

HOW DOES GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE INFLUENCE POLITICAL SUPPORT?

M. Stephen Weatherford

Much of the literature on political support is of little use to policy makers or those attempting to understand ordinary politics, because the concepts guiding research have focused attention on extreme cases of little relevance. If we are to interpret political support in terms of regime stability, then it is seldom at issue in advanced democratic societies; but if it indicates only approval for authorities, then direct measures of popularity do the job better. This paper works toward an empirical conceptualization of political support intermediate along that continuum by investigating the relationship between support orientations and the public's evaluation of governmental policy performance. Empirical hypotheses are drawn from an elaboration of the policy-relevant aspects of political support, and of the support-relevant aspects of policy evaluations. These hypotheses are tested against the American public's responses to the government's management of the economy, and they reveal several patterns useful to interpreting changes in the level of political support.

While the notions of political legitimacy and political cynicism remain two of the most evocative ones in the vocabulary of popular political commentators, political scientists studying advanced democratic societies view the corresponding concepts—system support and political trust—with suspicion. The reason for this is not simply that the words are evocative or symbolic; the problem is that the concept appears to fail the test of theoretical and empirical usefulness. This paper argues that that verdict is mistaken.

As an empirical matter, either the notion of legitimacy and its cognates seem to apply to situations—when revolution is in the offing and legitimacy is clearly in question (cf. Pye, 1971)—that are of little empirical interest in stable, democratic polities; or else they lead to confusion when applied to situations in which the incumbent government is in danger of being unseated

M. Stephen Weatherford, Department of Political Science, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106.

by normal political competition—a question of executive popularity, but just as clearly *not* a case of legitimacy. This empirical distinction is also reflected in the concepts that have organized research thinking on the notion of political support, where Easton's (1965, 1975) division of the objects of political support — into “regimes” and “authorities” — maps the same categories. Research inspired by the model has, in fact, been quite single-mindedly motivated by the quest to attribute observed variation in survey-based measures of political trust either to trends in support of the governing institutions or to fluctuations in approval of particular officeholders (cf. Miller, 1974a; Citrin, 1974; Miller and Jukam, 1977; Abramson and Finifter, 1981; Feldman, 1983). The supposition is that the validity of the construct would be shown if indicators of political trust covaried with attitudes toward institutions, while it would be undercut by evidence of covariation with opinions about particular officials. The former shows “legitimacy,” the latter “popularity.”

The lack-luster performance of political trust measures in these tests, however, does not necessarily indicate that the notion of system support is useless in describing the politics of stable advanced societies. Though such states are unlikely to be threatened by revolution, there is a great and visible difference between the situation confronting the government in a polity whose citizens are suspicious about leaders' motives and doubtful of their competence, and that confronting a government whose citizens assume that their institutions and governors typically produce fair and effective policies. “Faith in the system” on the part of citizens translates into palpable advantages in the context of policy making, advantages that—while they may not assure policy success—raise the probability that programs can be successfully implemented to ameliorate the grievances toward which they are directed. Moreover, the electorate's faith in the system determines the “maneuvering room” critical to government's ability to pursue a long-run policy path or to experiment with alternative instruments in seeking a policy goal (cf. Caddell, 1979; Salamon, 1981; Bardach, 1980).

This connection is especially critical in the economic policy area, where flows of aggregate benefits and costs proceed at quite different speeds. It is a commonplace among economists (and the fundamental theoretical motivation of virtually every political business cycle model [Nordhaus, 1975; Keech, 1980]) that the benefits of economic stimulation (increased employment and rising incomes) precede the costs (inflation). And to the extent that inflationary expectations become firmly established, bringing down the rate of price increase requires government to call on citizens' patience through a recessionary period of assured economic pain, for the sake of an abstract promise of stable prices in the future. Such a policy depends on the successful exercise of leadership, and that can only occur if citizens have enough

faith in the fairness and competence of governing institutions to forego holding the policy to account on the balance of current benefits and costs.

But the notion of *political trust* or *system support* that describes such situations fits into neither of Easton's categories. Just as it goes beyond particular authorities, so it falls far short of any serious threat to institutions or the organization of government. These two categories, that is, do not exhaust the varieties of "system support"; they merely name the *poles of a dimension* along which support varies.

Moreover, the end points are not the most interesting parts of this continuum. Between regimes and authorities lie most of the important problems of domestic politics. Questions of party, ideology, issue, and policy can be settled short of revolt, but all extend their implications beyond current officeholders, and the government's resolution of even apparently trivial issues—whether competent or inept, fair or biased—contributes to the sum of evaluations on which citizens eventually base their support for the political system. The inadequacy of the continuum's end points to guide constructive research on stable, democratic polities does not imply the uselessness of the concept; rather, it underlines the need for work toward defining, operationalizing, and testing an empirically applicable conceptualization of system support that lies intermediate along the continuum (Cronbach, 1971; cf. Baloyra, 1979; Weatherford, 1984).

