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Is There a Crisis of Trust in Australia?

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Introduction

Trust, or the lack of it, is one of the perennial themes of modern social and political discourse. We are peppered with talk of declining trust, the betrayal of trust and a crisis of trust in Australia and internationally, by politicians, commentators and members of the broader public alike. Seldom does a day go by when the issue of trust does not feature in newspapers and talkback radio. Such discussions have been fuelled in part by events on the political stage, such as the children overboard affair, before the 2001 federal election, and the revelations of the misleading basis for the decision to go to war in Iraq, but concern about trust has also been fuelled by more down to earth societal incidents such as news items reporting babies and young children being snatched from their parents in broad daylight at what often appears to be an ever increasing rate.

The question that this chapter addresses is whether such anecdotal evidence reflects the advent of a crisis of trust in Australia in recent times or whether it is truer to say that trust is an ongoing issue that is punctuated by particular political and social events from time to time that draw attention to it. While trust is an age-old and evergreen concept it has become the focus of attention in academic, political and social debate over the last decade to a degree that is almost certainly unprecedented. This focus on trust is due in no small part to the work of the American political scientist Robert Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000), for whom social and political trust represent important indicators of the key theoretical notion of social capital.

Social capital is largely what politicians are referring to when they talk about the need to revive and rebuild communities. It has in fact become common for politicians from all sides of politics to express concerns about social capital, although in the Australian political context it is most prominently associated with the ideas of the leader of the Labor Party, Mark Latham (1998). In broad terms social capital can be thought of as the sense of connectedness and civic-mindedness that people feel in strong and close-knit communities. More specifically, Putnam has defined social capital as ‘features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam 1995 p. 67), or ‘social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them’ (Putnam 2000 p. 19).

As is clear from the definition, trust is a central component of social capital. Putnam (1995, 2000) has argued that social capital is in decline in the United States of America and a significant amount of his evidence for this contention constitutes measures of different aspects of trust. Other scholars have reinforced these conclusions both in the United States and in Australia (for example, Nye, Zelikow and King 1997; Burchell and Leigh 2002). As a key indicator of the decline of social capital, trust thus becomes a topic of great interest, for it is assumed that it is directly related to other components of social capital, such as cooperation and the maintenance of social networks. The concern is that if trust declines, cooperative interactions and interrelations between individuals and within organisations may increasingly break down.

While social capital is a highly complex phenomenon, the concept of trust is itself multifaceted (Braithwaite and Levi 1998; Warren 1999; Putnam 2000). In this chapter I consider empirical evidence on two distinct elements of trust, social or interpersonal trust and political trust or trust in government, as well as various related indicators, such as confidence in institutions, perceptions of the appropriate amount of power different organisations should wield and participation in a range of socio-political activities. Participation of this kind is often regarded as one of the key outcomes of the possession of social capital. The data used in the analysis come principally from the 2003 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), conducted by Gibson et al. (2004), although several other data sources are also employed where appropriate in an attempt to make some judgements about changes over time.

Are Australians losing trust in each other?

The first question to be addressed in this analysis is whether there appears to be a decline in social trust in Australia. Before considering whether Australians have lost trust in each other, first it is necessary to establish current levels of trust as revealed by the AuSSA. The survey asked: ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’ In response to this question, only a minority – 41 per cent – indicated that they felt most people could be trusted, while 59 per cent were of the view that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people. To put these figures in perspective, while to find that only four in ten give a trusting response may seem like a disturbingly low figure to

some, this is a similar proportion to that giving a trusting response in the United States in recent years (Putnam 2000, p. 140), although generally a little higher, and also a similar proportion to that giving a trusting response in Great Britain since the 1980s (Johnston and Jowell 2001, p. 182; see also Johnston and Jowell 1999), although perhaps a little lower.

In the United States, however, social trust was higher back in the 1960s and has been falling ever since, thus giving rise to the concerns about social capital outlined above. In the 1960s the proportion of Americans giving the trusting response was around 55 per cent (Putnam 2000, p. 140). Can any similar trend be identified in Australia? Unfortunately, we have nothing like the time series of observations existing for the United States or even for Britain. The best we can do in Australia is to go back to a few scattered time points, starting in the early 1980s and then skipping to the middle of the 1990s, when the same question was asked in the Australian rounds of the World Values Survey, conducted in 1983 and again in 1995 (Inglehart et al. 2000). The question was also asked in the 2001 Australian Election Study (AES), conducted by Bean, Gow and McAllister (2002).

Figure 1 shows the percentage replying with the trusting response in each of those surveys, plus the 2003 AuSSA. Back in 1983 the proportion indicating social trust was 48 per cent. In 1995 the trusting proportion dipped to 40 per cent – almost the same as in 2003 – while in 2001 it was back up to close to the 1983 level, at 46 per cent. Having only four time points makes the discerning of any trend difficult. If we take the first and the last time points, there does seem to be some indication of a decline in social trust from the early 1980s to the first few years of the twenty-first century. But when we take account of all four readings on the graph, a more reasonable interpretation would seem to be one of trendless fluctuations, albeit with the possibility that the fluctuations are trending slightly downwards. But it will require several more readings over the next few years to be able to confirm this speculation. Of course, there remains the real possibility that Australia experienced higher levels of social trust further back in the twentieth century.

