A Matter of Trust

Trust in government

working paper no. 2
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The Victorian Government has vested the State Services Authority with functions designed to foster the development of an efficient, integrated and responsive public sector which is highly ethical, accountable and professional in the ways it delivers services to the Victorian community.

The key functions of the Authority are to:

- identify opportunities to improve the delivery and integration of government services and report on service delivery outcomes and standards;
- promote high standards of integrity and conduct in the public sector;
- strengthen the professionalism and adaptability of the public sector; and
- promote high standards of governance, accountability and performance for public entities.

The Authority seeks to achieve its charter by working closely and collaboratively with public sector departments and agencies.

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Trust is important for governments. It is a necessary element of democracy and gives governments legitimacy in making decisions, particularly where there are short term costs and only longer term benefits. However, the empirical evidence on the level of trust in governments is mixed and in countries such as Australia the true state of trust in government is harder to determine.

Surveys show variations in different aspects of political trust: local governments are considered more trustworthy than state or federal, local public services are viewed more favourably than the political system as a whole and public employees like nurses and police are seen as more ethical and honest than parliamentarians. People tend to be more positive about the professionals or services they have contact with and are more cynical about the trustworthiness of politicians and remote political systems.

Corruption and unethical behaviour – real or perceived – will impact on citizen trust and both politicians and public officials need to act with integrity to maintain trust. Governments need to encourage ethical and honest behaviours by promoting an ethical culture, as well as establishing mechanisms for holding government and public administrators accountable.

It is also likely that citizens’ perceptions of government performance and their experiences and satisfaction with public services influence trust in government. Research suggests that perceptions of the way government manages the economy and issues such as security influence trust, although this is moderated by demographics, culture and expectations.

But neither of these factors fully account for changes in trust, and efforts in recent years to improve government integrity and performance have failed to have a significant impact on trust.

The decline in political trust has occurred alongside a range of broader social changes, such as improved education levels, changes in family composition, mobility and increases in urbanisation. Research shows that decreases in social trust have contributed to the changes in political trust, levels and kinds of civic engagement may also have a role.

Public perceptions of government are increasingly dependent on the media, as levels of face-to-face engagement between political parties and their electorates diminish. With media displaying a distrustful attitude towards politicians and public services, governments need to consider other ways of interacting with citizens.

In the context of major challenges facing government, including climate change and population ageing, this raises the question of how important these changes are for government and how trust can be built and maintained.
1 understanding trust and its importance

1.1 what is trust

Trust is a complex concept, relevant for both interpersonal and organisational interactions. Trust underpins all human contact (Blind, 2007). When an individual trusts, they make themselves vulnerable to another individual, group or institution that has the capacity to harm them, believing that they will not be harmed (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Trust is a judgment that is conditional and may be domain specific – a person may be trusted in some situations and not in others.

When people, groups or institutions trust one another, they have less need to monitor each others behaviour. Thus having trust lowers transaction costs in a social, economic or political relationship (Fukuyama, 1995).

People’s confidence in each other as members of a community is described as social trust (Blind, 2007). Social trust is interpersonal or horizontal – between citizens rather than citizens and institutions such as government (Norwegian Social Science Data Services, 2005).

1.2 what is trust in government?

Trust in government, or political trust, refers to people’s confidence in government and its institutions, policy making and political leaders (Blind, 2007).

Political trust can be directed at the political system, government agencies and individual politicians and may be influenced by the activities of each, such as governance and policy making. Political trust can be further divided into diffuse trust, referring to evaluations of the system as a whole, or specific trust, directed towards particular institutions like the police or local government. The different variants of political trust work together – lack of trust in one area can transform itself into distrust of other areas or the political system as a whole (Blind, 2007).