The research reported in this paper investigates the interplay between citizens' evaluations of the quality of government's policy performance and their expressions of trust in the political system. Analysis concentrates on economic policy-making during a period, the mid-1970s, that includes a change of political authorities as well as unusually wide variation in economic conditions and political support. Economic policy is an appropriate focus, not only because of its importance (both to governments and to popular evaluations of their performance) and its widespread impacts, but also because the wealth of information that the political business cycle literature has revealed about the relationship between economic variables and partisan outcomes (cf. Eulau and Lewis-Beck, 1985) should contribute to drawing suitable generalizations for other issue areas. The paper proceeds in four sections. The first two consider the interplay between policy performance and political support, with the former focusing on the sort of information about policy that might be relevant to political trust, and the latter concentrating on the issue of how political support should be modeled and measured. The third presents a set of analyses testing hypotheses derived from the previous sections, while the conclusion suggests several ways in which the patterns of change observed empirically contribute to an understanding of the meaning of political trust.

WHEN SHOULD ECONOMIC POLICY PERFORMANCE AFFECT POLITICAL SUPPORT?

Several reasons justify the supposition that the quality of government macroeconomic policy performance will influence the extent to which citizens support national political elites and the institutions they occupy. First, the nature of the problem and the nature of the policies directed toward economic stabilization make it logical for citizens to attribute responsibility for smooth economic growth to the national government:

1. The impacts of economic recessions and inflations on citizens are largely independent of the distribution of skills and training, so that individual dislocations are not purely individual problems (cf. Brody and Sniderman, 1977).
2. Recessions and inflations produce impacts that are widespread throughout the economy, so that smaller jurisdictions lack the necessary authority or competence to address them (Musgrave and Musgrave, 1973).
3. Economic cycles produce aggregate disruptions—to employment, commerce, and investment—whose effect is to diminish the certainty or predictability on which stable growth depends. Thus economic welfare would be enhanced if the government acted to mitigate business cycles (Browning and Browning, 1983).

Moreover, the national government's responsibility to guide the economy along a smooth growth path is a long-standing one and is unambiguously accepted by both parties (Bailey, 1950; cf. Stigler, 1973).

But if economic policy shortfalls are the national government's responsibility, and if citizens consequently blame political authorities for poor performance, then what distinguishes the resulting shifts in support from the sort of partisan or anti-incumbent reactions considered in the political business cycle literature? This distinction is worth some elaboration, because inquiries about both sorts of support are versions of the same larger question: How does the economy affect political outcomes? For purposes of exposition, let us focus on declines in support. The sense in which legitimacy issues involve a "deeper-lying" or "longer-term" version of the question can be illuminated by considering what would count as a "relevantly poor economic policy performance."

For political business cycle models, seeking to predict the effect of economic policy shortfalls on the partisan distribution of the *vote*, the baseline for comparison is a relatively simple set of satisficing criteria (Kramer, 1971; Nordhaus, 1975; Tufte, 1978). More sophisticated treatments (Chappell and Keech, 1985; Hibbs, 1982b) specify the expectations-formation process with greater care and subtlety, but it is always possible to point to some set of statements about the economy that, if false (i.e., if they fail to fulfill the vot-

er's expectations of adequate performance), will result in withdrawing support from the incumbent government.

Predicting and measuring the effects of economic policy shortfalls on *political support* is more complicated, however, because the baseline is not a satisficing criterion defined in terms of recent economic indicators; rather, it is a more ambiguous set of indicators that are linked more loosely to current policy performance. Not only does the expectation formation process contain economic terms whose time horizons extend further backward into the past and forward into the future, but it also contains political terms that are themselves quite complex. This is not the occasion to specify a formal model of the set of judgments entering into such an evaluation.¹ But it does seem clear that at least the following inquiries would be made of any economic policy performance, to assess its appropriateness as evidence about a question of "system support." A policy shortfall, that is, would count as relevant if:

1. It is not attributable to *exogenous constraints* on the ability or power of political authorities to shape economic outcomes (e.g., supply shocks due to weather or to decisions of foreign governments). This is a necessary condition for holding the government accountable.
2. It is not attributable to differences between the *party or ideology* of the voter and that of the government. This assumes that it is not a political business cycle case.
3. Either (a) the situation has *persisted* long enough so that more than one set of leaders has failed to improve things, or (b) no policy proposal by the out-party shows any better prospects of success than current policies. This advances the attribution beyond current authorities to policies or programs.
4. The policy shortfall should produce a characteristic *pattern* of advantages and disadvantages across groups, classes, or sectors of the population. That is, the short-run impacts of particular policies should be understandable in terms of stable long-run interests. The patterning of advantages gives political meaning ("visibility," "comprehensibility"; cf. Weber, 1958; Ch. 7) to what would otherwise be a "stray fact" (Converse, 1964, 1975). If, however, beyond this there is in addition no identifiable set of fairly consistent winners and losers, then it is doubtful that even a series of performance shortfalls would stimulate doubts about legitimacy in the sense of system stability (cf. Dahl, 1956, 1966, 1982).

These criteria provide grounds for making the inference from policy dissatisfaction to system support. Two aspects are worth noting about the linkage this path provides. First, "ordinary" dissatisfaction with particular policies, or even with a string of policies from an administration, does not usually fulfill the rather demanding criteria required to motivate system-level evaluations. Second, while these criteria single out a special form and intensity of policy dissatisfaction, they are not sufficient to justify infer-

ences about support for basic governmental institutions—they do not limit the notion of system support to revolutionary situations. These sorts of policy-related effects on legitimacy are consistent with expressions like “The best people just don’t seem to go into politics anymore”; “Really good ideas just get bogged down in Congress”; and “Interest groups and selfish politicians keep good programs from getting through.” But resolving the qualms expressed by these statements would not require large-scale changes in institutions.