Figure 1 about here

Levels of interpersonal trust in Australia, 1995 – 2003

Another way of approaching this issue is to look at levels of trust within different age cohorts. Putnam (2000) was able to demonstrate, for example, that a major basis of the decline of social trust in the United States was the replacement of

older, more trusting, cohorts with younger, less trusting cohorts. Johnston and Jowell (2001), on the other hand, found little evidence for a similar phenomenon in Britain, consistent with their 'no change' interpretation of two decades worth of British data on social trust. Is there a generational basis to trust in Australia? Table 1 shows that to some extent there is. The least trusting age cohort is those aged between 18 and 34 years, among whom only 36 per cent in the 2003 AuSSA believe that most people can be trusted. This proportion jumps to 43 per cent among 35 to 49 year olds and to 45 per cent among the 50 to 64 year olds. However, among those aged 65 and over the proportion of trusting individuals drops back to 37 per cent, almost the same level as in the youngest cohort. We certainly cannot say that the most trusting cohorts are dying off while the least trusting come of age. In Australia, interpersonal trust appears to peak in middle age and then decline thereafter, reasons for which are considered in the conclusion. Overall, this kind of pattern is more consistent with a life cycle account than a generational one and provides no evidence to suggest that levels of trust might either decline or increase in the future.

Table 1 about here

Interpersonal trust by age, sex, education, class, income and region

Table 1 also contains data for several other fundamental socio-demographic variables, gender, education, (subjective) social class, income and region of residence. Taking each variable in turn, a gender difference is discernible in the data, but it is a narrow one. Nonetheless men are somewhat more inclined to be trusting than women (43 per cent compared to 39 per cent). A much more fundamental difference, however, is evident between those with and without a university degree. Among those with lesser educational qualifications, 36 per cent give a trusting response. But among the fifth of the sample who are university graduates fully 61 per cent express interpersonal trust. Within this group the ratio of trusting to untrusting individuals is effectively reversed from the pattern displayed within the sample as a whole and with education on the increase this is surely one positive sign with respect to the direction social trust may take in the future. There are equivalent, though less sharp, differences on the basis of subjective social class, with the middle class are more likely to express trust than the working class. Pusey (2003, p. 134) found differences in trust according to income. Such differences are also apparent in the AuSSA data, although whereas Pusey observed a clear distinction between low income earners and the rest, the data here show more of a tendency for trust to increase progressively with rising incomes.

Interestingly, and perhaps contrary to popular characterisations of city and country communities, urban residents are also somewhat more likely to express trust than rural residents, although the difference is modest.

Are Australians losing trust in government?

If the evidence we have provides no indication that Australians are losing trust in each other, what about the second element of trust, trust in government? AuSSA respondents were asked: 'Thinking about the Federal government in Australia these days, would you say it is run for a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?' Four response categories were allowed: 'entirely run for a few big interests', 'mostly run for a few big interests', 'mostly run for the benefit of all' and 'entirely run for the benefit of all'. Around 13 per cent said the Federal government is run entirely for a few big interests and a further 47 per cent said mostly, giving a total of 60 per cent giving an untrusting response. On the other side, 38 per cent thought the government to be mostly run for the benefit of all but only another 2 per cent were of the opinion that the government is entirely run for the benefit of all, making a total of 40 per cent offering a trusting response. Interestingly, the respective proportions of trusting and untrusting responses is almost exactly the same for political trust as for social trust.

But does 40 per cent represent a high or a low level of political trust and has this level changed over time? Again it is difficult to find comparable data sources from the past, but twice in the National Social Science Survey (Kelley et al. 1987, 1998), in 1984 and 1995, a closely comparable question was asked. Figure 2 depicts the three data points. From 43 per cent giving a trusting response in 1984, the figure dipped to 35 per cent in 1995, only to rebound to 40 per cent in 2003. As with social trust, there is little evidence here of a secular decline in political trust. In fact the data are quite consistent with interpretations offered previously that political trust in Australia follows a cyclical pattern based on the life of the incumbent government (Goot 2002; Bean 2001). These data fit comfortably within that framework, given that the 1984 survey was conducted with a one to two year old government in office, the 1995 survey was conducted in the context of a 12 year old government and the 2003 survey with a seven year old government.

Figure 2 about here

Levels of political trust in Australia, 1984 – 2003

Are there any further insights into political trust from the socio-demographic variables examined for social trust? Table 2 provides the answer. Again, age does make a difference to levels of trust. Only 31 per cent of 18 to 34 year olds believe the government is either mostly or entirely run for the benefit of all. The trusting proportion rises to 36 per cent among 35 to 49 year olds and jumps to 44 per cent among 50 to 64 year olds. And it rises still further to 46 per cent among those 65 and over. For political trust there may be an issue of generational replacement and a danger of secular decline. Yet, it is still more likely that the observed pattern reflects the life cycle, with those who have had more experience of politics displaying greater faith that the government is run with the wider good in view, not just narrow interests.

