

Political Support: Social Capital, Civil Society and Political and Economic Performance

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This article assesses two main theories of the decline of political support that is found in many western democracies. The first is society centred and built on the concepts of social capital, trust and civil society. The second is politics centred and focuses on the performance of government and the economy. The two theories are not necessarily incompatible, but they are usually treated in a mutually exclusive way. In this article they are tested against a combination of aggregate cross-national comparative data and detailed case studies of four countries that have suffered exceptional decline of political support for politicians, political institutions and the systems of government. The puzzle is that cross-national comparative evidence about a large and diverse number of nations supports social capital theory, whereas in-depth study of four countries that have experienced substantial decline of political support does not. The erosion of support coincides in all four with poor economic and/or political performance. A way of reconciling the two theories and their supporting evidence is suggested, arguing that while social capital is a necessary foundation for democratic support, it is not a sufficient cause.

Political support is declining in many established Western democracies as citizens become more and more critical of their political leaders, their government institutions and their system of democracy. They place less trust in their politicians; are increasingly unlikely to identify with political parties and express confidence in them; have less confidence in their main institutions of government; are more likely to believe that government is run for the benefit of a few big interests; and are more dissatisfied with the way democracy works in their country.¹ The decline mainly involves support for authorities and regimes, and has not penetrated to the community level (Dalton, 2004, pp. 45-8; Easton, 1975; Norris, 1999; Pharr and Putnam, 2000). National pride and support for democracy as a principle of government remain firm, but trust in politicians, confidence in political institutions and satisfaction with democracy have declined in many, though not all, of the older democracies.

This article examines the two theories of political support most frequently used to explain its decline. One is society centred and focuses on civil society and social capital. The other is politics centred and concentrates on the political and economic performance of governments. These are not the only theories of declining support but they are probably the strongest and most widely researched. Nor are the theories incompatible; they have been built into a single model (see Putnam *et al.*, 2000, pp. 22-5), but more usually they are treated separately in distinct literatures.



By political support is meant (borrowing from Easton, 1975, p. 436) the extent to which individuals evaluate political objects positively, that is, the mix of attitudes about political leaders, institutions and the system as a whole. Attempts to explain changing attitudes, however, face a double difficulty. On the one hand, it is necessary to have time-series data for a wide range of countries to avoid culture-bound explanations and the temptation to exaggerate the importance of short-term trends. But, cross-national surveys usually lack the historical and contextual detail necessary for explanations of change, and they rarely cover a long time period. To explain the dynamics of change we need the thick description of detailed country case studies, but these may produce misleading and culture-bound generalisations. This study uses both cross-national comparisons to establish general patterns and deviations from them, and follows through with case studies to explore the sequencing of causes and effects in four countries that show steep declines in support.

The article is divided into five parts. The first two consider performance and social capital theories separately, and the third evaluates the two together. The fourth part traces the origins and dynamics of falling political support in four countries that have experienced steep decline. The last discusses the results of the study and suggests a way of resolving the theoretical puzzle presented by the information.

Performance and Political Support

The effects of both economic and political performance on support for democracy are often contingent on a variety of individual, historical and institutional factors (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Anderson and LoTempio, 2002; Lewis-Beck 1988; Bengtsson, 2004; Finkel *et al.*, 1989; Mischler and Rose, 1997; Rudolph, 2003; Weil, 1989). Consequently, the relationship between performance and political support is sometimes strong but more usually it is indirect or weak (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Clarke *et al.*, 1993; Cusack, 1999; Kornberg and Clarke, 1992; Listhaug, 1995, pp. 288–94; Listhaug and Wiberg, 1995, pp. 316–20; Lockerbie, 1993; Weil, 1989).

Nevertheless, there is good evidence that citizens are more likely to approve of their government systems if they think they are open and fair (Miller and Listhaug, 1990; 1999; Weil, 1989), if they believe the government is stable and durable (Harmel and Robertson, 1986), if politicians are accountable (Weatherford, 1992), if government performs well in policy terms (Evans and Whitefield, 1995; Mischler and Rose, 2001), if the party system accommodates their interests (Borre, 1995, p. 354; King, 1997, p. 176; Miller, 1974; Norris, 1999, p. 232; Weil, 1989) and if their civil liberties are protected (Norris, 1999, p. 232). Recent research has shown that corruption and political scandal can have a strong effect on attitudes towards leaders, governments and political institutions (Anderson and Tverdova, 2003; Bowler and Karp, 2004; della Porta 2000; Rose

et al., 1998; Seligson, 2002; Weatherford, 1992; Welch and Hibbing, 1997), although their impact is mediated by political attitudes and the home-team effect (Mischler and Rose, 2001).

