Trust in Government:  
The United States in Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

How do Americans' attitudes about government and democratic politics compare to attitudes of citizens in other economically advanced democracies? As we demonstrate below, many Americans are somewhat cynical when asked if their government will do what is right, "most of the time." Yet Americans' display relatively high levels of trust in government when compared to citizens in most of the world's other major democracies. Why is this, and what are the effects of high (or low) levels of national trust in government? One traditional explanation of trust emphasizes the role of history and culture. That is, trust in government may be rooted in deep, long-term forces. Nations with common history or culture, then, should have similar levels of trust in government. Our comparative analysis of trust in 29 democracies suggests this traditional explanation may be insufficient. We find that a great deal of cross-national variation in trust can be explained how democratic institutions perform.

The United States' experience with democracy is, in many ways, rather unique. Many of the world’s established democracies have less practice with competitive democratic elections, and few have enjoyed as much stability in constitutional arrangements and partisan alignments as the United States. The large continental European democracies have had democratic institutions and party systems uprooted in the 20th Century by war and fascism, and military occupation. Other democracies have consolidated their political institutions and developed competitive party systems quite recently. The United States may also be atypical in having experienced less party system change than other democracies.

This relatively unique political history may serve to promote distinctive patterns of attitudes about democratic government, citizenship, and participation. By comparing Americans’ attitudes about politics to those held by citizens in other nations, we may gain a better understanding of what is, and is not, unique about the American experience. Such comparisons can also illuminate the factors that cause citizens to participate in politics, and to trust, or distrust, democratic arrangements.


Trust and Distrust of Government

David Easton’s (1965) classic ‘system theory’ of politics argues that the legitimacy of democratic political systems depends on how much citizens trust their government to do what is right most of the time. In theory, political trust links people to institutions that represent them, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic government (Gamson 1968, Putnam 1993, Hetherington 1998). Low trust and cynicism among a few people, or among many people for a short period of time, is to be expected, and may even be healthy as a means of promoting change. The legitimacy of a regime may be endangered, however, when most people distrust their government for extended periods of time (Erber and Lau 1990) – leading to contempt for laws and support for radical (or anti-democratic) alternatives. One component of political trust may reflect support for the institutions of a political system itself (rather than the government of the day), meaning that low trust could be associated with anti-system behavior (Muller and Jukman 1977).

One of the more striking findings from contemporary studies of public attitudes about government and politics is the low levels of trust of government in many western democracies (e.g. Dalton 1999; Klingemann 1999). Some observers see distrust of government as symptomatic of a general malaise among citizens of the world’s established democracies. This malaise has been described in many forms. The world’s wealthiest nations, having long-standing practice with representative democracy, are seen as having a crisis of trust in government, elected officials, and, perhaps, in traditional models of democracy. Signs of this deficit of political trust have corresponded with a decline in mass attachment to established parties, the rise of “anti-establishment” parties, and declining levels of participation at elections in many nations.

Scholars of public opinion note that most citizens of Europe and North America do not trust their government to “do the right thing” most of the time. As we see below, there is substantial argument about the meaning of this, and about causes of low levels of trust in government. There is a general sense, however, that people trust their governments less today than in previous decades. There is also evidence that citizens
have less confidence in the responsiveness of their governments compared to their peers 40 years ago (Nye et al. 1997; Dalton 1988 p. 231). Early evidence of reduced political trust led many to worry that some nations could eventually experience crises of support for their democratic system due to an erosion of the legitimacy of the regime (Miller 1974). Conversely, if rising levels of distrust merely reflect disdain caused by scandals or dissatisfaction with incumbent politicians, not with political institutions themselves, then low levels of political discontent would be less worrisome, and might be reversed (Citrin 1974). There is little evidence, however, that there has been any increase in trust in government since low levels were identified in the 1970s. Nor is there much to suggest that the world’s major democracies have experienced massive crises in regime legitimacy. All told, then, our review of Americans' trust in government can be seen against a backdrop of eroding support for government in many western democracies, the full implications for which remain points of ongoing debate.

Table 1 about here

Surveys conducted in 2004 and 2005 in 29 of the world’s most established democracies¹ (reported in Table 1) illustrate that in all but one nation (Denmark), most respondents did not agree that “most of the time, we can trust people in government to do what is right.” Nonetheless, The United States rates as one of the most trusting nations, with just 10 other affluent democracies showing higher levels of public trust in government. In nations with the highest levels of trust, 40 to 55 per cent trust their government. In Poland, Germany, Slovakia, and Japan, in contrast, only one in ten respondents say they trust their governments.

