

Trust in Government in the Aftermath of 9/11: Determinants and Consequences

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Among the most notable changes in U.S. public opinion that occurred after 11 September 2001 was a significant increase in trust in the national government. This study extends existing research on the causes of such changes in public opinion to include the post-9/11 period. The results indicate that a shift in public focus from domestic to international concerns was an important factor in the decline in cynicism that occurred after 9/11, and that public support for expending resources to address issues such as homeland security will be greater if increased trust in government can be sustained.

KEY WORDS: trust in government, presidential approval, attitude accessibility, 9/11, public opinion

In the days after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon (9/11), U.S. public trust in the government in Washington rose to a level not seen since the mid-1960s. In the last national poll assessing trust in government before 9/11, conducted in March 2001 by the *Los Angeles Times*, 29% of the public indicated that they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right either just about always or most of the time. In the first comparable poll after the attacks, conducted from 25 to 27 September by the *Washington Post*, the percentage of the public saying they trusted the government in Washington to do what is right either just about always or most of the time more than doubled, increasing to 64%.

Because this post-9/11 increase in trust followed a long period of relatively high levels of public cynicism about government, it provides an opportunity to review scholarship on public evaluations of government and to consider how past research may illuminate this substantial increase in trust. Are existing models of trust in government adequate to explain the change in public views of government that followed 9/11? If not, what can we learn from the observed decline in cynicism to help us understand how citizens may develop more positive assessments of

government? Is 9/11 likely to have a lasting effect on public evaluations of government, or is cynicism about government likely to resurface? If trust in government remains higher than it has been in recent years, are changes in governing or public policy likely to follow? More specifically, if the increase in trust proves to be fleeting, what are the implications for the policy priorities that have arisen since 9/11, including the attention to concerns about airport security, homeland defense, and combating terrorism abroad?

Given the theoretical importance of trust in government, a significant body of research has examined both the determinants and consequences of the relatively low levels of trust observed in recent decades. Researchers have focused on public evaluations of incumbent officials and the institutions of government and satisfaction with public policy and the actions of government officials (e.g., Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000, 2001; Citrin, 1974; Citrin & Green, 1986; Citrin & Luks, 2001; Miller, 1974a, 1974b) as causes of changes in trust in government. As citizens' satisfaction with the policies implemented by incumbent officials increases, researchers expect trust in government to increase as well. Examining the consequences of changes in public trust, scholars have focused on public support for government action and the allocation of resources necessary for this action (Chanley et al., 2000, 2001; Miller, 1974a, 1974b). As trust in government increases, citizens' support for expending public resources is also expected to rise.

Most relevant to 9/11, scholars have identified public concern about threats to national security as a factor that may influence the degree of cynicism about government (e.g., Alford, 2001; Chanley et al., 2000, 2001; Nye, 1997). When public attention shifts from concern about domestic policy issues such as health care and education to concern about issues of foreign policy and threats from abroad, trust in government may increase as the nation pulls together to address international concerns or defend national security. Consistent with this explanation, a shift in public focus to issues of national security after 9/11 may help to explain the concurrent decline in public cynicism. It is also possible, however, that the increase in trust is more a function of the rally in public support for the president, which also occurred as a result of 9/11. To assess these alternative explanations, the current research examines the effects of both of these variables.

Studies of the effects of changes in public trust in government have found that citizens' support for incumbent officials and willingness to commit public resources to solve problems facing the nation increase as trust in government rises (Chanley et al., 2000, 2001; Hetherington, 1999). As the national policy agenda has expanded to address concerns about homeland security, new threats to public health and safety, and fighting the war on terrorism both at home and abroad, the level of trust in government may become particularly important after 9/11. Specifically, if trust in government returns to the relatively low levels of the past several decades, it may become difficult to maintain public support for using public revenue to address these concerns about homeland security and threats to public health.

