Citizens in most countries of the world profoundly distrust policy makers and, more generally, state institutions. This attitude has taken root in developed countries even though their economic and social conditions are good, relative to the rest of the world. In an influential comparative study, Inglehart writes that “today, political leaders throughout the industrialized world are experiencing some of the lowest levels of support ever recorded.”

Twenty-five years after the publication of *The Crisis of Democracy* by Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki – a groundbreaking study predicting a bleak future for democracy in the Trilateral countries – Pharr and Putnam have assembled a number of authors to revisit the seminal thesis. While there is no consensus on the causes and the consequences of the declining confidence in policy makers, almost no one disputes its significance. In their introductory chapter to *Disaffected Democracies*, Putnam, Pharr, and Dalton write: “A large body of evidence demonstrates that over the quarter century since Crozier and his colleagues issued their report, citizen’s confidence in governments, political parties, and political leaders has declined significantly in most of the Trilateral democracies.”

Studies have related this widespread distrust to several factors, including: increased media coverage of corruption scandals, unmet expectations and disappointment with the ideals of modernity, and changing social tastes. Highlighting bureaucratic aberrations and doubtful behaviour on the part of politicians now occupies a pride of place in the news media’s marketing strategies. This situation can serve only to foster cynicism among those citizens enduring unemployment and social inequities while they await the prosperity that modernity was expected to bring. Furthermore, the younger generation born at the tail end of the age of modernity may not even share these materialistic values, which have served to legitimize contemporary state institutions.

Whatever the specific reasons behind this crisis of confidence, it is broadly associated with a sense that countries are not properly governed.
Some people might believe corruption diverts policy makers from their legitimate objectives, while others might think state institutions are not designed to address the right problems, but all seem to agree that government is not what it should be. Putnam, Pharr, and Dalton put forward the following argument: “The fact that public confidence has declined can be taken to mean that governmental performance is less satisfactory than it once was.” Concurring with them, although approaching the problem from an entirely different theoretical perspective, Schneider and Ingram state:

Discontent with democracy in the United States carries a curious twist in that criticism is not directed at the traditional symbols or mechanisms of democracy. Complaints are seldom heard about persons being denied the right to vote, to express their opinions, or to run for office. Journalists are not being jailed, threatened, or fined for criticizing the government or its policies. Leaders of radical social movements – either right or left – are not being denied the right to speak, demonstrate, or assemble. Criticisms in the United States center around governance – the capacity of a democracy to produce public policy that meets the expectations of the society.

Concerns about governance are not only common in the United States, but widespread throughout the advanced world. These concerns lie at the root of my motivations for this book proposing a closer examination of governance, via a comparative perspective, in three advanced democracies: France, the United States, and Canada.

Studying governance means recognizing that policy making is not exclusively the purview of government since bureaucracies and interest groups are also involved. Citizens not only distrust government, but also distrust the bureaucracies and the various interest groups involved in policy making. As Pierre and Peters argue, “a key reason for the popularity of this concept [governance] is its capacity – unlike that of the narrower term ‘government’ – to cover a whole range of institutions and relationships involved in the process of governing.” In other words, governance is achieved through complex relationships within the policy networks of state and civil society actors. Policy networks are structures that regulate the interactions of state and civil society actors in the governance process. These networks can influence how problems are defined or how the agenda is set. Certainly, they play a key role in policy formulation and implementation.

Political scientists have been prolific in developing theories to account for the role of state, nonstate, and even extraterritorial actors interacting in networks for the purpose of governing. Interestingly enough, several of these theoretical constructions inspire no more than further disillusionment
with governance. Power-hungry bureaucrats and resourceful special interest groups, allied with extraterritorial organizations accountable to no one, are often presented as controlling an ever-increasing share of policymaking activities. Interestingly, observers of these distrustful attitudes, although attentive, tend to overlook the effect that this type of intellectual production itself may have on the crisis of confidence. In any case, this book seeks to assess whether, in line with such theories, networks of actors governing advanced societies fail to address so alarmingly the most serious collective problems. Are policy solutions so poorly designed as to worsen problems rather than make them better? In other words, are countries so badly governed as to justify distrust in policy-making institutions and actors? These questions will be examined through a careful study of agro-environmental policy, one field of policy making among many to which they could be addressed.