¹ The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) conducted the Citizenship 2004 module in all of its 41 member nations in 2004. The General Social Survey conducted the ISSP Citizenship module in the US country as part of a 2004 national survey. The 29 nations included in this study represent nearly all of the world’s richest democracies, with democracies being defined as nations having Freedom House scores of ‘1’ for political rights and ‘1’ for civil liberties. GDP per capita (2004) for each nation included here ranked from 2nd to 37th globally (among democracies). Survey data from Estonia (32nd in GDP per capita among democracies), Greece (25th), Iceland (6th), Ireland (9th), Italy (20th), Lithuania (35th), Luxemburg (1st), and Malta (29th) were not available from ISSP at the time of writing.
There is some evidence that trust has eroded in many of these nations since the 1970s. When opinions from 2004 ISSP surveys are compared to similar measures taken in the mid 1970s, we find evidence of a decline in political trust and confidence in a number of nations where comparable data are available. Fewer Americans, British, French, and Germans expressed trust in their government or confidence in public officials in 2004 than in the late 1970s. Dalton (1988 p. 232) reported 34 per cent of Americans, 40 per cent of British and 52 per cent of West Germans trusted government “to do right” in 1977 - higher levels of trust than displayed in Table 1. Dalton also reported 43 per cent of Americans, 31 per cent of British, 36 per cent of French and 34 per cent of West Germans said government officials “cared” what people think in 1977. The 2004 ISSP survey found lower confidence in officials in each of these nations: 35 per cent of Americans, 23 per cent of British, 27 per cent of French and just 10 per cent of unified Germans held this opinion. Studies of Canada (Kornberg and Clarke 1992), Finland (Borg and Sankiaho 1995), and Sweden (Holmberg 1999) all find declining trust. Trust may also be in decline in Britain, Italy, and Japan (Dalton 1999; Beer 1982).

When results in Table 1 are compared to previous studies, there is less evidence of erosion of trust in Denmark and the Netherlands (Listhaug 1995; Newton and Norris 2000) – a pattern that echoes their high levels of satisfaction with democracy (Lijphart 1999 p. 286). Australia may also be one of the few established democracies where political trust is not in decline. Compared to people in most other affluent democracies in 2004, Australians are relatively trusting of their government, with 40 per cent saying government can be trusted to do what is right. Although few comparable surveys of Australian attitudes are available prior to the 1990s, trust may well be higher in Australia in 2004 than in previous decades. Australian surveys in 1979 and 1988, for example, found just 29 per cent of Australians saying the government could be trusted to ‘do the right thing’ (McAllister 1992:45).²

Figure 1 provides evidence that, overall, trust in government corresponds with individuals’ satisfaction with existing democratic arrangements – likely a reflection of their assessments of governmental, or regime, performance (Dalton 1999). Trust in

² Surveys from New Zealand demonstrate a similar increase in trust in government there, up from 31 per cent trusting in 1993 to 44 per cent in 2005.
government and satisfaction with how democracy is working, then, can be seen to be highly correlated across the 29 democracies included in this study \((r = .80)\). In Figure 1, the United States’ location is represented with the letters “us.” In these cross-national patterns, we see that the United States ranks among the highest of these nations in terms of levels of political trust and satisfaction with how democracy is working. High levels of trust also correspond with positive assessments of democracy in Australia, New Zealand, Finland, Switzerland, and Denmark. Clearly, the other side of this coin is that low trust corresponds with dissatisfaction with how the nation’s democratic system is working. Low levels of trust correspond with poor evaluations of how democracy is performing in Poland, Japan, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic.

\textbf{Figure 1 about here}

But what do high (or low) levels of political trust really mean? What might we make of the fact that just 31 per cent of American respondents trust their government? Conversely, what does it mean that few Austrians, French and Japanese trust their government "to do what is right" most of the time? As we see below, Americans have fairly cynical assessments of politics when we consider some attitudes, but relative to citizens of many of the world’s major democracies, they are quite optimistic. In the sections below, we examine various explanations for the causes of low political trust in order to assess what political attitudes correspond with political trust and distrust.