As for gender and education, men are only barely more trusting of government than women and while the pattern of the university educated being more trusting than the less well educated is repeated, it is nowhere near as stark in the case of political trust as it was for social trust. Mirroring the pattern for social trust, there are also differences in political trust according to subjective social class, with the middle class being more trusting, but for political trust the class difference is greater than the educational difference. With respect to income, there is a stark differentiation between those in the highest income band – who are more inclined to exhibit political trust – and all of the lower income groups. Finally, there is no difference at all in levels of political trust between rural and urban residents.

Table 2 about here

Political trust by age, sex, education, class, income and region

The broad similarity of the relationships with socio-demographic variables displayed by social and political trust raises the question of the connection between the two indicators. If they relate similarly to age, education, class and income, does this imply that the people who lack social trust are also those who lack political trust? Perhaps surprisingly, the data reveal that while the two are related, it is only true to a very modest extent. The Pearson product moment correlation of .14 (on a scale where 0 indicates no association at all and 1 indicates a perfect association) suggests that although social and political trust do vary together, there is a great deal of slippage in this covariation. Thus, while there is a broad tendency for the socially trusting to be more likely also to be politically trusting, many who are in the one category will not be in the other. To a large extent, the two items are tapping quite distinct phenomena.

Which organisations do Australians trust most?

While interpersonal trust and trust in government are particularly important elements of any examination of trust, it is useful to broaden the analysis by considering public attitudes to a wider range of social, political and economic institutions, which may all be relevant to an evaluation of social capital. This is done through a focus on the closely related notion of confidence (see Lipset and Schneider 1983). However, whereas trust is about expressing faith in other people, confidence, at least in the public sphere, is arguably more about evaluations of how effectively and appropriately organisations operate (Bean 2003). The 2003 AuSSA asked: ‘How much confidence do you have in the following organisations?’ Twelve organisations or institutions were listed and they, together with the response categories for the question, are shown in Table 3. They are displayed in order of confidence shown in them, rather than in the order in which they were asked in the questionnaire.

Table 3 about here

Confidence in institutions, 2003

The level of confidence expressed by the AuSSA respondents varied widely across the different organisations, with the defence forces standing out as easily the most supported organisation while at the other end of the scale banks and financial institutions outscored a number of other close contenders as the organisation which attracted the lowest expression of confidence. Over four-fifths of the sample expressed either a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the defence forces. The next most supported organisation was the police, with 72 per cent saying they had either a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in them, followed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and universities, each with 70 per cent (note, though, that the ABC attracted the second largest number recording a great deal of confidence – 16 per cent – after the defence forces, for which the equivalent number was 25 per cent). Charities were also fairly well supported, with 61 per cent expressing at least quite a lot of confidence in them.

No other organisation achieved a majority expressing confidence. Apart from banks and financial institutions, in whom only 26 per cent said they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence, the unions together with the courts and the legal system both had under 30 per cent expressing confidence, while the public service and churches or religious institutions had 32 and 35 per cent respectively. Forty per cent

showed some level of confidence in the Federal parliament and 42 per cent in major Australian companies.

Has confidence increased or fallen? For most of the items we again have comparable data from the 1995 World Values Survey and from the 2001 AES (although in some cases from only one or the other). There are minor wording variations in the descriptions of some of the items between the AuSSA and the other two surveys (for example, the term used for ‘the defence forces’ in 1995 and 2001 is ‘the armed forces’ and ‘trade unions’ is used instead of ‘the unions’) but not to the extent that comparability is likely to be impaired. Figure 3 contains the data. Before considering changes over time, we see immediately in Figure 3 that among the items for which there are data from at least two time points, the defence forces, the police and the universities stand out as the organisations in whom Australians consistently have the most confidence. At the other end, banks and financial institutions and the unions are consistently viewed with little confidence as, to a lesser degree, are the courts and the legal system and the public service.

Figure 3 about here

Confidence in institutions, 1995, 2001 and 2003

Focusing now on changing levels of confidence, only the defence forces appear to have given rise to a sustained level of increased confidence, and that from a fairly high base of 68 per cent, up to over 80 per cent in 2001 and 2003. This increased support may well reflect, at least in part, a response to the ever present threat of terrorism in the new global environment. Then again, there are few institutions for which the data show consistent downward trends either. There appears to be a moderate reduction in confidence in the public service, from a modest starting point, some indication of a decline in confidence in churches or religious institutions (although there are only two time points for this item), but only major Australian companies show a large and sustained fall, from 59 per cent displaying confidence in 1995 to 42 per cent in 2003.

This decline in public confidence in major companies over the last few years may come as little surprise in the wake of the recent string of collapses of major corporations, such as OneTel and HIH, but this is in fact a continuation of a substantial decline from high levels of confidence in major companies expressed by the Australian public in the 1980s (Papadakis 1999, p. 76). Not that an earlier decline from the 1980s to the 1990s should be a surprise either, when we think of the

corporate scandals surrounding high-profile business men like Alan Bond and Christopher Skase. In fact the sustained fall in confidence in major Australian companies is a stark example of how the inappropriate actions of a few can taint the public image of a whole sector.

