THE CONTOURS OF DISAFFECTION

The disaffection at the heart of the legitimation crisis in American public life is not one-dimensional, but multifactorial. It is not unlike the distinction made in social theory among class, status and power. Though these may be correlated as structures of inequality, they are not the same thing; they need to be distinguished. The same is true of disaffection: It is important to tease out separate factors to clarify the changing dynamics underwriting democratic practice in America. By combining and correlating specific questions from the survey, one can not only isolate those factors from each other, but derive summary indicators that will help give a better sense of the uneven landscape of disaffection.

The Dimensions of Disaffection

Distrust, Cynicism, and Alienation

For the purposes of this inquiry, distrust toward government is understood through the relative degrees of trust or confidence that the government can solve problems and tell the truth, and that what it communicates through the media is believable; that it won’t intrude upon the freedoms that Americans enjoy; and that its leaders are competent to do their jobs. Cynicism toward

The questions constituting the “distrust” index were: “When the government in Washington decides to solve a problem, how much confidence do you have that the problem will actually be solved?”; “How much confidence do you have in the people who run our government to tell the truth to the public?”; “Our system of government is good, but the people running it are incompetent.”; “These days, the government in Washington threatens the freedom of ordinary Americans.”; and “You can’t believe much of what you hear from the mainstream media.” The
leaders is defined by opinions about whether leaders and other elites are more interested in serving themselves than the common good, are more interested in keeping power than doing what is right, and are indifferent toward the lives and thoughts of ordinary people.\textsuperscript{46} Finally, alienation is, in effect, a personal sense of estrangement from the world around you. This includes a sense of having little or no agency in the ordering of the world. It is reflected in the view that “the American way of life is rapidly disappearing,” that “America used to be a place where you could get ahead by working hard, but this is no longer true,” and that compared to 25 years ago, you are worse off.\textsuperscript{47}

statement about the media is, in our view, as much about the veracity of what the public hears about the government as it is about the media as a purveyor of information. When the media item is omitted, the patterns remain the same, but the Cronbach’s alpha for the index drops from .774 to .754.

\textsuperscript{46} The questions constituting this index are: “The most educated and successful people in America are more interested in serving themselves than in serving the common good,” “Most politicians are more interested in winning elections than in doing what is right,” “The leaders in American corporations, media, universities and technology care little about the lives of most Americans,” and “Most elected officials don’t care what people like me think.” Alpha for this index is .671, which is relatively high for an index comprised of only four ordinal measures.

\textsuperscript{47} The questions constituting the alienation index are: “The American way of life is rapidly disappearing,” “America used to be a place where you could get ahead by working hard, but this is no longer true,” “These days I feel like a stranger in my own country,” “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does,” and “Would you say people like you are doing much better, better, about the same, worse or much worse than twenty-five years ago?” Alpha for the index is .746. For all three indices — distrust, cynicism and alienation — EM estimation of individual item scores was used to replace missing data and principal components analysis was used to assign item weights.
As we’ve seen, all of these dimensions of disaffection are fairly widely distributed across the population, but the full complexity of the story is revealed only by examining the patterns of interaction among the different categories of disaffection. The first thing to note is that disaffection can be focused privately or publicly, toward the personal or the institutional. Alienation — with its sense of becoming marginalized, of losing, of working without reaping, of not being seen or heard, and of things spiraling downward — is the private face of disaffection, while cynicism toward leaders, experts, officials and those in positions of power (as well as distrust of public institutions) constitute the dual public face of disaffection. The

48 Distances between the statements of disaffection in this figure were assigned using a Multidimensional Scaling of Tau measures of association between the individual items.
interplay between the personal and the institutional is difficult to discern. What follows is our first attempt to interpret some of these dynamics.

The closer the statements in Figure 6, the greater the similarity in how Americans respond to them. A private statement that “People like me don’t have any say,” for instance, is closely tied to the more institutionally framed view that “Most elected officials don’t care what people like me think.” And the latter sense that officials don’t care is related closely to views that they will lie to the public and that they are incompetent. It is important to recognize that the converse to these patterns is also true. Those who retain confidence in the media, for example, are also less inclined to say government officials are incompetent or that they fail to tell the truth. They are also among those most likely to still believe that government can really solve problems when it sets its mind to. And the distance between these statements on the left and one on the far right-hand side of the chart about “the most educated and successful people in America” reflects the fact that confidence in government ebbs and flows somewhat independently of confidence in the highly educated and the wealthy; they don’t necessarily rise and fall together.