What image of voters’ information-processing is presupposed by the hypothesis that they draw this connection between policy performance and political trust? Specifically, does the proposed relationship make excessively strong assumptions about the interest or competence of ordinary voters? In order to motivate the model, it is not necessary to suppose that citizens follow politics as an immediate personal concern or even as a more than episodic avocation. Most citizens do not, and need not, know many details about current partisan conflicts. At the same time, most will have quite an accurate impression of the major problems in the country and the major issues on the government’s agenda (Converse, 1975; Fiorina, 1981). Moreover, although it may not be based on close calculation, most will have an overall evaluative sense of how the government is doing, from the perspective of their own interests and group loyalties, in a variety of issue areas—certainly including the management of the national economy. It is this evaluation that is tapped by survey items inquiring about how well the respondent thinks the government is handling problems of inflation or unemployment or is managing the economy in general.

HOW SHOULD ECONOMIC POLICY PERFORMANCE AFFECT POLITICAL SUPPORT?

If these considerations help to demarcate the independent variable, can we specify the dependent variable in a similar way? What indicators should be observed, and how should we expect them to change, if inadequate policy performance causes diminished political support? This section works toward specifying the appropriate observations, taking up three subsidiary issues: (1) Should a model of policy performance and political legitimacy be framed in terms of stocks (cross-sectional observations) or flows (change over time)? (2) How should political trust be expected to vary? And (3) What are the measurement and data requirements for testing these hypotheses empirically?

Policy and Political Trust: Static Versus Dynamic Hypotheses

The concerns of policy makers and political commentators, however

imprecisely articulated as hypotheses, do not describe a static relationship. Interest in the effect of economic policy performance on political support is stimulated by the prospect that economic successes or failures might alter the context of consent within which the government must implement policies. The supposition is that, as citizens' evaluations of the quality of economic policy worsen, their support for the administration's other programs and possibly even for the government at large will decline correspondingly. Thus, observing cross-sectional similarity between economic policy judgments and reported support for the political system, or even the stronger evidence of relationship that would be shown by a consistent covariation over several cross-sections, does not appropriately address the hypothesis of interest.

The methodological deficiencies of cross-sectional data for investigating the question are as serious as the substantive ones: merely showing that an index of political trust covaries with some evaluation of government policy at a particular time does not provide sufficient evidence for inferring a causal connection (cf. Citrin, 1974). It is intuitively attractive to suppose that policy performance influences political trust, but without information about temporal priority, a counterhypothesis that reverses the direction of causation is equally tenable. If political trust is, as the notion of *legitimacy* implies, a broadly generalized orientation toward the government's activities and institutions, then surely it might temper or shape the way individuals perceive particular policies. And if "system-supportive" individuals take an optimistic view of government policies, while citizens with less faith in the system are more skeptical about the prospects for policy success, then we would observe a cross-sectional correlation for which the proper interpretation was just the reverse of the initial supposition. Without observations of the two concepts over time, neither of these interpretations can be rejected.

The Components of Change in Political Support

Previous research on political support has produced results that are either paradoxical or are evidence that the empirical construct is as complex as the concept itself. There is evidence, for instance, of high overtime stability in measures of political trust (Weatherford, 1984; cf. Wheaton et al., 1977). This suggests that trust is in part responsive to citizens' sense of long-run loyalty to the nexus of institutions, general policy predilections, and political elites that are typically implicated in questions of legitimacy. But measures of trust fluctuate over time more readily than they would if their variation were caused *only* by stable legitimacy orientations. This suggests that there is some short-run or medium-run component that also influences the sense of support tapped by these measures. Research on political trust in a variety of periods and settings shows that the short-term component may reflect a

response to particular authorities, but that for the most part the measures are not indicative of temporary shifts in the popularity of officials (cf. especially Sniderman et al., 1975; Citrin et al., 1975; Entman, Prothro, and Sharp, 1974; Abramson and Finifter, 1981; Feldman, 1983).

These findings seem paradoxical only if we suppose that political support is a simple, unitary phenomenon. However, the concept of political legitimacy, and the construct we approach with measures of political trust, is in fact a global variate (Rosenberg, 1968) comprised of orientations toward numerous aspects of governmental performance. Suppose that political trust responds to three sorts of causal impulses, each with its own characteristic pace and pattern of change over time and in response to events:

- Legitimacy (“regime”) orientations;
- Reactions to particularly notable performances by current or recent incumbents (“authorities”); and
- Perceptions of policy successes or failures.

The first component, linked to feelings of long-run loyalty to the political system as a whole, varies only slowly. In a stable polity where the government generally performs no worse than those in comparable nations, citizens’ sense of the system’s legitimacy may remain steady over quite long periods. The causal impact of this component will help to explain the average level of political trust over a long period, or to explain differences in the level of trust from one nation to another (if comparable indicators can be assumed; cf. Almond and Verba, 1963, 1980). Because legitimacy orientations are learned early and are deeply embedded in the belief systems of individuals, they will be highly resistant to change (Citrin et al., 1975; Sniderman et al., 1975). Given this stability, the legitimacy component will explain little of the variation observed over a time span as short as one or two presidential administrations.