Confidence in other organisations, such as the unions, the courts and the legal system, the police, banks and financial institutions, and universities has shown relatively little change, while confidence in the Federal parliament has risen and then fallen again. As discussed earlier in relation to the data on trust in government, it is likely that the explanation for these vacillations lies largely in the nature of the political cycle.

An alternative way of considering which organisations Australians trust most is to look at perceptions of the relative amount of power they should have. The 2003 AuSSA provided an opportunity to explore public perceptions further in this respect by asking about the power of four major organisations and there is some overlap with the questions on confidence. The question read: ‘Thinking about the amount of power organisations have in Australia today, please say whether you think each of the following should have more power, less power or the same amount.’ The organisations in the list were big business, the Federal government, the mass media and unions.

As Table 4 reveals, few respondents thought that big business should have more power. A total of only 5 per cent felt that big business should have either more power or a lot more power, while 62 per cent thought big business should have either less power or a lot less power. For the mass media, however, the proportion saying they should have less power was even greater. Twenty-nine per cent of the sample said the mass media should have a lot less power and a further 41 per cent said they should have less power – a combined total of 70 per cent. Views were more balanced about the Federal government, with 24 per cent saying it should have more power – somewhat more than said it should have less (20 per cent), although the majority (56 per cent) were of the opinion that the Federal government has about the right amount of power at the moment. With respect to unions, greater numbers favoured them having less power (45 per cent) than more power (19 per cent), but over a third were content with the amount of power they currently have. It is interesting to compare the contrasting views of unions and big business with similar attitudes expressed back in the 1970s and 1980s. Whereas now more people want to constrain the power of big

business, then more people believed that unions had too much power (McAllister 1992, p. 90). Of course, there is ample evidence to suggest that unions actually do have less power now and thus the changing perceptions of the public as recorded in survey data reflect changing realities. Overall, the data in Table 4 depict an Australian public reluctant to support major organisations having more power than they do already, with many believing they should have less. These results are consistent with a picture of Australia as a society which is not prepared to place too much trust in its social and political leaders.

Table 4 about here

Perceptions of how much power organisations should have, 2003

How does trust relate to political and social participation?

Social capital is about action as well as attitudes. In fact commentators would be less concerned about levels of trust if trust were not regarded as a window to behaviours that matter for maintaining a healthy society and polity. Thus in the final section of this analysis it is appropriate that we turn to an examination of participation in political and related activities. The initial part of this exploration is based on the AuSSA question: ‘Over the past **two years** or so, have you done any of the following things to express your views or represent your interests?’ The five activities were: ‘contacted a politician or government official either in person, or in writing, or some other way’, ‘taken part in a protest, march or demonstration’, ‘worked together with people who shared the same concern’, ‘boycotted or bought certain products for environmental, ethical or political reasons’ and ‘participated in a strike or industrial action’.

To set the scene, Figure 4 displays the percentages of the AuSSA sample answering yes with respect to each of the activities. It is quite apparent that the two activities that might be regarded as the least political of the five, working with people who share the same concern and boycotting or buying products, are the ones most likely to have been undertaken by the respondents. Around half the sample reported having participated in each of these activities in the last two years. The more overtly political activities are much less common, especially protest activity and strike activity. Only 12 per cent and 8 per cent, respectively, said they had been involved in

these activities. In between comes contacting of politicians or government officials: 32 per cent of respondents reported having done this in the past two years.

Figure 4 about here

Participation in political activities in the past two years

We would expect from social capital theory that participation would be related to trust. Certainly, it is reasonable to expect that those with higher levels of interpersonal trust would be more likely to participate than those who are less trusting, since all of these activities involve or imply a degree of cooperative interaction with other individuals. The picture is less clear for political trust, since past research has shown that those exhibiting political trust are more likely to engage in system supporting political activities like voting, but are less likely to engage in a range of other political activities that place a demand on the political system (Bean 1991). In other words, some people engage in some kinds of political activity partly because they don't trust politicians and want to change things, or at least register that view. The activities we are considering here have more of that 'protest' character and thus may well be negatively related to political trust.

Table 5 provides the answer. The pattern of responses is very consistent across the table and, on the surface, is similar for the two types of trust, though generally stronger for interpersonal than political trust. Respondents displaying interpersonal trust are 7 per cent more likely to contact a politician than the untrusting, 8 per cent more likely to take part in a protest, 8 per cent more likely to work with other people sharing the same concern, 12 per cent more likely to boycott or buy products for environmental, ethical or political reasons and perhaps slightly more likely to participate in industrial action. None of these differences are of great magnitude but, with the exception of industrial activity, they are all quite distinct.