It is also informative to consider how the dimensions of disaffection vary across particular groups in society. Distrust toward the government, for example, does not differ significantly for different income groups in America. It does, however, differ by their age, gender, race and residence. Distrust is one-and-a-half times more likely to be very high among Baby Boomers, for example, than Millennials, higher among men than women, and higher among those who live in less populated areas than in urban areas of the country. Distrust is twice as likely to be very high among whites as among Hispanics or African-Americans, and almost as much difference in levels of trust exists between religious conservatives, whether Protestant or Catholic, and their more moderate and progressive counterparts.49

49 Quartile-cut versions of the distrust, cynicism, and alienation indices were utilized for these comparisons. For narrative purposes, respondents who scored in the highest quartile — among the highest twenty-five percent — are considered “very high,” and the second quartile, simply “high.” Together, these two groups constitute the half of respondents that are highest on each index. The terms “low” and “very low” are employed similarly to describe the bottom two quartiles, which together encompass those who score in the lower half on each index.
In the case of 

cynicism toward elites, a person’s generation, region of the country and ethnicity offer little clue about their cynicism. The same generally goes for gender, even though women are slightly less cynical about experts, leaders and elected officials than are men. Similarly, the population density where one lives is only loosely connected to cynicism — those who live in rural areas tend to be slightly more cynical toward elites. The key elements tied to cynicism are income and education, especially the latter. Here, cynicism is twice as likely to be very high among those earning less than $25,000 per year than among those earning $250,000 or more per year. In the case of education, cynicism is three-and-a-half times more likely to be very high for those who have a high school diploma or less than for those who have undertaken post-graduate studies.

Finally, personal 

alienation, which includes the sense of being powerless and culturally marginalized, reveals no significant gender or racial differences. Evangelicals, however, are more alienated than non-Evangelical Protestants with the latter nearly twice as likely to score low on alienation. The contrast between conservative Catholics and progressive Catholics is equally pronounced. Interestingly, the religious group that is most likely to score low on personal alienation is the one that claims no religious affiliation at all — the “nones.” Generation too is an important axis of difference on alienation, with baby boomers one-and-a-half times more likely to be highly alienated, as we have defined it here, than Millennials. Even more significant is your education, income and the population density of your neighborhood: Alienation rates are twice as likely to be very high in the most rural areas as in the denser cities; three-and-a-half times more likely if you have only a high school diploma than a graduate degree; and four times more likely if you are in the lowest income bracket than if you belong in the highest income bracket. As with distrust of political institutions and cynicism about America’s “experts” and leaders, personal alienation is more closely tied to education and income than to other measures of social location.

The Deepest Disaffection

A certain amount of disaffection is found across all categories: men and women; young and old; white, black and Hispanic; rich and poor; and so on. And yet there is also no question that the patterns we are seeing confirm what
we know both anecdotally and from other survey work: that there is a predictable unevenness — some are more completely, even stridently, disaffected than others.

When one considers all dimensions of disaffection together and looks to their cumulative impact, one sees the greatest intensity of total disaffection in a population that tends to be more male than female, disproportionately represented among Baby Boomers, and among those who reside in the lowest density parts of the country, though not in any particular region of the country. It is notable that minorities are under-represented at very high levels of disaffection (only 31% of African-Americans and 35% of Hispanics are among the top 40% of disaffected overall) yet nearly half of all whites are found among the highest groups of disaffected. Less surprising is the fact that the most disaffected are disproportionately poor: 53 percent of those who make less than $50,000 per year have very high disaffection compared to 14 percent of persons making over $100,000 per year. The pattern intensifies further with education: Most of the disaffected are poorly educated. Among the most disaffected, 84 percent don’t have a college degree, compared to 16 percent who do. Religious faith seems to be less determinative than additive. The more conservative you are in your faith, the more likely you will have higher levels of disaffection.

The Demand for Change

Among those who are most disaffected — the most distrustful, cynical, and alienated — roughly three out of four (72%) want major changes: one-fourth (24%) believe that “the system of government itself is broken and needs to be replaced with something completely different”; one-half (48%) believe that major

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50 About half (47%) of all who are in the highest two levels of disaffection are men compared to 39 percent who are women.

51 In very high levels of disaffection, respondents are one-and-a-half times more likely to be a Boomer than a Gen Xer or a Millennial.

52 About half (53%) of all who have a very high disaffection live in the lowest two levels of population density. If you live in the least populated rural areas, you are twice as likely to be in the highest category of disaffection.

