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**Support for Democracy**  
Social Capital, Civil Society and  
Political Performance

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## **Abstract**

Two main theories are widely used to explain the widespread loss of political support in western democracies. One is largely society-centred and built around the concept of social capital and civil society, the other is predominantly politics-centred and focuses on the performance of government and the political system. Social capital and civil society theory argues that a decline in democratic support is a consequence of a decline of social trust, engagement in voluntary associations, and civic and community engagement. The performance hypothesis is that falling support is the consequence of government failure, primarily political but also economic. They are usually used separately and independently, although they are not incompatible. Cross-national comparative research shows that there is an association between social capital and political support, though not a particularly strong one. Case studies of countries that are notable for their loss of political support, however, show that loss of social capital is not responsible. The solution to the puzzle that this conflicting evidence presents is not to throw away either or both the theories but to recognize that they work together. Social capital, political performance, and political support are mutually inter-dependent, though sometimes loosely connected. Some case studies suggest that loss of support may be greatest in countries and among social groups with high social capital, but that these countries and groups may quickly regain support if performance improves.

## **Zusammenfassung**

Der weit verbreitete Verlust politischer Unterstützung in westlichen Demokratien wird überwiegend durch zwei Theorierichtungen erklärt. Die eine ist im wesentlichen gesellschaftszentriert und um die Konzepte Sozialkapital und Zivilgesellschaft herum gruppiert, die andere ist vorwiegend politikzentriert und auf die Leistungsfähigkeit der Regierungen und des politischen Systems fokussiert. Die Theorie des Sozialkapitals und der Zivilgesellschaft argumentiert, dass das Schwinden demokratischer Unterstützung Resultat einer Verringerung des sozialen Vertrauens sowie des Engagements sowohl in freiwilligen Vereinigungen wie auch im zivilen und kommunalen Bereich sei. Die Theorie politischer Leistungsfähigkeit erklärt schwindende Unterstützung durch Regierungsversagen, vorwiegend politisch, aber auch ökonomisch. Beide Theorien werden gewöhnlich getrennt und unabhängig voneinander gebraucht, obwohl sie nicht inkompatibel sind. International vergleichende Forschungen zeigen, dass es eine – wenngleich nicht besonders stark ausgeprägte – Beziehung zwischen Sozialkapital und politischer Unterstützung gibt. Fallstudien über Länder mit einem auffälligen Verlust an politischer Unterstützung zeigen jedoch, dass der Verlust von Sozialkapital dafür nicht verantwortlich ist. Die Lösung dieses rätselhafter Evidenz liegt nicht darin, eine oder beide der beiden Theorien zu verwerfen, sondern anzuerkennen, dass sie sich ergänzen. Sozialkapital, politische Leistungsfähigkeit und politische Unterstützung sind, auch wenn sie manchmal nur locker verbunden sind, wechselseitig voneinander abhängig. Einige Fallstudien legen den Schluss nahe, dass der Verlust politischer Unterstützung am größten ist in Ländern und zwischen sozialen Gruppen mit hohem Sozialkapital. Dieser Verlust kann aber schnell kompensiert werden, wenn sich die politische Leistungsfähigkeit der Länder und Gruppen verbessert.



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# 1 Introduction: Theories and Concepts

Political support has been declining across many, if not most, of the established western democracies in the past decade or more. It is useful in this respect to distinguish, as Easton (1965) does, between support at the community, regime, and authority levels, because the evidence shows that many people are ‘critical citizens’ (Norris 1999) or ‘dissatisfied democrats’ (Pharr and Putnam 2000), whose support for democracy is firm, but whose trust in political leaders, parties and governments, confidence in public institutions, and the operations of government has fallen. As one survey of trends in eighteen western countries concludes, ‘citizens have grown more distant from political parties, more critical of political elites and political institutions, and less positive toward government...’ (Dalton 2004: 45-6. See also Putnam, Pharr and Dalton 2000; Klingemann 1999; Dalton 1999; Nye, Zelikow and King 1997; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Decline is faster and started earlier in some countries than others, and some show few signs of failing support, but in general the trend is down in most of the established democracies of the west.

Some have claimed that loss of political support does not matter much. The fact that the populations of many western democracies are distrustful of their political leaders, lack confidence in public institutions, believe that their governments are less accountable, and are increasingly dissatisfied with the workings of their democracy, shows that voters are maturing into a ‘realistic cynicism’ and ‘vigilant scepticism’, which is good for democracy (Citrin (1974: 988). Samuel Huntington (quoted in Orren 1997: 88-9) has said that ‘Distrust of government is as American as apple pie.’ There may be some truth in this, but, nevertheless, it seems likely that falling political support, especially the widespread and rapid decline found in some countries, signals a problem of some kind. Either government is failing to meet the rising expectations of its citizens, or they are failing to meet the old standards set for them, or perhaps they are increasingly caught in the hostile glare of the mass media spotlight (alienated intellectuals may also play a part) and appear to be failing, although neither governments nor citizens are changing much. In any event, democracy depends to a certain degree on popular support, and loss of support is a warning.<sup>1</sup>

This article examines two theories of political support, and by comparing both it tries to establish a better understanding of the social, economic and political foundations of democracy. One theory 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 by no means the only theories of political support and its decline, but they are probably the strongest and most widely researched. Nor are they incompatible. On the contrary they have been built into a single model (see Putnam, Pharr, Dalton 2000: 22-25), but more usually they are treated separately and tested quite independently. In this article they are con-

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<sup>1</sup> The argument is rehearsed by Dalton 2004: 9-13.

sidered together and their different contributions to political support evaluated against each other.

By political support is meant (borrowing from Easton 1975: 436) the extent to which individuals evaluate political objects positively. Easton distinguishes between three main levels of political objects: authorities, regime, and community. Authorities cover particular politicians and governments, regime covers the institutions of government and the operations of the political system, and community refers to the nation as a whole. This distinction is useful (cf Fuchs 1993) because it is evident that support for authorities (a given political leader or party in government) can fluctuate much more rapidly and independently of support for the regime (how democracy works), and for the community (pride in a nation). We may lose faith in a government, without losing faith in parliament, and lose faith in parliament without losing faith in the nation.