Social Capital, Civil Society and Political Support

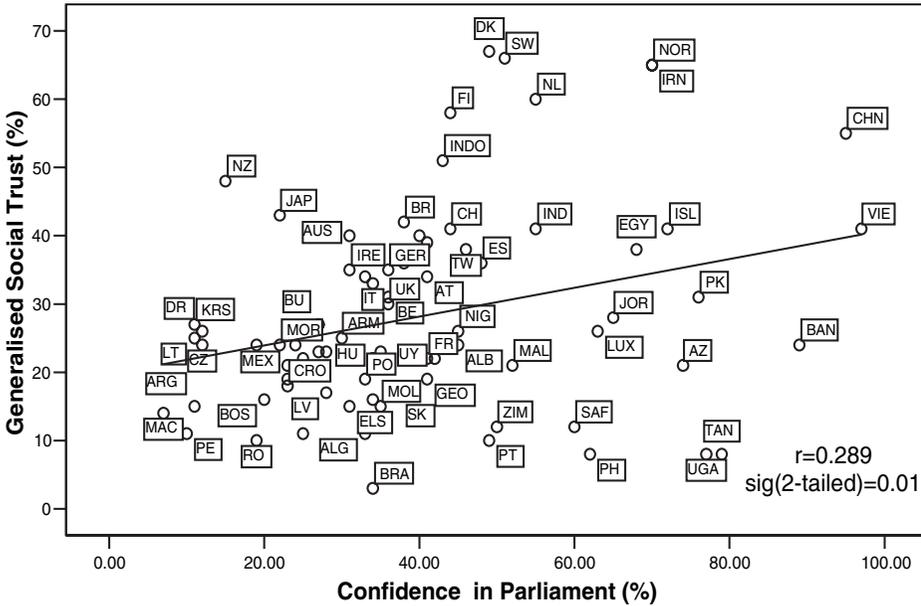
Although they have different intellectual origins and rather different concerns, social capital and civil society theory are close cousins; both argue that stable democracy rests on strong formal and informal social networks in the community that are independent of government, and both emphasise the importance of the social foundations of democracy, particularly the civic virtues associated with strong and dense networks of voluntary associations.

The main strength of social capital and civil society theory seems to lie less at the individual than at the aggregate national level – it is more effective in explaining the differences between countries than between individuals. As the ‘rainmaker’ hypothesis suggests, generalised social trust and the patterns of behaviour on which it is based provide a social climate that affects everyone in society to a greater or lesser extent, irrespective of their personal disposition to trust or distrust (Delhey and Newton, 2005; Foley *et al.*, 2001; Levi, 1996; 1998; Newton, 1999; 2001; Newton and Norris, 2000; Putnam, 2000, p. 138; Putnam *et al.*, 2000, p. 26; Smith *et al.*, 2004; Tarrow, 1996; van der Meer, 2003).

Social capital theory argues that there is a virtuous circle of high trust, well-established social institutions, good government and strong popular political support, which then helps to sustain social trust between citizens, foster community and civic participation and encourage collective activity for the common good. Research finds a syndrome of low generalised social trust, low confidence in the institutions of government, little regard for the public interest (Rothstein, 2000), tax evasion (Scholz, 1998), high levels of corruption (Delhey and Newton, 2005; van der Meer, 2003, p. 147), poorly performing government (Knack, 2002; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Putnam, 1993), a comparatively low regard for citizen rights (Knack and Keefer, 1997; Tyler, 1998) and a reliance on particularised trust in order to get by in daily life (Rose, 2001; Sztompka, 2000). On the other side of the coin, high generalised social trust is accompanied by a respect for citizen property rights and civil liberties (Knack and Keefer, 1997, pp. 1275–66), civic cooperation (Knack and Keefer, 1997, p. 225), established and stable democracy (Booth and Richard, 2001, p. 55; Delhey and Newton, 2005; Evans, 1996; Inglehart, 1999, pp. 102–4; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Newton, 1999; Paxton, 2002; Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 2002, pp. 223–9; Woolcock, 1998, pp. 176–8) and high levels of confidence in political institutions (Newton, 2001; Zmerli, Newton and Montero, 2007).

