

1

Introduction

Many Americans no longer believe that their government can be trusted to do what is right; or that it is run for their benefit; or that the people running it know what they are doing. And it is not just politics that has disillusioned them. The leadership of nearly every key institution of America—including medicine, higher education, organized religion, the military, the Supreme Court—has suffered a severe loss of public confidence. This loss, many feel, is symptomatic of a broader malady. Accounts vary; but the warning signs include the disaffection of citizens and the rise of adversary politics. We face, they say, a crisis of confidence.¹

Perhaps. But to know how citizens feel about government—to know more are alienated or fewer allegiant—is not enough. The quality of their judgment matters, too. What is decisive, I think, is the readiness to recognize that

1. Arthur Miller, "Political Issues and Trust in Government," *American Political Science Review* 68 (1974): 951-972, especially table 1, p. 953. For a cautionary criticism see Jack Citrin, "Comment," *ibid.*, pp. 973-988. For a judicious review of the evidence see Everett Ladd, "The Polls: The Question of Confidence," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Winter 1976/77, pp. 544-552. For recent statements of opposing interpretations on the validity of a "crisis of confidence" see Patrick H. Caddell, "Crisis of Confidence I—Trapped in a Downward Spiral," *Public Opinion* 2 (October/November 1979), and Warren E. Miller, "Crisis of Confidence II—Misreading the Public Pulse," *ibid.*, pp. 9-15. For more general interpretations see Robert Nisbet, *Twilight of Authority* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); Jurgen Habermas, "Legitimation Problems in Late Capitalism," *Social Research* 40 (Winter 1973): 643-667; Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978); Samuel P. Huntington, "The United States," in Michael J. Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington and Jori Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

this system of government, for all its virtues, has its faults—and the other way about. Some citizens are ready to acknowledge there is something to be said on the other side; their judgment is more evenhanded, more differentiated—in a word, more balanced.

Judgment of Government

Being alienated or allegiant is one thing; having a balanced judgment is another. A citizen may dislike government—he may be bitterly critical of it—without losing perspective or balance. Or he may think highly of it, and lack balance. And unless we pay attention to whether citizens' judgment of government is balanced—and not just whether they are alienated or allegiant—we are likely to mistake the habits of mind that favor democratic politics.

It is tempting to take the change in public attitudes toward political institutions as evidence of healthy skepticism.² The politics of the last two decades, in this view, have been a hard taskmaster: they have taught many citizens that public officials will get things wrong sooner or later; that when things go wrong it is a citizen's right, and arguably his duty, to express his complaints and to act on his criticisms; and, finally, that a distrust of leaders can be a salutary part of the practice as well as of the theory of democratic government.

A sanguine view. But how many citizens see that it is precisely because leaders may be untrustworthy that the institutions of representative democracy are designed to set one off against the other? How many have a new appreciation of checks and balances, or of the separation

2. Vivien Hart, *Distrust and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

of powers, or of judicial review? It is the institutions of liberal democracy—not just unpopular leaders or shady practices—which are the target of public criticism. And their failings seem confounded with their virtues. Liberal institutions have not won special praise for restraining elites; and they have come under fire for frustrating citizens—for not being responsive or really representative.

Cynicism is not the same thing as skepticism. The mood of disillusion which has settled over the country is disquieting. Yet as we may be too quick to welcome popular support for public institutions, we may be too ready to worry about its loss. What would we have thought, one might ask, if citizens had not become more cynical? The last two decades have seen political scandal, assassination, riot, war, Watergate. If citizens could have watched this parade of horrors without having their confidence disturbed, they would have proven themselves incapable of judgment, and we should have had to abandon the idea of citizenship.

There is cause for concern: a citizen who is overready to disapprove of government may be overready to contest it, or refuse to comply with it. Whether a person is indeed overready to disapprove of government may be the decisive aspect of his orientation toward government. Two people may be equally alienated, yet the judgment of one may be comparatively evenhanded, that of the other plainly onesided. And just as the allegiant may not suit the temper of a democratic politics if they lack balance, the alienated may not threaten it if they have balance.