Producing serious empirical analysis investigating these questions is of crucial importance. Although this crisis of confidence has remained short of generating popular demonstrations and mass riots against democratic institutions, it is not without consequences. Distrust encourages illicit behaviour such as cheating on taxes and a more general disregard for the law. It also discourages young, talented people from contemplating a career in the public sector. Distrust reduces the possibility for social solidarity and may consequently cultivate social fragmentation. It gives momentum to the project of dismantling states’ policy-making capacity. In so doing, distrust runs the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy since a harsh social climate and the hollowing-out of the public sector make for difficult conditions of governance. Given these plausible consequences, the scholarly output and the theoretical models of governance that feed into the crisis of confidence deserve serious analysis.

The detailed examination provided here of environmental policy development for the agricultural sector in three countries – France, the United States, and Canada – should serve as a warning against the temptation to rapidly conclude that governance is alarmingly inadequate in advanced democracies. More often than not, policy networks are found to produce agro-environmental policies that address the concerns of wide constituencies. What is more, poor policy making has little to do with big bureaucracy and special interest groups to which political scientists have often attributed policy failures. This analysis suggests that publicly engaged intellectuals should attempt to curb the confidence crisis before the self-fulfilling prophecy of inadequate governance becomes a reality.

**Problem-Solving Policy Networks**

Central to this book is the idea that a large proportion of the population in most countries believes governance does not occur in the way it
should. Since, as mentioned above, governance in advanced economies is achieved through policy networks, the confidence crisis suggests that citizens must often view these networks as wholly inadequate. But what would an adequate policy network look like?

Fritz Scharpf argues that the legitimacy of democratic policy-making arrangements can be both input-oriented and output-oriented. Input-oriented legitimization is based on the idea that democratic government is “government by the people.” Based on the principle of popular sovereignty, it requires a citizenry that desires to participate in the making of policy choices and therefore calls for open political institutions. Allowing a wide participation, institutions must inspire a sense that each and every citizen counts in the political community; institutions must allow for the voice of any citizen to be heard. In other words, an input-oriented perspective on legitimacy accords participation a value independent of the quality of the policy choices it produces.

This is a highly idealistic perspective on legitimacy. Scharpf has argued that in large countries, where the citizenry is minimally unified, institutions can rarely simultaneously allow everyone to participate and still function adequately. The idea of a policy network itself suggests a certain form of exclusion, which, it can be assumed, renders policy making easier. To be sure, openness can confer a measure of input-oriented legitimacy onto policy networks, but, as they imply some exclusion, participation in them will never constitute a sufficient source of legitimacy. Therefore, when examined exclusively from an input-oriented legitimacy perspective, networks never come across as adequate policy-making arrangements. In networks, as in most institutional settings, input-oriented legitimacy needs to be complemented by output-oriented legitimacy.

Where “government by the people” can be only approximated, citizens of democratic societies should expect “government for the people” to confer output-oriented legitimacy on policy-making arrangements. As Scharpf sees it, “output-oriented notions refer to substantive criteria of buon governo, in the sense that effective policies can claim legitimacy if they serve the common good.” In areas where specialized knowledge is required, all forms of popular participation can even be suspended and power delegated to administrative bodies that are thereby entirely deprived of input-oriented legitimacy. In several countries, central banks have very little input-oriented legitimacy, relying instead on output-oriented legitimacy. Citizens are content with central bankers looking after their long-term interests. The judicial review responsibilities of courts also fall into this category. Constitutional law is a fundamental area that citizens and elected officials in several countries have preferred to leave in the hands of those who possess the best knowledge of legal principles and traditions.
While central banks and courts sometimes make controversial decisions, the belief that worse decisions would come out of institutions more open to participation is a sufficient source of legitimacy.

Most of the time, however, policy efficacy does not require such a complete suspension of the institutions from which input-oriented legitimacy normally emerges. More often, input-oriented aspects blend with output-oriented aspects to confer legitimacy upon policy-making arrangements. In addition, it should not be assumed that policy efficacy necessarily decreases as participation increases. Scharpf suggests that mechanisms such as elections, which we tend to view in terms of input-oriented legitimacy, can sometimes contribute to increasing policy-making efficacy. In a recent study, MacAvoy shows that ordinary citizens’ participation in environmental management makes for better solutions. And I later argue that good policy-making performances require a relative openness of policy networks.

Nevertheless, participation alone rarely appears sufficient to legitimize institutions. Results are always expected: While results sometimes justify the suspension of participation, participation never justifies the suspension of results. In other words, input can only go so far in legitimizing political institutions, and therefore output-oriented legitimacy appears crucial to modern states. Modern states need the capacity to resolve pressing collective problems. To return to the initial question in this section, an adequate policy network is one that makes a strong contribution to output-oriented legitimacy by resolving collective problems efficiently.