Figures 1 and 2 are consistent with this theory, showing a correspondence between generalised social trust and indicators of political support across a large

Figure 1: Generalised Social Trust and Confidence in Parliament in 79 Countries, 2000



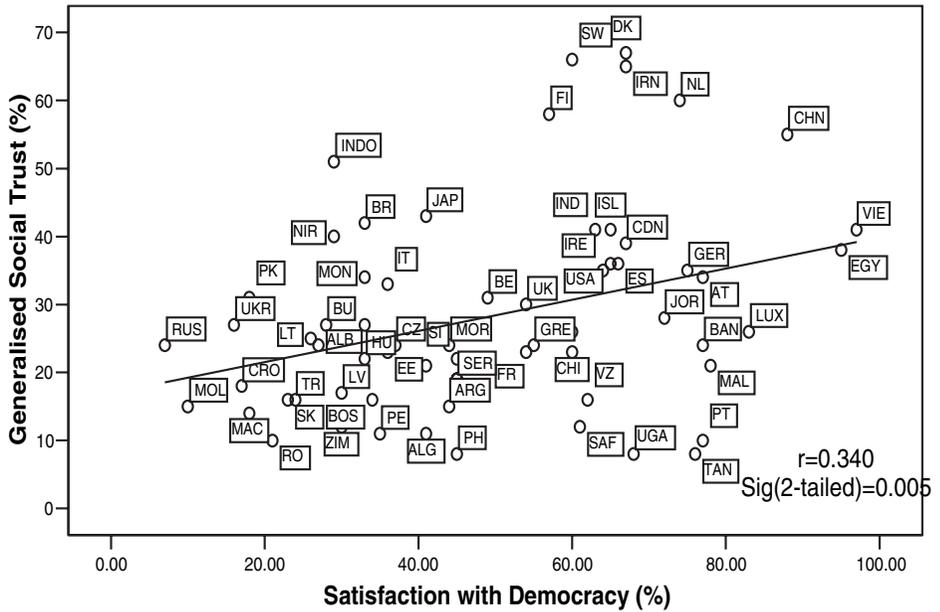
Notes: Data are from the World Values study 1999–2002 as presented in Inglehart et al. (2004, Tables A165 and E075). Pearsonian correlation. The figure presents all those countries in which questions about both social trust and confidence in parliament were asked. The question about trust was ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people’ and the percentage refers to those who say ‘Most people can be trusted’. The question about confidence in parliament was ‘I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?’ The percentage figure is those who respond ‘A great deal/quite a lot’.

number and wide variety of countries. Nevertheless, while the associations are statistically significant they are not especially strong as aggregate correlations go. We will consider some possible reasons for this in the next section, which reviews the relative strengths and weaknesses of performance and social capital theories of political support.

Performance and Social Capital/Civil Society Theories Reviewed

It is possible, perhaps likely, that neither performance nor social capital theory on its own is adequate to understand fully support for government, even though they are often treated independently in different and separate literatures, and even though research shows that they are mutually dependent in many ways. Indeed, it is difficult to disentangle the two theories in the real world. Economic policies

Figure 2: Generalised Social Trust and Satisfaction with Democracy in 66 Countries, 2000



Notes: The figure presents all those countries in the World Values study in which questions about both social trust and satisfaction with democracy were asked. The question about satisfaction with democracy (E088) was 'On the whole are you very satisfied, rather satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy is developing in your country?' and the percentage refers to those who reply 'Very/rather satisfied'. For other details see the note to Figure 1.

can affect political support (Clarke *et al.*, 1993; Cusack, 1999), but democracy can also affect economic growth (Baume and Lake, 2003), which, in turn, can influence social capital (Knack and Keefer, 1997; Putnam, 2000), which also affects political support (Dalton, 2004). Political institutions can limit economic options and policies (Persson, 2002), which can influence political support, while political support for government can also influence the outcomes of economic policies (Mischler and Rose, 2001; Scholz, 1998). Forms of government and their representative procedures can create incentives for individuals to behave in ways that increase social capital (Schneider *et al.*, 1997; Weatherford, 1992, p. 160), just as forms of government affect the political support they get (Rohrschneider, 2002). According to Pamela Paxton (2002), social capital helps to promote democratic government, which helps to generate social capital, and according to Stephen Knack (2002) and Eric Uslaner (2002, p. 245), social capital helps to improve the performance of government, which affects political support. Marc Hetherington (1998) finds that declining trust reflects dissatisfaction with leaders and institutions, which then creates a political climate that makes it more difficult

for governments to succeed. Social trust may be a foundation on which democratic government can be developed, but democratic elections themselves help to improve levels of social trust (Rahn *et al.*, 1999).