The difference between specific and diffuse support is also useful because we should distinguish between the short-run impact of immediate events, and the accumulated experience over the long term. Long run economic and political success can insulate a system of government from short-run shocks. Diffuse support is the kind of stable support that democracy rests upon. The main concern here is with deeper levels of diffuse support for regimes and communities, since these tell us more about how people evaluate their political system than their more volatile attitudes towards particular political leaders, parties, or governments.

The two theories can be tested at either individual or cross-national comparative levels, and on either a cross-sectional or time-series basis. Each has its uses for different purposes, but if regime and community support change more slowly than that for authorities, it is probably more satisfactory to use time series data. And if we are to avoid the dangers of culture-bound explanations based on the experiences of a single country, it is probably best to build in cross-national comparative data drawn from a wide variety and large number of countries.

The rest of the article divided into six main parts. The next considers theories of economic performance and the evidence for them. It is followed by a similar discussion of political performance and political support. Attention is then turned to social capital and civil society theories, and evidence of their association with political support. Having considered the two main theories separately, the next section compares and contrasts the two together, concluding that although there is evidence for both, it is neither strong nor consistent because there are too many exceptions to the general pattern. Besides, research clearly shows that support, performance, and social capital are mutually inter-dependent. The next section looks more closely at four exceptional national cases of steep or prolonged loss of support – Finland, Sweden, New Zealand and Japan – in order combine both cross-sectional survey research and time-series aggregate data that allow us to probe more deeply into the causes of declining support. The last section draws together the lessons of the analysis to present a more complete account of political support and the social and political foundations of democracy.

## 2. Economic Performance and Political Support

One might expect political support to reflect the ability of government to deliver what the general public expects of them. For example, legitimacy crisis theories argued that the increasing inability of western democracies to deliver what citizens expected and politicians promise would undermine support (Habermas 1973, Offe 1984), and since economic well-being is a crucial part of the package it follows that economic performance should be particularly important. There is more than enough evidence that it does affect voting behaviour (Alt and Chrystal 1983, Lewis-Beck 1988, Hibbs 1987, Merkl 1988, Anderson 1995), but rather little to show that it has much of an impact on regime and community support.

This may well be because there are many ways in which the link between economic performance and support may be attenuated or broken. First, to hold governments and government institutions accountable for economic performance the electorate must first believe that they are responsible for either causing or curing it, and voters do not act uniformly or homogeneously in this respect. The evidence suggests that judgments about responsibility for economic conditions are conditioned by individual ideology and partisanship, by the institutional context (Rudolph 2003). Second, economic policies may benefit some groups and harm others, so creating and undermining support in different parts of the electorate. Third, the electorate is divided between the egocentric and sociotropic (Sniderman and Brody 1977, Lewin 1991), those who vote retrospectively and prospectively (Anderson 1995), and those who punish bad performances or reward good ones (Lewis Beck 1986, Bloom and Price 1975, Alt 1980). Fourth, it may be some time before poor economic performance effects regime and community support in established democracies, where economic success over a long period of time can build up a reservoir of political allegiance that buffers politicians and institutions from short-term economic shocks (Almond and Verba 1963, Easton 1975, Weil 1989, Conradt 1980). Conversely, citizens of the new democracies of central and eastern Europe, though skeptical, were willing to give their new democratic institutions the benefit of the doubt in their early years (Mischler and Rose 1997, Bauer-Kaase and Kaase 1996, Finkel et al. 1989), although Duch (1995, 2001) argues that economic voting will develop as the ambiguity of the links between government policy and economic performance declines.

Therefore, evidence of a link between economic performance indicators and support is mixed and patchy (Weil 1989, Listhaug 1995: 288-94, Listhaug and Wiberg 1995: 316-20, Toka 1995; Kornberg and Clarke 1992; Lockerbie 1993, Anderson and Guillory 1997, Cusack 1999). One systematic analysis of pooled data for eight west European countries from 1976 to 1986 (Clarke, Dutt and Kornberg 1993) concludes that 'Although our analyses reveal the presence of a political economy of attitudes toward the political systems and societies of the eight Western European countries, many of the estimates were small...barring extraordinary circumstances (e.g. national economic disasters, major political triumphs or traumas), the political economy of public orientations towards polity and society in contemporary Western democracies is real but limited.'

A good deal of time-series cross-national comparative research confirms this conclusion. According to Dalton (2004: 127) 'In most OECD nations, however, the link between econo-

mic performance and political support appears tenuous.’ He also observes (p. 126. See also Bok 1997) that while political support has generally declined in these nations, economic standards have improved, and support has declined most among educated and affluent groups who had benefited most from increasing affluence.

### **3. Political Performance and Democratic Support**

The evidence suggests a closer connection between regime and community support and political performance than support and economic performance, although this, too, is often mediated by ideological and partisan attitudes (Anderson and LoTempio 2002) and by the home team effect (Anderson and Guillory 2003). Moreover, it may be that support for western democracies is declining not because their performance is any the worse, but because their shortcomings are more likely to be criticised now that the cold-war is over (Kaase and Newton 1995: 126-7).<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, there are many indications that government performance effects system support. 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; Fuchs, Guidorossi and Svensson 1995: 328; Weatherford 1992), if they believe the government is stable and durable (Harmel and Robertson 1986; Schmitt 1983), if politicians are accountable (Weatherford 1992), if government performs well in policy terms (Mishler and Rose 2001; Evans and Whitefield 1995), if the party system accommodates their interests (Weil 1989; Norris 1999: 232; Miller 1974; King 1997: 176; Borre 1995: 354), and if their civil liberties are protected (Norris 1999: 232). The mere event of an election, quite apart from the opportunity it offers to ‘kick the rascals out’, increases social, political, and institutional trust (Kaase and Newton 1995: 137; Rahn, Brehm and Carlson 1999; Price and Romantan 2004: 939-56).