Table 5 about here

Participation in political activities by interpersonal and political trust

The pattern looks similar for political trust, but note that the trusting response is the one in the far right column of the table and that group displays lower levels of participation than those who distrust the government, as we conjectured above. The politically trusting are 2 per cent less likely to contact a politician than the politically untrusting, 8 per cent less likely to protest, 2 per cent less likely to work with others, 7 per cent less likely to boycott or buy products and 4 per cent less likely to engage in industrial action. Of course, it is important to emphasise the slim differences between

the politically trusting and untrusting. Political trust is a factor that does not make much difference to whether people participate in political and related activities or not.

In addition to questions about political participation, one section of the AuSSA also contained questions about participation in a range of voluntary groups and organisations and it is this kind of social participation that is seen as a particularly vital indicator of social capital (Putnam 2000). The AuSSA asked about 15 different groups and organisations, in two separate batteries, introduced by the question: ‘We would like to ask you if you are a member of any of the groups and organisations listed below.’ These data were supplied to the author by Andrew Passey and Mark Lyons and reference should also be made to the chapter by these authors in this volume. The list of groups and organisations is shown in Table 6. Levels of participation ranged from 56 per cent of the sample reporting that they belonged to a consumer or automobile organisation, to only 4 per cent being members of a lobby group or a political party. In between, 47 per cent belonged to a sporting or recreation group, 30 per cent to a financial cooperative, 24 per cent to a religious group, 20 per cent to a neighbourhood or community-based group or to a union, 15 per cent to a professional society, 14 per cent to a group that helps people with special needs, 11 per cent to an environmental group or aid organisation, 10 per cent to an art, music or educational group, 8 per cent to a self-help/consumer health group, 7 per cent to a group working to improve the environment and 6 per cent to a group that promotes rights.

Table 6 about here

Participation in groups and organisations by interpersonal and political trust

Table 6 shows membership of these organisations by interpersonal and political trust. Focusing first on interpersonal trust, we see that despite the wide variation in levels of membership of the different groups, the pattern is the same as for participation in political activities. In all 15 cases, those who say most people can be trusted are more likely to participate in voluntary organisations than those who believe that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people. Again, none of these differences are massive – the largest is 13 per cent for membership of consumer or automobile organisations – and several of them are only 1 or 2 per cent, but the tendency is consistent for the more trusting to be more inclined to engage in social participation.

The results for political trust are more of a mixture. In the case of several groups with a more overt political character, such as unions and rights groups, the untrusting are more likely to participate than the trusting, mirroring results for the political participation questions cited above. But in most other cases where some difference is apparent, the results in Table 6 indicate that political trust, as well as social trust, facilitates participation in voluntary groups and organisations. Those who are politically trusting are clearly more likely to participate in religious groups, professional societies and consumer or automobile groups, for instance. Again, however, as for political participation the margins between the politically trusting and untrusting are relatively slim for the most part and in some cases there is no difference at all.

Conclusions

Is there a crisis of trust in Australia? And what does this tell us about the state of social capital in Australia? If a crisis is a decisive turning point, then the empirical evidence reviewed in this chapter provides no indication of a current crisis as such. That is not to say, however, that Australia can be described as a truly healthy society in terms of trust and in turn of social capital. The survey data we have considered indicate that both social and political trust are displayed by minorities of the adult population and this has been the case for some time. We might thus say that there is something of a deficit of trust in Australian society. But the evidence that trust is in further decline is slim. In this sense Australia better reflects the 'no change' scenario established for Great Britain by Johnston and Jowell (2001) than the more dire picture painted for the United States by Putnam (2000).

This conclusion is reinforced by the findings on social trust in different age cohorts. In America, older generations are consistently more trusting and the youngest generation is consistently the least trusting. But, like Britain, in Australia there is a curvilinear relationship between age and social trust in which the level of trust is greatest among those in their middle years and then trust declines again among the older cohorts, to the point that the old and the young have similar levels of trust. Perhaps what the old and the young have in common in this respect is that they share a lesser sense of control over their lives than the middle aged. Social trust is thus not likely to decline in Australia on the basis of a generational shift.

The analysis of social trust by education is also very revealing. On the one hand it is somewhat disturbing that those who lack a university education – the vast majority of the population – are less inclined to exhibit trust in other people. Among other things, this hints at a differential in interpersonal trust founded in socio-economic divisions, an observation reinforced by the data on subjective class and income. As long as such divisions persist in society it is likely those in the more disadvantaged groups will continue to feel less disposed to be trusting of others. Yet, on the other hand, the high level of social trust among the university educated provides some cause for optimism with respect to the future of social capital. University education is becoming more widespread and these findings imply that those who acquire greater knowledge and understanding through education are more likely to be comfortable putting faith in other people. This is one group that contains a clear majority of trusting individuals.

On the basis of the evidence from this analysis and elsewhere (Bean 2001), it would appear that social or interpersonal trust is a better indicator of social capital than political trust or trust in government. The latter generally has weaker relationships with other variables of interest and is in fact negatively related to political participation. Social trust, on the other hand, promotes greater levels of participation, even if the differences between the trusting and the untrusting are relatively modest. Political trust as measured here, however, is less about a broader sense of trust in the political system generally and more about public evaluations of the people who are running the government of the day. This makes it sensitive to the ups and downs of the political cycle and thus not good indicator of social capital, which is clearly a concept with a broader referent.