Surprisingly, few studies have sought to link policy network structures and the performances of political actors attempting to resolve problems. Most of the study of networks has preferred to shed light on participation, on patterns of exclusion, or on the power distribution embodied within networks. Rhodes suggests six reasons that make networks important: (1) they limit participation; (2) they define roles; (3) they exclude issues from the policy agenda; (4) they shape the behaviour of actors; (5) they privilege certain interests; and (6) they substitute private government for public accountability. Rhodes' interest in policy outputs is limited; while conclusions on policy outputs may be derived from the power-interaction analysis he proposes, he does not go the extra mile to link networks to systematic policy choices. In other words, the network analysis produced by Rhodes raises important input-oriented legitimacy questions but does little for output-oriented legitimacy.

The work of Bressers and O'Toole is more systematically concerned with the policy outputs that networks are likely to yield. Specifically, they attempt to show that the choice of policy instruments depends on two sets of network characteristics: (1) the degree of cohesion of the networks
in question; and (2) the interconnection they establish between state and civil society actors. For instance, they argue that networks with weak cohesion and weak interconnectedness, because they require state actors to make an appeal to more coherent normative values, are likely to resort to regulations. While this may represent one of the most systematic attempts to correlate network types and policy outputs, the focus on policy instruments does not extend easily to reflections on specific performances of political actors and policy networks or, as a result, to reflections on output-oriented legitimacy. As I argue in Chapter 2, it may be possible to attain the same result with two different policy instruments, at least in the environmental sector.

Moving closer to the question of output-oriented legitimacy is the network literature centred on policy change. At the heart of these studies is the idea that networks display different capacities for mediating the effect of globalization or regional integration. In countries and sectors where networks establish close interconnections between well-organized groups and state agencies, often in so-called corporatist networks, adaptation to regional or international pressure takes on a distinctive domestic character. This conclusion encourages reflections on output-oriented legitimacy in many ways. Borrowing from Polanyi’s *Great Transformation*, some might view as encouraging that resistance to the tenets of the self-regulating market remains possible in this era of globalization. However, the proponents of the self-regulating market might have a different view. In any case, the objective of these studies on policy change has not been to think about output-oriented legitimacy systematically. In addition, globalization is only one among several challenges facing the modern state, and therefore assessing networks’ adaptational capacity provides only a partial view of their performance.

When policy networks comprise strong state agencies, Atkinson and Coleman argue, they anticipate rather than react to problems. Although their notions of anticipatory and reactionary industrial policy are not easily transferable to sectors other than economic policy, Atkinson and Coleman provide a relative if not all-encompassing view of the policy-making performance of networks. In line with this groundbreaking work, Weiss suggests that networks establishing a pattern of “governed interdependence” between the state and civil society are those most likely to be capable of developing successful policy strategies in an ever-changing world. Although such networks constrain policy-making participation, they nonetheless constitute an important source of output-oriented legitimacy. Taking my cues from Weiss, I present in Chapter 3 specific hypotheses regarding networks’ capacity to generate good policy-making performance. Establishing a clear relationship between networks and policy-making performance is an essential and distinctive feature of this book.
Assessing Policy-Making Performance

When policy networks function adequately, or when they are capable of resolving collective problems – in short, when their policy-making performance is good – they deserve some legitimacy. One might suggest citizens are being misled if they are told to distrust such governance mechanisms. But how does one go about assessing policy-making performance?

Policy makers address a broad range of problems, from unemployment to the depletion of fish stocks, each requiring very particular expertise and solutions. Given such conditions, the task of assessing the problem-solving performance of policy makers for a representative sample of problems would be impossible to accomplish in a single book. The more representative the sample of problems becomes, the fewer the details that can enter into the analysis. This is a common problem in social science; as the number of cases increases, the relevance of the analysis to each of them often decreases. In this book, I have therefore chosen to focus on a single policy problem, assuming that cases differ so much in nature that any addition would engender a significant reduction in the quality of the analysis. I have focused my attention on agricultural pollution as it presents itself in three countries: France, the United States, and Canada.

Unlike for some other social problems, a large body of knowledge exists on potential solutions to environmental problems. It is not my intention to minimize the difficulty associated with addressing environmental problems, but as a British official once said: “There is virtually no form of environmental pollution that we do not know how to control.” It is particularly important for such a study on policy makers’ problem-solving capacity to focus on potentially resolvable problems. Who could blame policy makers for failing to solve problems for which no solutions currently exist? Agricultural pollution is indisputably a down-to-earth problem for which, as we will see in Chapter 2, several innovative solutions circulate in policy-making networks.