One form of political performance that clearly influences support is lack of transparency, corruption, and political scandal. Although their impact is also mediated by political attitudes and the home-team effect (Mishler and Rose and Rose 2001), they have a strong effect on support for governments, civil servants, and political systems across a wide range of democracies (Rose, Mishler and Haerpfer 1999; Bowler and Karp 2004; Seligson 2002; Anderson and Tverdova 2003; della Porta 2000; Welch and Hibbing 1997; Peters and Welch 1980; Weatherford 1992). Not all political scandals are the same, however. The American public reacted to the Nixon and Clinton scandals in very different ways. Watergate was seen as a failure of the President and Nixon was held accountable, and while Clinton’s personal ratings fell sharply as a result of the Lewinsky affair, his Presidential support was barely affected. As Miller (1999) observes, the American public ‘judges broader, more profound aspects of go-

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard it is significant that political support in the USA rose sharply immediately after 9/11 (Dalton 2004: 1)

vernment performance and not simply how they feel about a particular official, even the president.’

To sum up, political performance seems to have a bigger effect on regime and community support than economic performance, but nevertheless its impact is contingent on a variety of individual, historical, and institutional factors. Therefore, there is no direct, automatic or simple relationship between support and political performance. Besides, if performance is important, then the next question is ‘What conditions make it possible and likely that a system of government will perform well.’ Social capital and civil society theory offer an answer to this question.

#### **4. 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 underlying social foundations of democracy.

As Putnam and Goss (2002: 6) put it:

‘...recent work on social capital has echoed the thesis of classical political theorists from Alexis de Tocqueville to John Stuart Mill that democracy itself depends on active engagement by citizens in community affairs...there is mounting evidence that the characteristics of civil society affect the health of our democracies, our communities, and ourselves.’

Putnam’s (1993) thesis is that greater stocks of social capital in the north of Italy has resulted in a more developed and effective form of democracy than in the social capital poor south. His later study of the United States (Putnam 2000) argues that political support has declined, (along with voting turnout, citizen participation in election campaigns, signing petitions, running for office, working for a political party, attending a political meeting or rally, attending a public meeting, and writing to a representative) because of the erosion of social capital.

The central concepts common to civil society and social capital theory are shared values and civic engagement. Shared values based upon generalised trust and an understanding of the rights and duties of the individual make peaceful and co-operation relations between citizens possible in private, economic, and public life. Engagement in informal social life and formally organised associations provide the all-important foundations of social existence outside the control of government, and at the same time, promotes an understanding of, an involvement with, and engagement in the common affairs of citizens. Both social capital and civil society are built around the all important voluntary associations that link individuals into so-

ciety, bind society together, and constitute a stable form of social life that is independent of government and cannot be controlled or manipulated by it. Declining political trust and support is caused by increasing social distrust and disengagement from the formal and informal life of the community and its civic affairs.

The evidence supports some of these claims but not others. There is some evidence to show that voluntary organisations can have an impact on generalised social and political trust, and on patterns of attitudes and behaviour that support democracy. However, most research fails to uncover a strong, consistent, or statistically significant associations of this kind (Knack and Keefer 1997: 1280-1; van Deth 1997; Stolle 2001; Stolle and Rochon 2001; Pharr 2000: 185; Hooghe 2003a, 2003b; Newton 1999 ; Freitag 2003, Delhey and Newton 2003, 2004). This work offers rather little support for the claim that voluntary associations and voluntary activity are the bedrock for the norms and practices of democratic government. Indeed, two recent overviews of the evidence are largely dismissive of the role of voluntary associations in generating the ‘habits of the heart’ associated with democratic support (Stolle and Hooghe 2003: 233-4; Uslaner 2002: 128, 193). It is not necessary to go as far as these writers to conclude that the evidence is not strong enough to support the weight of theoretical importance often attached to voluntary activity.

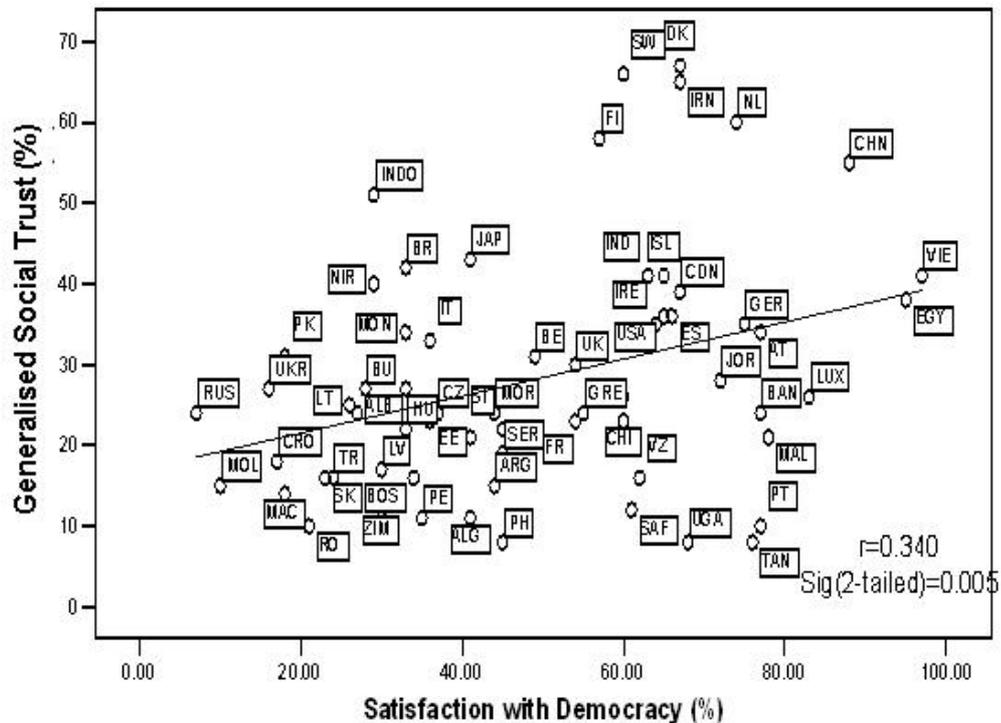
Most research also finds weak or insignificant correlations between individual expressions of social trust and political trust, but then most research relies upon single questions to measure each of them, and on either simple Yes/No responses or four point rating scales (Kaase 1999; Wright 1976: 104-10; Craig 1993: 27; Orren 1997; Newton 1999: 180; Diani 2004). If more sensitive measures using batteries of scaleable items and eleven point rating scales are used, then the individual correlations turn out to be highly significant and substantively large across a wide range of European countries, (Zmerli, Newton and Montero forthcoming; see also Jagodzinski and Manabe 2004). It seems that social and political trust are associated at the individual level, after all, as social capital theory predicts.

