mental attitudes but without threatening the survival of liberal democracy itself.

Putnam (2002) suggests that declining faith in government represents a deflation of the political culture, reducing the capacity of the political system to achieve shared goals. The argument here is that trust encourages cooperation, while distrust breeds political deflation. A culture of trust oils the wheels of collective action, enabling projects to be initiated which are impractical in a society where mutual suspicion prevails. But as trust in government falls, so people become less willing to believe what their leaders say, to turn out at elections, to fight wars, and to support public projects in which they do not see a sure return for themselves or their immediate circle (Hetherington, 2004).

Just as trust in others builds social capital, so trust in government creates political capital. Where the bond between citizens and government is strong, the government will be granted the flexibility needed to respond effectively to shared problems. So, we have here another angle on the cultural basis of stable liberal democracy; one focused on political trust, rather than the civic culture.

It is ironic, suggest Putnam and Goss (2002, p. 3), that ‘just at the moment of liberal democracy’s greatest triumph, some fundamental social and cultural conditions for effective democracy may have eroded in recent decades, the result of a gradual but widespread process of civic disengagement’.

In an influential study using Italy as his laboratory, Putnam (1993) attempted to test his ideas about trust by showing how a supportive political culture directly enhances the performance of a political system. In their original work, Almond and Verba had portrayed Italy as a country whose people felt uninvolved in, and alienated from, politics. Italian culture was distinctly uncivic, lacking positive and supportive attitudes among the majority.

Putnam revisits Italy’s political culture, paying more attention to diversity within the country. He demonstrates how cultural variations within Italy influenced the effectiveness of the 20 new regional