

I acknowledge that my sympathies lie with the second camp. In recent years many academics have exalted civic engagement, seeing in it the solution to social problems and conflicts that have resisted the application of expertise and money. But civic engagement can be expected to have such salutary consequences only if those engaged are representative of the interests and values of the larger community. That is true by definition if *everyone* is engaged, but when engagement is largely the domain of minority viewpoints, obvious problems of unrepresentativeness arise. When they do, civic engagement has a dark side that is not sufficiently recognized by its proponents. Unfortunately, as a brief survey will suggest, over the course of the previous generation developments in American politics have cumulated to increase the conflict between civic engagement and representative democracy.

From JFK to WJC

As a starting point, consider the much-discussed decline in trust in government. There is a great deal of evidence on this subject, but the best time series are those contained in the American National Election Studies (see Figure 11-2). From the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s people's trust in government declined dramatically: a generation ago two-thirds to three-quarters of the population expressed high levels of trust; under one-third did so in 1996.

Three observations. First, those who write on this subject generally assume—at least implicitly—that the decline in trust is bad. I am agnostic on this point. Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and other American luminaries probably would have been more disturbed by the 1960s figures than the 1990s ones. Second, there also is a tendency for analysts to assume that the early figures are representative and the later ones aberrant. That seems a dubious assumption. Anyone reasonably familiar with American history should have no trouble thinking of eras when popular attitudes probably looked more like they do today than they did in the 1960s. Rather than 1994 Americans being a bunch of angry cynics, 1964 Americans may have been a bunch of deluded optimists. Third, many observers have pointed out that declines in trust are not limited to government or to the United States.¹¹ As a social scientist committed to generalization I recognize the

11. See, for example, Lipset and Schneider (1983).