The strength of social capital and civil society theory, however, seems to lie rather less at the individual than at the comparative cross-national level. The ‘rainmaker’ hypothesis (that rain from heaven falls on the just and the unjust alike), claims that generalised social trust, and the generally trustworthy behaviour on which it is based, provides a social climate that affects everyone in society to a greater or lesser extent, irrespective of their personal disposition to trust or distrust (Putnam, Pharr and Dalton 2000:26; Newton and Norris 2000; Van der Meer 2003). It is also claimed that social capital and civil society is as much a top-down, government lead phenomenon, as a bottom-up individually driven one, because forms and practices of government can encourage trustworthy behaviour and attitudes on the part of their citizens (Levi 1996, 1998; Newton 2001; Putnam 2000: 138; Maloney, Smith and Stoker 2004; Tarrow 1996; Foley, Edwards and Diani 2001).

This suggests that a comparison of countries may be more successful than a comparison of individuals in finding an association between social capital and measures of political support. This is shown in Figures 1 and 2. Figure 1 shows that there is a significant association between generalised social trust and confidence in parliament satisfaction in 79 countries in 2000 (Pearson’s  $r = 0.29$ , significant at 0.01). At one extreme, Brazil, Algeria, Peru, Mace-



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



On the other hand, there is a group of stable democracies, mainly the wealthy OECD nations, where high social trust is accompanied by a respect for citizen property rights and civil liberties (Knack and Keefer 1997: 1275-6), civic cooperation (Knack and Keefer 1997: 1259), established and stable democracy (Putnam 1993, Evans 1996; Knack and Keefer 1997; Woolcock 1998: 176-8; Inglehart 1999: 102-4; Newton 2001; Booth and Richard 2001: 55; Paxton 2002; Uslaner 2002: 223-29; Delhey and Newton 2004), and high levels of confidence in political institutions. Norway, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Canada, Finland, and Ireland stand out in this respect. Their high levels of social trust and co-operation mean that they have well established and effective social institutions, which makes it easier for government to work effectively and in the public interest. The quality of their government helps to create a structure in which social institutions can operate effectively, which, in turn, enables a climate of social trust and co-operation to flourish. The result is a virtuous circle of high trust, well established social institutions, and good government that sustains itself with high levels of popular support.

While the distribution of countries in Figures 1 and 2 suggest that this is the general case, it is also true that the correlations between social trust and confidence in parliament, and trust

and satisfaction with democracy are not particularly strong, though statistically significant. A good number of countries lie off the regression lines. There are three reasons for this. First, the data about some countries may not be of the highest reliability because of the technical problems of carrying out opinion research. This may explain the location of some of the most obvious outliers - Ghana, Bangladesh, Azerbaijan, The Philippines, and India – in the Figures. Second, it is possible that the question about confidence in parliament may be interpreted in a different way in some of the newest democracies. Countries such as South Africa, Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, and Bosnia express much higher levels of confidence in parliament than their social trust scores suggest, perhaps because respondents in these countries do not always disentangle confidence in parliament from a belief in democracy as a principle of government.<sup>3</sup> Third, and more important from the point of view of classic trust theory, there is a group of countries where confidence in parliament is substantially lower than predicted by their trust scores, or where political support has declined in spite of no loss of social trust. This is not because of technical problems with surveys, nor because of the inability of respondents to distinguish between different levels of the system, but, as we will see, there are good reasons for support being lower than predicted by social trust. Finland, Sweden, New Zealand and Japan are in this group, and we will examine them more closely in the next section to see what explains their low or declining levels of political support. Before we do this, however, it is necessary to return to the two main theories to summarise the conclusions so far, and make some further observations about them.

## 5. Performance and social capital/civil society theories reviewed

Although most of the written work treats the two sets of theories as separate and independent, they are neither distinct nor mutually incompatible.<sup>4</sup> One of the few attempts to build a theory of declining confidence in government democratic support that draw upon both is provided by Putnam, Pharr and Dalton (2000: 23), for whom both social capital and the performance of representative democratic institutions is important for explaining political confidence.

Indeed it may well be that neither theory is adequate on its own because they need each other. Empirical research certainly shows their inter-relationships. For example, economic policies can effect political support (Cusack 1999; Clarke, Dutt and Kornberg 1993), but de-

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<sup>3</sup> In 24 OECD countries, where data reliability is comparatively good, and where the confidence in parliament question is likely to have a similar meaning the simple correlation between social trust and confidence in parliament rises from 0.23 for all 65 countries to 0.34, which is significant at 0.05. Though higher than the figure for the larger number of countries, the OECD figure is not a strongly significant figure either, but then there are rather few cases and not a great deal of variance to explain.