In short, we should not lose sight of the fact that social capital, political performance and political support are closely interdependent, a fact that helps to explain why neither of the theories, on their own, fully explains levels or changes in support. There are too many exceptions to the general rules of each. The problem is that, while cross-national comparisons help us to establish general rules, this sort of analysis rarely takes us far in understanding causal connections and dynamics of change. For this we need in-depth case studies to uncover historical developments and national contexts that might explain levels of political support and changes in them. An inspection of the figures shows four notable examples of declining political support in the established democracies since the 1980s – Finland, Sweden, New Zealand and Japan. These are extreme cases of declining support that are likely to reveal cause and effects relationships most clearly. If social capital and/or performance theories do not work in such limiting cases, there is less reason to believe that they will work in more typical ones.

This study makes use of secondary sources for its case study evidence. They have the advantages of being rich in detail provided by experts with an in-depth understanding of their countries, but they also have the disadvantage of being uneven in their focus and detail, no two case studies providing exactly comparable evidence about the same topics for the same time period. In what follows, the treatment of Finland is most detailed, Japan the least. Nevertheless, it is clear that all four countries display the same general patterns of changes in political support, social capital and government performance.

Four Case Studies of Declining Support

Finland

Confidence in the Finnish parliament fell heavily from 65 percent in 1981 to 34 percent in 1990. The fall was large, sudden and especially notable because it took Finland from one of the highest in the world (second only to Norway in Western Europe) to the level of Portugal, South Korea and Italy. The combined figure for confidence in the armed forces, legal system, police, parliament and the civil service tumbled from 72 percent in 1980–1 to 53 percent in 1990–1, the largest fall in seventeen advanced democracies (Dalton, 1999, p. 68). By the mid-1990s satisfaction with democratic performance was 52 percent, equal to Uruguay's, and 30 percent below Denmark and Norway. Evaluation of regime performance in the mid-1990s was even lower at 23 percent, the same as Estonia, Turkey and Mexico, and 47 percent below Norway's (Klingemann, 1999, pp. 47–55)

The slide in support did not reach the community level, however. Support for democracy, though quite low by Western European standards, was still 75 percent

in 1990, and on the measures of national pride and willingness to fight for their country the Finns, at 78 percent, were up with Sweden and Norway (85 percent and 81 percent, respectively).

What accounts for this precipitous fall in political support, normally among the highest in the world? Generalised social trust was consistently high throughout the 1980–2000 period. It rose from 57 percent in 1981 to 63 percent in 1990, and then fell slightly to 58 percent in 2000. There is no indication that voluntary membership and activity declined before, during or after the collapse of political support in the 1980s. On the contrary, although Finland has one of the highest rates of voluntary group membership in the world and a strong tradition of unpaid voluntary service (Inglehart *et al.*, 2004, Tables A064–A096; Curtis *et al.*, 1992, p. 142), its rate of new group formation remained high and individual membership increased fairly constantly after 1972 (Siisiäinen, 1999, p. 132).

Declining political support in Finland was accompanied by acute political and economic problems. A prosperous and high-growth country from 1970 to 1988, Finland's economic recession between 1989 and 1993 was described as 'one of the most severe that has been endured by any OECD country in the post-war period' (OECD, 2004a, p. 24).² Borrowing increased steeply, house and security prices doubled and the over-valued currency fell whilst exports fell drastically.³ Money fled the country when the Bank of Finland deregulated interest rates and the movement of capital to encourage market efficiency. Unemployment reached a historic high; government deficits trebled. Taxes and interest rates increased steeply but services and wages were cut. At the sametime bankruptcies multiplied, public debts trebled, and the government introduced an austerity programme together with a drastic restructuring of the economy involving privatisation, deregulation and rationalisation.