The analysis has also shown that levels of public confidence in different institutions varies widely, from the defence forces, which are highly regarded, to banks and financial institutions, in which the public manifestly lacks confidence. Both the most and the least well regarded institutions appear to remain fairly consistent over time. The most disturbing findings on confidence in institutions is almost certainly the sharp decline in the public confidence displayed in major Australian companies, a trend that has been evident over a period of 20 years and which may not yet have bottomed out. The untoward activities of high-flying corporate figures which have provoked this downturn in public sentiment do little to bolster the maintenance and regeneration of social capital in Australia.

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Table 1 Interpersonal trust by age, sex, education, class, income and region, per cent within rows

	Interpersonal Trust	
	Most people can be trusted	Can't be too careful
Age		
18 – 34 (n=677)	36	64
35 – 49 (n=1175)	43	57
50 – 64 (n=1201)	45	55
65 and over (n=893)	37	63
Sex		
Female (n=2081)	39	61
Male (n=1824)	43	57
Education		
No university degree (n=2997)	36	64
University degree (n=839)	61	39
Subjective Class		
Middle (n=1948)	50	50
Working (n=1580)	30	70
None (n=319)	36	64
Annual Income		
Under \$10,400 (n=744)	32	68
\$10,400 to \$25,999 (n=1084)	35	65
\$26,000 to \$51,999 (n=1123)	43	57
\$52,000 and over (n=746)	56	44
Region of Residence		
Rural (n=1427)	38	62
Urban (n=2452)	43	57

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003.

Table 2 Political trust by age, sex, education, class, income and region, per cent within rows

	Political Trust	
	Federal govt run for big interests	Federal govt run for benefit of all
Age		
18 – 34 (n=683)	69	31
35 – 49 (n=1231)	64	36
50 – 64 (n=1231)	56	44
65 and over (n=931)	54	46
Sex		
Female (n=2131)	61	39
Male (n=1903)	59	41
Education		
No university degree (n=3067)	61	39
University degree (n=896)	55	45
Subjective Class		
Middle (n=2030)	52	48
Working (n=1642)	69	31
None (n=327)	69	31
Annual Income		
Under \$10,400 (n=761)	63	37
\$10,400 to \$25,999 (n=1119)	61	39
\$26,000 to \$51,999 (n=1155)	64	36
\$52,000 and over (n=779)	51	49
Region of Residence		
Rural (n=1457)	60	40
Urban (n=2553)	60	40

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003.

Table 3 Confidence in institutions, 2003, per cent within rows.

	A great deal of confidence	Quite a lot of confidence	Not very much confidence	No confidence at all
The defence forces	25	57	16	2
The police in my State (or Territory)	13	59	23	5
The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)	16	54	25	4
Universities	11	59	25	5
Charities	9	52	29	10
Major Australian companies	2	40	47	11
The Federal parliament	5	36	45	15
Churches or religious institutions	7	28	38	27
The public service	2	30	52	16
The courts and the legal system	4	25	47	24
The unions	3	25	48	24
Banks and financial institutions	2	24	45	29
(n=4270)				

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003.

Table 4 Perceptions of how much power organisations should have, 2003, per cent within rows

	A lot more power	More power	Some amount of power	Less power	A lot less power
Big business	2	4	33	47	15
The Federal government	4	20	56	16	4
The mass media	1	5	24	41	29
Unions	4	15	35	25	21

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003.

Table 5 Participation in political activities by interpersonal and political trust, per cent participating

	Interpersonal Trust		Political Trust	
	Most people can be trusted	Can't be too careful	Federal govt run for big interests	Federal govt run for benefit of all
Contacted politician or govt official	36	29	33	31
Taken part in protest, march or demonstration	17	9	15	7
Worked with people sharing some concern	53	45	49	47
Boycotted or bought products for environmental, ethical or political reasons	59	47	55	48
Participated in strike or industrial action	8	7	9	5
(n=4270)				

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003.

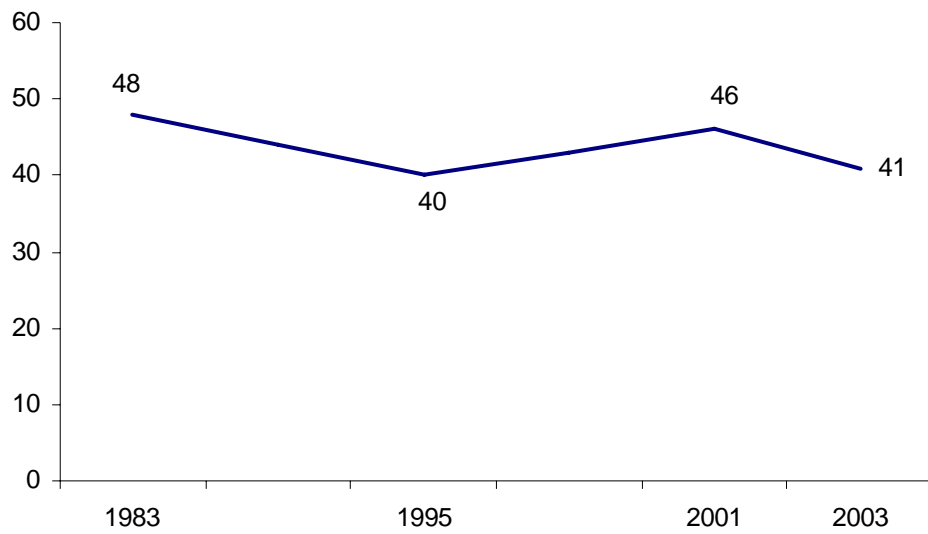
Table 6 Participation in groups and organisations by interpersonal and political trust, per cent participating