1.3 the importance of trust

Within an organisation or community, trust can have three benefits: (1) to reduce transaction costs, (2) to facilitate appropriate deference to authorities and (3) to increase the spontaneous sociability among members (Kramer, 1999). Trust reduces the need for lengthy negotiations over transactions, reducing time and resource costs. For those in positions of authority, trust is important as it limits the need to continually explain and justify decisions as well as the costs and impracticalities of monitoring and responding to performance and cooperation concerns. Fukuyama (1995) has argued that spontaneous sociability is an important manifestation of trust, as it helps build large organisations which can then lead to growth and prosperity. Economists are realising the benefits of trust for business and its role in wealth creation (Harford, 2006), but these benefits of trust are also relevant for government.
Trust makes it easier for governments to govern effectively and efficiently. As with business, trust lowers the transaction costs for governments interacting with citizens. When citizens trust governments, they are more likely to comply with government regulations, policies and programs (Levi & Stoker, 2000). This can have widespread implications for government – higher levels of trust means greater compliance with business regulations, paying taxes, immunising children, saving water and so on. Citizens are also more likely to volunteer for the military and to make sacrifices during times of crisis (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Van Roosbroek, 2006).

Fundamentally, societal and political trust are an important part of democratic government. For democracy to work, citizens must trust each other, including elected politicians, and act on the belief that mutual benefits will flow from cooperation (Ankersmit & Velde, 2004). Politicians need the trust of citizens to form a legitimate, effective or democratic government (Pechtold, 2005), as they need the support of citizens to make and implement decisions.

Pechtold (2005) describes trust as ‘capital’ for governments to ‘invest’ in reform. Governments need trust to build partnerships and social cooperation, which then enables decision making and the implementation of reforms to meet common objectives (Cheema, 2007). This can be particularly important for reforms with long term gains which incur costs in the short term. If the public trusts governments, they will be more engaged with service delivery, which will lead to improved services, while an absence of trust undermines legitimacy of public office-holders to act on the behalf of the public (Graham, 2006). When citizens lose trust, they become less interested in participating in the government process and less likely to support and follow government policy decisions (Robillard, 2003).

At the same time, a level of distrust is also important in democracies, as this promotes accountability. Democratic societies rely on public trust but also include checks and balances, such as legislative transparency, the use of audits and the rule of law and an impartial judiciary, to insure that trust is upheld (Mulgan, 2005). This becomes a paradox of democracy: by using principles such as periodical elections and terms of office, democracies institutionalise distrust and thereby support a culture of trust in society (Sztompka, 1998). Finally, in a democracy if the government loses the trust of citizens, it can be replaced with a new government.

1.4 why look at trust in government now?

Governments around the world have been undertaking significant reforms in public administration, which has changed the way the public sector works, how governments and citizens interact and how the public can be involved in policy making. Despite making government more efficient, effective, transparent and responsive, there is a view that public trust in government has not improved (Pechtold, 2005).

The new public management reforms also changed the role of the citizen to consumer (Christensen & Lægried, 2003). By focusing on customer demands and expectations, it is expected that public services will be more effective and that outputs will be more consistent with community preferences, a key goal of democracy. However, citizens have additional duties that clients or customers do not (Noordhoek & Saner, 2005). This can have two implications for trust.

Firstly, consumers and citizens have different motivations in decision making: consumer choices are based on self interest, whereas citizens are obligated to think of the collective good (Aberbach & Christensen, 2005). If government focuses on consumers above citizens, this promotes individualism and de-emphasises collective activities and thinking, part of the fabric of democracy.
Secondly, consumers can have a more direct influence on decisions about policies and services (Aberlach & Christensen, 2005), but this can create inequalities for those without the intellectual or material resources to make informed decisions about consumption (Aberbach & Christensen, 2005). This more direct experience and influence may impact on trust, depending on people’s perceptions of efficiency-oriented reforms and their expectations and experiences as customers (Christensen & Lægried, 2003).