<sup>4</sup> For example in the excellent set of twelve essays on *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Nye, Zelikow, and King, eds, 1997), the term 'social capital' appears in the index only once, and is presented as 'a commonsense concept referring to the ability of people to work together.' (Nye, 1997: 13).

mocracy can also effect economic growth (Baum and Lake 2003), which, in turn, can influence social capital (Putnam 2000; Knack and Keefer 1997), which affects political support (Dalton 2004). Similarly, political institutions can have an impact on economic policies (Persson 2002), which can influence political support, while the effectiveness of economic policies can also be influenced by political support (Mischler and Rose 2001; Scholz 1998), which is associated with social trust. The design of government institutions and their representative procedures can create incentives for individuals to behave in ways that increase social capital (Schneider et al., 1997; Weatherford 1992: 160), just as the design of representative institutions can affect the political support they get (Rohrschneider 2002). According to Paxton (2002) social capital helps to promote democratic government while democratic government helps to promote social capital, and according to Knack (2002) social capital, in the form of generalized reciprocity and trust, help to improve the performance of government, which can affect political support. Hetherington (1998) finds that declining trust not only reflects dissatisfaction with leaders and institutions, but also creates a political climate that makes it more difficult for governments to succeed. Unsuccessful governments are likely to lose support. While it is often claimed that social trust is a necessary foundation for democratic government, the reverse may also be true insofar as democratic elections can have the effect of increasing social and political trust (Rahn, Brehm and Carlson 1999).

In short, although it may be useful, to simplify difficult research problems, to treat political performance and social capital as independent influences on political support, we should not lose sight of the fact that all three – social capital, political performance, and political support – effect each other. This helps to explain why neither social capital nor political performance theories on their own explains a great deal of the variance in political support, or changes in these levels. For the same reason, it also helps to explain why there are many exceptions to the general rule suggested by the theories, and why there are so many deviant cases in Figures 1 and 2.

We will now look more closely at four rather striking cases of declining democratic support – Finland, Sweden, New Zealand and Japan - to see what these four outliers from the regression lines tell us about declining political support. The case study approach allows us to combine different sorts of cross sectional and survey data with time-series aggregate evidence for individual countries. Case studies also allow us to probe much deeper into the background of falling democratic support with richer and more detailed evidence than aggregate cross-national studies present.<sup>5</sup> It is in the nature of case studies that some are better documented than others, and we start here with the Finland because it is the country with the most comprehensive (English language) literature about it.

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<sup>5</sup> On the methodological strengths of combining cross-national aggregate studies with case studies, as this does, see Sambanis 2004).

## **6. Four Case Studies of declining Support. Finland**

Confidence in the Finnish parliament fell heavily from 65% in 1981 to 34% in 1990. The fall of 31% was not only large and sudden, but all the more notable because it took the Finnish figure from one of the very highest in the world (second only to Norway in west Europe) to no more than a medium level by global standards, on a level with Portugal, South Korea and Italy. Confidence in a set of five sets of public institutions (the armed forces, legal system, police, parliament, and the civil service) tumbled from 72% in 1980-1 to 53% in 1990-1 (Dalton 1999: 68), the largest fall of any in seventeen advanced democracies covered in Dalton's study. By the mid 1990s, satisfaction with the democratic performance of government in Finland was 52%, equal to Uruguay's, and some thirty percentage points below neighbouring Denmark and Norway. Evaluation of regime performance in the mid-1990s was even lower at 23%, the same as Estonia, Turkey and Mexico, and 47% below Norway's (Klingemann 1999: 47-50).

The downward slide stopped short of the most basic level of the political community. Support for democracy, though quite low by west European standards, was still 75% in 1990, and on the measures of national pride and willingness to fight for their country the Finns, with a score of 78%, were up with Sweden and Norway (85% and 81% respectively). In other words, in the 1980s Finland was an extreme case of decline of trust and confidence in politicians and public institutions, but of continued faith in the political community.

What accounts for this precipitous fall in political support in a country where it is normally among the highest in the world? The first thing to note is that generalized social trust, probably the best single indicator of social capital, was high in Finland in the 1980s, as it was in previous decades (Delhey and Newton 2004). Nor did social trust decline. On the contrary, it increased from 57% to 63% between 1981 and 1990, the same decade that political support fell so steeply, and then returned to its 1981 level with a figure of 58% in 2000.

Finland also maintained its unusually vibrant associational life in the 1980s and 1990s. The country has one of the highest rates of voluntary group membership in the world, as well as a strong tradition of unpaid voluntary service (Inglehart et al., eds., 2004: Tables A064-A096). The level of voluntary activity remained high and constant throughout the period from 1945 to 1994. Between 1945 and 1964 an average of 2,200 new organizations were registered every year, compared with 2,300 per year between 1965 and 1979, 2,243 between 1980 and 1989, and 2,037 between 1990 and 1994 (Siisiainen 1999: 122). The rate of registration of new groups reached an unusually high peak of close to 3,500 in 1984, with another peak in 1995. From 1960 to 1995 the rate of new voluntary association registration fluctuated around an average of about 2,500, showing no sign of long term decline or increase (Siisiainen 1999: 123).

Figures for the density of voluntary organizations are reflected in those for individual group membership in Finland. A comparison of data provided by Siisiainen (1999: 133) and Curtis, Grabb and Baer (1992: 142) shows that Finland has a rather high percentage of multi-

ple group memberships – comparable with Norway’s, and only slightly lower than Sweden’s, which is the highest in the fifteen established democracies in the Curtis, Grabb and Bear study. Moreover, there is no indication that voluntary membership and activity has declined in Finland before, during or after the collapse of political support in the 1980s. On the contrary, individual membership of voluntary associations increased fairly constantly after 1972 (Siisiainen 1999: 132). Those belonging to no voluntary organization fell from 38% in 1972 to 21% in 1988, while those belonging to three or more groups increased between 1975 and 1988.

Finland is a puzzle from the point of view of social capital theory, therefore, particularly when compared with its neighbours, Denmark and Norway, which show no signs of either weakening social capital or declining political support (Klingemann 1999; Dalton 1999; Holmberg 1999). In contrast, Finland shows no sign whatsoever of loss of social capital, but political support collapsed. What explains the decline of political support in Finland, if it is not a decay of social capital?

In 1980 Finland was a successful, prosperous, politically stable and peaceful country. Its economic growth rate of 4% p.a. was one of the highest in Europe, partly because it had come to a political accommodation with its neighbour, the USSR, which took 10% of Finland’s exports. The industrial relations system of the country, though rather rigid and conflict ridden, was manageable. There was a good deal of government instability, because minority coalitions and caretaker governments tended to turn over at a fast rate, but that was also managed.

