CHAPTER 1

Trust and Political Disenchantment
An Overview

Ken Newton

Trust is an age-old topic in social and political theory, dating back at least to Confucius, who identified it as an essential ingredient of government, together with food and arms. In the past two decades or so, however, it has attracted vast and diverse research activity in the social sciences and beyond – psychology, sociology, economics, politics, management, education, development studies and medicine. Widespread interest in the topic is not just an academic matter, either. Following the academic work that shows trust is a general benefit to the society, the economy and the polity, Government agencies and policy-making institutions such as the World Bank, the OECD and the EU started their own work on trust and a broad array of practical problems of public policy. They have also investigated the problem of how to increase levels of trust, especially among groups in society where it is low.

The resulting research has uncovered strong associations between trust, in both its social and political forms, and a wide variety of important phenomena in modern society. People who trust others, it seems, are healthier, happier and wealthier and they tend to live longer and feel more satisfied with their own lives (Helliwell and Putnam 2004). They are more tolerant, more likely to help others and co-operate with them, and more likely to support aid for minorities and the poor; as a result, trusting societies are generally more integrated and cohesive and less likely to suffer from illegal behaviour, social strains and deviant behaviour (Uslaner 2002; Marien and Hooghe 2011). Trusting individuals have higher rates of civic participation, volunteering and giving to charities (Uslaner and Brown 2005) and trusting communities have lower crime rates and higher levels of school attainment (Putnam 1993).

Political trust is also associated with many forms of political attitudes and behaviour. Those who distrust their government are more likely to vote for opposition and third parties (Hetherington 1999), and they often display less interest in politics, and are less likely to be active in civic life and they are more likely to engage in illegal activities and to condone improper behaviour such as not buying tickets for public transport or parking illegally (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Uslaner 2002). At the country level there is evidence that higher levels of both social and political trust are associated with democratic development and stability, the rule of law, social and economic equality, economic
development and belief in democracy, as well as satisfaction with the way that democracy works in any given country (Knack and Keefer 1997; Inglehart 1997: 188; Keele 2007; Zak and Knack 2001; van der Meer and Dekker 2011). Trusting nations have more equal income distributions (Delhey and Newton 2005) and less corruption (Della Porta, 2000). Their citizens are more likely to pay their taxes, and in return get better and more efficient public services (Sholtz and Lubell 1998).

In short, government and society seems to work more smoothly and effectively if it is built on the twin features of social and political trust. At the other extreme it is rightly said that the person who trusts nobody and trusts nothing should not take the risk of getting out of bed in the morning. Such people are exceedingly rare in modern society (Newton and Zmerli, 2011: 15). In this sense, Confucius is right: trust is one of the core features that make social and political life possible. More recently trust has been described as the glue that holds society together and the lubrication that makes it work more effectively, and for this reason trust is often treated as the core component of social capital and its best empirical indicator. Trust may not be the ‘chicken soup of social life’, as Uslaner (2000–2001) puts it, but it certainly seems to be mixed up with a great many social ‘goods’, just as lack of trust seems to be accompanied by many social ‘bads’.

However, a difficult problem was presented by survey results in the earlier stages of social capital research. Although theory suggested that there should be a close connection between social trust and political trust, empirical results could not find this at the individual level, although statistically significant correlations were discovered at the national level. Later work, however, confirmed the theory. A strong statistical association appears at the individual level as well when the two are measured more accurately, notably by means of multiple, scalable questionnaire items, in particular the Rosenberg (1957) scale for social trust and batteries of questions for confidence in political institutions. It helps if respondents are given an eleven-point rating scale when answering the trust questions. This work also found a close association between social and political trust on the one hand, and measures of political attitudes, on the other (Glanville and Paxton 2007; Freitag 2003; Zmerli and Newton 2008; Freitag and Bühlmann 2009). In other words, there is a close three-cornered relationship between social trust, political trust and measures of democratic satisfaction and confidence in the institutions of government.

Confirmation that social and political trust are connected and associated with an array of political attitudes and behaviour solves an important problem in research, but news from the trust front is not all good. A persistent refrain in political science, at least from 1968 onwards, has been that democracy is in a