Normally a comparatively peaceful and stable polity (in spite of minority and caretaker coalitions and some difficulties with industrial relations), Finland entered into a period of exceptional political conflict and instability in the late 1980s and early 1990s. A radical Conservative–Social Democratic coalition government was elected in 1987; Harri Holkeri became the first Conservative prime minister since 1946. It was the first time the Conservatives had been in government for twenty years and the first time the Centre party had been out of power for more than a few months since April 1945. Holkeri's coalition pushed through a radical economic programme causing open conflict with the Central Bank (its director was sacked in 1992), a threatened general strike and the resignation of one Cabinet minister – a rare event in Finland's consensus, coalition politics. Another minister was forced to resign from parliament for corruption – a shocking and unprecedented event.⁴

Finland's collapse of political support in the late 1980s and early 1990s was not caused by any decay of social capital, but a period of severe economic and political problems. However, in the second half of the 1990s the country's 'new economy'

had achieved a strong recovery, reaching a 5 percent growth rate in 1997. Political life settled back into its normal pattern, and the 1999 election was exceptionally dull, even by Finnish standards (Nurmi and Nurmi, 2001). Confidence in public institutions (the armed forces, the education system, the police, the civil service), improved substantially, and confidence in parliament increased from 34 percent to 44 percent, taking it up to the Swiss figure and not far behind Denmark (49 percent) and Sweden (51 percent). Satisfaction with democracy improved from 52 percent in 1995 to 57 percent in 2000. In 1995, 75 percent of Finns thought of democracy as the best form of government (rather low by world standards and equal to Belarus, Armenia and the Ukraine), but by 2000 this had climbed to 91 percent, equal to the Swiss figure. The country had regained much (not all) of its political support by 2000.

A single case study proves nothing, but the Finnish case suggests that it might be a combination of *high* social capital and severe economic and political performance problems that caused political support to fall. Exceedingly well connected with voluntary and community life, highly educated and well informed politically (Norris, 2000), the Finns had been accustomed to one of the world's most effective and efficient economic and political systems. Perhaps it was the high level of social capital and political awareness combined with severe political and economic problems that caused the rapid loss of political support? In this case, one might also speculate that the high level of social capital and political awareness combined with economic and political recovery allowed political support to bounce back almost to its previous level.

Sweden

Whereas Finland suffered a sharp fall in political support, it declined more slowly in Sweden. Between 1970 and the 1990s there was a substantial fall in political trust, subjective and system competence, party identification and confidence in parliament, the Cabinet and the major institutions of government (Dalton, 1999, p. 66; Holmberg, 1999, p. 105; Holmberg and Weibull, undated; Klingemann, 1999, p. 47; Listhaug and Wiberg, 1995, p. 320; Rothstein, 2002, p. 293). As in Finland, support for the political community and democracy retained their strength. Support for democracy as the best form of government remained solid and pride in the country and willingness to fight for it were high (Rothstein, 2002, p. 294).

There is no evidence of a decline of social capital in Sweden in recent decades. Generalised social trust rose from 57 percent in 1981 to 67 percent in 1997, remaining at 66 percent in 2000. Informal social activity and the number of citizens who could be characterised as socially isolated and passive declined between 1968 and 1991, while participation in formally organised voluntary associations, the number of organisations, levels of activity and group financial resources also increased (Rothstein, 2002, p. 303, p. 319; de Hart and Dekker,

1999, p. 77; Holmberg and Weibull, undated, p. 9). Sweden's voluntary sector in the mid-1990s was, if anything, stronger even than Finland's, which ranked among the foremost in the world (Siisiäinen, 1999, p. 133).

Two experts on Swedish politics agree on the same general explanation of falling political support. Soren Holmberg (1999, pp. 114–22) concludes that political factors are the most powerful, especially popular evaluation of government performance. 'In this sense', he writes (p. 122), 'political distrust is best explained by politics'. Bo Rothstein (2002, pp. 324–31) argues that the failure of the Swedish corporatist model of incremental wage bargaining produced increasing industrial conflict, a spiral of inflation, a series of currency devaluations and a sharp decline in economic performance, dropping Sweden from fourth in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) wealth table in 1970 to eighteenth in 1997 (see also OECD, 2002a), plus a long and unusually bitter struggle between unions and employers. The failure of the old corporatist system to produce compromise on labour laws and flexible systems of production caused the government to push through heavily criticised reforms. In short, both Holmberg and Rothstein agree that political developments caused the decline of political support.

