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SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRUST:

**CONCEPTS, CAUSES AND
CONSEQUENCES**

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Our politics are polarizing and divisive, negative partisanship is on the rise, and people seem to be gradually retreating into their own information bubbles, only consuming information that reinforces their point of view. We are witnessing a global rise in populism and the reputation of liberal democracy has taken a hit. And attempts to reduce polarization, carried out most prominently by former President Barack Obama, have failed entirely.

Many think these unfortunate events are the result of falling social and political trust. But the truth is fairly complex, which is why it is important to examine what current trust research actually reports.

This essay outlines the nature, causes, and consequences of social and political trust. Its purpose is to both summarize some of the main findings of the large empirical literatures on social and political trust and to draw out some implications from these literatures for sustaining a diverse social order.

The overall conclusion of this essay is two-fold: First, social and political trust are critical social achievements for sustaining a diverse social order, but social trust is more important than political trust. Second, liberal-democratic market-institutions play a modest role in sustaining social trust, and a large role in sustaining political trust. We can conclude, then, that liberal-democratic market societies are part of a positive causal feedback loop that sustain trusting social orders with diverse persons who disagree.

This paper has seven sections. I begin by outlining the idea of social trust in the empirical literature and reviewing the way in which it is measured. I will then outline the causes of social trust in section II and explore the many consequences of social trust in section III. I will outline the distinct but related idea of political trust and review the way it is measured in section IV, and explore the causes and consequences of political trust in sections V and VI respectively. I conclude in section VII by exploring the implications of the previous sections for sustaining a diverse social order.



I.

WHAT IS SOCIAL TRUST?

Social trust, often referred to as “generalized” trust, is trust in strangers — persons within one’s society with whom one has little personal familiarity. Social trust can thus be understood broadly as trust in society. But trust to do what? Social trust is trust that persons will abide by social norms, which are publicly recognized, shared social rules that people both in fact expect one another to follow and think that everyone morally ought to follow.¹ Social trust creates a climate of practical and strategic stability. Because people in trusting societies generally believe that others will follow these social norms, they can formulate projects and plans with relative confidence.

This understanding of social trust is well-grounded in the social-trust literature. Most scholars see trust as a product of durable mutual expectations about cooperative moral behavior. Some, such as Eric Uslaner, a political scientist at the University of Maryland, understand moralistic trust as trust that others share one’s personal values. However, it is better to understand social trust as trust that people share and recognize an array of social rules that do not necessarily correspond to what persons consider of ultimate value in life.² We do not need to know a person’s ideology to know whether we expect them to stop at a red light, or to not steal your phone if you leave it in Starbucks by mistake. Social norms lie at the root of social trust, and norms and our personal ideals are not related in a straightforward way. Fortunately, that means we can socially trust persons with very different values than our own.

Importantly, social trust must be grounded in what the late political scientist Russell Hardin called trustworthiness, which we can understand as a disposition to comply with social norms. Social trust can only be rationally sustained if people think that those they trust merit that trust. In other words, it is rational to trust others only if we think they are trustworthy.³ And we can understand a socially trustworthy person as one who is disposed to follow shared social norms. We generally want social trust to be sustained for the right reasons. Pouring the “trust hormone” Oxytocin into the water supply might make people more trusting, but it is not a good way to promote social trust. It is better to sustain social trust by giving persons morally appropriate incentives to be trustworthy, and then allowing social trust to form as a free cognitive and emotional response to observed trustworthy behavior.

1 Bicchieri, Cristina. 2006. *The Grammar of Society*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

2 Uslaner, Eric. 2002. *The Moral Foundations of Trust*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

3 Hardin, Russell. 2004. *Trust and Trustworthiness*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.



Measuring Trust

The trust literature in political science and economics is decades old and there is a sizeable literature on that literature which assesses the viability of the trust measures. There are two main approaches to measuring trust found in the literature: direct and indirect. However, direct and indirect measures of trust don't always line up, and they seem to have conflicting implications. So, in order to draw clear lessons from the empirical literature on social trust, it is necessary to understand these tensions and make some judgments about how much weight to give evidence derived from these different measures. It is possible, in my view, to responsibly appeal to the empirical social-trust literature while taking worries about measurement seriously.

Direct measures of trust are based on people reporting their trust levels on surveys and questionnaires. Indirect measures infer subjective trust expectations by observing individual decision-making, behavior, and reactions, usually in structured experiments.⁴

The self-report surveys from which direct measures draw have been around since the early 1940s and begin with what I will call the standard trust question. Here's how the General Social Survey (GSS) phrases it: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?"⁵ In more recent surveys, such as the World Values Survey, the following two questions are also often included: "Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?" And: "Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance or would they try to be fair?" In many cases, responses are used to form an overall social-trust index. Today, researchers use modified versions of these early questions. Some new surveys include the "wallet" question: "If you lost a wallet or purse that contained \$200, how likely is it to be returned with the money in it if it was found by ..." and then provides different groups.⁶

A different set of questions asks individuals to report their level of trust in social, political and economic institutions. Direct measures of institutional trust arose during the 1960s and include questions about whether persons trust their government, certain political parties, or political officials. Surveys now often include questions with a structure like that found in the European Social Survey: "please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust."⁷ One of

4 Bauer, Paul, and Markus Freitag. 2017. "Measuring Trust." In *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, edited by Eric Uslaner, 1-29. New York: Oxford University Press., p. 3.

5 Jennings, M Kent, and Laura Stoker. 2004. "Social Trust and Civic Engagement across Time and Generations." *Acta Politica* 39, 342-379., p. 350.

6 Ibid, p. 7.

7 European Social Survey. 2016. ESS Round 8 Source Questionnaire. London: ESS ERIC Headquarters, c/o City University London.



these institutions is “the government,” which is also invoked with survey items like the following: “People have different ideas about the government in Washington. These ideas don’t refer to Democrats or Republicans in particular, but just to the government in general. We want to see how you feel about these ideas. For example ...”