To better understand the implications of 9/11 for public trust in government, the current research examines changes in trust in government using quarterly time series measures of public opinion ranging from 1980 through the end of 2001. A time series approach is particularly valuable for assessing causal mechanisms in processes that occur over time and identifying how changes in the political environment affect public opinion about government and issues of public policy. Although 9/11 was unique in terms of the number of lives lost in a terrorist action, it resembled other threats to national defense in one respect: It had predictable consequences for public concern about issues of foreign policy and national security and for public evaluations of President Bush. Whether increased public concern about international affairs or increased support for the president helps account for the increase in trust in government is less clear. The current research is designed in part to shed light on this issue.

Identifying the Determinants and Consequences of Public Trust in Government

Figure 1 presents a graph of public trust in the federal government from 1958 to 2001. With the exception of the final data point in the graph, the data come from the American National Election Studies (ANES) measure of trust in government, which is based on responses to the question “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?” The values in the figure are percentages of respondents who indicate they trust the government in Washington to do what is right either just about always or most of the time. After the ANES survey in 1958, this question was not asked again until 1964. Beginning in 1964, however, the question has been asked consistently at 2-year intervals. The last ANES measure is from the 2000 election study, and the last data point in the graph is from the *Washington Post* poll cited above.

For anecdotal explanations of the changes in public views of trust evidenced in Figure 1, we can identify historical events that are likely associated with changes in trust from the 1960s to the present. In the latter half of the 1960s, for example, increasing public disillusionment with U.S. involvement in the conflict in Vietnam likely contributed to increasing public cynicism in government. During the 1970s, trust in government declined further as the Watergate scandal and the subsequent resignation of President Nixon were followed by increasing public dissatisfaction with the Carter presidency. Trust in government began to rebound during President Reagan’s first term in office, as the proportion of those saying they trust the government in Washington to do what is right either just about always or most of the time increased from 25% to 40%. After the Iran-contra scandal in Reagan’s second term, however, trust again began to decline. The House bank scandal of 1992 was followed by the early years of the Clinton presidency, when the failure of Clinton’s attempt to reform health care policy and increasing partisan gridlock