As in Finland, the Swedish situation stabilised after 1995 when the economy revived (OECD, 2002a, p. 98) and political life returned to greater normality. And, as in Finland, economic and political recovery coincided with a 'bounce back' of political support. Confidence in parliament increased from 47 percent to 51 percent between 1990 and 2000 (Inglehart *et al.*, 2004, Table E075) and satisfaction with democracy rose from 48 percent in 1996 to 65 percent in 2000 (Holmberg and Weibull, undated, p. 19). Support for democracy as the best form of government increased slightly from 93 percent in 1990 to 95 percent in 2000.

It is interesting to compare Finland and Sweden with Norway and Denmark: all four have maintained unusually high levels of social capital; unusual economic and political problems have been accompanied by marked loss of political support in Finland and Sweden, followed by a bounce back when economic and political performance improved; Norway and Denmark show few signs of weakening political support (Dalton, 1999; Holmberg, 1999; Klingemann, 1999) and neither have experienced exceptional political or economic problems in recent decades (OECD, 2002b, p. 30; 2005, p. 25; the annual 'Political Data' sections of *The European Journal of Political Research*).

*New Zealand*⁵

Political support slumped heavily in New Zealand in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1991 it was the lowest since opinion polling started in the 1960s. Confidence in parliament declined so much that by the early 1990s it was at the

same level as Argentina, Macedonia, Venezuela, Columbia, Brazil and Peru. Official voting turnout figure declined, party membership and identification fell, contributions to party funds began to dry up and increasing numbers felt that politicians were out of touch (Dalton, 2004, pp. 29–33; Vowles, 2004).

Social capital remained high by world standards. Social trust in the 1990s was on a par with Finland, Ireland, Canada, The Netherlands, West Germany and Iceland. Voluntary activity was also unusually high by world standards, though there are some indications of a small decline between 1981 and 1999 (Curtis *et al.*, 1992; Donovan *et al.* 2004; McVey and Vowles, 2005; Vowles, 2004, p. 8).

New Zealand has had long-term economic problems that produced severe political problems. Real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita fell from 138 percent of the OECD average in 1965 to 88 percent in the late 1990s (OECD, 2004b, p. 23), when the country had one of the most sluggish, high-debt and inflationary economies in the OECD, setting the scene for reduced government spending. Unemployment increased and wages and working conditions worsened. Strident public opposition to a new value-added tax led to an incoming government reverting to an unpopular surtax on high pensions. Two successive governments ran into problems, including the creation of breakaway parties, the sacking of Cabinet ministers, slumps in government popularity and the loss of important by-elections.⁶

Against a background of severe economic and political problems, and widespread distrust and disillusion with politicians and parties, a referendum on the electoral system was held in 1992 that produced unusually strong support (85 percent) for constitutional reform. The initial effect of this reform was increased satisfaction with the democratic process to a high 75 percent (Karp and Bowler, 2001, p. 59), but a mood of disillusionment reduced this rapidly to 45 percent soon after when the first coalition government of the new electoral system fell apart in 1998. The success of the second coalition government, plus one of the highest rates of economic growth in the OECD after 1999, coincided with increased support for the system (Karp and Bowler, 2001, p. 59). Satisfaction with democracy (and other indicators of support) climbed from 45 percent in 1998 to 67 percent in 2002 (Vowles *et al.*, 2004, p. 174). As in Finland and Sweden, New Zealand seems to have solved at least some of its severe political and economic problems, and like them political support has bounced back.

Japan

Levels of political support in Japan have generally been low by OECD standards, but fell to near-record low levels in the early 1990s (Pharr, 1997, pp. 237–45; 2000, p. 174). Belief in democracy as a form of government rose between 1968 and 1993 (Inoguchi, 2002, pp. 363–4, p. 373; Kobayashi, undated, Tables 9–12), but trust in politicians fell sharply, as did satisfaction with democracy, support for

parties, confidence in parliament and many other public institutions (Dalton, 2004; Inoguchi, 2002, p. 377; Kobayashi, undated, ch. 9, s. 3 (1); Newton and Norris, 2000, p. 57; Pharr, 2000, p. 175). Among ten Asian countries in 2003, Japan ranked at the very bottom of the table, and often by a wide margin, for confidence in central and local government, parliament, the army and the legal, educational and public health systems (Inoguchi *et al.*, 2005, pp. 359–62).