The issue of trust and making collective decisions is particularly relevant as governments increasingly face a range of complex or ‘wicked’ problems, such as climate change, the ageing population and protection against terrorism or other threats. With no easy solutions, governments need to convince constituents (including businesses) to make sacrifices and to change their behaviours so that outcomes for the public can be achieved (Mulgan, 2004; Lyons, 2007). Low levels of trust in government will make this challenging, if not impossible.
Measuring trust in government is a complex area; levels of trust can vary between perceptions of public institutions, public servants and officials, politicians and public sector employees. Overall data in Australia on trust and confidence in parliament and other institutions shows variation over time and between measures.\footnote{Data from Australia-wide surveys is considered here as Victoria-specific data is not available}

Goot (2002) collated data from a range of surveys conducted between 1969 and 1999, where respondents were asked if they believe the government can be trusted. In 1969, 46\% of Australians reported that the government can be trusted ‘sometimes’ or ‘usually’. The data shows some fluctuation over time but in 1999 this had decreased to 37\%. Figure 1 shows the data for all surveys between 1969 and 1999.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Proportion of Australians who believe the government can be trusted ‘sometimes’ or ‘usually’}
\end{figure}

The World Values Survey, conducted in Australia in 1983 and 1995, also provides some broad measures of trust, asking respondents to indicate their level of confidence in a range of institutions (World Values Survey, 2006). Table 1 shows the proportion of people with ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence in parliament, civil service, the armed forces, police and the justice system. Confidence in all of these institutions except the armed forces declined, with the greatest decreases in confidence in the justice system and in parliament.
Table 1 World Values Survey: % of Australians with ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of confidence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1981</th>
<th>1995</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Civil service</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>↓9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliament</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>↓24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed forces</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>66.0</td>
<td>↓0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>↓4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice system</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>↓25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major businesses</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>↓21.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Confidence in parliament decreased from 54.8% in 1981 to 29.9% in 1995. Confidence in the civil service also declined, from 46.8% to 37.4% in 1995. Most recently, confidence in the civil service was higher than confidence in parliament. In contrast, confidence in major businesses is higher than confidence in parliament or the civil service.

The Roy Morgan survey of professional ethics and honesty provides a measure of trust in members of parliament and other professionals (Roy Morgan Research, 2005). While there are some fluctuations, the data show a steady decline in perceptions of parliamentarians in the survey years since 1974. The 2005 survey results indicate that 15% of people believe federal members of parliament have ‘very high’ or ‘high’ standards of ethics and honesty, compared to 13% of state members of parliament. This ranks parliamentarians among the bottom third of the 28 professions included in the survey.

Transparency International provides an additional measure of trust of the public in government. Australia is ranked eighth out of 164 nations included in the Corruption Perception Index, last compiled in 2004 (Transparency International, 2004).

Internationally, there is a widely held perception that political and social trust are in decline (Blind, 2007; Levi & Stoker, 2000), but this is not without debate. The lack of time series data, fluctuations in the data that is available and diversity of levels of trust towards different institutions and across countries make it difficult to claim with confidence that trust has declined universally (Public Governance Committee, 2005). Even in Australia, Goot (2002) argues that the timing of surveys in relation to the election cycle may explain the changes in perceptions rather than representing a crisis of trust in government. Governments new to office are more likely to be trusted than those who have been in office for a long time.

Christensen and Lægreid (2002) note that trust may have both personal and institutional aspects, where peoples’ level of trust may differentiate between the system and individual actors they observe or interact with. This has also been described as diffuse or specific trust (Blind, 2007). Measures of trust show a ‘paradox of distance’, whereby the public indicates high levels of trust in local public services, such as a school or hospital, but low levels of trust in the system as a whole. In Australian surveys of confidence in federal, state and local governments, the latter enjoy higher levels of confidence that federal or state governments (Goot, 2002). Despite claims that they do not trust government, Victorians continue to place their trust in public institutions, such as health services, public infrastructure and educational institutions, as they go about their daily lives.
3 factors contributing to changes in trust

3.1 perceptions of government integrity

Early discussions about trust assumed that government scandals, politicians behaving dishonourably and public rejection of major political decisions were to blame for the decrease in trust. This argument was particularly prevalent in America, where scandals such as Watergate were seen to be responsible for eroding the public’s confidence in government (Leigh, 2002).

It is self evident that eradicating corruption and improving the ethics and integrity of government will improve political trust (Blind, 2007) and this has been confirmed by empirical research. For example, Job (2005) found that trust in government suffered when people perceived corruption and a lack of honesty in government. There is also evidence that there is scope to improve trust – the Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer shows that citizens rate political parties and parliaments as the most corrupt institutions in society (Transparency International, 2006).