Many readers, and philosophers in particular, will immediately worry that these questions are too vague for hundreds of studies and dozens of books to justifiably rely upon. Perhaps people have different views about who is included in “most people” other than, say, their countrymen. However, it turns out that generalized trust is a stable measure across a wide variety of contexts, both across cultures⁸ and within different radii of groups trusted.⁹ And many researchers think that these measures of generalized trust really are getting at some stable, society-wide attitude¹⁰ that other persons can be relied upon to engage in basic ethical behavior.

In the 1960s, lab work on game theoretic behavior began and laid the foundation for indirect measures of trust. The classic trust game is similar to the dictator and ultimatum games. In such games, one player has the authority to divide a prize between two parties, offer the division to the second party, and then the second party has the right to accept or reject the division. If the second party rejects the offer, neither party gets anything, but if he accepts, both parties receive the divided prize.

The trust game is a game of this type, though in many cases it involves trusting multiple people to act cooperatively. The canonical lab experiment occurs when subjects are randomly, anonymously paired with one another and given different jobs. It is described as follows:

Both players were given an endowment, and the first mover was asked whether she would be willing to send some part of her endowment to the second mover. The experimenter tripled whatever was sent to the second mover. The second mover was then asked how much he wished to send back to the first mover. Once the second mover completed his task, the players were paid and the experiment was over. Neither player knew the other, and they were paid in private. ... the game is a two-person sequential prisoner’s dilemma.¹¹

The game is thought to measure trust since the second mover has no self-interested motive to return part of her endowment to the first mover, and the first mover can infer this and so should send nothing either. But empirical research finds that trust in this sense is common in the laboratory.

8 Reeskens, Tim, and Marc Hooghe. 2008. “Cross-Cultural Measurement Equivalence of Generalized Trust from the European Social Survey (2002 and 2004).” *Social Indicators Research* 85, 515-532., p. 530 find that “Generalized trust ... seems to refer to the same latent structure across Europe.”

9 Delhey, Jan, Kenneth Newton, and Christian Welzel. 2011. “How General Is Trust in ‘Most People’? Solving the Radius of Trust Problem.” *American Sociological Review* 76, 786-807., p. 786.

10 Nannestad, Peter. 2008. “What Have We Learned About Generalized Trust, If Anything?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, 413-436., p. 418.

11 Wilson, Rick. 2017. “Trust Experiments, Trust Games, and Surveys.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, edited by Rick Wilson, 1-32. New York: Oxford University Press., p. 3.



The game is called the “trust game” because it appears to have elements of both trust and trustworthiness. The first mover exhibits trust because the first mover might be motivated by a trusting attitude to believe that the second mover will return some of her endowment. The second mover exhibits trustworthiness because the second mover doesn’t have to return any part of her gains.

The difficulty with the trust game is that motives other than trust might be at work, such as concerns with efficiency, reciprocity, and altruism.¹² But many think that the behavioral measures of trust are, for all their flaws, superior to the survey measures. As economists often stress, talk is cheap, while action is costly, so behavioral measures are more likely to reveal the truth.

A significant worry about much of the empirical literature derives from laboratory work on trustworthy behavior. Trust-game experiments suggest a “lack of close correlation between behavior and questionnaire responses” such that those who say they are highly trusting are not in fact more likely to cooperate in micro-level trust games.¹³ Worryingly, “the three questions most often used in survey research to measure general trust were not predictive of the likelihood that subjects will trust each other even in a repeated setting,” suggesting that the subjects may be “responding in a glib manner to this survey instrument.” In a recent survey of the literature on trust games and self-report measures, Rick Wilson of Rice University notes extensive research that shows that the two measures are uncorrelated. This line of research raises a serious concern: it could be the case that people say that they trust others but act as though they do not.

Some trust researchers have tried to answer this skepticism by arguing that in fact, the behavior and survey measures are congruent when it matters. For instance, trust researchers have found that “specific questions about past experiences of being trusted or extending trust in the past” were tied to trusting behavior and that the survey questions “were positively correlated with trustworthy, if not trusting, behavior.” Thus, since trust is arguably produced by the perception of trustworthy behavior in others, then the finding that high-trusters behave in a trustworthy fashion in experimental settings strengthens the case for congruence. High-trusters act in a trustworthy fashion because they believe others are trustworthy based on their observations.

Moreover, recent work has found a correlation between self-report measures of trust and trusting behavior in the trust game with high financial payoffs; the behavioral and survey measures largely converge when the payoffs in behavioral settings are high. Paola Sapienza of Northwestern University and colleagues found that as payoffs in the trust game increase,

¹² Wilson 2017, p. 4. Also see Cox, J. C. 2004. *How to Identify Trust and Reciprocity*. *Games and Economic Behavior* 46, 260-281.

¹³ Ahn, T. K., Elinor Ostrom, David Schmidt, and James Walker. 2003. Trust in Two-Person Games: Game Structures and Linkages. In *Trust and Reciprocity: Interdisciplinary Lessons for Experimental Research*, edited by Elinor Ostrom and James Walker, 323-351. New York: Russell Sage., p. 345.



the more the survey measures and the trust-game behaviors correlate.¹⁴ And Wilson found that “when the appropriate controls are put into place (at least among students in the lab), it appears that the first mover’s behavior and the General Social Survey item [the main trust question] are correlated.”¹⁵ So it looks like the trust-game data need not be taken to undermine the survey data.

There is another reason to remain confident in direct measures of trust. Laboratory settings may elicit different motives than those generally at work “in the wild.” Indirect measures may generate misleading results if artificial games, by abstracting from the social context that real interactions involve, lead participants to make choices inside experimental scenarios in a way that does not reliably reflect their level of trust in strangers in their societies. So even if it is true that the trust-game data and the survey data are inconsistent, it does not mean we should automatically favor the trust-game data. It is reasonable, then, to appeal to the direct measures of social trust, as long as we keep the limitations of the data in mind.