There is little sign of an erosion of Japanese social capital in recent decades. The World Values surveys show social trust at a constant 42 percent in 1980, 1990 and 1995. Takashi Inoguchi's (2002, pp. 363–4) composite indicator of civic activity also remained constant between 1981 and 1996, but the number of interest groups and voluntary associations multiplied dramatically (Inoguchi, 2002, pp. 360–3; Pharr, 2000, p. 184). Japanese citizens attach more importance to involvement with clubs and hobby groups than the citizens of any other of the ten nations covered by the AsiaBarometer of 2003 (Inoguchi *et al.*, 2005, p. 338). At the same time, there is little evidence that involvement with voluntary groups in Japan is associated with political trust or satisfaction with politics, and the multiplication of interest groups and voluntary associations in Japan, 1960–90, seems to have done little to sustain trust in politicians, satisfaction with politics or confidence in the political system (Pharr, 2000, p. 188).

What explains the decline of political trust and confidence in Japan is not a decline of social capital but the performance of the political system and of the politicians who ran it. Corruption has been a particularly important issue in Japanese politics and elections (Reed, 1991) and, according to Susan Pharr (2000, p. 199), 'officials' misconduct has been by far the single best predictor at any given point in time of citizen confidence in government over the past two decades'. Misconduct in this context refers not just to the headline-hitting corruption scandals from Lockheed in 1976 to the Recruit affair of 1989, but to the routine misuse of public money by politicians for private and party gain (Kobayashi, undated, ch. 7, s. 5). Large numbers of Japanese citizens believe that their politicians are corrupt and dishonest (Pharr, 1997, p. 240), and some studies link this to low levels of political trust and confidence, and to dissatisfaction with public policies (Dadabaev, 2005, p. 35; Inoguchi *et al.*, 2005, p. 367)..

Neither economic performance nor social capital explains the loss of political support in Japan. Support fell as national wealth increased (Susan Pharr, 2000, p. 180) and social capital was highest among the best-educated, managerial groups who showed the greatest loss of support (Kobayashi, undated, Table 9–27; Inoguchi, 2002, pp. 371–2). This combination of circumstances is consistent with the earlier tentative suggestion that a mixture of high or rising social capital and poor government performance may cause support to fall (see Table 1). Unlike Sweden, Finland and New Zealand, however, political support has not improved in Japan, but then political performance has not improved either.

Table 1: Four Case Studies of Political Support, Social Capital and Political and Economic Performance: Summary

<i>Political support</i>	<i>Social capital</i>	<i>Economic and political performance</i>
<i>Finland</i>		
Unusually high by world standards in 1981	Unusually high by world standards 1981–2000	Unusually good by world standards until early 1980s
Large and sharp decline in many indicators of political support early 1980s–1990		Severe economic and political problems early 1980s to early 1990s
Recovery of political support to near 1981 levels by 2000		Economic and political performance largely restored to normal levels in late 1990s
<i>Sweden</i>		
Long, slow decline in many indicators of political support, 1960s to early 1990s	Unusually high by world standards 1950s–2000	Economic and government problems caused by breakdown of Swedish model 1980s to 1990s
Partial recovery of political support in late 1990s		Economic and political performance improves and stabilises in late 1990s
<i>New Zealand</i>		
Comparatively high by world standards until 1980s	Comparatively high by world standards 1980s–2000	Economic and political performance comparatively good until late 1980s
Sharp decline in indicators of political support starting in late 1980s		Sharp economic decline in late 1980s, followed by severe economic problems
Small revival of political support		Radical reforms of economy and constitution
Decline in political support again		Disappointment with constitutional reforms and first coalition government

Table 1: *Continued*

<i>Political support</i>	<i>Social capital</i>	<i>Economic and political performance</i>
Substantial revival of political support 1998–2002		Second coalition government a greater success
<i>Japan</i>		
Low and declining levels of support from 1980s to 2000. No revival of support	Low but increasing in 1980s and 1990s	Strong economic performance falls off in 1980s, and economic shocks in 1990s. Widespread concern with pervasive political corruption 1970s to 2000

Discussion

We can draw two conclusions from this discussion with some degree of confidence. First, Figures 1 and 2 show a statistically significant and positive association between generalised social trust and various measures of political trust and democratic support across a wide range and large number of countries. Although they are simple correlations and not particularly strong ones, they are consistent with the results of most other cross-national comparative work on social capital. Second, a decline of political support is not associated with a decline of social capital in the four case studies. It is sufficient to discover one black swan to disprove the claim that all swans are white, and in Sweden, Finland, New Zealand and Japan we have four black swans. It does not follow that there is never a link between social capital and political support, but in these four limiting cases there is virtually no evidence of such a link.