However, storm clouds were gathering over Finland in the early 1980s.<sup>6</sup> The economy began to overheat rapidly, as borrowing increased steeply, house and security prices doubled, salaries rose, and the over-valued currency fell. Exports were increasingly affected by the implosion of the USSR.<sup>7</sup> To make things worse, the Bank of Finland deregulated interest rates and the movement of foreign capital to encourage market efficiency. Governments also started a policy of privatization, deregulation, rationalization, and economic re-structuring. State enterprises were required to make profits, and service and hi-tech industries were encouraged at the expense of engineering. The result was an increase in unemployment and the start of an austerity programme as government debt increased as a proportion of GDP.

The formation of the Harri Holkeri’s Conservative/Social Democratic coalition government in 1987 was also the start of an unusual political period: Holkeri was 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 since April 1945, with the exception of February-September 1972. Holkeri’s coalition pressed on with a radical programme of economic restructuring, privatization, and deregulation.

By the end of the 1980s Finland was entering into deep economic recession in which industrial output fell, unemployment reached an historical high, government deficits trebled, and taxes increased, but services and wages were cut. In the early 1990s, huge amounts of

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<sup>6</sup> For an account of the Finnish economy in the 1980s and 1990s see Pesonen and Riihinen, 2002: 246-62.

<sup>7</sup> Exports to the USSR were 13% of the national total in 1990, 5% in 1995 and 4% in 2000.

money fled the country, interest rates soared, and the value of the currency dropped steeply. Business bankruptcies multiplied. Open conflict developed between the government and the central bank, and the Director of the Bank of Finland was sacked in 1992, resulting in a more economic turbulence and an increase in money fleeing the country. The government was forced to float the Finnish Markka in September 1992. A general strike was threatened. A cabinet minister (Eeva Kuuskoski) resigned from the government in 1992 on a policy issue - a rare event in Finnish coalition politics - and in the same year another minister (Kauko Juhan-talo) was found guilty of corruption and expelled from Parliament – an unprecedented event in Finnish politics. The country was deeply divided on membership of the European Union.<sup>8</sup>

The causes of Finland's collapse of political support were not social or related to the erosion of social capital, social trust, or social engagement. On the contrary Finland remained a well-founded civil society. The causes of the political problems lay in economic and political events.

The Finnish story does not end here. There is an important sequel to the crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s. By the end of the 1990s the economy had recovered to a growth rate of 5% in 1997, and political life settled down into a more normal pattern. In 2001 the most hotly debated issue in parliament was same-sex partnerships (Sundberg, 2002: 952). More significant, confidence in public institutions (the armed forces, the education system, the police, the civil service), improved substantially. Confidence in Parliament increased from 34% to 44%, taking it up to the Swiss figure and not far behind Denmark (49%) and Sweden (51%), though still way behind Norway (70%). Satisfaction with democracy improved from 52% in 1995 to 57% in 2000. In 1995, 75% 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%, equal to the Swiss figure. Finland did not recover to 1980s levels of political support, but it made significant gains towards them.

It may be that the combination of *high* social capital and severe government performance problems caused political support to plummet in the 1980s. Used to smoothly working (not trouble free) government and a successful economy, being well embedded and connected in society and its organizational life, being highly education, and well informed and socially and politically aware (Finland has one of the highest newspaper readerships in the world - Norris, 2000) the Finns may have reacted strongly to their problems. Perhaps it was the high level of social capital combined with severe and unusual political and economic problems that caused the rapid loss of political support. Equally, having an exceptionally good stock of social capital may have helped support returned towards its previous high levels when the political and economic storm had passed, and it may have passed the quicker because of the stock of social capital. In other words, the speculation here is that high social capital will magnify the loss of political support in times of under-performing government, but makes recovery the faster when performance recovers.

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<sup>8</sup> 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*.

## Sweden

Whereas Finland suffered a sudden and sharp decline in political support, followed by equally sharp (but partial) recovery, Sweden's long-term decline shows few signs of recovery. According to Holmberg (1999: 105. See also Listhaug and Wiberg 1996, 320), trust in politicians has been declining more or less constantly for the past thirty years in Sweden. The percentage disagreeing with the statement that parties are only interested in people's votes, not their opinions, decreased from 51% in 1968 to 25% in 1994, and the percentage disagreeing with the statement that parliament does not pay much attention to what people think fell from 60% to 28%. Similarly, there has been a decline of strong party identifiers from 53% in 1960 to 24% in 1994 (Holmberg 1999: 109; Dalton 1999: 66).

In 1986, confidence in the Riksdag and the cabinet was 51% and 47% respectively; by 1996 these figures had fallen to 19% and 18%: in 1968, the 'year of revolutions' in many other European countries, half the Swedish population believed that the Riksdag paid attention to what ordinary people thought and 60% believed that the parties were interested in people's opinions; by 1994 the figures were 28% and 25% respectively (Holmberg 1999: 107, 112. See also Listhaug and Wiberg 1996, 320).

Between 1980 and 1990 the combined score for confidence in the armed forces, the legal system, police, parliament, and the civil service fell from 63% to 56% (Dalton 1999: 68. See also Listhaug and Wiberg 1995: 306). There is some slight evidence of a small upturn in confidence in parliament, the police, the justice system, and the civil service by 2000, but the downward trend continued for the armed forces and the education system. According to surveys of the SOM Institute at Goteborg University, confidence in the Swedish parliament fell from 47% in 1986 to 19% in 1996, confidence in the cabinet from 51% to 18%, and in the government from 44% in 1986 to 22% in 1999. (Holmberg 1999: 112; Rothstein 2002: 293). By the mid 1990s, only 33% of Swedes expressed approval of the performance of their political regime, about the same as Puerto Rico and Peru, and less than half Norway's 70% (Klingemann 1999: 47).