For the rest of this paper, then, I will draw primarily from direct measures of social trust. The great advantage of self-report measures is that they are cross-cultural and allow us to compare trust among different cultures and different types of institutions. The trust-game data are far less varied and rich. But the tensions between the survey- and trust-game-data should make us cautious about drawing definite conclusions about which institutional structures generate trust, even when the direct measures establish a clear correlation between social trust and certain rights practices and their associated institutional structures.

14 Sapienza, Paola, Anna Toldra-Simats, and Luigi Zingales. 2013. Understanding Trust. *The Economic Journal* 123, 1313-1332..

15 Wilson 2017, p. 8.



II.

THE SUSTAINING CAUSES OF SOCIAL TRUST: WHAT WE DO AND DON'T KNOW

Now let us turn to examine what causes social trust. This is a vital question given the importance of social trust for realizing a number of goods. For instance, economists, sociologists, psychologists and many others have argued that social trust is critical for maintaining well-functioning political and economic institutions. If members of a society do not trust one another, then they have little reason to take the risks required to create, build, and sustain good institutional structures. As such, social trust will generate many great goods. However, one of the most remarkable features of the literature on social trust is how little we know about what causes it to form and endure. If trust is in fact a linchpin of a healthy democracy and a thriving economy, then it is a matter of some urgency to develop a fuller and more rigorous understanding of the underlying conditions that sustain it.

Diversity

Some of the conventional wisdom about the sustaining conditions of social trust is false. Despite widespread belief to the contrary, there is, for instance, very little correlation between a society's degree of ethnic diversity and the level of social trust that it enjoys. According to a recent study by Peter Dinesen of the University of Copenhagen and Kim Sønderskov of Aarhus University, "meta-analyses report substantial variation in the relationship between ethnic diversity and social trust."¹⁶ It does appear that ethnic diversity can bear negatively on trust, but this is usually due to "lack of contact and a segregation effect," not diversity per se.¹⁷ Studies that control for the level of interaction across ethnic lines "indicate that the estimated effect of diversity becomes less negative/more positive under contact."¹⁸

¹⁶ Dinesen, Peter Thisted, and Kim Mannemar Sønderskov. 2017. Ethnic Diversity and Social Trust: A Critical Review of the Literature and Suggestions for a Research Agenda. In *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, edited by Eric Uslaner, 1-35. New York: Oxford University Press., p. 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.



And so, overall, Dinesen and Sønderskov's survey of the research concludes that, "exercising great caution, we do believe it is fair to say that the main finding from the literature is a negative — albeit not always significant — relationship between ethnic diversity and social trust," though there's "not really a consensus."¹⁹ However, it is clear that when ethnic diversity is highly segregated, social trust does fall.²⁰

Economic Growth

One might think that economic growth promotes social trust, since richer people are less likely to be suspicious of one another.²¹ However, Christian Bjørnskov, an economist at Aarhus University, convincingly argues that the strong empirical connection between social trust and economic growth has mostly the reverse causal explanation.²² A high level of social trust reduces the cost of commercial transactions, and so facilitates economic growth through free exchange.

Economic Inequality

One might also think that economic equality causes social trust. It is reasonable to suppose that people who sense large gaps in the distribution of economic benefits within their society may come to believe that others who are much wealthier or poorer are too different to be trustworthy, or that those at the top got on top through unfair or corrupt processes.²³ There is indeed a strong empirical correlation between a society's level of economic equality and its level of social trust, but the direction of causation is hard to determine.²⁴ Many trust researchers seem to think that economic inequality leads to more social distrust.²⁵ However, the mechanism is unclear. It may be because perceived economic inequality is taken to be a sign of unfairness and corruption and social institutions that are not organized to work to the benefit of all. On the other hand, economic inequality may simply generate cues for social difference, leading people to withhold trust in direct response to these cues. This is to say that economic inequality makes a pre-existing

19 Ibid., p. 25-6.

20 Enos, Ryan. 2017. *The Space between Us: Social Geography and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

21 Friedman, Benjamin. 2005. *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*. New York: Knopf. offers a related argument that growth produces more social cooperation.

22 Bjørnskov, Christian. 2017. "Social Trust and Economic Growth." In *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, edited by Eric Uslaner, 1-24. New York: Oxford University Press.

23 Uslaner, Eric. 2017. "Political Trust, Corruption, and Inequality." In *Handbook of Political Trust*, edited by Sonja Zmerli and Tom W.G. van der Meer, 302-315. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

24 Bergh, Andreas, and Christian Bjørnskov. 2014. *Trust, Welfare States, and Income Equality: Sorting out the Causality*. *European Journal of Political Economy* 35, 183-199.

25 Uslaner 2002 is the most prominent of these researchers.



sense of social distance more salient, not that it is the primary source of that distance.

There is a strong case to be made that, in fact, most of the robust positive correlation between social trust and economic equality is explained by the fact that societies with a high level of social trust are more supportive of redistributive policies, which reduces economic inequality.²⁶ When we trust others, we are less likely to be suspicious that those who receive economic transfers will misuse them or have secured those benefits unfairly. As a result, as Andreas Bergh and Bjørnskov argue, socially trusting societies are more likely to see redistribution as fair or just rather than as wasteful or a reward for sloth.

Corruption and the Rule of Law

There is one sustaining institutional cause of social trust about which we can be relatively confident. The evidence clearly shows a close connection between higher levels of social trust, lower levels of corruption in the legal system, and other indicators of reliable adherence to the rule of law.²⁷ And in this case the direction of the causal arrow is less obscure. A functional legal system that is not easily corrupted, bribed, etc., appears to lead people to trust others in their society.