\textbf{Critical citizens and political engagement}

One influential explanation for contemporary political distrust is that the political behavior and expectations of citizens have changed over recent generations. Public expectations about how government should work, and of the role of citizens in their political system, may have changed substantially since World War II. With higher levels of education among the mass public, greater levels of affluence, and greater access to information, contemporary citizens may well expect more direct say in what government does, and have less interest in traditional modes of representation.

Some political analysts see the trend toward weaker party loyalties (Dalton 1984) greater direct citizen influence over party nominations, more frequent use of citizen initiatives and referendums, and direct election of local officials as the result of popular
demands for new forms of participation (Budge 1996; LeDuc 2003 p. 30). As democratic nations mature, citizens may come to believe they are quite capable of playing a direct role in governing, while being suspicious of established political arrangements that grant significant responsibilities to elected officials. Research from Norris (1999) and Inglehart (1999) suggest that these demands come from politically cynical citizens who are losing confidence with representative government and conventional modes of politics, but yet retain a strong commitment to the principles of democracy. Others note a corresponding decline in the willingness of citizens to defer to authority (Inglehart 1990), as important in the "unfreezing" of political alignments and institutions (Bogdanor 1994). From this perspective, because many ‘post-material’ (Inglehart 1977) or ‘critical citizens’ (Norris 1999) in the contemporary era now have most of their material needs satisfied, their orientation toward government and politics may have come to focus more on the political process itself.

In this new political relationship, as affluence and education increases, citizens are expected to demand more direct influence. However, if we look at the overall correlation between national wealth (GDP per capita) and levels of political trust, we find that, across the affluent democracies listed in Table 1, levels of trust and levels of per capita income, are only slightly related ($r = .30$). America lies well above the average level of national wealth per head among these nations, and slightly above the average level of political trust. America’s relatively high levels of political trust, then, may reflect something about its wealth, but national wealth is only modest predictor of trust across these 29 nations.

**Citizen Involvement and Engagement**

Dalton (1984) and Inglehart (1990) have emphasized that the higher levels of ‘cognitive mobilization’ of contemporary citizens have led to greater demands for public access to governmental decision-making processes. The classic idea of elected representatives serving as trustees, who are granted broad discretion by their constituents, may have been undermined by citizens’ growing expectations that elected officials should serve as delegates who directly express the will of the public. This suggests that nations where individual citizens have more internal political efficacy – that is, a sense that they have the personal capacity to understand political issues and affect government – will
have higher levels of engagement with the political system. Figure 2 illustrates that citizens who lack personal political efficacy tend to have low levels of political trust ($r = .46$). We see here that relatively high levels of political trust in Denmark, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand and Cyprus correspond with relatively high levels of personal, or internal, political efficacy. However, high efficacy in the United States and Belgium do not correspond with high levels of trust.

**Figure 2 and Figure 3 about here**

But a key element of the critical citizen / post materialist model of citizen orientation to government centers on demands for participatory politics: in other words, high efficacy - the sense that participation in politics is important and actually matters - leads to higher expectations about the role of the citizen in a democratic society. The patterns in Figure 3 confirm the importance of this linkage: there is a clear inverse relationship between levels of political trust and the proportion of people who feel their nation’s opportunities for citizen participation are inadequate ($r = -.44$). Here, in the right-hand portion of the figure, we see lower levels of trust where citizens feel that they need more opportunities for input in decision making - nations like Japan and Germany where opportunities for direct political participation are relatively limited (Scarrow 2001). Higher trust is evident where people find participatory opportunities more adequate. A case in point is high levels of trust in Switzerland, which has the most directly democratic arrangements among the world’s democracies. Denmark and Sweden, with multi-party systems that may tend to promote representation and voters’ sense of connectedness with their party, follow suit. Conversely, in nations where more people believe that additional modes of citizen input are required, trust is lower. Japan, for example, with a rigid party system long dominated by one party, ranks high on demands for more citizen input and low on trust in government.

This variant of the critical citizen / post-materialist thesis has been used to explain the decline of social class as a basis for party support (Dalton 1988) and the rise of support for independent candidates and non-traditional parties. In short, the expectation here is that those who feel political parties provide inadequate choices and opportunities for involvement will be distrusting of government. And, indeed, Figure 4 illustrates that distrust is modestly associated with frustration about the choices presented by political
parties ($r = -.30$) and that most Americans agree with the statement, ‘political parties do not give voters real policy choices.’ Thus, despite (or because of) the stability of the American party system, we find a level of frustration with political parties in America similar to that in Israel and South Korea.