Inglehart’s studies of changing social tastes also justify the selection of such a postmaterialistic problem as environmental protection. As citizens’ worries become increasingly distant from material concerns, policy makers should pay increasing attention to postmaterialistic problems. In fact, policy makers may not be deserving of trust if they limit themselves to addressing problems in which citizens are losing interest.

If agricultural pollution is a problem for which innovative solutions exist, adopting these solutions nevertheless involves facing up to serious difficulties. Policy networks, upon which the responsibility is likely to fall for developing effective agro-environmental policies, are unlikely to be well disposed toward innovative solutions. Agriculture is a sector in which state intervention has been high, historically speaking. In turn, for administrative purposes, state intervention has involved establishing strong agricultural
bureaucracies accustomed to aiding farmers. Agricultural bureaucracies should consequently have a greater capacity than environmental agencies to develop and diffuse their policy preferences. In addition, farmers are generally efficiently organized and can therefore be expected to exert great influence within networks. Notably, they should be capable of resisting environmentalists’ demands for constraints on farming practices. Furthermore, those who no longer view policy making in exclusively domestic terms are also well served, as agriculture is arguably the object of the most ambitious common policy in Europe – a policy, incidentally, presently confronting certain difficulties – and now constitutes a major stake in international trade negotiations. It is at best unclear whether this supranational policy-making context enables superior agro-environmental policy-making performance. These themes will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that if policy makers can successfully develop environmental policies for agriculture, there is no reason to expect them to be unable to attain similar results in the relatively numerous sectors where political obstacles are fewer. While it may be hazardous to generalize from such a specific case as agricultural pollution, revealing successful environmental policy development in agriculture would offer a solid indication that policy networks can resolve problems more generally.

**Successful Environmental Policy Development in Agriculture**

In this book, the successful development of environmental policy in agriculture serves as an indication that policy networks are capable of addressing collective problems and that, therefore, they are deserving of trust. But the notion of successful environmental policy development deserves clarification. Janice Gross Stein reminds us that success in the utilitarian tradition is a function of internal satisfaction. If citizens who use the environment are satisfied, then environmental policy is successful. Inversely, if citizens who use the environment are unsatisfied, then the policy fails. In short, this utilitarian view forbids any questioning of citizens’ views. Citizens just cannot be wrong: If they think governance is inadequate, it must be inadequate. As I see questioning the opinions provided by citizens surveyed about governance as a worthy enterprise, I naturally reject the utilitarian method.

But I am not alone in thinking this way. In an analysis of education policy, Stein argues that parent satisfaction cannot be the sole measure of policy performance. She writes: “Most [citizens] would expect schools to be held accountable for more than the satisfaction of parents. They would expect student achievement to improve over time.” In the introduction to a collective book that takes dissatisfaction with government very seriously, Putnam, Pharr, and Dalton write: “None of us argue that popularity is the
sole measure of democratic performance, and all of us recognize that gov-
ernments often must (or should) take actions that might reduce their pop-
ularity in the short run. Some of us believe that democracy is not (just) about
making citizens happy, and that it is also supposed to facilitate ‘good gov-
ernment,’ whether or not citizens are pleased with government action.”32

Just as consumers lack knowledge about products, citizens are rarely in a
situation of perfect information about policy. Their opinions are often
shaped by widely diffused impressions that rarely accurately reflect the
actual situation in a sector. And it should also be underlined that public
opinion itself is not a homogeneous whole. While I agree that the indi-
vidual citizen’s views should not be taken lightly (otherwise, I would not
have written this book), they do not always provide a reliable and clear
measure of policy success. Therefore, assessing policy-making success re-
quires reference to collective values or external criteria. And reduction in
the environmental impact of modern farming practices immediately comes
to mind as the ultimate criteria for policy success in the agro-environmental
sector. Unfortunately, criteria selection is rarely this simple, essentially be-
cause of measurement problems.33

First, deciding upon when a policy problem has been effectively re-
solved often depends on where one draws the boundary that defines the
problem. For example, assuming that environmental experts have deter-
mined that the water in a hypothetical watershed shows unacceptable lev-
eels of contamination, one might suggest that the problem is solved the
day the contamination is brought down to an acceptable level. Moreover,
where environmental policies contribute to contamination reductions of
this sort, analysts might be tempted to conclude that successful policy-
making efforts have been made. However, a broader examination of the
situation might reveal that contamination levels were not reduced with-
out causing other problems. The environmental regulatory standards may
have impaired the competitiveness of the watershed and caused job losses.
Industries forced to invest in expensive technologies may suffer from a
reduced capacity to employ people. In addition, reductions in water con-
tamination in the watershed might cause new environmental problems if
the technologies used to comply with water regulations shift pollutant
emissions to the air and soil. In short, the broader view one has of a prob-
lem, the less likely one is to conclude that the solutions applied have
addressed it in a satisfactory manner.