It is not entirely clear why this is the case. It is probably partially due to the fact that people's property rights are better protected from strangers in non-corrupt legal systems.²⁸ Functional legal systems punish theft effectively, for instance, so one does not have to worry that her neighbors will steal from her, which means she has less cause for suspicion. It is also possible that people use the behavior of judges and the police as proxies for the trustworthiness and goodness of the people as a whole, as judges and police might be seen as examples of the character of society generally.

Recent empirical work on trust and fairness by Jong-sung You of Australian National University backs up this claim. You argues that "the fairness of political and legal institutions affects people's incentives for trust and trustworthiness" and that "individuals' perceptions of the fairness of their society directly affects their trust in other people."²⁹ While many social-trust researchers think that economic inequality directly reduces social trust and trustworthiness, You argues that it does so by leading people to think

26 Bergh and Bjørnskov 2014 provide a rich and detailed argument to this effect, using multiple methods.

27 You, Jong-sung. 2017. "Trust and Corruption." In *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, edited by Eric Uslaner, 1-31. New York: Oxford University Press.

28 Though see Bjørnskov, Christian. 2019. "The Political Economy of Trust." In *The Oxford Handbook of Public Choice*, edited by Roger Congleton, Bernard Grofman and Stefan Voigt, forthcoming. New York: Oxford University Press. for some skepticism about whether legal property rights cause social trust.

29 You, Jong-sung. 2012. "Social Trust: Fairness Matters More Than Homogeneity." *Political Psychology* 33, 701-721., p. 702.



that their political and economic institutions are unfair. You's empirical work shows that "individuals' perceptions of fairness are significantly correlated with social trust."

This suggests that further inquiry into the moral and political psychology of social trust may pay dividends. I would argue that public respect for rights is a primary driver of social trust and helps explain the connection between trust and perceptions of the integrity of legal and political institutions. A widespread sense of the security of rights promotes social trust by leading people to feel as though they can generally trust others, on the grounds that each person is treated fairly and equally in legal and political institutions.

A general ethos of respect for equal rights seems likely to sustain trust through both cultural and political channels. First, visible public respect for rights will be taken to reflect widespread social commitment to the idea that each person ought to be treated fairly, which creates an expectation that others will at least feel they should conform to norms of fair dealing. Second, the social pressure to conform that accompanies the recognition of social norms helps to assure people that others feel the same pressure. This increases each person's confidence that others are trustworthy. Third, as a political matter, rights will not be given vigorous and reliable legal protection without a general ethos of respect for rights. So even if we doubt the moral motives of others, salient public commitment to legal- and constitutional-rights protection helps people believe that political and legal systems will detect and punish untrustworthy behavior and that people will tend to avoid such behavior as a result.

Personality and Culture

There are also a variety of cultural and psychological factors that determine one's capacity to be socially trusting. The first non-rational factor is personality type; some researchers claim that "personality mediates the relationship between biology and interpersonal trust."³⁰ At least one study suggests, for instance, "interpersonal trust [is] positively related to openness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability, and negatively related to conscientiousness."³¹

Social-trust researchers disagree about the extent to which social trust is determined by "cultural persistence" or "experiential adaptation." The debate concerns the "question of whether social trust is ... a deeply held disposition socialized early in life that remains relatively immune to subsequent experiences or ... an impressionable outlook shaped continuously throughout

30 Cawvey, Matthew, Matthew Hayes, Damarys Canache, and Jeffrey Mondak. 2017. "Biological and Psychological Influences on Interpersonal and Political Trust." In *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, edited by Eric Uslaner, 1-37. New York: Oxford University Press., p. 8.

31 Ibid., p. 15. This may imply, importantly, that conservatives, who tend to have lower openness and higher conscientiousness, are less trusting.



life by an individual's experience."³² There is evidence for both models.

One way that trust researchers try to resolve the dispute is by studying immigrants' trust. If the cultural-persistence hypothesis is true, we should expect social trust among immigrants to remain largely unaffected by the social trust found in the societies to which they migrate; but if the experiential-adaptation hypothesis is true, we should expect immigrant social trust to gradually match social-trust levels in the places to which they have migrated.

John Helliwell of the University of British Columbia and colleagues estimate that social-trust levels among migrants are about two-thirds determined by the social norms in their adopted societies, and only one-third by their experience in their country of origin.³³ Dinesen and Sønderskov have studied trust among immigrants to Sweden over long time periods. They found that, after 45 years, these immigrants have the same trust levels as natives of their new home country.³⁴ So the preponderance of the evidence is consistent with the experiential hypothesis. And this accords with my story about the psychological basis of social trust. Social trust is responsive to the behavior of others, and presumably to the trustworthiness of others that we infer through our experience of their behavior.

³² Dinesen and Sønderskov 2017, p. 2.

³³ Helliwell, John, Shun Wang, and Jinwen Xu. 2014. "How Durable Are Social Norms?" Immigrant Trust and Generosity in 132 Countries. 1-27. NBER Working Paper No. 19855. Interestingly, cultural persistence appears to be stronger in the United States than other countries, though Dineson and Sønderskov think this observation is due to the greater amount of effort in measuring cultural persistence in the U.S. See p. 26.

³⁴ This point is probably not undermined by the possibility of a self-selection effect, since "those who have just migrated are very similar in their level of trust independent of their destination." See p. 24.



III.

CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL TRUST

The social value of social trust is a function of its contribution to the formation and maintenance of effective economic and political institutions.

Many researchers believe that social trust is critical for the creation of social capital, which Edward Glaeser and David Laibson of Harvard University and Bruce Sacerdote of Dartmouth College define as “a person’s social characteristics — including his social skills, charisma, and the size of his Rolodex — which enable him to reap market and non-market returns from interactions with others.”³⁵

Social capital is built in part by being trustworthy in the eyes of others, and being trustworthy requires meeting public expectations of norm compliance. When we trust others over an extended period of time, and are trusted in turn, we are able to establish social networks we can rely upon in taking the risks needed to build social institutions. Social capital only accumulates within a system of social trust.