Great caution must be exercised in drawing further conclusions from this study, particularly since the case study evidence is inconsistent with the aggregate, cross-national evidence, and since there are only four case studies. Although these are carefully chosen as examples of substantial decline in political support in order to test social capital theory, we inevitably run into the problem of more variables than cases when we try to go beyond this task, and it would take many more cases and control groups to uncover the interrelationships between three sets of variables.

However, the evidence, limited though it certainly is, suggests some interesting possibilities. The four case studies all show ample evidence of severe economic and political problems, suggesting that performance may have more to do with

declining support than social capital. However, the temptation to throw away social capital theory because it is not confirmed by the case studies should be resisted, not least because the evidence presents a puzzle: the aggregate data is consistent with social capital theory, while the case study evidence is not. How can we resolve the theoretical dilemma presented by the inconsistent evidence? The following suggestions emerge from the evidence presented here, but this is far from strong or conclusive given the limitations of both the aggregate cross-national analysis and the four case studies. What follows, therefore, takes the form of no more than cautious and tentative suggestions.

It may be difficult to build democracy in countries that do not have the necessary basis of social trust and cooperation, a well-founded civil and community life and social institutions that work effectively and impartially. Low social trust is not normally associated with the sort of well-performing democracy that is likely to sustain high levels of political support. But social capital is not necessarily, automatically or invariably associated with high levels of political support. The cross-national correlations in Figures 1 and 2 are statistically significant and not trivial, but they are not substantively large either, and there are many exceptions to the general rule, not least the four examples of Finland, Sweden, New Zealand and Japan. High and sustained levels of social capital do not seem to prevent a decline of support where there are severe economic problems and/or an apparent failure of political performance. Social capital may be a necessary but not sufficient basis for democratic government, and a necessary but not sufficient basis for high levels of support for the political system. In general, social capital may encourage effective democratic government, which may encourage positive attitudes towards the operation of the system of government, but the link may be broken by poor performance, among other possible intervening variables.

It may be – although the hypothesis is speculative – that the more social capital the proportionately greater the loss of support in times of severe political and economic trouble. This suggestion is consistent with other research showing that political support in the Western world has declined most among educated and wealthy groups that have benefited most from rising affluence (Dalton, 2004, p. 126; see also Bok, 1997; Pharr 2000, p. 180; Kobayashi, undated, Table 27; Inoguchi, 2002, pp. 371–2). Conversely, high social capital countries like Finland, Sweden and New Zealand have managed to rebuild support rapidly when political and economic problems were resolved with some degree of success.

Social capital, political performance and political support seem to be mutually interdependent and to form a single syndrome, but the cause and effect relations between them are not perfectly symmetrical, and the links are sometimes loose and contingent. If so, it is not enough to rely on either social capital or performance theories to explain decline in political support in Western democracies. Both may be right, but only in part, and it may take both together to build a satisfactory explanation.

Lastly, the case studies may throw light on a broader range of theories of political crisis and loss of support for democracy. It is striking that all four countries experienced real problems of economic and political performance. If this is the case, then neither government overload, nor a crisis of legitimacy, nor the demands of new social movements, nor structural realignments caused by post-modern transformation, nor rising popular expectations of government seem to have caused the public to become more critical of their political leaders, institutions and systems of government. Rather, real-world problems caused their citizens to revise their political opinions, and when these problems were (partially) solved in Finland, Sweden and New Zealand, the political mood became more positive and supportive. We cannot be sure, given the limitations of the study, but it is possible that strong social capital may have something to do with both the decline and revival of political support.

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Notes

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- 1 For a recent summary and overview of the evidence see Dalton (2004).
- 2 For an account of the Finnish economy in the 1980s and 1990s see Pesonen and Riihinen (2002, pp. 246–62).
- 3 Exports to the USSR were 13 percent of the national total in 1990, 5 percent in 1995 and 4 percent in 2000.
- 4 For details of economic and political events in Finland in the 1990s see Jan Sundberg's annual entry in the Political Data Yearbook of the *European Journal of Political Science*.
- 5 I am grateful to Professor Jack Vowles and an anonymous reviewer for suggesting important improvements to this section on New Zealand.
- 6 For details of these see Vowles (1992; 1994).

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