Second, it is a difficult task to link a “solved” problem – if one can con-
vincingly be identified – to the effects of public policy. To illustrate this
difficulty, Putnam speaks of the “Massachusetts Miracle Fallacy.”34 As he ex-
plains, despite politicians’ rhetoric to the contrary, the strong economic
performance in New England at the end of the 1980s was not caused by
state policy. Similarly, reductions in contamination levels in the hypothetical
watershed discussed above may be attributable to a wide range of factors, and public policy may be only one of them. The adoption of cost-efficient new technologies by industry can effectively reduce pollution in the absence of any state intervention. Lower contamination may also result from plant closures due to a downturn in the business cycle that may not have much to do with government policy. Conversely, a situation where pollution levels remain high despite policy makers’ best efforts may not necessarily indicate a policy “failure.” When state intervention cannot improve a situation, it may nevertheless prevent it from getting worse and even contribute to avoiding major catastrophes. For example, public policies might incite growing industries to contain increases in pollutant discharges, thereby preventing a pollution problem from turning into a health hazard. In several policy sectors, including the environment, it is difficult to assess the precise impact of public policies.

To avoid the Massachusetts Miracle Fallacy, Putnam suggests focusing on policy outputs rather than on policy outcomes. Borrowed from systems analysis, the concept of policy outputs refers to the products of political institutions – namely, policy inaction or policy actions that generally apply to a sector – whereas policy outcomes refer to the impact of those actions or inactions on the sector.

Following Putnam, I have therefore identified success criteria relevant to policy outputs rather than policy outcomes. In this process, I have assumed that epistemic communities have a central role to play in defining appropriate solutions to policy problems. Taking a broad view of epistemic community, however, I was unable to single out a community of experts capable of providing policy makers with consensual indications as to which agro-environmental policy instruments work and which do not. Therefore, unlike some other studies of policy outputs, including that of Putnam, high-performance environmental policies do not necessarily converge toward a given “one best” policy approach or solution. As explained at length in Chapter 2, epistemic communities in the agro-environmental sector nevertheless agree on three broad principles: (1) the selected instruments should target significant changes in modern farm practices; (2) these changes should concern a wide range of practices; and (3) efforts should be made to spare, to the greatest extent possible, the profitability of agriculture. In light of current knowledge in the agro-environmental sector, I argue that these three principles derive from widely accepted collective values and constitute satisfying external criteria with which to assess environmental policy success in agriculture. In other words, the measure of policy-making performance that I propose in this book rests on the intrusiveness, the comprehensiveness, and the economic sensitivity of agro-environmental policy decisions.
If such policy-making efforts are to be devoted to agricultural pollution, it had better be a serious problem. Information to the contrary would indicate that policy makers are wasting their time and taxpayers' money and that, consequently, they are not deserving of trust. I therefore turn to a discussion of agricultural pollution's seriousness.

**How Serious Is Agricultural Pollution in France, the United States, and Canada?**

The United States and France are the largest exporters of agricultural commodities in the world, and Canada is not very far behind. To attain such a ranking in terms of agricultural exports, each of the three countries targeted agriculture for protection and state assistance in the postwar period. The idea was that a developed agricultural sector would contribute to broader economic and even strategic policy goals. In turn, state-encouraged increases in production were achieved in the context of a somewhat declining land base in each of the three countries. Intensive agriculture may of course contribute to soil erosion, but urban sprawl is an even more important contributor. In Canada, for example, urban sprawl in the Toronto and Montreal regions has occurred at the cost of some of the most fertile agricultural land in the country. Less land, combined with more production, necessarily engenders higher environmental risks.