The second component attaches to specific political authorities. To distinguish it from executive popularity, suppose that it responds not with every shift in national opinion but reflects major trends in public evaluations of the most highly visible political elites. This element is intended to capture specific effects like those of Watergate, as well as more diffuse ones, like the claim that Carter’s ineptitude sapped Americans’ faith in their government or that Reagan’s style has helped to rebuild it. It would be surprising if this component produced large or lasting changes in system support. The empirical literature is quite consensual in concluding that the immediate effects of political scandals or of admired leaders are on executive popularity, not on political support. The relatively central place of support orientations in individuals’ belief systems insulates them from short-run events and condi-

tions, and citizens are cautious about generalizing from such obviously idiosyncratic evidence to broad, long-term attitudes of faith in the political system (Sniderman et al. 1975; Sniderman, 1981). Only if a particular crisis were especially significant, or if some perturbation in political trust were quite small or temporary, would the most appropriate explanation be in terms of opinions about current authorities.

If, however, interest is in explaining changes in the level of political support over the medium run (say, two to six or eight years), then neither of these components provides much theoretical leverage. Shifts over this time scale would be the ones most relevant to policy makers, but they cannot be readily explained as changes in the level of the system's legitimacy or as nothing more than responses to current incumbents. It is reasonable to suppose that they reflect praise or criticism of major public policies. The third component encapsulates these policy effects on political support. The influence of policy evaluations on political support will not be a simple one-for-one impact, however. Political trust reflects citizens' feelings about the overall fairness and competence of government, and the legitimacy of a stable, on-going political system means that these feelings will be quite strongly inertial. Their response to any new information, whether about politicians or about policies, will be damped. But evaluations of policy performance are more directly tied to political support than are ratings of particular officials: the long gestation process of typical policies, and the involvement of multiple governmental agencies in their formulation and implementation, makes them better evidence about the system as an institutional design for problem solving. To the extent that most policies address issues widely viewed as important and the proper concern of government, and to the extent that they work to ameliorate the problems, they will enhance political trust. Over the long run, of course, legitimacy is wholly determined by policy performance. The models proposed by Baloyra (1979) and Weatherford (1984), however, imply that policy evaluations influence support over shorter periods. The analysis below investigates a notion of political support envisioned as largely inertial but still significantly affected by the net positive or negative balance of evaluations of recent government policy performance.

Measurement and Data

Public evaluations of government economic policy performance are collected regularly by the National Election Studies. The analysis below utilizes ratings of unemployment policy, inflation policy, and overall economic management.² The abstract model of policy influences on political support is not limited to economic policy; an ideal test of it might arguably employ a salience-weighted summary evaluation over all issues for each respondent.

The analysis below uses economic policy evaluations because they have several desirable properties. Most information about the effectiveness of macroeconomic policies comes to citizens by way of ordinary, direct experience. To the extent that its interpretation is mediated by elites, claims and counterclaims center on effectiveness rather than on partisan differences over goals. The high degree of party agreement on stabilization goals makes the issue an appropriate ground for evaluations that go beyond particular authorities to policy streams or institutions. Both these aspects contribute to the validity and reliability of economic policy evaluations as reflections of perceived policy impacts. By making this issue a relatively direct test of the hypothesized connection between policy impacts and evaluations, on the one hand, and political support, on the other, these properties rule out potential sources of ambiguity in interpreting the results.

In contrast, social welfare policies entail direct benefits and costs for fewer citizens (and even for these, the link to national policy is mediated by the role of state and local governments and by the policies of "street-level bureaucrats"), and they are couched in a strongly ideological context of partisan differences. Foreign policy issues are less partisan than social welfare policy questions, but citizens have almost no direct experience with their effects. Because the perception of policy intentions and effects is so thoroughly mediated in both cases, any observed covariation between political support and performance evaluations would be open to a host of alternative interpretations in terms of both political and measurement influences. Although these issue areas are prime targets of eventual generalizations, they are less appropriate for analysis testing the presence of relationships.

Political support is indicated by the conventional SRC-CPS multi-item index.³ The index has several advantages: It is intended to measure the Eastonian concept of system support, and it has some claim to face validity as such a measure. Moreover, although the small number of points in the series makes formal time-series analysis impossible, the largest aggregate shifts in the index's value—in 1964-66 and 1972-74—do occur at points where they can be interpreted as signifying disillusioned expectations about system performance.⁴ And its reliability is very high when compared with virtually any other measure of political orientations. There is skepticism currently about political trust as a useful construct, but this reflects not on its measurement properties but on its meaning or significance (cf. NES Board of Overseers, 1980-86). As the introduction to this paper suggests, those doubts may have been lent undeserved credibility by the way in which political support has generally been conceptualized. In any event, assessing the doubts and establishing the meaning of the construct are empirical issues. The analysis section of this paper investigates some of those issues; for that, the measurement properties of the political trust index justify its use.⁵

Finally, the model's focus on changes in political support as a function of shifts in the perceived effectiveness of economic policy dictates the use of panel data for their ability to distinguish individual-level change unambiguously. The preferred data would, in addition, cover a period during which economic conditions and public evaluations of economic policy varied substantially, and in which potential effects of other sources of change in political support (especially those associated with authorities) could be controlled. The American panel survey of 1972-74-76 fulfills these requirements.

