence in a wide range of private and public institutions. Indeed, there have been significant improvements in public confidence in some areas of the public sector such as education and law enforcement. It is also important to note that the public sector in Australia maintains higher levels of public confidence than other public institutions such as the federal executive, political parties or, even, parliament. Thus, there is some lack of clarity regarding the magnitude of the problem although there appears to be some agreement that this issue is important. Public confidence is important, at least to the extent that it contributes to public cooperation with processes and civil order. More importantly, public confidence may also be an indicator of how well democracy is functioning.

There is a range of literature offering some solutions to declining trust in government. A high priority of several analysts is the problem of the alienation of citizens from policy processes. Some authors argue that citizen participation is a means by which the population is encouraged to consider

the implications of policy choices such “that participation must take place in a structure that forces citizens themselves to face the hard decisions” (Mansfield, 1997: 134). These approaches to government emphasise making government more effective by keeping “it as close to the people as possible” (Bennett and Dilulio, 1997: 31).

Information is a central component of any strategy to allow citizens to participate in policy processes. It was noted earlier in this paper that accurate and reliable information is an important part of maintaining public trust. Here, there are calls for government “to adapt to new conceptions of its role that are consistent with an information-based economy ...” (Nye, 1998, B6). The dissemination of information is crucial to issues such as:

- distinguishing between the real performance of the public sector as opposed to the images presented in the media and in political debate;
- facilitating public participation and engagement in policy processes. Knowledge of these processes and institutions appears to correlate with confidence in government; and
- assessing actual and perceived benefits of models of public management and public-private relationships used to position government within society.

Another suggestion for building public confidence in government is for politicians and policy makers to stop campaigning against the public sector and “start stressing the crucial role that it plays” (Nye, 1998: B6). In the Australian context, this issue has broad implications for the political rhetoric of election campaigns but also for the models of public sector management that assume that the public sector is inherently inefficient or ineffective compared to the private sector (Freebairn, 1998). Fundamental assumptions relating the public sector and changes to the nature of public administration, especially with respect to marketisation of public sectors, may be contributing to a loss of public confidence in the public sector. The public is increasingly being encouraged to ignore fundamental differences in the objectives and nature of private and public organisations, as the role of the public becomes more confused with the private sector.

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