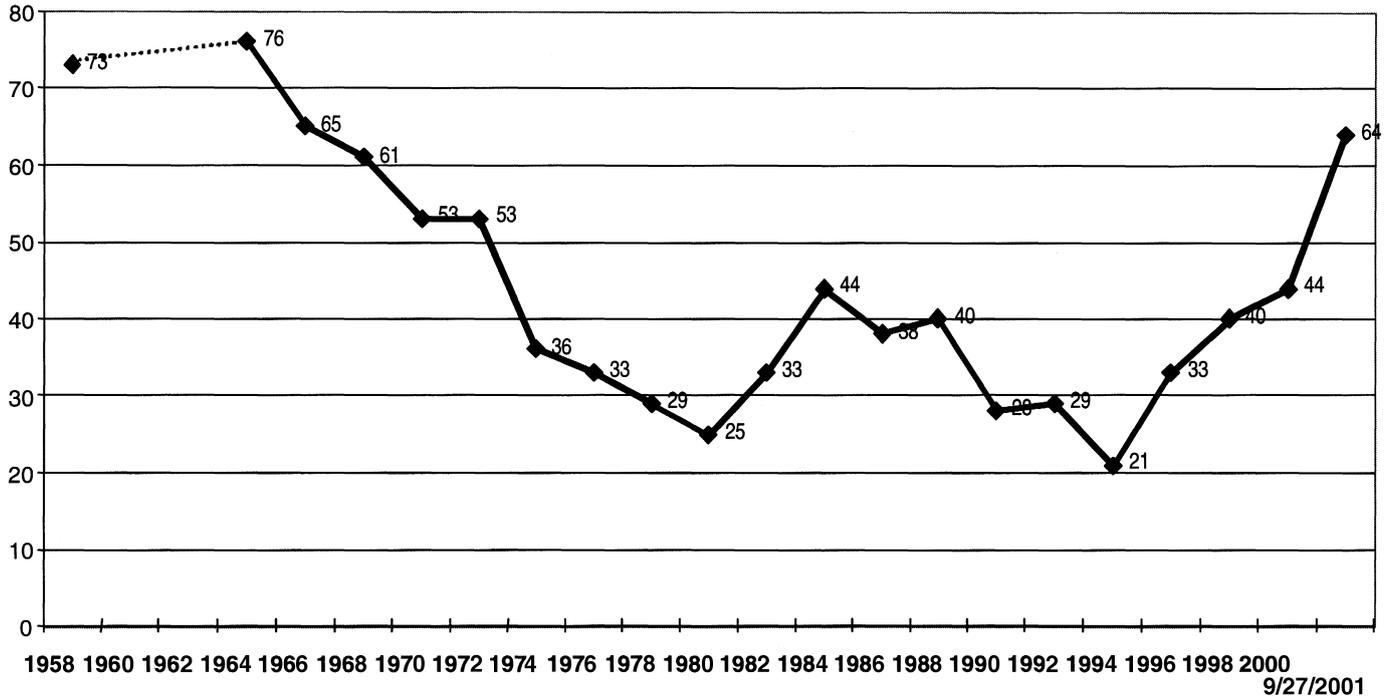


Figure 1. Trust in the government in Washington, 1958–2001. Values are percentages responding “most of the time” or “just about always” to the question “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?” (ANES surveys, 1958–2000; *Washington Post* poll, 27 September 2001)

in Washington likely contributed to more cynical views of government. Coincident with the Republican takeover of the House for the first time in 40 years, trust reached a low point in the time period in the graph in 1994.

Beyond this type of anecdotal examination of changes in trust in government, debate about the causes and consequences of public trust in government among scholars of public opinion can be traced back to an exchange between Arthur Miller (1974a, 1974b) and Jack Citrin (1974). Miller argued that the substantial decline in trust in government from 1964 to 1970 reflected public dissatisfaction with the policies of both the Republican and Democratic parties. Moreover, Miller proposed that public cynicism could lead to public rejection of the institutions of government and pose a threat to the overall system of government. Taking a more optimistic view, Citrin argued that dissatisfaction with the performance of incumbent policymakers was the principal cause of distrust. Thus, Citrin argued, cynicism posed a threat to the reelection prospects of incumbent elected officials, but it did not endanger the system of governance. Rather, Citrin saw distrust as providing an important check on lawmakers. To restore trust in government, incumbent officials need only change their behavior to reflect the wishes of the citizenry.

Miller and Citrin each presented evidence to buttress their distinct views, and later research has marshaled further support for both positions. More consistent with Miller's view, survey results show declines in confidence in both Congress and the executive branch that are similar to the decline in trust evidenced in Figure 1 (e.g., Chanley et al., 2001). More consistent with Citrin's view, negative evaluations of trust often coincide with pessimistic views of the economy or changes in partisan control of the presidency, House, or Senate (e.g., Chanley et al., 2000, 2001; Citrin & Green, 1986; Citrin & Luks, 2001). Distrust in government also has been found to increase with public concern about crime (Chanley et al., 2000; Mansbridge, 1997; Pew Research Center, 1998), political scandal (Chanley et al., 2000), and increasing media focus on political corruption and scandal (Orren, 1997).

Most relevant to the post-9/11 increase in trust, increased public focus on international concerns and perceptions of threat from abroad has been proposed to explain changing levels of trust in government (e.g., Alford, 2001; Chanley et al., 2000, 2001; Nye, 1997). Evidence concerning such a link, however, is mixed. The end of the Cold War, for example, has been proposed to account for relatively low levels of trust in the 1990s. Yet the decline in trust began in the mid-1960s, during a period when the nation was involved in the conflict in Vietnam and there was clear public concern about threat from abroad.

In time series analyses of the effect of public focus on international concerns, Chanley et al. (2001) found that increasing public attention to issues of foreign policy and national defense were indirectly related to public trust in government. When a different model of trust in government was used, however, public focus on international concerns did not seem to influence the extent of trust in government (Chanley et al., 2000). The present research extends the time series data on trust in

government to the end of 2001 and provides an opportunity to examine this relationship again.