POLICY AND POLITICAL TRUST: PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS

How did changes in economic policy evaluations influence political support over the mid-1970s? Tables 1-4 present the data. Both in Tables 1 and 2, showing the relationship over the period from 1972 to 1974, and in Tables 3 and 4, depicting the corresponding relationship over the 1974-76 period, there is a substantial correlation between shifts in judgments about government economic policy and changes in political support. During the earlier period, among those who viewed the administration's economic management as improving, 40% reported correspondingly enhanced levels of political trust, while among who saw the quality of economic policy-making as declining, more than half increased their criticism of government in general. For the later period, the relationship is slightly stronger still.

The relationships shown in these tables are net of the effect of partisanship, and they remain robust when controls are applied for respondents' opinions about Watergate. Tables 2 and 4 show the appropriate coefficients. These tables recompute the corresponding coefficients for Tables 1 and 3, controlled, seriatim, for approval of President Nixon's resignation, and for approval of President Ford's pardon of his predecessor.⁶ While the absolute numbers change from table to table, the net percentage difference for each of these control tables is quite close to that for the corresponding original. Whatever the effect of Watergate on political trust, it caused no diminution in the strong correlation between changes in economic policy evaluations and changes in political support, over either period.

The relationship here is intuitively appealing, and it constitutes good initial evidence that citizens' evaluations of the effectiveness of government economic policy serve as the foundation for more general judgments about the system as a whole. By considering the four criteria set out above for inferring system-level evaluations from experience with particular policies, we can trace the path from economic policy evaluations toward legitimacy.

On the question whether Americans attribute responsibility to the national government for managing the economy, the empirical evidence is strongly consensual in showing that they do, and that elections are often influenced

TABLE 1. Election-to-Election Change in Political Support, by Change in Economic Policy Evaluations, 1972–74^a

Change in Economic Policy Rating	Change in Political Support (%)			Sample Proportions
	Increased	Same	Diminished	
Better	40	24	36	.06
Same	25.9	33.4	40.7	.363
Somewhat worse	22.7	27.7	49.6	.431
Much worse	16.9	27.3	55.8	.146
Difference (better-worse)	23.1	– 3.3	–19.8	

^a $N = 1,252$.

TABLE 2. Election-to-Election Change in Political Support, by Change in Economic Policy Evaluations, 1972–74, Controlled for Reactions to Watergate

	Change in Political Support (%)		
	Increased	Same	Diminished
Nixon resignation ^a			
Approve	21.4 ^c	–5.2	–16.4
Disapprove	15.6	5.8	–21.6
Ford pardon ^b			
Approve	28.1	1.9	–29.9
Disapprove	23.2	–5.8	–17.4

^a“Thinking back a few months when Richard Nixon resigned from office, do you remember if you were pleased or displeased about his resignation, or didn’t you care much one way or the other?” (1974).

^b“Not too long ago, President Ford pardoned Richard Nixon for any wrongdoing he may have committed while he was President. Do you think Ford should have pardoned Nixon?” (1974 and 1976).

^cEntries correspond to the bottom row of Table 1, the percentage difference in the political support category comparing those whose economic policy evaluations improved to those whose policy evaluations worsened.

by macroeconomic performance (Kiewiet and Rivers, 1985). Second, public opinion clearly supported the Nixon administration’s economic policies through at least the 1972 election (cf. Tufte, 1978) and held the government responsible for conditions following the election. In spite of the apparently exogenous nature of the OPEC oil embargo in late 1973, moreover, the public did not exonerate the Nixon or Ford administrations from blame for rising inflation and unemployment through 1976 (Hibbs, 1982a; Blinder, 1979).

TABLE 3. Election-to-Election Change in Political Support, by Change in Economic Policy Evaluations, 1974–76^a

Change in Economic Policy Rating	Change in Political Support (%)			Sample Proportions
	Increased	Same	Diminished	
Much better	52.7	31.1	16.2	.06
Somewhat better	42.0	31.3	26.7	.280
No change	31.4	39.3	29.4	.161
Somewhat worse	30.0	30.8	39.2	.391
Much worse	25.8	29.7	44.5	.158
Difference (better-worse)	26.4	1.4	-28.3	

^a $N = 1,251$.

TABLE 4. Election-to-Election Percentage Change in Political Trust, by Change in Economic Policy Evaluation, 1974–76, Controlled for Reactions to Watergate^a

	More Trusting	Same	Less Trusting
Nixon resignation			
Approve	14.0	6.8	-20.3
Disapprove	7.4	9.3	-16.7
Ford pardon			
Approve	22.7	5.6	-28.3
Disapprove	17.9	-2.8	-15.1

^aTable entries and item wordings are given in Table 2.