As in Finland, political support for the political community and for democracy as a form of government retained their strength, but satisfaction with national democratic performance was 55% in 1995, well below Denmark and Norway's 82% and 83%. Support for democracy as the best form of government remained solid at 93% in the mid 1990s, and had climbed 2% by 2000. Pride in the country and willingness to fight for it was still high by global standards. As Rothstein (2002: 294) puts it, Sweden's democratic stability is not threatened by deep crisis, but there are clear signs of long-term deterioration of confidence in the central political institutions and political participation.

Like Finland, Sweden presents little evidence of a decline of social capital. On the contrary, participation in voluntary organisations, unusually high by world standards in the 1950s, remained high or rose over the next forty years, when membership, the number of organisations, level of activity, and financial resources increased (Rothstein 2002: 303, 319). Informal social activity has also increased, especially in informal study circles, which, accor-

ding to one observer, ‘maintain a civic network right across social borders’ (quoted in Rothstein 2002: 301). According to one study (de Hart and Dekker 1999: 77) Sweden has maintained in place in the top three of twelve advanced democracies in the west so far as membership of and activity in voluntary associations, and Sweden’s voluntary sector in the mid 1990s was, if anything, stronger even than Finland’s which ranked among the foremost in the world (Siisiainen 1999: 133. See also Rothstein 2002: 303-4).

Nor is there evidence of a decline in generalised social trust in Sweden. On the contrary, World Values Surveys show it rising from 57% in 1981 to 67% in 1997, and remaining at 66% in 2000. Likewise, the numbers of Swedes who can be characterised as socially isolated and passive declined between 1968 and 1991 (Rothstein 2002: 316).

If a decline in social capital, social trust, and social engagement does not account for a decline in political support in Sweden in the late twentieth century, what does? Holmberg (1999: 114-22) examines various possibilities including social capital, government performance, policy disagreements and distance, economic downturn, and the mass media. He concludes that political factors are the most powerful:

‘without a doubt the most important political explanation has to do with government performance – with people’s evaluations of what they get from government and their assessment of what the government does. Government performances, and people’s perceptions of that performance, are the central factors. In this sense, political distrust is best explained by politics.’

Rothstein (2002: 324-31) develops the same sort of argument about political performance. He speculates that ‘organized social capital’ in Sweden broke down, by which he means the special government institutions that managed the incremental and consensual relations between the unions, employers, farmers, and the (Social Democratic) government. The resulting failure of the Swedish corporatist model of incremental wage bargaining produced increasing industrial conflict,<sup>9</sup> a spiral of inflation, a series of currency devaluations, and a sharp decline in economic performance which took Sweden from fourth in the OECD wealth table in 1970 to eighteenth in 1997. It also produced a long and unusually bitter struggle between unions and employers over the wage earner funds that were supposed to socialize all major private companies in Sweden. The failure of the old corporatist system to produce compromise on labour laws and flexible systems of production also led the government to push through heavily criticised changes.

In short, both Holmberg and Rothstein agree that it was not the decay of social capital that caused the long term slide in political support in Sweden, but a set of political considerations that caused a breakdown of the Swedish model of corporatist consensus that, in turn, caused failures of economic and government performance.

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<sup>9</sup> One rather striking figure illustrates the significance of the break down of the Swedish model: in 1975-9 the number of working days lost because of industrial disputes per thousand in the civilian labour force was 26. From 1980 to 1984 it was 218.

## New Zealand

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, political support slumped heavily in New Zealand to the point where approval ratings in 1991 were the lowest since opinion polling started in the 1960s. Confidence in parliament in this normally stable and peaceful democracy declined in the 1975-93 period, and in the 1990s was at the same level as Argentina, Macedonia, Venezuela, Columbia, Brazil, and Peru. Voting turnout declined from a post-war high of just over 90% to 71.7% in 2002; party membership fell from about 22% of the population in the 1950s to less than 5% in 2000; public contributions to party funds dried up (Vowles 2004). Increasing numbers in the mid-1990s felt that politicians were out of touch, and party identification declined (Dalton 2004: 29-33).

At the same time, indicators of social capital are comparatively high by world standards in New Zealand. The World Values surveys shows that social trust in the 1990s was on a par with Finland, Ireland, Canada, The Netherlands, West Germany, and Iceland. Voluntary activity was also high. One study (Donovan et al. 2004) finds widespread participation in associations, especially sports clubs. The New Zealand election study estimates that 69% of those aged 18 and over were association members (Vowles 2004: 8). The figure may not be exactly comparable, but it suggests that New Zealand is not far behind the USA and ahead of Sweden, The Netherlands, the UK, Australia, Eire, and Canada, which were the leading countries in the Curtis, Grabb and Baer (1992) study of 15 wealthy western nations.

Vowles (2004), however, finds a decline in voluntary activity from 85% participation by those aged 15 and over in 1981 to 69% of 18 and over in 1999. There was also a clear decline in attendance at association meetings once a month or more. At the same time McVey and Vowles (2004) find little evidence in a cross-sectional analysis of individual participation to support the theory that voluntary associations act as the 'free schools' of civic engagement and trust, and reject the idea that the decline of political participation is related to declining social capital.

Once again, if it is not social capital that has caused political support to decline in New Zealand, what is it? The country's political problems were caused by a sharp reversal of economic fortunes that resulted in severe political problems. In 1990 the country had one of the most sluggish, high debt, and inflationary economies in the OECD, causing government to reduce spending. Unemployment increased, and changes in trade union and labour laws resulted in worse wages and working conditions. There was a public outcry against a new pensions and tax scheme that forced the government to revert to an unpopular surtax on high incomes.

This in turn, produced a series of political problems.<sup>10</sup> One leading government member was sacked for criticising policy, and some party members broke away to form a new party. Government popularity slumped and it lost a couple of important by-elections. Election turnout declined. Against a background of severe economic and political problems, and wi-

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<sup>10</sup> For details of these see Vowles 1992, 1994.

despread distrust and disillusion with politicians and parties, a referendum on the electoral system held in 1992 produced massive support (85%) for constitutional reform. Almost overnight New Zealand converted itself from a comparatively pure form of majoritarian democracy to a modern consensus type of political system.