I do not mean to suggest that a balanced judgment is all that is important, or imply that others, in not focusing on it, have looked at what is unimportant. They have concentrated, rightly, on comparing the alienated and the allegiant to learn the causes and consequences of the public's loss of confidence in political authorities. They have

worked at defining and measuring key terms—at honing distinctions between general and specific support, responsiveness, legitimacy, alienation, cynicism.³ By contrast, I shall use words like *alienated* and *cynical* more or less interchangeably, not because a distinction between them cannot be drawn but because drawing it would only tend to obscure the distinction that matters most to me—whether a citizen’s judgment of government is balanced or not.

Of course, a word like alienation is abstract, complex, ambiguous. But no more so than a hundred other ones. Indeed, far from its meaning being peculiarly elusive, there is substantial agreement on what is indicative or diagnostic of being politically alienated—a state of affairs which tends to be chiefly obscured by paying attention to what researchers *say* they do rather than to what they in fact do. As a practical matter I take alienation to mean what they also take it to mean: specifically, the more unfavorable citizens’ attitudes are toward the political order, the more cynical, disaffected, alienated they are; conversely, the more favorable their attitudes, the more trusting, supportive, allegiant they are.

There is no shortage of distinctions to make. One can argue that the notion of alienation consists of a number of distinct dimensions such as legitimacy and responsiveness. Or one can argue that how citizens feel about the political system must be distinguished with precision from how they feel about incumbent leaders. I happen to be of the opinion that these particular distinctions are rather less obvious than one might at first think.⁴ But the test of

3. For one of the clearest and most current expositions see David Easton, “A Re-assessment of the Concept of Political Support,” *British Journal of Political Science* 5 (October 1975): 435-458.

4. See Appendix A, “A Note on the Measurement of Political Alienation.”

a distinction is whether it is profitable, not whether it is arguable. And for my purposes the distinction to emphasize is between those whose judgment of government is balanced and those whose judgment is not, and this quite apart from whether they are alienated or they are allegiant. Alienation is not, at bottom, my subject; but the turmoil of the last two decades does allow me to take up an older question: Which habits of mind are congenial, and which inimical, to a democratic politics?

The Design of the Study

The mission of the larger study, of which this book is one aspect, is the development of social indicators in three areas—prejudice, the status of women and political alienation. For all the differences among them, the three share a common aim: to devise dependable indicators of change, based not on objective measures (for example, the rate of inflation) but on individual reports of subjective states. This aim dominates the study design.⁵

We shared interests and, to a lesser extent, problems. So the three areas took the first step in concert—conducting a survey of the adult population of the five-county San Francisco Bay Area. The questionnaire was a collaborative effort. The participants in each of the three groups took responsibility for developing a battery of questions for their own area of interest and expertise. The hour-long interview, consequently, was divided into four nearly equal parts—sections on alienation, prejudice, the status of women and miscellaneous matters of interest to all, such as education or occupation.

With the assistance of the field staff of the Survey Re-

5. The objective was common, but the strategies were, properly, various; here I shall report only the alienation aspect of the larger project.

search Center, Berkeley, we drew a full probability cluster sample of the adult population of the San Francisco-Oakland Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area. This five-county area (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco and San Mateo) had a population of slightly more than three million in 1970. We interviewed 963 of these people in the summer of 1972. This sample I shall call the Bay Area Survey (BAS).⁶

The BAS sample is uncommon in one respect: it includes, by design, more blacks than would be interviewed in a strict probability sample. (Since prejudice was the prime interest of one group of researchers, the reasons for this are obvious and compelling.) But everything has a price. To increase the number of black ghetto respondents we had to decrease the number of non-black respondents who would otherwise have been interviewed. A weighting factor, calculated in the customary fashion, has been introduced to correct for this special feature of the sample. The unweighted number of respondents is 963; the weighted N is 1,000.