Organisations and jurisdictions have been pushing for greater integrity and ethical standards among politicians and public officials. Donald Johnson, until recently the OECD Secretary-General, called for leaders to focus on restoring principles, values and ethics to rebuild trust in government (Johnson, 2003). In countries like the United States and United Kingdom, centres or committees have been established to champion ethical behaviours and principles (Centre for Ethics in Government, 2007; Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2007).

Both Robillard (2003) and Uhr (2005a) argue that it is not enough for governments to tell citizens to ‘trust us’. Trustworthiness needs to be demonstrated through ethical behaviour, transparency and prudential stewardship (Robillard, 2003) and through a balance of responsibility and accountability (Uhr, 2005a). Governments need a culture that promotes ethical behaviours as well as maintaining institutions equipped to monitor the accountability of government and public officials (Uhr, 2005b).

Perceptions of honesty and ethics are not limited to politicians – the behaviours of public officials may also influence citizen trust. Civil servants can be less prone to perceptions of corruption, as they may be trusted to represent the public interest in areas of administration (Blind, 2007). Winston (2002) looks at the moral competencies that public servants need to provide good governance. These include fidelity to the public good, the duty of civility, respect for citizens as responsible agencies, prudence and proficiency in social architecture. As governments change, practitioners need to stay focused on these moral dimensions to ensure good governance.

Despite the focus on ethics and integrity of government in recent years, trust has not improved significantly, suggesting that integrity and ethical standards are important but are not the only drivers of trust in government. Job’s research supports this: while perceptions of corruption and honesty were important, so to were levels of social trust. If people trust each other and strangers in general, they may trust their government even if there is some level of perceived or real corruption (Job, 2005).
3.2 perceptions of government performance

In addition to improved ethics and integrity, citizen’s expectations of a fair and efficient government and poor government performance may lead to lower satisfaction and trust (Van Ryzin, 2006). The increased focus on the role of the citizen as consumer makes this a potentially significant area.

The relationship between government performance and trust is unlikely to be straightforward, as demographics, culture, expectation, experiences and satisfaction may all influence citizen perceptions. The direction of causality is a further complication: perceptions of government performance may influence trust in government, but trust and other attitudes towards government may impact on perceptions of performance (Van de Walle & Bouchaert, 2003). Van Ryzin (2006) has attempted to account for these factors in his conceptual framework for investigating the relationship between government performance, satisfaction and trust. Van Ryzin proposes four stages, each influenced by exogenous factors such as demographics or attitudes:

- Public managers use strategies to influence outcomes;
- Citizens experience or perceive these outcomes;
- Performance perceptions are combined by citizens into overall satisfaction judgements, weighing expectations and perceptions;
- Citizens’ overall satisfaction contributes to trust and influences behaviours.

A range of studies have explored the relationship between government performance and trust and have found that various aspects of government performance are relevant to perceptions of trust (Keele, 2004). How well governments manage the economy and issues such as crime and security can influence perceptions of trust. Job (2005) found that when people perceive their government to be distributing funds wisely and fairly, trust in government is higher.

Analysis by Barnes and Gill (2000) suggests that perceptions of government performance may be more important than actual performance. They collected data on 35 indicators of progress (such as prosperity, quality of life, personal security and affordability of housing). When they compared these to measures of trust, they found that trust declined as government performance improved. They concluded that mistrust was not directly related to government performance and factors such as higher expectations may also have a role in the decline in trust.

International research also indicates that while trust may be related to government performance, improvements in performance do not automatically lead to increased trust (Public Governance Committee, 2005). OECD analysis shows that governments have become more efficient, transparent and customer-focused, but this may not be enough to gain the full confidence of the public, particularly as citizen expectations continue to rise (Sallard, 2005; OECD, 2006). Governments are also faced with two conflicting trends: on one hand, people want to be left alone to make decisions about their own lives, but at the same time have greater expectations of government.