Social Capital and Economic Performance

Many studies conclude that social capital and economic performance measures are positively correlated. Paul Whiteley of the University of Essex has argued, “Social capital ... plays an important role in explaining the efficiency of political institutions, and in the economic performance of contemporary societies.”³⁶ He focuses on a study of the relationship between social capital and economic growth in 34 countries between 1970 and 1992, and argues that the impact of social capital on growth “is at least as strong as that of human capital,” which is positively correlated with growth. Social capital has a similar impact on the ability of poorer nations to adopt technological innovations introduced by richer countries and to “catch up” with rich countries in terms of their level of development. Social capital is

³⁵ Glaeser, Edward, David Laibson, and Bruce Sacerdote. 2002. “The Economic Approach to Social Capital.” *The Economic Journal* 112, 437-458., p. 48. For further discussion and several related definitions, see Dasgupta, Partha, and Ismail Serageldin, eds. 2000. *Social Capital: A Multifaceted Perspective*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank.

³⁶ Whiteley, Paul. 2002. “Economic Growth and Social Capital.” *Political Studies* 48, 443-466., p. 443 equates social trust and social capital, but his point still stands if these ideas are distinguished in the way I have proposed.



thought to reduce transaction costs in markets and reduce the burdens of enforcing agreements. It also limits fraud and theft.

Recent work by Fabio Sabatini of the Sapienza University of Rome has helped to quantitatively substantiate political scientist Robert Putnam's famous comparison of northern Italian and southern Italian institutions, with social capital in the former appearing both more plentiful and higher-functioning than in the latter.³⁷ Sabatini finds that "strong ties," such as familial relations, do not promote economic development. However, "weak ties," which act as conduits for the diffusion of knowledge and trust among strangers, do promote development and growth.³⁸

Vidmantas Jankauskas of the Technical University and Janina Šeputienė of Šiauliai University have found that social capital — understood as a form of social trust involving the maintenance of wide social networks — is positively correlated with economic performance in 23 European countries.³⁹ Reino Hjerpe of the Government Institute for Economic Research, in a survey of the relationship between social capital and economic growth, argues that social/generalized trust positively correlates with many measures of economic performance.⁴⁰ Robert Hall of Harvard University and Charles Jones of Stanford University find that in 130 countries, differences in "social infrastructure" lead to considerable social differences in the accumulation of capital, economic productivity, and even educational attainment, which impacts income across countries.⁴¹ And Bo Rothstein of the University of Gothenburg and Dietlind Stolle of McGill University argue that a survey of the social-trust literature finds that social capital is said to produce "well-performing democratic institutions, personal happiness, optimism and tolerance, economic growth, and democratic stability."⁴²

This literature should lead us to conclude that social trust has great social value since it facilitates the effective functioning of many vital social institutions.

37 Putnam, Robert. 1994. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

38 Sabatini, Fabio. 2007. "The Role of Social Capital in Economic Development." 1-28: AICCON Cultura Cooperazione., pp. 19-20.

39 They find no correlation, however, between the degree of civic involvement in these societies and economic performance. See Jankauskas, Vidmantas, and Janina Seputiene. 2007. *The Relationship between Social Capital, Governance and Economic Performance in Europe*. *Business: Theory and Practice* 8, 131-138.

40 Hjerpe, Reino. 1998. "Social Capital and Economic Growth." *Government Institute for Economic Research (VATT)*, 1-26.. The term "generalized trust" derives from Fukuyama, Francis. 1995. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. New York: Free Press., p. 29.

41 Hall, Robert, and Charles Jones. 1999. "Why Do Some Countries Produce So Much More Output Per Worker Than Others?" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 114, 83-116., p. 84.

42 Rothstein, Bo, and Dietlind Stolle. 2008. "The State and Social Capital: An Institutional Theory of Generalized Trust." *Comparative Politics* 40, 441-459., p. 441.



Trust in Government

Many researchers are keen on distinguishing between trust in society and trust in government, and they worry that trust in society may not transfer to trust in government.⁴³ Rothstein and Stolle find that “citizens make distinctions between various types of institutions,” though they do “make strong connections between the impartiality of institutions and generalized trust at the micro and macro levels.”⁴⁴ They also find that “there is no relationship between political institutions with elected office and generalized trust at the aggregate level.”⁴⁵ However, they still find that “there is a rather strong relationship between aggregate levels of confidence in [legal] institutions and generalized trust.”

In other words, generalized trust is connected to trust in the police and the courts, but not as much to trust in politicians. Generalized trust is weakened when people experience “widespread corruption, inefficient institutions, unreliable police, and arbitrariness and bias of courts.”⁴⁶ Sonja Zmerli of Goethe University Frankfurt and Ken Newton of the University of Southampton find “robust and statistically significant correlations between generalized trust, on the one hand, and confidence in political institutions and satisfaction with democracy, on the other” in 23 European countries and the United States.⁴⁷ So there is good evidence that generalized trust and law-and-order institutions are connected, such that high generalized trust can produce high trust in legal institutions. The evidence that generalized trust is connected to trust in political institutions is weaker. But this need not be entirely worrying. As Hardin has argued, skepticism toward politicians can be useful.⁴⁸ I will have more to say about this kind of trust — trust in government or political trust — below.

While there is much less data on this, social trust is also arguably required in order to form thicker moral relationships, especially relations of romantic love and friendship. Societies with high social trust strengthen our capacity to sustain love and friendship and allow for the establishment of relations of love and friendship beyond members of our in-group, as well as maintaining relations of love and friendship with persons who leave the in-group.