In other research following the Miller-Citrin exchange, the evidence in at least one area of contention can be seen as providing greater support for Citrin's perspective. Whereas Miller saw rising cynicism as a threat to the system of government overall, later research indicates that evaluations of trust are based more on assessments of incumbent policymakers than on evaluations of the system. Many citizens, for example, are unwilling to say that they trust the government in Washington to do what is right most of the time. When asked about their views of the "system of government," however, these same citizens often express pride and support (Citrin, 1974; Lipset, 1995). Consistent with Easton's (1965) expectation that evaluations of the system of government are likely more enduring than opinions about incumbent office-holders, short-term events such as changes in policy or fluctuations in the state of the economy have a greater influence on evaluations of incumbent elected officials than on support for the political system overall (Norris, 1998).

Although less catastrophic than a collapse of support for the entire system of government, declining trust nonetheless has consequences. Voters who are less trustful of government are more likely to support third-party candidates and nonincumbents (Hetherington, 1999). Declining trust is one of the factors responsible for citizen support for devolution of governmental authority from the federal to state and local governments (Hetherington & Nugent, 2001). Lower levels of trust are also linked to declining public support for federal government spending in areas such as education, the environment, and aid to cities (Chanley et al., 2000, 2001). Perhaps most important, trust in government is important for gaining citizen compliance with the law without resorting to coercion (Barber, 1983; Levi, 1997, 1998; Scholz & Lubell, 1998; Scholz & Pinney, 1995; Tyler, 1990). In short, declining public trust in government has a variety of negative effects short of endangering the entire system of government, and there is ample reason to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that are responsible for these changes.

After 9/11, the federal government marshaled its resources to handle a broad range of new issues. From helping with the recovery in New York City and improving homeland security to battling terrorism across the globe, these policy initiatives require substantial tax dollars and other public resources. Unless a higher level of public trust in government can be sustained, citizen support for the allocation of resources necessary to implement the post-9/11 policy agenda may be problematic.

Time Series Data and Measures

The analyses that follow are based on quarterly time series data spanning the years from 1980 to 2001. The measure of trust in government and several other

measures in this research were created using a dyad ratios algorithm developed by Stimson (1999; see this source for a more technical discussion of the dyad ratios algorithm than that presented here).¹ Stimson devised this algorithm to allow for time series examination of public opinion in areas where data limitations would otherwise preclude such analysis. Stimson's technique relies on covariance among different time series indicators of a given concept to create a single time series measure that reflects the shared variance among different time series.

For the measure of trust in government, for example, there is no single question that is asked at relatively frequent intervals over a long period of time. The measure of trust that spans the longest time period comes from the ANES biannual survey (Figure 1). However, trust in government is not necessarily expected to remain static or to change in a simple linear manner in the time between ANES surveys. To assess changes in trust in government at more frequent intervals, the Stimson technique enables the use of data from other survey houses that ask questions about trust that are similar or identical to the ANES question. The data for the measure of trust used in the analysis that follows are based on questions about trust in government drawn from the ANES and polls conducted by Gallup, CBS News, the *New York Times*, ABC News, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, Princeton Survey Research Associates, and Market Strategies. To the extent that trust in government changes in similar ways across the measures of trust from these different survey houses, the Stimson algorithm creates a single measure of trust that reflects these common changes.

As determinants of trust in government, I included measures of presidential approval; public satisfaction with the economy; and public concern about crime, political scandal and corruption, and national defense and foreign policy. The measure of presidential approval is based on data from the Gallup Polling Organization's national polls of satisfaction with the job performance of the president. The observations for the measure of presidential approval were averaged to create a single value for each quarter in the years 1980 through 1991.

For the measure of public views of the economy, I used the Conference Board's measure of consumer sentiment, which is designed to capture public expectations for national business conditions. This and other measures of public perceptions of the future of the national economy have been found to be important determinants of trust in government and approval for both the president and Congress. The Conference Board's measure of consumer sentiment is based on a monthly survey of a representative sample of 5,000 U.S. households. The measure is based on an index of items that assess consumer evaluations of current and future national business conditions, as well as evaluations of current and future availability of jobs. As with the measure of presidential approval, the observations for the measure of

¹ For examples of other research using the Stimson algorithm to create time series measures, see Chanley (1999), Chanley et al. (2000, 2001), Durr (1993), and Stimson (1999).

consumer sentiment were averaged to create a single value for each quarter in the years 1980 through 1991.