Beyond the BAS each area pursued a separate strategy of data collection tailored to its special needs or concerns. The principal problem confronting my colleagues and myself was, at one level, elementary and perfectly obvious: What does it mean to be politically alienated? For decades Americans have been asked how they feel about the political process and politicians. Do they believe that people in public life are, by and large, honest? Do they think that political leaders care what the average citizen wants? Do they feel that public officials know their jobs?

6. A comprehensive report, prepared by William Nichols, on sampling and other technical features of the BAS sample is available, on request, from the Survey Research Center, University of California, 2538 Channing Way, Berkeley, Calif. 94720. Documentation is also available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research.

But for all the questions that have been asked and despite all the analysis over the years, we do not know whether alienation from politics means one thing or several, or indeed whether those who say they are alienated are in fact alienated.

To learn better what lies behind an apparently cynical answer we selected for intensive study a number of respondents whom we had interviewed as part of the BAS. They were chosen in the following way. All questions in the original interview which might indicate how alienated a person is we combined into a single, summary measure; using this index, we ordered respondents according to how favorable (or unfavorable) their attitudes were, and divided the distribution of their scores into fifths. The last step was to select at random respondents within each quintile, choosing proportionately more from the two extreme groups. Our reasoning: they embody the orientations of interest to us in purest form; they are palpably alienated or allegiant.

Our objective: to break out of the cocoon of conventional questionnaires in order to learn what it means to score as alienated in a paper-and-pencil test or a standard interview. We conducted (and recorded) the "depth" interviews between February and July 1973. Interviewers were specially trained and directed to pounce on ambiguities, clichés, inconsistencies. They applied pressure. They asked a question, followed up and, sometimes, probed again, by design, in an effort to pin down how Americans feel about different aspects of American politics—to gauge the sincerity and strength of their sentiments, to expose contradictions, to illuminate nuances. After this grilling, lasting on the average an hour, we presented them with yet another questionnaire, to be completed in privacy and mailed back to us. We wound up with 143 respondents for whom we had both complete

transcripts of their depth interviews (some tape recorders failed) and a completed questionnaire—or 195 after weighting to correct for the selection procedure; I shall call them the Mailback Sample.

In sum, we gathered data in three different ways—by a standard interview, by an intensive interview and by a self-administered questionnaire. Each type of data has advantages and risks: the BAS is the largest and most solid; the Mailback is the most exhaustive and telling; the depth interviews are the richest and least reliable.

The Argument

Citizens have become more suspicious, more critical, more cynical about politics. So much more so, some suggest, that we face a crisis of confidence. A political system, they argue, must enjoy a deep reservoir of basic support. This reservoir assures the backing of citizens, their willingness to go along with government policies whether or not they have had the chance to approve them in advance—indeed whether or not they believe them to be a good way to deal with the problems before the country. Alienation, in this view, cripples the effectiveness, and thereby threatens the stability, of the political order.⁷ A government that enjoys little trust is much like a business that has poor credit. Both have a hard time getting backing—even for ventures that would restore their good name. Shaky enterprises are hard pressed to secure support, for any venture is risky if an enterprise is shaky.

Moreover, on the grounds that citizens are disillusioned with politics, a variety of political changes have

7. For the best (and most concise) explication of this argument see James S. Coleman, "Comment on 'On the Concept of Influence,'" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1963): 63-82.

been defended or excused: the multiplication of presidential primaries; the imposition of formal restrictions on presidential powers—for example, the budgetary reform act; the diffusion of influence in Congress; the fashion of investigative journalism; the recruitment of a new generation of congressional activists; the celebration of the eclipse of machine politics; the enfeeblement of the political parties and rise of single-issue politics. The net effect, some argue, is to encourage public officials to promise more, yet leave them able to deliver less; to turn the public's loss of confidence into a vicious circle, with more and more feeling that things are getting worse—even when they happen to be getting better; in short, to raise the issue of the governability of democracies.⁸

I am not unsympathetic to this view. But it seems to me useful to reverse the customary question—to ask whether allegiance, as well as alienation, may be a problem. It can. And we shall see this once we see that there are two quite distinct types of allegiance. The difference between the two centers on a readiness to recognize that government need not be good in all respects, even if it is good in most. In terms of commonly used measures, the two are indistinguishable. But a distinction between them can and should be drawn, for one involves a judgment of government that is balanced, the other a judgment that is one-sided.