3.3 changes in social trust

It is possible that the changes in political trust over time may reflect a broader societal change, particularly changes in interpersonal or social trust. While government performance and integrity may influence political trust, improvements in these areas have not generated a return of high levels of trust in politicians and government, suggesting that other issues are involved.
The decreases in political trust have not happened in isolation: trust in other professions and institutions have also declined. Confidence in major businesses, trade unions and the press has declined (World Values Survey, 2007) and perceptions of ethics and honesty in bank managers, lawyers and journalists have also declined (Roy Morgan, 2005).

Two factors may be of particular relevance for political trust: civic engagement and social trust, which in turn are two key aspects of social capital (Keele, 2004). It seems likely that socially trusting people are more willing to trust government and in particular that those who are engaged in civic activities are likely to sense greater opportunities for influence through established political processes and thus trust government institutions. Putnam, who first argued that social capital has declined in the United States, suggests that building social capital builds social cooperation and encourages effective government, leading to political trust (Putnam, 1995).

This raises two questions about social capital and political trust. Firstly, is there evidence that social trust and civic engagement influence political trust and secondly, what drives changes in social capital (and how can it be improved)?

Research does indicate that social capital has an impact on political trust. Keele (2004; 2007) looked at social capital in general (using a combination of social trust and civic engagement measures) and found that government performance has an impact on political trust in the short term, but that social capital had a more decisive and powerful effect on political trust in the long term.

Some researchers have looked more specifically at the role of social trust and civic engagement in political trust. Research on social trust indicates that higher levels of social trust contribute to higher levels of political trust. For example, Donovan and Denemark (2007) analysed international data to show that high levels of interpersonal trust sustain high levels of political trust. In Australia, Job (2006) found that social trust predicted political trust, particularly for local government institutions. Job suggests that if people learn trust through their family, social and workplace experiences, they then trust people they do not know, including those with different social status and power.

The evidence around civic engagement is less clear. Job (2006) found that civic engagement was only weakly related to political trust and was not predictive of levels of trust in government at either the local or remote level. Other researchers have looked more specifically at political involvement and have found this to be related to political trust. These studies show that citizens with more positive views of democracy and with a greater sense of influence on political outcomes have a higher trust in government (Christensen & Lægried, 2002; Donovan & Denemark, 2007).

In Australia, interest and involvement in political activity appears to be remaining steady. Goot (2002) cites survey data that shows similar levels of political interest (or interest in ‘what’s going on in politics’) across the 1980s and 1990s, with over two thirds of the population taking some or greater interest. Worthington (2001) reports that support for major political parties is declining, as shown by voting patterns in federal elections, but notes that the formal vote in Commonwealth elections increased in 96% in the 1980s to 97% in the 1990s.
A wide range of factors could be involved in changes in social capital and social trust. Putnam considered trends such as mobility and suburbanisation, education levels, changes in traditional family units, the role of women and generational effects (Putnam, 1996). His analysis shows that there is a generational effect for trust, where people who came of age after World War II are less civic-minded and less trusting. When factors such as age, income and education are controlled, there is also a strong impact of technology on social capital; television watching is strongly and negatively related to social trust. Other researchers have suggested that the trend towards social modernisation or post-materialist and post-modern values are responsible for the changes in trust in advanced industrial countries (Dalton, 2005; Inglehart, 2000) where those with higher living standards and more freedom also have lower trust.

There is contrasting evidence around the role of education. Some analyses show higher education levels lead to higher trust, presumably because people with more education also have a greater understanding of and support for political processes (Christensen & Lægried, 2002; Putnam, 1996). This may be the case in older generations, but other evidence suggests that among younger generations, higher education levels lead to a greater scepticism of political processes and lower levels of trust in government (Dalton, 2005).

Putnam’s ideas about social capital and its relationship to trust in government have generated considerable debate, challenging both his data analysis and the conclusions drawn (Smith, 2001). In Australia, while it is acknowledged that social capital is important, it has not been established that social capital is decreasing (Leigh, 2002; Goot, 2002; Worthington, 2001). Fukuyama (1999) suggests that governments can increase social capital through education, by providing public goods (such as property rights and public safety) and by avoiding taking on activities better left to the private sector or civil society, to avoid people becoming dependent on governments to organise society. Beyond this, Fukuyama suggests that it is difficult for government to influence social capital in communities (Fukuyama, 1999).
4 the influence of the media

If citizen’s perceptions of their political efficacy or of government integrity and performance are as important as what the government actually does, then channels of information about and ways of engaging with government become critical for influencing trust in government.