As indicators of public attention to crime, political scandal and corruption, and defense and international concerns, I relied on responses to the open-ended question "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" The data for these measures are based on questions about the most important problem facing the nation from surveys of nationally representative samples conducted by Gallup, ABC News, CBS News, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, the Opinion Research Center, and the Associated Press. No single survey house asked this question on a quarterly basis from 1980 to 2001. Thus, as with the measure of trust in government, I used Stimson's dyad ratios algorithm to develop quarterly measures for this analysis.

The first of the most important problem (MIP) variables, MIP Crime, is based on the percentage of respondents who identify crime as the most important problem facing the nation. This includes general references to crime, violence, and the criminal justice system, as well as references to more specific types or instances of crime, such as gun violence, school shootings, or the incident at Columbine High School. The second variable, MIP Corruption, is based on the percentage of respondents who identify issues of corruption in government or political scandal as the most important problem facing the nation. This includes general references to corruption in government, political scandal, or corrupt or dishonest public officials, as well as references to specific instances of corruption or scandal, such as the Clinton impeachment scandal, Whitewater, the House bank scandal, or the Iran-contra scandal. Consistent with existing research, I expect that trust in government declines with increasing public concern about crime or political corruption. The third variable, MIP International, is based on the identification of national defense, national security, war or the threat of war, foreign policy, international issues, or particular nations (e.g., North Korea), regions (e.g., the Middle East), or international figures (e.g., Saddam Hussein) as the most important problem facing the nation. Although the evidence on this point is mixed, I expect that trust in government will be greater when citizens are more concerned about issues of foreign policy and national defense.

In addition to examining the causes of trust in government, this research extends time series analysis of the consequences of trust. As an indicator of public support for government spending in a variety of areas of public policy, I used Stimson's (1999) measure of policy mood. This measure reflects common changes in public willingness to support federal spending across a range of areas of domestic policy, including education, welfare, health, the environment, and aid to cities. This measure has been updated through the second quarter of 2000, limiting the time frame for this analysis from 1980 through June 2000. Consistent with existing research, policy mood is expected to increase with public trust in government, as greater trust leads to increased public support for government spending. To control

for other potential causes of policy mood, I included the same set of predictors used in the model of trust in government.

Analysis and Results

To model trust in government and policy mood, I used a distributed lag technique (for further discussion of distributed lag models, see, e.g., Pindyck & Rubinfeld, 1991). Trust and policy mood at time t are each treated as a function of the causal variables not only at $t - 1$, but also in prior quarters. This is based on a geometric lag model that assumes that the past values of independent variables have effects that decline geometrically over time, so that current and recent values have a greater influence than more distant values. Trust in government at any given time is modeled as a function not only of current circumstances but also of historical influences, with current and more recent events having greater effects than more distant events. With the use of a Koyck transformation, the distributed lag formulation of trust in government is modeled by including the lagged value of trust in the model. Similarly, policy mood is modeled by including the lagged value of policy mood in the equation.

The results for the models of trust in government and policy mood are presented in Table 1. Each of the variables in the analysis is coded on a 0–1 scale to facilitate comparison and interpretation of the effects of each variable. For the model of trust, Table 1 presents the results of three distinct analyses. Model 1 presents the equation for the model of trust as a function of each of the independent

Table 1. Trust in Government (1980:1 to 2001:4) and Policy Mood (1980:1 to 2000:2)

Independent variable	Trust in government (model 1)	Trust in government (model 2)	Trust in government (model 3)	Policy mood
Trust $t-1$.57*** (.10)	.58*** (.10)	.62*** (.09)	
Policy mood $t-1$.84*** (.05)
Trust t				.07* (.04)
Presidential approval t	.06 (.04)		.08** (.04)	.01 (.02)
Consumer sentiment t	.06 (.05)	.09** (.05)		.02 (.02)
MIP International t	.20** (.08)	.20** (.08)	.20** (.08)	-.03 (.03)
MIP Crime t	-.17** (.08)	-.19** (.08)	-.11* (.06)	-.02 (.03)
MIP Corruption t	.06 (.34)	-.04 (.34)	.21 (.32)	-.09 (.13)
Constant t	.02 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.04 (.03)	.07*** (.02)
Adjusted R^2	.73	.73	.73	.89
Standard error of estimate	.03	.03	.03	.01
Ljung Box Q test	16.32	15.76	16.62	20.99
N	87	87	87	81

Note. Each of the variables in the analysis is coded on a 0–1 scale. Statistically insignificant Ljung Box Q test statistics indicate the absence of serial correlation.