	Interpersonal Trust		Political Trust	
	Most people can be trusted	Can't be too careful	Federal govt run for big interests	Federal govt run for benefit of all
Unions	22	18	23	16
Political party	4	3	3	5
Lobby group	6	3	4	4
Group that promotes rights	9	3	7	4
Environmental or aid group	15	7	11	11
Group working to improve the environment	10	5	7	8
Neighbourhood or community group	23	19	20	22
Sporting or recreation group	51	44	46	49
Self-help/consumer health group	9	8	7	10
Group that helps people with special needs	15	14	14	15
Art, music, or education group	13	8	11	10
Religious group	26	23	20	30
Professional society	23	10	13	20
Consumer or automobile organisation	64	51	54	61
Financial cooperative	33	29	32	28

(n=2087)

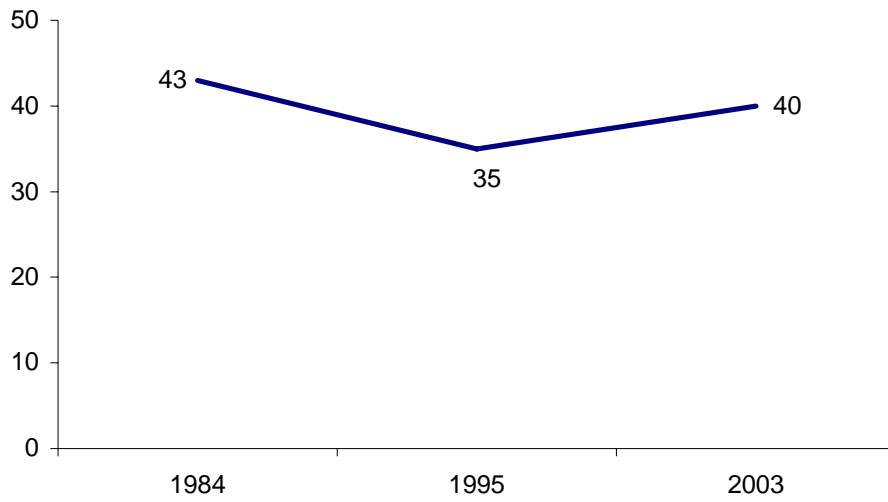
Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003.

Figure 1 Levels of interpersonal trust in Australia, 1995 – 2003 (per cent saying most people can be trusted)