Evidence for the third criterion, persistence (of the policy problem as perceived by citizens, and of the relationship with political trust), is necessarily limited by the time span covered by the data, but several considerations suggest that the linkage found here reflects a regular connection. The aggregate time series of political trust since the late 1950s displays shifts that are roughly in tandem with changes in real personal disposable income, although alternative explanations for shifts in the series cannot be conclusively tested, given data limitations. In addition, Nixon's resignation and Ford's assumption of the presidency brought widely noted differences in political style and the treatment of issues—the contrast between the two at the level of “authorities” could hardly have been more clear. The consistency of the relationship between economic policy judgments and political support over two periods punctuated by this change of presidents argues that this linkage is indeed reflective of policy grievances. Finally, concentrating on change scores show-

ing individual-level shifts over the panel, rather than on comparisons across cross-sections, helps to control possible episodic sources of covariation.

The fourth criterion refers to the patterning of advantages and disadvantages flowing from government policies. On questions of economic management, such a pattern would be shown, for instance, if the short-run outcomes of particular economic events or policies were congruent with the long-run distribution of economic advantages in the class structure. Such a close fit between short-term financial impacts and class position occurs in recessions, when, for instance, the probability of becoming unemployed during a cyclical downturn is several times higher for blue-collar or less-skilled service workers than it is for white-collar employees (cf. Hibbs, 1975, and the works cited there). To the extent that stable divisions of class interests are represented in the alignment of the major parties, the partisan political implications of recession during a Republican administration are obvious. Indeed, one might suppose that, since each subsequent postwar recession has been worse than the last, working- and lower-class citizens may infer that poor economic management typifies both parties and, on that ground, may increase their criticism of government as a whole. But the pattern of short-run and long-run economic policy impacts is not so clear for inflation. There is disagreement among economists over what segment of the socioeconomic hierarchy suffers more during inflations, but a conservative reading of the evidence would suggest that the costs are moderately skewed toward the upper end of the status scale (cf. Blinder and Esaki, 1978; Bach and Stephenson, 1974; Hibbs, 1975).

These objective differences are reflected in individuals' concerns about their own economic welfare and in their perceptions of whether unemployment or inflation is the more serious national problem. Over the full CPS series and for every Gallup survey for which occupational breakdowns are available, middle- and upper-status individuals are 1 1/2 to 2 times as likely as working- and lower-status respondents to claim that inflation is a more important or pressing problem than unemployment. Hibbs (1979) notes that this distinction persists across a wide range of aggregate economic conditions and of aggregate public concern with the economy.

The criterion of congruence between the patterned distributions of long-run and short-run political economic advantages grounds this analysis of political support in observed economic grievances and stable political interests. The patterning criterion will thus clarify the interpretation of the relationship observed in Tables 1-4, both in terms of political and economic interests, and in terms of causal priority.

Two sorts of outcomes are possible when congruence or patterning is measured between short-run economic policy grievances and long-run class interests. If the two are unrelated—that is, if economic policy complaints are

equally likely to spring from every location in the socioeconomic hierarchy — then this entails that:

1. National economic conditions, rather than personal financial condition or class considerations, motivate the expression of economic grievances (i.e., they are “sociotropic”); and
2. Causal priority in the relationship between policy evaluations and political trust is ambiguous. If there are no predictable differences in the source of economic policy complaints (as a function of the personal impact of the economic conditions those policies foster), then it is just as parsimonious an explanation for the observed relationship to argue that declines in general political support lead to economic policy complaints, as it is to argue the reverse.

If the two are related — that is, if the more politically significant economic grievances spring from working-class and lower-class citizens in recessionary times, but from middle- and upper-status individuals in inflationary times — then this entails that:

1. Economic policy evaluations reflect the personal interests or group advantages that are affected by the conditions those policies have fostered (i.e., they are “self-interested”). “Patterning,” that is, shows that economic policy grievances reflect short-run evaluations that are grounded in the class structure’s distribution of long-run advantages and disadvantages.
2. Causal priority is (almost completely) unambiguous. If the most politically significant economic policy grievances (i.e., those having the greatest effect on political support) spring from just those individuals whose class position makes them most vulnerable to personal economic disruption, then it is extremely unlikely that the hypothesized causal direction is reversed.

The cyclical behavior of the U.S. economy over the period 1972-76 makes this a particularly good period for investigating the hypothesis of patterning. Over the whole period, economic issues dominated all others (domestic political and social issues, international and defense issues) in the public’s image of “What is the most important problem facing this country today?” (American Institute of Public Opinion, 1972-77). But the period breaks naturally into two segments.

During the period from mid-1972 until late 1974, inflation rose from about 3% to 12%, while unemployment remained stable in the 4%-6% range. This aggregate economic movement was reflected in the government’s agenda, commentaries in the media, and the public’s concerns. The beginning of this period might be placed in the second or third quarter of 1972, when it began to look as if Nixon’s program of wage and price controls was not, in fact, containing inflation, and its end point placed in 1975:1 (first quarter), when

President Ford officially abandoned the fight against inflation and turned his administration's policy toward coping with unemployment and recession. Over the same time span, public opinion on the question "Is inflation or unemployment the more serious problem?" rose from just under half citing inflation in mid-1972 to nearly 80% naming inflation by late 1974. During the period from 1972 to 1974, that is, inflation was the primary economic problem in the country, as well as the major issue on the agenda of the government and the public.