* $p < .05$, one-tailed; ** $p < .05$, two-tailed; *** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

variables identified above. In this equation, the coefficients associated with MIP International and past values of trust in government are each positive and statistically significant. As the public becomes more focused on issues of international concern, trust in government increases. The coefficient associated with MIP Crime is negative and statistically significant, consistent with previous research showing that increased public focus on crime leads to greater public disaffection with the federal government. The coefficients associated with presidential approval, consumer sentiment, and MIP Corruption are each positive, although they do not attain statistical significance. However, presidential approval and consumer sentiment are correlated with each other, which may explain why neither of these variables is statistically significant. Thus, two further models of trust in government were created to assess the independent effect of these two variables.

In model 2, presidential approval is removed from the analysis. The coefficient associated with consumer sentiment is again positive, and it now attains statistical significance. Consistent with prior research, as public perceptions of the future of the economy become more optimistic, trust in government also increases. In model 3, consumer sentiment is removed from the analysis and presidential approval is included. The coefficient associated with presidential approval remains positive, and it now attains statistical significance. As approval of the president increases, trust in government also rises.

More important for the present research, the results for models 2 and 3 reveal that the effect of MIP International is independent of the effect of either presidential approval or consumer sentiment. Across the three models of trust, the coefficient associated with MIP International remains positive and statistically significant. A comparison of the results for models 1 and 3 clearly indicates that the increase in trust that results from greater public attention to international concerns is not simply a function of the increased support for the president that accompanies threats to national security or U.S. military action abroad. Moreover, this suggests that the decline in cynicism that followed 9/11 was not simply a function of the rally in support for the president. Rather, the results in Table 1 show that increased attention to international concerns may lead to greater trust in government, regardless of public approval for the job performance of the president.

Although the coefficient for MIP Corruption does not achieve statistical significance in the models of trust presented in Table 1, I hesitate to conclude that public concern about corruption in politics is unrelated to public cynicism about government. Rather, given the theoretical importance of perceptions of corruption, I see this as an important area for further research.

The results of the equation for policy mood (Table 1) indicate that trust in government is the only variable, aside from policy mood itself, that emerges as a statistically significant predictor of public support for government spending across a range of issues of public policy. Consistent with theoretical expectations and existing work, greater trust in government translates to enhanced public support for government spending. Although these data do not extend to the end of 2001,

the results of this analysis provide further evidence that trust in government is an important component of gaining public support for the actions of government.

Discussion

The results of this research provide new evidence about the determinants and consequences of trust that is largely in accord with prior work in this area. Increased public attention to international concerns and more positive assessments of the economy and the president's job performance are each found to lessen public cynicism about government. Conversely, greater public concern about crime promotes an increase in cynicism. With respect to evaluations of the economy, presidential approval, and public concern about crime, these findings are consistent with prior research on the causes of trust in government.

The central focus of this research has been to help provide an understanding of the decline in cynicism that occurred after 9/11. Thus, the most significant contribution from this work is the finding that increased public attention to international affairs serves to enhance public trust in government. Despite theoretical expectations, prior research in this area has not consistently found a relationship between public focus on international concerns and views of trust in government. The results of the current research, however, clearly point to increased focus on terrorism and national defense as an important factor in the decline in public cynicism about government. Consistent with this view, polling data on trust in government in October, November, and December 2001 showed incremental declines in trust in government accompanied by decreases in the percentage of the public identifying terrorism, defense, and foreign policy concerns as the most important problem facing the nation. Although the proportion of respondents who said they trust the federal government most or almost all of the time remained at almost 50%, trust in government began to dissipate somewhat as public focus on international concerns also began to lessen.