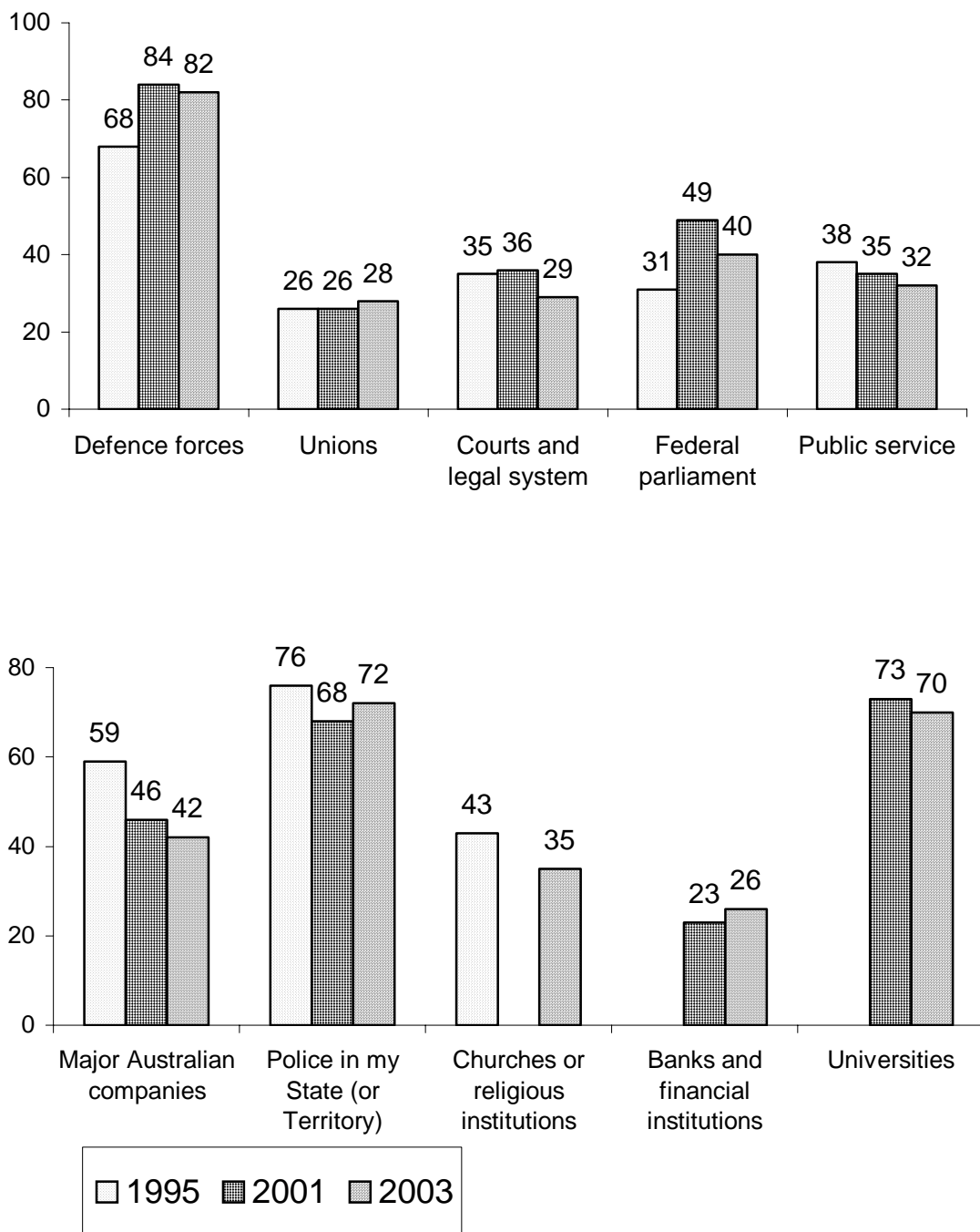
Source: World Values Survey, 1983 Australian data (n = 1228), 1995 Australian data (n = 2048); Australian Election Study, 2001 (n = 2010); Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003 (n = 4270)

Figure 2 Levels of political trust in Australia, 1984 – 2003 (per cent saying Federal government is run for the benefit of all the people)



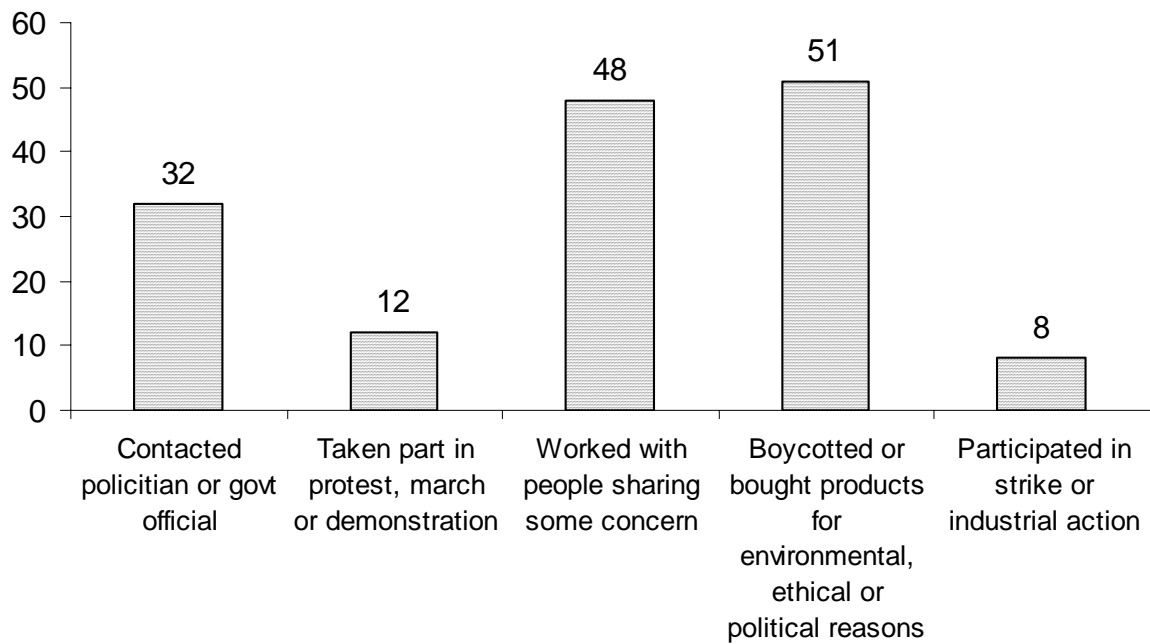
Source: National Social Science Survey, 1984 (n = 3012); 1995 (n = 2338); Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003 (n = 4270)

Figure 3 Confidence in institutions, 1995, 2001 and 2003 (per cent with a great deal or quite a lot of confidence)



Sources: World Values Survey, 1995 Australian data (n = 2048); Australian Election Study, 2001 (n = 2010); Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003 (n = 4270)

Figure 4 Participation in political activities in the past two years (per cent)



Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2003 (n = 4270)