In order to remain or to become important exporters of agricultural commodities, farmers in France, the United States, and Canada have had to rely increasingly on inputs such as pesticides and chemical fertilizers for crops, as well as on specialized feed and genetic technologies for livestock. For example, in Canada in 1960, farmers were using an average of 9 kilograms of commercial fertilizer per hectare of arable land; in 1987 the figure was 48 kilograms per hectare. In the US, 39 kilograms of commercial fertilizer per hectare were used by farmers in 1960; in 1987 this figure was 94 kilograms per hectare. In France the situation is even worse: In 1960, 102 kilograms of commercial fertilizer per hectare were used; in 1987 it had reached 299 kilograms per hectare. As a result, yields have substantially increased, especially in France. In 1960 French farmers were harvesting 0.41 metric tonnes of wheat per hectare; in 1996 they harvested 6.5 tonnes per hectare. In the US wheat yields between 1960 and 1996 increased from 0.29 tonnes per hectare to 2.41 tonnes per hectare. The figures for Canada are comparable, with 0.23 tonnes per hectare produced in 1960 and 2.26 tonnes per hectare in 1996. Similarly, the number of days to raise livestock has dropped significantly in all three countries as a result of important increases in farmers' spending on feed and supplements.

Statistics suggest that France has more reasons than the United States and Canada to be concerned about agricultural pollution. This is not entirely
surprising given that between the 1970s and 1980s France became the second largest exporter of agricultural commodities, just behind the United States, a country which is many times larger in terms of agricultural land. Furthermore, as the protection provided to French agriculture by the European Common Agricultural Policy is eroded by international trade agreements, competitive pressure appears to be leading to greater farm concentration in the crop and livestock sectors.

To be sure, agriculture was identified as an important source of pollution as early as the 1970s in all three countries. In France, a task force was mandated in the 1970s to study the problem of nitrates in water. This process led to the 1980 Hénin Report, which identifies a number of agricultural practices as contributing to the nitrate problem. In 1972 the United States and Canada began to sign agreements on water pollution in the Great Lakes. In these agreements, agriculture was already associated with water pollution. In 1984 a Canadian Senate report on soil erosion, *Soil at Risk*, made news headlines across the country. Senators complained that if nothing was done about the erosion problem, the agricultural capacity of Canada could be seriously impaired.

Using various techniques, government agencies have more recently quantified the impact of farming on water quality. Recent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) figures show that agriculture in the United States has contributed to the degradation of 60 percent of the country’s rivers and streams that were surveyed. The Institut français de l’environnement showed that 38 percent of the drinking water in France is threatened by agricultural pollution. An Agriculture Canada survey showed that 40 percent of the wells in rural Ontario are polluted at levels above the provincial standards.

Increased agricultural productivity has also caused air pollution problems. Of course, more fossil fuel is needed to run today’s modern agricultural machinery. Recent studies even show that gas emissions from livestock and their manure contribute to global warming. In recent years, odours from livestock production have disturbed enough voters to attract the attention of local politicians. In France, the United States, and Canada, rural residents discomforted by strong odours and dust have resorted to public demonstrations to express their concerns about the intensification of agricultural production.

In addition to the general effects of agriculture on the environment, a number of events associated with agricultural pollution have captured media attention in these three countries. Some cases of bacterial contamination of drinking water were particularly serious. The largest accident occurred in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where about 100 people are believed to have died and 403,000 others were made sick in 1993 after drinking water was contaminated with a parasite called cryptosporidium. The parasite, it
has been argued, originated from agricultural runoff. While it was predicted some time ago that cases of illness due to bacteria were likely to appear in Canada’s rural areas, a deadly accident finally occurred in Walkerton, Ontario, in the spring of 2000. Bacterial contamination is also a problem in France, but, in addition, cases of drinking water severely polluted with nitrates and agricultural chemicals have been reported. In the spring of 1997, the city of Rennes in France even stopped providing elementary school students with tap water for fear of contamination, notably by atrazine, a pesticide used by corn growers. After reports of problems of nitrate and bacterial contamination of water in France, the OECD issued a “recommendation” for the country regarding agricultural pollution. In Maryland and North Carolina, a microbe called *Pfiesteria* has killed thousands of fish in the past few years and might be associated with human health concerns. There is growing evidence that the outbreak was triggered by livestock manure run-off. One could also mention the broadly publicized lagoon spills in North Carolina in the summer of 1995. According to some accounts, the environmental impact of those spills compares in severity to the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which occurred off the coast of Alaska in 1989.

In short, under the conditions just described, it would be natural to expect policy networks in France, as well as in the United States and Canada, to turn to agricultural pollution and develop policies to address the problem. Failure to do so would constitute proof to the effect that advanced democracies are not properly governed – a situation indicating policy makers might not deserve to be trusted.