Turning to the consequences of trust in government, this research is consistent with past work that has found that public support for government spending is greater when trust in government is higher. These results are significant for assessing the extent to which citizens are likely to support expending public resources necessary to address issues of homeland security. Although the current research is limited to a measure of policy mood that is based on evaluations of public support for issues of domestic concern, public support for spending on national defense and foreign policy concerns is also likely to vary with levels of public trust in government. Given the resources that are likely to be required to maintain defense and foreign policy initiatives such as the war on terrorism, it is particularly important to understand the role of trust in government in maintaining support for these policy actions. Thus, this remains an important area for future research.

The current research is also limited to macro-level time series analysis that does not allow for direct assessment of the individual-level psychological mechanisms that underlie the changes in public opinion observed in the aggregate-level data. Existing theory and research from political psychology, however, suggests that the construct of accessibility plays an important part in understanding the development of public opinion and attitudes about government. Accessibility refers to the extent to which information or attitudes are retrieved from memory and used in making judgments or decisions (see Fazio, 1986). Research in social and political psychology reveals that information or attitudes must be both available and accessible from memory if they are to affect the processing of incoming information and the judgments or decisions that follow (see, e.g., Aldrich, Sullivan, & Borgida, 1989; Higgins & King, 1981). Furthermore, information and attitudes that are more accessible have greater influence on subsequent judgments or evaluations than do information and attitudes that are less accessible (see, e.g., Fazio & Williams, 1986; Lau, 1989).

In understanding changes in public views of government, it is very likely that 9/11 made concerns and attitudes about national security more accessible in response to questions about the most important issues facing the nation and trust in government. This is consistent with a post-9/11 increase in the percentage of citizens identifying issues of defense and foreign policy as the most important problem facing the nation. Moreover, the results of the aggregate-level analysis discussed here provide evidence that the increase in trust that also followed 9/11 can be explained in part by greater accessibility of concerns about defense and foreign policy.

Whether 9/11 will have an enduring effect on public trust in government remains to be seen. The present results imply that the answer depends on whether the public maintains its renewed focus on issues of foreign policy and national security, or whether these concerns are displaced by concerns about the national economy, crime, or other divisive issues of domestic policy. If the faltering economy of 2001 is restored to health and citizens remain decidedly concerned about threats to national security or issues of foreign policy, President Bush and members of the House and Senate are likely to encounter relatively little resistance to their plans to allocate government resources to address new policy priorities. If worries about a declining economy or other domestic concerns return to the fore, however, public trust in government and support for government spending may well begin to dissipate.

The renewal of trust in government that occurred in the aftermath of 9/11 has given government officials an opportunity to engender a sustained period of greater public trust in the institutions and actions of government. Moreover, to the extent that the president and members of Congress are able to maintain higher levels of trust, citizens will be more likely to support the policy initiatives that may be required to avoid similar catastrophic events in the future. A continuation of the decrease in cynicism, however, is not a foregone conclusion. Rather, the present

results suggest that if elected officials are to maintain higher levels of trust and continued support for government action to address issues of homeland security and the war on terrorism, they will need to keep concerns about issues such as the economy and crime in check.

Finally, it is important to consider whether declining levels of partisan strife and political acrimony have contributed to more positive public assessments of government. Since 11 September 2001, Republicans and Democrats have remained largely united in their response to the attacks of that day. On 16 May 2002, following a White House disclosure that President Bush had been warned about the danger of terrorist hijackings in the months preceding 9/11, congressional Democrats began to express greater criticism of the president and call for congressional hearings to examine precisely what he may have known in advance of the attacks. Republicans countered that Democrats are only seeking partisan gain. At this writing, it remains to be seen whether charges concerning the Bush administration's handling of information about national security will remain an issue of contention or be dealt with quickly and set aside. To the extent that this or other issues foster a return to the type of acrimonious political debate that has characterized national politics in recent years, however, public trust in government is likely to suffer. At present, the lack of adequate measures to capture this aspect of the political context does not allow for a systematic time series assessment of the effect of changes in the level of political animosity on public trust in government, leaving this as an additional topic for future research.

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