In contrast to political trust, it appears that social trust is an almost unalloyed good. Of course, being socially trusting is not good if one is surrounded by

43 Hardin 2004, p. 151 stresses this distinction and doubts a connection between the two. See Cook, Karen, ed. 2001. *Trust in Society*. New York: Russell Sage. and Braithwaite, Valerie, and Margaret Levi, eds. 1998. *Trust and Governance*. New York: Russell Sage. respectively.

44 Rothstein, Bo, and Dietlind Stolle. 2002. “How Political Institutions Create and Destroy Social Capital: An Institutional Theory of Generalized Trust.” *In American Political Science Conference*. Boston., p. 27.

45 Rothstein and Stolle 2008, p. 450. Emphasis mine.

46 Ibid., p. 451.

47 Zmerli, Sonja, and Ken Newton. 2008. “Social Trust and Attitudes toward Democracy.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 72, 706-724., p. 706.

48 Hardin 2004, p. 107.



untrustworthy people. But societies that can sustain high levels of social trust enjoy enormous benefits with few costs.

IV.

POLITICAL TRUST

Political trust can be understood to include trust in government broadly or trust in democracy, as well as trust in more specific institutions and groups, such as the civil service, parliament, and particular elected officials.⁴⁹ As with social trust, political trust is determined by survey work, especially the World Values Survey and the American National Election Survey. Often these questionnaires are limited to a handful of questions with limited responses, but more recent surveys ask a larger number of questions with up to an 11-point scale, yielding richer data and in some cases changing or strengthening older empirical results.⁵⁰ Importantly, the diversity of survey instruments might suggest that work on political trust deploys several different conceptions of political trust. Yet it appears that political-trust research is approximating a single underlying construct.⁵¹

Unlike social trust, political trust is not an unalloyed good. Democracies depend on a certain degree of political distrust of political officials and political parties.⁵² However, if we distinguish between political trust in government and democracy and political trust in parties and elected officials, we can offer a finer-grained analysis according to which broad trust in democracy and government is good, but a certain degree of distrust of particular officials and parties is also desirable. We want people to be general political trusters and specific political distrusters.

49 Norris, Pippa. 2017. "The Conceptual Framework of Political Support." In *Handbook of Political Trust*, edited by Sonja Zmerli and Tom W.G. van der Meer, 19-32. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing..

50 Marien, Sofie. "The Measurement Equivalence of Political Trust." 89-103.

51 Ibid., p. 98.

52 Warren, Mark. 2017. "What Kinds of Trust Does a Democracy Need? Trust from the Perspective of Democratic Theory." In *Handbook of Political Trust*, edited by Sonja Zmerli and Tom W.G. van der Meer, 33-52. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.



V.

CAUSES OF POLITICAL TRUST

We now turn to examine the causes of political trust.

Economic Improvement

One central, well-documented institutional cause of political trust is economic performance.⁵³ When people feel that their own economic performance is strong, they exhibit more political trust. People increase political trust only when their perceived economic welfare has increased in the recent past, say over the past several years. Political trust also often decreases in response to major economic crises and the fear of loss of income. However, true economic welfare, and true economic improvement, may not increase political trust if one's perceived economic welfare departs from one's actual economic welfare.

Political trust also appears to have some non-institutional causes, such as social trust, though this may be indirect. For example, if social trust increases economic growth, and economic growth improves personal economic welfare, that will tend to increase political trust.⁵⁴

Corruption and Inequality

A second central, well-documented institutional cause of political trust is the observed level of corruption. Corruption's reduction of political trust is much like its reduction of social trust. This is tied to economic inequality, which also appears to decrease political trust because people see it as evidence of corruption. Eric Uslaner argues that "inequality leads people to believe that leaders listen far more to the rich than to others in society" and that, generally, perceived unfairness reduces trust in government.⁵⁵ This effect can be hard to correct because rich citizens can navigate corrupt environments more effectively than the poor, which can help to cement or

53 Zmerli and van der Meer. "The Deeply Rooted Concern with Political Trust." 1-15., p. 7.

54 Zmerli, Sonja, and Ken Newton. "Objects of Political and Social Trust: Scales and Hierarchies." 104-124., p. 105.

55 Uslaner, Eric. "Political Trust, Corruption, and Inequality." 302-315., p. 302.



even increase economic inequality. Instances of “grand corruption” widely observed by the public also damage political trust. Importantly, small acts of corruption (“petty” corruption) don’t decrease political trust much, with the notable exception of bribes and gifts to the police or the courts.⁵⁶

Social Insurance

Effective social insurance also seems to increase political trust, as “the more positively an individual estimates the state of social protection in the country, the higher the satisfaction with democracy.”⁵⁷ The reasons for this are complex, but probably have to do with decreasing economic anxiety and reducing inequality. Importantly, there is evidence that means-tested social insurance targeted at the poor can reduce political trust while universal welfare supports that go to the middle class can increase social trust.⁵⁸

Authoritarianism vs. Democracy

One important finding in the political-trust literature is that authoritarian regimes can exhibit high levels of political trust, as long as they manage corruption and economic performance effectively. Democratic government can actually lower political trust vis-à-vis some authoritarian regimes, though this appears to be the result of transitioning to democracy from authoritarianism and the experience of newly democratic peoples with democratic institutions.⁵⁹ Their high hopes for democracy are often disappointed. Political trust is also affected by a winner’s bias, such that political trust is higher after an election win for one’s party and lower in the case of a loss, especially in winner-take-all voting systems. This can be trust-reducing vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes. Another trust-reducing effect of democracy is that citizens will now blame other citizens and large parties for bad outcomes, rather than a few authoritarian leaders. Democracies will encourage people to be angry at other large sectors of the population. As a result, democracy can foster distrust of elements of the democratic system.

And yet, democracy can help political trust. In general, observed compliance with political norms by officials, especially in the civil service, will tend to increase political trust of some varieties, as will shared norms of citizenship

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 308.