**A Comparative Research Design**

The crisis of confidence in policy makers is widespread within advanced democracies. Putnam, Pharr, and Dalton observe only small differences, distrust appearing only slightly less severe in some Northern European countries. Because the confidence crisis is based on a perception that countries are not properly governed, similarities in distrust levels appear curious since governance structures, or policy networks, markedly differ from country to country. Assuming that governance structures are not all equal, that they encourage differentiated policy-making performances in specific contexts, country variations in confidence levels should be apparent. The failure to observe such variations suggests possible distortions in popular perceptions regarding governance. In any case, this puzzle calls for a comparative research design, with two distinctive features.

First, the selected countries must face similar agro-environmental problems because the nature of problems likely influences policy-making performance. The policy-making performance of country A may be superior to that of country B, but little is revealed about the governance capacity of
policy networks if policy challenges in country A are much lighter than those in country B. In other words, because the nature of policy problems significantly varies between countries A and B, governance structures do not deserve more trust in the former country than they do in the latter. To highlight the contribution of networks to policy-making performance, it is essential to design a comparative research approach that makes invisible the influence of the nature of problems, and it is for this reason that I have selected countries that face similar agro-environmental challenges.

France, the United States, and Canada have relatively similar agricultural sectors. FAOSTAT, a Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) database, shows comparable net per capita production index numbers for the year 2001 for the three countries, the United States coming first with 108.4, Canada second with 105.4, and France third with 97.7. Among the top agricultural producers in the world, all three countries have experienced a substantial restructuring of their agriculture since the Second World War, resulting in a significant decrease in the number of farmers and an increase in the size of farms. In the year 2000, as a share of the total population, the agricultural population represented only 3.5 percent in France, 2.6 percent in Canada, and 2.3 percent in the United States. This decline has been accompanied by the intensive use of modern farming practices, requiring significant farm capital endowment. Despite possessing large agricultural economies, France, the United States, and Canada have nevertheless remained agriculturally diversified, combining field crops with the raising of livestock. As discussed above, in each of these countries, farming is sufficiently modern that pollution has become a problem. Although the intensity of intervention using fertilizers and other chemicals is particularly high in France, agricultural pollution also poses a significant challenge in the United States and Canada.

Second, the selected countries should possess different governance structures. If country A and country B face similar policy challenges but are governed by distinctive policy networks, these distinctive networks are likely to enter into an explanation of any differences in policy-making performance. Historical-institutional analysis, in fact, stresses differences in policy-making capacities arising from different institutional contexts. The logic of influence tied to a specific institutional context should shape policy networks in ways that will alleviate or aggravate policy-making performance. When the policy networks of a country are unable to formulate adequate policies, the citizens of this country are justified to complain about governance.

Institutional differences between France, the United States, and Canada are significant enough to expect variations in policy-making performance. France is a unitary country, a form of state whereby subnational governments are subordinated to the central government. In contrast, Canada is
a federation in which subfederal governments enjoy wide policy-making autonomy. The United States is also a federation, albeit a more centralized one than Canada. The parliamentary systems of the three countries also significantly vary. France has a semipresidential system of government in which the president exercises tight control over policy making, outside periods of cohabitation. Cohabitation occurs only when the president belongs to a political party different from that of the prime minister, who has to be supported by the Assemblée nationale. In contrast, the American president has little legislative control because Congress operates relatively independently. With a Westminster system of parliament, the Canadian prime minister has more legislative control than the American president. These institutional characteristics of each country are not without consequences for policy networks. The division and the separation of powers that characterize the United States fragment policy networks, some would say, in an exceptional manner. In contrast, the concentration of powers in France, arising from both the form of the state and its semipresidential system, encourages the formation of tight and cohesive networks around those in positions of power. One might however expect these networks to be currently under pressure arising from European integration. Networks in Canada are frequently trapped between the fragmentation logic of federalism and the concentration logic arising from Westminster parliamentarism. Canadian policy networks are likely to vary extensively depending on whether they operate in federal, provincial, or shared sectors of jurisdiction.

Policy studies on agriculture have documented the differences between the three countries at the level of policy networks. In France, agricultural policy making has been handled through a corporatist policy network, whereas in the United States, Congress has often played a determinant role in a network otherwise increasingly fragmented. Unsurprisingly, agricultural policy networks in Canada are relatively segregated between the provincial and federal levels of government, with stronger networks located in the provinces. Because such differences exist, one might expect policy-making performance in the agro-environmental sector to vary from one country to the next. In turn, such variations should raise questions as to whether the crisis of confidence deserves to be as widespread as it is.