53 Seen another way, half (48%) of all those who make less than $50,000 per year have very high disaffection compared to one-third (34%) of all those who make more than $100,000 per year.

54 Again, seen differently, one out of two people who have some college or only a high school diploma or less (50%) have very high disaffection, compared to one out of four who have a post-graduate degree.
changes are needed in both the system and the people running it. Likewise, 98 percent of the most totally disaffected agree that “we need a President who will completely change the direction of this country.”

The Least Disaffected

As noted, disaffection is inarguably found everywhere in the population, but unevenly. Those who are most disaffected tend to have a certain profile, but this is also true of those who are less disaffected.

American Dreamers: African-Americans and Hispanics

African-Americans and Hispanics love their country and think highly of it as much as white Americans. Nearly half (47%) of all blacks and Latinos (42%) believe that America “is the greatest country in the world, better than all other countries” and nearly as many (45% and 49% respectively) see America as “a great country, but so are certain other countries.” Eight of ten (80% of blacks and 82% of Latinos) also agree that “America is an exceptional nation with a special responsibility to lead the world.” The vast majority (80% African-American, 78% Hispanic) agree that they are “proud to live under our American system of government.” Even so, their patriotism has a distinctly different tone than that of white Americans. Whites are nearly twice as likely as blacks and Hispanics to say they are “very patriotic,” while blacks and Hispanics prefer the more subdued “moderately patriotic” option.55

If anything, both blacks and Hispanics exude greater confidence in the United States government than whites. This is particularly notable in the small numbers of Hispanics (22%) and blacks (12%) who have “no confidence at all” in the ability of government to solve problems and in the people who run our government to tell the truth to the public (Hispanics: 22%; blacks: 19%; and whites: 36%). In general, whites are twice as likely as blacks and Hispanics to be very distrustful of the government on a variety of measures. Their disparate levels of trust are mirrored in disparate philosophies of government — a majority of whites believe government is doing too many things that are better left to private entities and individuals, while two-thirds

55 Two-thirds of whites say they are “very patriotic” compared to 35% of Hispanics and 35% of blacks.
of Hispanics (65%) and blacks (69%) believe government should actually be doing more to improve the lives of ordinary Americans.

That the trust of minorities extends to the current president is not surprising given his own minority status, but the extent of that difference — 94 percent of blacks view Obama favorably as do 78 percent of Latinos, compared to 44 percent of whites — is striking. These respective levels of support are reflected in black and Latino levels of opposition to changing immigration policies, building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico, repealing the Affordable Care Act and banning U.S. entry to all Muslims. Minorities generally oppose all of these changes in policy. Their disproportionate residence in densely populated urban centers, their tendency to identify as Democrats and Independents rather than Republicans, and perhaps their experiences of violence, threats of violence, and suspicions of violence in their own communities may all inform their distinctive view of guns in public spaces. More than four out of five African-Americans (83%) and more than three out of five Hispanics (62%) say it would make our nation a more dangerous place if more Americans legally carried weapons in public. Only a minority of whites (43%) say the same.

The high confidence levels of minorities also extend beyond government to broader perceptions of the state of the nation. Seven out of ten blacks (70%) and Hispanics (72%), for example, believe the United States is not a nation in decline, but is instead holding steady or improving; only a minority of whites (43%) say the same.
This disparity parallels differences in minority views of what has happened to “people like you” during the past twenty-five years. Only one in five African-Americans (19%) and Hispanics (20%) say they are worse off, compared to nearly half of whites (43%) who say they have it worse. Hispanics in particular say the “quality of life for their racial or ethnic group in the U.S.” has improved in recent years — they are three times more likely to say this than are whites.

These positive impressions of the United States — what it stands for and how it functions — are especially notable in light of perceptions of history and social circumstances. Eight out of ten (81%) blacks and six out of ten (60%) Latinos agree that “our founding fathers were part of a racist and sexist culture that gave important roles to white men while harming minorities and women;” only a minority of whites (45%) subscribe to this historical narrative. Minority perceptions of police and law enforcement are even more distinct from those of whites. Sizable majorities of blacks (83%) and Hispanics (63%) say “the police and law enforcement unfairly target racial and ethnic minorities” compared to only a third (33%) of white Americans. The same pattern is reflected in the greater sense among minorities that “people of other races can’t really understand how my race sees things.” Three-fourths (74%) of all blacks agree with that statement compared to just over half (55%) of all Latinos and only one-third (36%) of all whites.