By early 1975, the contractionary effects of supply shocks and of two years of consistent anti-inflationary fiscal and monetary policy had curtailed inflation, but they had produced the most severe recession since the Great Depression (cf. Eckstein, 1978; Blinder, 1979). By 1975:2, inflation had been cut in half, to 6%, and it continued to decline to about 4% by the end of 1976. Unemployment, on the contrary, nearly doubled, rising to 9% by 1975:2, and it remained within a point of that level throughout 1976. Public opinion reflected these cyclical trends, with the proportion citing unemployment as a more serious problem than inflation rising from 20% in late 1974 to 75% by mid-1975, and unemployment remaining the primary problem throughout 1976. During the period from late 1974 through 1976, that is, unemployment was the major problem in the economy and on the government's and the public's agenda.

If genuine economic grievances are reflected in the economic policy evaluations that influence political trust—if the criterion of patterning is fulfilled—then we should expect to find that higher-status respondents are the source of most economic policy complaints in the earlier period, with the relationship being reversed in the later period. Tables 5-8 show the class sources of changes in economic policy evaluations over the two segments of the panel.

During the inflationary period of 1972-74, the greatest shifts toward negative judgments about government economic policy came from upper-status citizens: they were about 15% more likely than lower-status respondents to claim that the government's policy effectiveness had declined over the period.

TABLE 5. Election-to-Election Change in Evaluations of Government Economic Policy, by Class, 1972-74^a

Socioeconomic Status	Change in Economic Policy Evaluation (%)			Sample Proportions
	Better	No Change	Worse	
High	10.2	23.1	66.8	.35
Medium	13.8	30.8	55.4	.31
Low	16.1	33.2	50.8	.34
Difference (high-low)	- 5.9	-10.1	16.0	

^a N = 1,285.

TABLE 6. Election-to-Election Change in Evaluations of Government Economic Policy by Class, 1972-74, Controlled for Reactions to Watergate^a

	Change in Economic Policy Evaluations (%)		
	Better	No Change	Worse
Nixon resignation			
Approve	-6.8	- 8.6	15.3
Disapprove	-5.6	-13.9	19.5
Ford pardon			
Approve	-5.0	- 9.4	14.4
Disapprove	-5.1	-10.4	15.5

^aTable entries and item wordings are given in Table 2.

TABLE 7. Election-to-Election Change in Evaluations of Government Economic Policy, by Class, 1974-76^a

Socioeconomic Status	Change in Economic Policy Evaluation (%)			Sample Proportions
	Better	No Change	Worse	
High	54.9	33.2	11.9	.36
Medium	41.2	43.8	15.2	.30
Low	39.7	41.7	18.6	.34
Difference (high-low)	15.2	- 8.5	- 6.7	

^aN = 1,224.

TABLE 8. Election-to-Election Change in Evaluations of Government Economic Policy, by Class, 1974-76, Controlled for Reactions to Watergate^a

	Change in Economic Policy Evaluations (%)		
	Better	No Change	Worse
Nixon resignation			
Approve	16.5	- 8.8	-7.8
Disapprove	13.6	- 7.9	-5.8
Ford pardon			
Approve	16.9	-10.5	-6.5
Disapprove	13.4	- 7.4	-5.9

^aTable entries and item wordings are given in Table 2.

In the later years, a period marked by sharp and persistent recession, the shift in public evaluations of the quality of economic policy was just the reverse: lower-status were more likely than upper-status citizens to claim that policy effectiveness had declined, and in fact, middle- and upper-class

respondents were some 15% more likely to report that, in their view, policy had improved.

As in the previous analysis, economic policy evaluations are controlled for the potentially spurious effects of corresponding changes in party affiliation, and Tables 6 and 8 show that the original relationships are robust in the face of controls for Watergate. Moreover, the measure of socioeconomic status used here reflects a conservative test of the hypothesis: it is a simple trichotomization of the occupational status scale. Judging from the results of other research, adding information about class identification or authority relations would strengthen the relationship shown here (cf. Robinson and Kelley, 1979; Wright and Perrone, 1977; Vanneman, 1980).

The pattern observed in these two tables is readily interpretable in terms of conditions in the economy and their translation into politically relevant evaluations of government policy, and the findings are consistent with generally accepted explanations of political business cycles (Hibbs, 1985; Cameron, 1984). But the results have important implications for the interpretation of political support. The next section suggests some of those implications.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has raised several questions about the concepts of legitimacy and political support, and thus the empirical investigation has been couched within the ambit of several contextual considerations. These include ones relating to the *objects* of politically supportive attitudes, ranging from regime to authorities, and the *time scale* over which we wish to explain variations in political support, with "legitimacy" being implicated by long-run secular trends, "authorities" by short-run changes, and policies and their impacts being most prominent in explanations of changes in support over periods of a couple of years to perhaps a decade.

The tables produce two sets of findings that have implications for both these dimensions. The first four tables show a consistent and quite strong link between evaluations of economic policy performance and judgments about the competence and fairness of the government in general. Tables 5-8 investigate the sources of those policy grievances, and they help to interpret the relationship between changing economic policy evaluations and changing levels of political support.