Lastly, it should be noted that the research efforts leading to this book concentrated on the agenda-setting and policy-formulation stages of the policy-making cycle. Questions related to the policy-implementation and policy-evaluation stages were largely left out. The information on agenda setting and policy formulation in France, the United States, and Canada was primarily obtained through nearly one hundred confidential interviews conducted between 1997 and 1998 with officials representing all the
major organizations involved in agro-environmental policy. Several of these interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Quotes that did not risk breaching the confidentiality of the interviewees are reproduced in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The information obtained from these interviews was verified, to the greatest extent possible, using official documents and secondary sources. Official documents were also utilized to update the analysis to the spring of 2002.

**The Book’s Outline**

Overall, I argue in this book that distrust in governance arrangements is misplaced on two counts. First, the empirical evidence suggests that, more often than not, policy networks do in fact adequately address serious problems. While performance levels appear to be higher in France and in the United States, no network associated with agriculture and the environment in any of the three countries regarded agricultural pollution as a problem undeserving of its attention. Second, the factors usually suspected for policy-making failures were not found to have such effects in France, the United States, and Canada. In fact, there is no reason to suspect that bureaucracy, interest groups, or internationalization necessarily engender poor policy-making performance. Rather, it was found that under specific conditions, each of these factors can have positive effects on performance levels. In other words, beliefs to the effect that policy networks generally fail to address problems adequately are unjustified. The next six chapters will attempt to make this argument a convincing one.

In Chapter 2, I present a method for assessing policy-making performance in the agro-environmental sector. After discussing the objective- and solution-oriented methods, I propose an assessment based on points of convergence between otherwise competing epistemic communities. Three competing agro-environmental epistemic communities are identified. I show that despite competition over the specific manner of approaching agricultural pollution, these communities are in relative agreement over three policy beliefs: (1) environmental policy must bring major changes in farming practices; (2) it must cover a comprehensive range of farming practices; and (3) it should be economically sensitive. I thus conclude that highly proficient agro-environmental policy-making performance occurs when it allows the development of policies consistent with these beliefs.

In Chapter 3, after a brief discussion of agenda setting, I present the network approach, which informs the central argument of the book. I argue that problem solving is most likely to occur when actor constellations properly balance cohesion and diversity. In addition, network structures that attribute a central role to civil society actors, but that distribute power evenly between them and state actors, are those likely to yield the highest
performance because, following Weiss, they enable “governed interdepen-
dence.”68 I then move on to discuss a number of policy-making theories
suggesting that real-life networks are unlikely to be of this nature. In fact,
theories on the new politics of the welfare state, on regionalization, and
on internationalization appear to constitute solid foundations for the cri-
sis of confidence.

However, these latter theoretical proposals are quickly dismissed in Chap-
ter 4, the first of three empirical chapters. Chapter 4 shows that France,
between the 1980s and 1990s, moved from poor to high policy-making
performance. It is shown that multilevel governance, which strengthened
environmental bureaucracy without threatening interest groups’ role with-
in a corporatist network, did not prevent this change in performance level
but rather enabled it to occur.

Chapter 5 shows that although American policy makers did not attain a
performance level as satisfying as that found in France, they still obtained
good results. In fact, the central problem is one of coordination between
federal and state agro-environmental policy. This lack of coordination is
attributable to the presence of two complementary but largely auton-
omous actor networks rather than, as theoretically suspected in Chapter 3,
to bureaucracy, interest group politics, or internationalization.

Chapter 6 serves to confirm that these factors are not major causes of
bad policy-making performance. Of the three countries, Canada displays
the least satisfying performance level, thereby justifying citizens’ fears that
environmental policy makers fail to live up to their promises. However,
citizens would be targeting the wrong causes if they were to blame bureau-
crats and self-interested organized groups. In fact, it seems that only better
group organization and stronger bureaucracies within environmental pol-
cy policy networks would lead to an improvement in Canada’s environmental
policy-making performance.

After a systematic comparison of these three countries, Chapter 7 revis-
its the distrust-inspiring theories presented in Chapter 3. Central to this
chapter is the demonstration that these theories not only unjustifiably
nourish the crisis of confidence, but also misplace the responsibility for
policy-making failures. While the theories are not rejected altogether,
adjustments are proposed to give them a trust-inspiring twist.