Who would expect more than a handful to think the government is good in nearly every respect and bad in none? Who would doubt that citizens holding to so extraordinary a view of government would prove, on the average at least, to be ill informed, poorly educated, po-

8. Two able expositions of the ungovernability thesis are: Anthony King, ed., *Why Is Britain Becoming Harder to Govern?* (London: B.B.C. Publications, 1976), and James Douglas, "The Overloaded Crown," *British Journal of Political Science* 6 (October 1976): 483-506.

litically apathetic? And yet the allegiant who lack balance, far from being a rarity, turn out to be rather sizable in number—even at a point in time and in a part of the country where to be politically cynical threatened to be socially fashionable. But it is not just a question of numbers. Zeal tends to be self-defeating in politics. Factors that encourage a person to be extremist in sentiment—the handicap of a poor education, for example, or an emotional conflict—tend to discourage him from being extremist in action: he is more likely to be apathetic or less likely to be effective. But those whose judgment lacks balance, who are overready to approve or to disapprove of government, are neither socially marginal nor psychologically crippled. And so they are as politically active, as consequential, as citizens whose judgment is balanced.

Attitudes toward authority, if my theory is sound, have two dimensions: one affective, the other cognitive. And this applies to the alienated just as it does to the allegiant. Citizens may harbor uncommonly unfavorable feelings about the government just as they may hold uncommonly favorable ones toward it—without a loss of perspective. We can, in short, distinguish the alienated citizen whose judgment of government is balanced from the one whose judgment is one-sided, even though both are equally cynical about politics and politicians.

We shall miss or mistake much of the significance of the wave of political cynicism which has washed over this country unless we take into account the fact that many citizens are alienated but their judgment of government is balanced. There is a civil temper, a way of thinking which is congenial to a democratic society, and a vital aspect of it is balance. We may, without intending to, confuse being civil with being well behaved or, worse, with being agreeable. But a citizen may be thoroughly alienated—he may entertain the most unflattering thoughts about the coun-

try's leadership; he may be persuaded the government is corrupt—and yet be civil.

By civil I mean certain habits of mind that favor a pluralist politics. But I also mean certain forms of conduct, the most debatable of them being protest. The role of protest in a liberal society is subject to dispute partly—though only partly—because we do not know or cannot agree on the facts of the matter; in a representative sample of the national population there are too few protestors to analyze. And that is a happy feature of this study: a sizable number who have actually engaged in a variety of forms of political protest.

In my view, certain forms of protest suit a pluralist politics: they represent an enlargement of more familiar ideas of citizen participation; they do not reflect a repudiation of conventional politics or the political order. There are, then, at least two questions to answer. First, which types of protest appear congenial and which more problematic in a democratic society? Second, to what extent is the connection between alienation and protest a function not so much of how a person feels toward the political order as of the way he thinks about it—that is, of whether his judgment is balanced or not? Democratic citizenship involves a sense of limits, and it is this sense which a balanced judgment both reflects and reinforces in behavior as well as belief.

It is the way that citizens think about political authority specifically, not the way they think generally, that I want to explore. And there is a difference. Politics aside, citizens whose judgment of government is balanced and those whose judgment is not are much alike. They sound the same when they talk of work, or their families, or the cost of housing; one is no more given than the other to oversimplification, to thinking in either-or terms, to favoring extreme views. But when it comes to politics, to a

judgment of government, some citizens do lose their sense of perspective, of balance. And that is what is of interest—how citizens react when authority becomes controversial.

My view is this: Alienation of course may be a threat to the political order but as a rule it helps assure the stability and quality of a democratic politics. The issue is not whether the consequences of alienation may be good or bad, for they can be either or both; and disillusion is a normal part of the political process—however much we would rather regard it as an aberration. That is why I take the question, in the end, to be this: Under what conditions can a democratic polity tolerate, or even benefit from, political discontent and disorder?