⁵⁷ Kumlin, Staffan, and Alte Haugsgjerd. 2017. “The Welfare State and Political Trust: Bringing Performance Back In.” In *Handbook of Political Trust*, edited by Sonja Zmerli and Tom W.G. van der Meer, 285-301. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing., p. 289.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Also see Kumlin, Staffan, and Bo Rothstein. 2005. “Making and Breaking Social Capital: The Impact of Welfare-State Institutions.” *Comparative Political Studies* 38, 339-365.

⁵⁹ Letki, Natalia. 2017. Trust in Newly Democratic Regimes. In *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, edited by Eric Uslaner, 1-26. New York: Oxford University Press.



where citizen involvement increases their support of political institutions.⁶⁰ In particular, when citizens feel that government officials treat them fairly, they are more likely to be politically trusting.⁶¹ This is especially true in developed, democratic societies where economic performance is slower than in developing, authoritarian nations, where evaluations of economic performance are most salient.

Media

There is limited evidence that mass media can affect political trust; the effects are more modest than one might expect and may not be negative, depending on the media source.⁶²

Before we can assess the effect of media on political trust, however, we should examine the data on trust in mass media themselves. Here are some of the main facts about the trust in media.⁶³ First, media distrust ranges from significant to high in most developed countries, and trust in media is often declining, especially in the United States (falling from 72 percent in 1972 to 40 percent in 2012). There are differences in trust between types of media — say, newspapers and cable news — and substantial variation within media types, such as among different cable news channels. Public service news sources tend to be more trusted. Somewhat surprisingly, trust in media and journalists is nonetheless similar to that exhibited toward many other major institutions and occupations. The reasons for distrust are various, but a main source of distrust of media is that they are seen as influenced by powerful people and organizations.

It looks like media exposure tends to reduce political trust, perhaps because they are seen as “sensational, superficial, inaccurate” and as concentrating on “bad news.”⁶⁴ Importantly, mass media do not make already distrustful people less trusting, but rather can hurt trust among the trusting. This trust reducing effect seems tied largely to trust in newspapers, however, and not trust in television news.

Some researchers have postulated a general “media malaise” effect in reducing political trust. Media sources concentrate on bad news, a tendency compounded by negative election campaigning, uncivil politician behavior, attack-journalism frenzy, entertainment value, and even the emphasis television places on colorful, moving images. However, some find evidence

60 van Deth, Jan. 2017. “Compliance, Trust, and Norms of Citizenship.” In *Handbook of Political Trust*, edited by Sonja Zmerli and Tom W.G. van der Meer, 212-227. Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing., p. 224.

61 Grimes, Marcia. 2017. “Procedural Fairness and Political Trust.” In *Handbook of Political Trust*. 256-269, p. 256.

62 Newton, Ken. 2017. “Political Trust and the Mass Media.” In *Handbook of Political Trust*. 353-372.

63 Ibid, pp. 354-8.

64 Ibid, p. 353.



of the potential for a virtuous circle “in which attention to election campaign communications and individual feelings of political trust are mutually reinforcing.”⁶⁵

The trust effects depend on the sort of media one consumes. Those who watch a lot of TV and entertainment TV have lower political and social trust, but watching a lot of TV news is more strongly associated with high political trust.

It is unclear what the effect of media distrust is on political trust. If people do not trust the media much, then they probably are more likely to “fall back on their partisan predispositions when evaluating political events and opinions.”⁶⁶

Unfortunately, we know less about the connection between media trust and political trust in authoritarian regimes, though political trust will doubtless depend on the extent to which citizens in authoritarian countries trust mass media, given how it is high universally strictly controlled in those societies.

Education improves citizens’ ability to track the behavior of governments. When government performance is seen as strong, education can engender political trust, but if performance is seen as weak, the opposite may occur.⁶⁷ This is probably because education makes citizens more discerning consumers of mass media about political matters, and so they detect when their institutions are performing well or poorly and why.

Association Participation

Associational participation seems to increase political trust, though it is not entirely clear why. Associations improve the quality of democracy, perhaps by helping with responsibilities the state can’t address. Alternatively, associations may increase the representativeness of democracy because associations can influence politicians more effectively than individuals.⁶⁸ People who live in communities with an active civic life will be more trustworthy. However, these differences are typically thought to be selection effects; high-trust persons are more likely to join associations.

65 Ibid., p. 363.

66 Ibid., p. 366.

67 Mayne, Quinton, and Armen Hakhverdian. 2017. “Education, Socialization, and Political Trust.” In *Handbook of Political Trust*. 176-196, p. 181.

68 Liu, Christopher, and Dietlind Stolle. 2017. “Social Capital, Civic Culture, and Political Trust.” In *Handbook of Political Trust*. 338-352, pp. 338-9.



Immigration

Lauren McLaren of the University of Glasgow finds that “perceived size of immigrant groups” has negative effects on political trust, though not actual sizes.⁶⁹ This is perhaps because ethnic diversity may decrease political trust, and immigrant groups are seen as bringing increases in ethnic diversity.

VI.

CONSEQUENCES OF POLITICAL TRUST

Interestingly, we know more about the causes of political trust than social trust, though we know more about the consequences of social trust than political trust. Some argue that political trust is declining in many North American and Western European nations due to rising inequality and various widely observed events and governmental failures, such as Watergate or other corruption scandals. Others argue that as people grow richer and more educated they become more discerning observers of political events, and come to have higher expectations of democracy. “At the same time that people have become less trustful of government,” Russell Dalton of the University of California at Irvine has written, “other opinion surveys show continued and widespread attachment to democracy and its ideals, which may have strengthened in recent decades.”⁷⁰

If Dalton is correct, then declining trust in government may “not represent alienation from the democratic process,” and low political trust may not lead to a legitimation crisis for democratic governments generally. In fact, falling political trust could be a good thing, if it means that citizens are now more attentive and expect more of their officials. According to Dalton, scandals and mass media, and even some economic disruptions, probably do not reduce political trust much or erode social capital. Instead, political trust is falling cross-nationally regardless of these events, and the data does not show that social capital is decreasing cross-nationally.⁷¹

69 McLaren, Lauren. 2017. “Immigration, Ethnic Diversity, and Inequality.” In *Handbook of Political Trust*. 316-337, p. 320.