John Lloyd argues that the media is now almost the only carrier of political messages, as other traditional forms of interaction between parliamentarians and the public (such as political party and union membership) have declined (Button, 2007). This particularly becomes an issue when journalists have a distrustful attitude towards politicians.

Television has become a key source of information about government, with a focus on graphic, dramatic and instant stories with little depth of analysis (Barnes & Gill, 2000). It is generally agreed that political reporting has changed over the last few decades, with a greater focus on conflict and negative reporting (Leigh, 2002). O’Neill (2002) suggests that the media bombards the public with information, reporting and opinion and that while the public consumes this it remains sceptical about the independence and impartiality of journalists.

In the sixties, Harold Evans, then editor of the Sunday Times, told his reports to remember one question to think about when interviewing politicians: ‘why is this bastard lying to me?’ Back then, this was the view of a radical reporter, but it is seen as the ingrained approach of most modern reporters (Button, 2007; Mulgan, 2004). Mulgan (2004) claims that the media – with some exceptions – lacks a strong ethic in searching for the truth, leaving the public with inaccurate views on the world around them. This is, he suggests, a major reason for the decline in trust in government.

O’Neill suggests that editors and journalists needs to become more accountable, through steps such as separating reporting and opinion, declaring interests and disclosing payment for information (O’Neill, 2002). Mulgan advises government and public agencies to follow simple rules to regenerate trust. He suggests that when governments do their job well, try to be honest and service the public, and communicate and apologise when things go wrong, trust has improved (Mulgan, 2004).

Governments also have other avenues to interact with citizens. Decentralisation and local autonomy can foster more participatory governance and allow citizens to become active partners in policy design and implementation, bringing government and citizens closer and enhancing trust (Cheema, 2007). Governments need to ensure that not only do they engage with citizens, but that they also demonstrate to citizens that they are listening and using their input (OECD, 2006).
conclusions

Trust is clearly important for governments: it is a requirement for forming a democratic government and to carry out the business of public administration without overly burdensome costs and regulations. It is also clear that trust cannot be assumed: governments need to act and appear trustworthy to be trusted.

Ethical and honest behaviour among politicians, morally competent behaviour among public servants and a lack of corruption are all necessary conditions for building political trust. It is also evident that citizens’ perceptions of government performance, influenced by expectations and service experiences, impact on their trust in government.

These two factors, the integrity and performance of government, form the basis of rational evaluations of government (Job, 2005). Improvements in these areas do lead to increases in trust, although trust may also influence these perceptions. However, recent improvements in rational perceptions of government have not been enough to significantly improve trust. This suggests that rational factors are necessary but not sufficient for high levels of trust in government.

Changes in political trust have not occurred in isolation from other changes. Political trust may be dependent to a large degree on aspects of social capital, particularly social trust, where changes in political trust reflect broader social changes. Changes in the role of citizens as consumers, social modernisation, post materialism, generational changes and other social trends may all be having an impact on social and thus political trust.

This raises the issue of the ability of governments to influence political trust and more broadly social trust. Fukuyama (1995) suggests that governments do not have many angles to changing trust in government, as many of the key influences rely on social interactions and connections between citizens. Governments also need to decide to what degree they want to intervene. Political trust is critical for good governance and for a well functioning government, but at the same time citizens increasingly want to be left alone by government, free to make their own choices and decisions (Pechtold, 2005).

Internationally, it is generally agreed that trust in governments has declined and that governments need to improve citizen trust. Increasingly, governments face significant issues that require citizens to trust that government will make decisions that are for the public good in the long term, even if the decisions involve short term sacrifices. These issues include climate change, wars and the health and income needs of the growing elderly population. However, the theories and evidence about the nature and direction of causal influences on political trust are equivocal and in some cases contradictory.