## Japan

Levels of satisfaction with politics in Japan have generally been low by OECD standards, but they fell to near-record low levels in the early 1990s (Pharr 1997: 237-45, 2000: 174). As in other countries, growing distrust in politics and politicians contrasts with rising support for democracy as a form of government (Inoguchi 2002: 363-4, 373; Kobayashi, undated: Table 9-12). While those believing that democracy is a good thing rose from 38% in 1968 to 59% in 1993, there was a sharp fall in trust in politicians (Dalton 2004: 29) and satisfaction with politics (Pharr 2000: 175). In the early 1970s, 74% of voters claimed to support a political party; by 1993 this had slipped to 64% (Kobayashi undated, Chapter 9, Section 3 (1). See also Dalton 2004: 33). Confidence in parliament also fell between 1976 and 2001 (Dalton 2004: 38). By the 1990s it was at 29%. Confidence in public institutions (except the police, military, and judiciary) also registered a significant decline during the 1980s and into the 1990s (Newton and Norris 2000: 57; Inoguchi 2002: 377). In the 1990s satisfaction with democracy was on a level with Mexico, The Philippines, Poland, Peru, Serbia, and Bulgaria. A survey in 1995 found that 29% agreed with the view that Japanese democracy was functioning well, and 61% disagreed (Pharr 2000: 176).

Over the same period, however, there is little sign of an erosion of social capital, and quite a few indications of improvement. Social trust rose from 26% in 1978 to 38% in 1993, low by many western standards but still an increase. The World Values surveys shows trust was a constant 42% in 1980, 1990, and 1995. Inoguchi's (2002: 363-4) composite indicator of civic activity remained constant at between 27.7% and 25.2% between 1981 and 1996, but the number of interest groups and voluntary associations multiplied dramatically (Pharr 2002: 184. See also Inoguchi 2002: 360-3). At the same time, there is not much evidence that involvement with voluntary groups in Japan is associated with political trust or satisfaction with politics (Pharr 2000: 185-8). On the contrary civic engagement seems to have little to do with satisfaction with politics, and the multiplication of interest groups and voluntary associations in Japan over the 1960-1990 period seems to have done little to sustain trust in politicians, satisfaction with politics, or confidence in the political system (Pharr 2000: 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. Pharr (2000: 199) shows that 'in Japan, at least, 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 to the corruption that pervaded Japanese politics from the 1976 Lockheed scandal to the Recruit affair of 1989. According to Kobayashi (undated, Chapter 7, Section 5) it is not just the headline hitting corruption cases that alienates

the Japanese voter, but the routine way in which politicians use public funds for private gain and to conduct their electioneering activity. In 1992 no less than 74% of the Japanese agreed with the view that 'many dishonest people' were running their country, compared with 'only' 44% who said the same in 1976 (Pharr 1997: 240).

Neither economic performance nor social capital explains the loss of political support in Japan. On the contrary, support fell as national wealth increased (Pharr 2000: 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: 371-2). This combination of circumstances is consistent with the earlier suggestion that a mixture of high or rising social capital and poor government performance in Finland may have caused a large drop in political support.

## **7. Discussion and Conclusions**

Research that relies wholly on cross-national aggregate statistics such as those presented in Figures 1 and 2 is likely to conclude in favour of social capital and civil society theory. Research that relies wholly on the case studies of rapidly declining political support is likely to reject such theories in favour of explanations concentrating on political performance. However, the temptation to throw away social capital theory because the four case studies do not support it should be resisted. At the same time how can we reconcile the apparently contradictory conclusions of the comparative and case study approaches?

Across the globe the highest levels of social trust are usually associated with the highest levels of political support – in Norway, The Netherlands, Denmark, Iceland, and Canada, for example. At the other extreme, the lowest levels of political support are usually found in countries with the lowest levels of social trust - Brazil, Peru, Puerto Rico, Macedonia, Colombia, Argentina, Romania and Venezuela. This is because it is difficult to build democracy in poor countries that do not have the necessary basis of social trust and co-operation, a well-founded civil and community life, and social institutions that work effectively and impartially. Therefore, low social trust is not normally associated with the sort of well-performing democracy that generates high levels of political satisfaction and support.

But high social trust does not necessarily or automatically go with high levels of political confidence. Social capital is a necessary but not sufficient cause of political support and government effectiveness, although generally high social capital is associated with effective and democratic government that commands citizen support. In the long run political performance may effect regime and community support, but diffuse support built up over a long period of economic and political success may dampen the immediate effects of short-run under-performance.

The link between social capital and political support can be broken by exceptionally poor government performance – political failure, severe economic problems, and an accumulation of corrupt and scandalous events. In these circumstances, political support may drop sharply with no change in social capital. In fact, the more social capital the proportionately greater may be the loss of support in times of severe political and economic trouble. At the same time, a high social capital country like Finland and New Zealand can rebuild support rapidly if political and economic problems are sorted out. It is difficult to imagine Brazil, Peru, Bosnia, or Macedonia pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps in this way.

Social capital, political performance, and political support are mutually inter-dependent and form a single syndrome, but the cause and effect relations are not perfectly symmetrical, and the connections are sometimes loose and contingent. It is not enough to rely on either social capital or performance theories to explain decline in political support in western democracies. They are both right, but only in part.

Lastly, the case studies of Finland, Sweden, Japan and New Zealand throw light on another issue about declining political support. It is sometimes questioned whether government has actually performed badly, or whether citizen expectations have risen, causing disappointment with performance that has not actually worsened (Bok 1997: 56). It is noticeable that in the four case studies discussed here, it was not rising standards or unreasonable expectations, but real political and economic events that caused the withdrawal of political support. Neither government overload, nor a crisis of legitimacy, nor the demands of new social movements, nor structural realignments caused by postmodern transformation was responsible for this, but rather a set of objective political and economic problems that caused the public to adjust its views of their systems of government.

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