Because different social groups, with partially conflicting political and economic interests, are hurt by different macroeconomic policy shortfalls, complaints about economic policy represent quite specific and probably temporary demands. In responding to shifts over the period of a few years in the balance of economic policy evaluations, political support transmits important information about citizens' perceptions of the government as a set of

problem-solving institutions. Moreover, this relationship is quite independent of any short-run changes in political trust that are linked to particular authorities or to a highly visible episode like Watergate. This means that political support is a more complex and multifaceted empirical construct than the sort of straightforward, stable, long-run loyalty implied by the notion of legitimacy. Its level is not determined solely by acceptance of the institutions of government—or that level would be essentially stable. But neither is its variability wholly attributable to fluctuations in executive popularity (cf. Sniderman et al., 1975; Feldman, 1983). An important portion of the variance in political support over the medium run springs from a third component intermediate between these two: the public's evaluation of the government's policy performance.

In an ongoing, democratic polity like the United States, in which the fundamental legitimacy of the system is seldom at issue, the fact that political support reflects an inertial cumulation of medium-term policy judgments makes good sense. The resulting empirical construct occupies an intermediate point along the continuum of objects of support, between the stability of the regime and the flux of incumbent authorities. Moreover, the sort of evaluative exercise it implies lies intermediate between unquestioning trust and unrelieved cynicism (cf. Baloyra, 1979). The notion of faith in the system, qualified by skeptical consideration of the impacts of recent policies, is not as neat a formulation as the antinomy of regimes and authorities, or trust and cynicism, but it is closer to the concept of democratic citizenship (Thompson, 1970).

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NOTES

1. It is worth drawing the parallel between the sort of calculation at work here and the one that political business cycle models implicitly presume citizens use in making partisan choices. Political business cycle models propose that voters hold incumbents accountable for the quality of their short-term economic policies. But not all economic events or changes, whether in family financial condition or in national business conditions, are influenced by the government. It is only "politically relevant" economic changes that drive electoral outcomes. Specifying how much of any observed economic decline is to be blamed on the administration is presently the focus of great attention by researchers in this area. Economists formulate the challenge as an errors-in-variables problem, and the bulk of their work has concentrated on deriving alternative estimators that are less susceptible than OLS coefficients to the distortion caused by imprecise measurement (Kramer, 1983). Social psychologists view

the problem as one involving attribution, and their work has focused on identifying social groups or economic conditions across which the directness of attributing responsibility to government varies (Feldman, 1985; cf. also Conover, 1985; Peffley, 1985).

The "legitimacy-relevant" component of a given change in economic condition is a proper subset of the "vote-relevant" component. Because the criteria for making inferences from specific situations to system support are more demanding than those linking economic conditions to the vote, the legitimacy-relevant component is proportionately smaller. As this related work develops improved methods for measuring (and estimating the effects of) the politically relevant in economic changes, its results will contribute to research on the policy-related antecedents of political support.

2. For 1972, the items are:

- How do you feel about what our government is doing about the economy—jobs, prices, profits?
- As to the economic policy of the government—I mean steps taken to fight inflation or unemployment—would you say that the government is doing a good job, only fair, or a poor job?

These are combined into an additive index (Cronbach's alpha = .66).

There is one item in 1974:

- As to the economic policy of the government—I mean steps taken to fight inflation or unemployment—would you say that the government is doing a good job, only fair, or a poor job?

For 1976, the items are:

- Thinking about the steps that have been taken to fight inflation, would you say that the government has been doing a good job, only fair, or a poor job?
- How about the government's economic policy dealing with unemployment—would you say that the government has been doing a good job, only fair, or a poor job?

These are combined into an additive index (Cronbach's alpha = .64).

3. These items appear identically in all years:

- Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste much of it at all?
- How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some some of the time?
- Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?
- Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people who usually know what they are doing, or do you think that quite a few of them don't seem to know what they are doing?
- Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked at all?

Following conventional procedures (cf. Abramson and Finifter, 1981), a summary index was formed from the five items. Reliability for the index (Cronbach's alpha) is .71.

4. A third argument is occasionally advanced in favor of the political trust measure's validity. This one notes that particular items in the index covary in predictable ways with other measures of political attitudes. For instance, the item mentioning "crooks" generated more assent during Watergate; and the item mentioning "big interests" running the government shows some correlation with party (cf. Lipset and Schneider, 1983). This argument is irrelevant; it

is the index, not its component items, that is supposed to indicate system support. Showing that individual items are (imprecise) measures of disapproval of Watergate or of populist partisan feeling has only a tenuous connection with the interpretability of the larger index as an indicator of support orientations quite different from incumbent disapproval or partisanship.

5. It is important to take account of party identification in investigating the hypothesized connection between policy evaluations and political trust. Both variables are related to party in the cross-section, so that party (or, more precisely, change in party) is a potential source of spurious relationship between changes in their values over time. To control for this potentially confounding effect, the following procedure was performed on the measures of change in economic policy evaluations and political trust. First, each was regressed on change in party affiliation; next, the residual from this regression was computed and calibrated to the original indicator (so that declines or improvements in policy evaluations or political trust could be recovered); then, the residualized form of each of the indicators was used in all the analyses.
6. The percentage difference coefficients shown here are virtually identical to regression coefficients, given the monotonicity of the patterns in the underlying tables. Presentation in Tables 2 and 4 is abbreviated to save space; full tables are available from the author.

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