70 Dalton, Russell. 2017. “Political Trust in North America.” In *Handbook of Political Trust*. 375-394, pp. 381-2.

71 Ibid, p. 386.



Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan has argued that “public priorities are broadening to include new post-material values that stress autonomy, self-actualization, and a more assertive political style” and that these values often have a “libertarian component that leads individuals to question authority,” leading to less trust.⁷² These “engaged citizens” (who are arguably “conceptually equivalent to postmaterialists,” when empirically measured), are less trusting of politicians and political institutions, but they have high support for democratic values, including equality and the protection of minority rights.

Dalton argues, plausibly, that political trust is falling in the following way: “First, there is often a precipitating factor that makes people begin to question government in a new way” — a scandal, or a recession, etc. However, when the conditions improve, and a new government is elected, political trust “does not return to its previously high level.” Postmaterial values have already raised citizen expectations. Consequently, government failures make citizens less likely to have political trust in the future.

This account of falling political trust is interesting because it tells us whether we should expect less political trust to cause problems. If declining faith in political institutions is the result of increasingly postmaterialist citizens, who are confident in democracy, and insist on it doing better, then a drop in political trust should not create social instability. But if political trust has fallen due to factors that also undermine democratic values, then we should be more worried.

Marc Hetherington of Vanderbilt University argues that political trust is important to give leaders the confidence they need to enact programs that improve lives.⁷³ Rothstein argues that countries with higher political trust have higher-quality government, which leads government to spend more on social policies and improve other outcomes.⁷⁴ Low political trust may, therefore, make it harder for governments to function and give engaged citizens what they want in terms of better policy. Accordingly, despite the likelihood that political trust has fallen due to the emergence of more engaged, demanding, and critical citizens, the resulting decrease in political trust has made government less functional and responsive, which is bad. Democratic idealism that led us to expect government to do better may have made it worse.

⁷² Inglehart, Ronald. 1990. *Culture Shift in Advanced Industrial Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.; Dalton 2017, p. 387.

⁷³ Hetherington, Marc. 2005. *Why Trust Matters*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

⁷⁴ Rothstein, Bo. 2011. *The Quality of Government: Corruption, Social Trust, and Inequality in International Perspective*.



VII.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINING A DIVERSE SOCIAL ORDER

Sustaining a diverse social order requires effective economic-judicial institutions. First, a functional and fair legal system, including both courts and police, is needed for people to trust one another and to trust government. Perceived corruption in political systems, and especially in legal systems, undermines both social and political trust quickly and sharply. Second, people are more politically trusting when they believe that their economic performance has improved, and sometimes when they believe that the economy is doing well generally. Societies that can overcome the challenges of diversity are ones that know how to combat corruption and rent-seeking; maintain fair, non-extractive economic institutions; and possess the policy flexibility and sensitivity to promote economic growth.

Developing countries such as China experience torrid rates of catch-up growth, and arguable enjoy high levels of political trust as a consequence.⁷⁵ But in developed nations, where growth is slower, economic performance matters less for political trust. Richer and better -educated societies have more discerning and demanding citizens who are politically distrustful in part because they are such strong supporters of democracy. Thus, we should expect political trust to fall worldwide as economic fortunes rise. Rising wealth and material security will lead the people of up-and-coming middle-income countries to pay more attention to the non-economic dimensions of policy and tune in to questions of morality, group identity, and individual rights. While the Chinese appear to have enormous trust in their authoritarian national government, this does not suggest that mature liberal-democracies might do better by restricting democracy or limiting the electoral process. Instead, ensuring that institutions are widely responsive to the interests and beliefs of critical citizens is essential for maintaining political trust. We can expect that as China develops and its economic growth slows as it reaches the level of wealth found in developed nations, Chinese citizens will come to have more multifaceted political evaluations and so will express lower political trust. While elections are associated with lower political trust, this is not because elections undermine democracy, but because people are more focused on the warts of governmental policy and procedure. And if elections are essential for good policy, in terms of both

⁷⁵ Assuming that the China data is sound, which some trust researchers doubt. See Uslander 2002, p. 226.



procedural fairness and economic performance, then electoral institutions are essential for overcoming excessive and dysfunctional levels of political trust.

We have also seen that strong associational freedom, which manifests in high participation in many kinds of associations, may promote social and political trust by putting citizens into positive contact with one another, so this is yet one more way in which the institutions of free societies can promote social and political trust across difference.

There is also reason to believe that policies aimed at reducing economic and ethnic segregation will promote social and political trust. Overcoming the challenges of diversity is achieved partly through encouraging diverse people to interact with one another regularly in all walks of life. So, there is an important imperative of integration to increase social and political trust among diverse persons in order to facilitate any number of goods that result.⁷⁶

If we want to sustain social cooperation in diverse societies, and to reap the benefits, we need policies and institutions that maintain high social trust and high political trust in democratic government generally, while allowing for a modestly high level of political trust in particular politicians and political parties. We can do this by protecting liberal rights, such as freedom of association and freedom from discrimination and segregation. We can do this by protecting democracy, which helps to produce less corruption and better economic and institutional functioning broadly. We can do this by protecting the rule of law, which reduces corruption and improves economic performance. And we must also make use of markets and social insurance in order to ensure that the economy performs well for everyone and protects most people from being exposed to dangerous, trust-destroying economic and social risks. This is probably why the liberal-democratic, capitalist welfare-states, such as the Nordic countries, have the highest levels of social and political trust. There is a positive feedback loop between these institutional structures and social and political trust generally.

76 Anderson, Elizabeth. 2010. *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.



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