The resilience of African-American and Hispanic faith in government and nation is also striking in light of their personal social circumstances. Only 14 percent of Hispanics and 21 percent of African-Americans (by our survey
estimates) have a college degree, compared to 35 percent of whites. And substantial majorities of both blacks (62%) and Latinos (72%) get by on family incomes of less than $50,000 a year compared to only a minority of whites (37%). Given their material circumstances, it is not surprising that 62 percent of all African-Americans and 56 percent of all Hispanics describe their family’s current financial situation as “only fair” or “poor” compared to 45 percent of all whites. Though not dramatic, a larger number of blacks (45%) and Hispanics (40%) do agree that “these days I feel like a stranger in my own country” compared to 36 percent of all whites. African-Americans are particularly inclined to say the economic system is rigged in favor of the wealthiest Americans — half of them (48%) “completely agree” this is how the economy operates, compared to less than thirty percent of Hispanics (28%) and whites (29%). Adding those who “mostly agree,” more than 70 percent of all three groups say the economy is rigged.

In spite of perceptions of historical and contemporary injustice, and even in the face of challenging social circumstances, Hispanics and African-Americans remain hopeful and faithful. Half (49 percent of Hispanics and 48 percent of blacks) believe the future for people like themselves will be better in twenty-five years. Another quarter believe it will be about the same, and only a quarter think it will be worse (compared to 40 percent of whites who think things will be worse). Hispanics have an especially strong conviction that “if you follow the rules and behave responsibly, you can pretty much expect life will turn out well”; 78 percent agree with that statement. A majority of African-Americans
(58%) agree with this as well, though not to the same degree. A substantial majority of Hispanics (67%) also believe Americans can “make it if they’re willing to work hard,” yet only a minority of blacks (47%) hold this opinion. While African-American faith in the long-term rewards of hard work may be weaker than for more recent immigrants, their religious faith remains strong. African-Americans report a distinctively active prayer life — two-thirds say they pray daily — and a sense that people who are not religious do not share their beliefs and values (60%).

It is hardly surprising that on many questions in the survey, we find as pervasive disaffection in minority communities as we have in the white population. Indeed, minority levels of cynicism toward leaders and experts, and their personal alienation and feelings of lack of agency, are comparable to the levels in the white community. Yet against all odds and difficulties, the African-American and Hispanic communities tend to see a brighter future for themselves. They continue to pursue the American Dream and perhaps for this reason — at least insofar as confidence in government and in their own situation is concerned — they are less disaffected. And this in spite of their lower incomes, lower levels of education and “their experiences as minorities in American society.”

The Wealthy and Well-Educated

The other group that is less disaffected is elites, those who are disproportionately well-educated and wealthy. Among the wealthiest, 92 percent of those making over $250,000 and 81 percent of those making between $100,000 and $250,000 describe their financial situation as excellent or good (and well they should!). Seventy-one percent of those with post-graduate degrees describe their financial circumstances the same way. Two-thirds of the biggest income earners also acknowledge that they are doing much better or better than 25 years ago compared to 37 percent of those in the lowest income bracket. These are individuals who are comfortably situated in life, and they know it.

Perhaps it is for this reason that, as a group, they tend to have greater agency and thus less alienation, less cynicism, and greater trust in government

56 On this point, 71 percent of whites hold this view.
compared to those who have less. The findings are consistent. About one-third (30%) of all who are making over $250,000 per year have a very high trust in government, compared to 21 percent of the poorest in this category. This holds for those who have a post-graduate degree — 34 percent have a very high level of trust, compared to 20 percent with a high school diploma or less. The same is true for patterns of cynicism: 42 percent of the wealthiest Americans have a very high trust in leaders compared to 17 percent of the poorest. Thirty-five percent of those with very high levels of educational attainment have high levels of belief in their leaders compared to 17 percent of the most poorly educated. Finally, and not surprisingly, the wealthiest have the greatest sense of agency: One in four (39%) of the wealthiest have very low alienation compared to 14 percent of the poorest. Likewise, with the best educated: 35 percent have a very low alienation compared to 16 percent of the most poorly educated.

It is entirely plausible that their general lack of cynicism, distrust, and alienation (as compared to others) could be a reflection of their circumstances. It is entirely plausible that for these reasons, as well, the wealthiest are the most likely to say that “the system is good and needs very little change” and are the least likely to say that “the system of government itself is broken and needs to be replaced with something completely different.” Half (51%) of all those with postgraduate degrees also disagree that “we need a President who will completely change the direction of this country.”