**Figure 4 about here**

**Corruption, Cynicism, and Political Distrust**

Another explanation for the current state of citizen orientations toward government and politics is that changes in the availability of political information have made people more aware of what their governments do, but that there are ill effects of this new awareness. In previous generations, citizens may have been socialized to have a sense of blind loyalty to their party and government, and a willingness to participate flowing from a sense of civic duty. But the rise of mass media - with its focus on scandal and hostile investigative reporting (Graber 1989 p. 235) - makes it harder for governments to hide their dirty laundry. A consequence of this increased popular scrutiny of the workings of governments, and attention to scandals, may well be a reduction in citizens’ confidence in political institutions (Patterson and Donsbach 1996). If so, then current cynicism about politics reflects the unmasking of political events (e.g. Watergate, sex scandals, bribery) that would have gone unnoticed in previous generations.

**Figure 5 about here**

Much of the attention of mass media has been on political corruption - such as stories about disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramhoff, members of Congress pleading guilty to bribery (Randy "Duke" Cunningham, R-CA), influence peddling (Bob Ney, R-OH, Richard Pombo, R-CA), soliciting and accepting illegal gifts in exchange for assistance with earmarks (Allan Mollohan, D-WV), $90,000 in suspected cash bribes hidden in a Congressman's freezer (William Jefferson, D-LA), nepotism (John Doolittle, R-CA, Curt Weldon, R-PA, Richard Pombo, R-CA, and Maxine Waters D-CA), FBI subpoenas issued to investigate lobbyist shake-down schemes (Jerry Lewis, R-CA), earmarking public funds for personal gain (Ken Calvert, R-CA), and improper sexual emails (Mark
Foley, R-FL). The volume of such media focus suggests that political distrust may reflect perceptions of corruption about politicians.³

Figure 5 illustrates a strong, negative link at the national-level between trust and the idea that corruption is widespread in a nation’s public service ($r = - .60$). Our data also show a strong link between perceptions of corruption in the public service, and the belief that “politicians are in politics only for what they can get out of it personally” ($r = .80$). Figure 5 suggests that a relatively high proportion of American's perceive that corruption is a problem among their public officials. Nations toward the left-side of Figure 5 have fewer people who say "a lot" or "almost everyone" in public life is corrupt; those to the right have more people saying this. There are more nations to the right of the United States (with lower public perceptions of official corruption) that to the left (where nations such as Japan and South Korea - with notoriously corrupt elected officials - are located. Figure 5 suggests that trust in government in the United States, and across these 29 nations may, be shaped by perceptions of how well (or badly) public officials behave. Indeed, the lowest levels of trust are found in nations know to have relatively high levels of corruption among bureaucrats and public officials (e.g., Poland, Slovakia, which have high levels of corruption according to Transparency International).

There is some debate about the meaning of this link between perceptions of corruption and trust. It may reflect how democratic institutions are actually functioning (or failing to function); or it may reflect media-fueled cynicism, which has little grounding in how politicians and public officials actually (mis)behave. That said, survey research in several nations has demonstrated that citizens in places with higher levels of public corruption have more negative attitudes about public officials, and less trust in government (Anderson and Tverdova 2003). Personal exposure to acts of official corruption has also been shown to erode confidence in the political system, and lower interpersonal trust (Seligson 2002). Putnam (1993) demonstrated strong links between

³ A variant of this explanation argues that media scrutiny of the regular workings of representative government reveal bargaining and partisan strategy that that the public has no taste for (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001). The legitimacy of representative institutions suffers, and incentives to participate out of civic loyalty may now be weaker. A summary of corruption issues with the 2006 US Congress can be found in the report, Beyond Delay: The 20 Most Corrupt Members of Congress. Washington, DC: Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington.
political attitudes and government performance in Italy. Behavioral studies also find that people who are represented by legislators caught in scandals have lower trust and political cynicism, and that voter experience with actual scandals, rather than just exposure to news, drives cynicism (Bowler and Karp 2004; also see Chaney, Rudolph and Rahn 2000).

All of this leads us to believe that patterns of opinion plotted in Figure 5 probably reflect something about how actual corrupt practices might compromise trust in democracy. For one thing, an external measure of corruption in each nation derived from assessments of experts, business people and international organizations (the Transparency International Corruptions Perceptions Index, or CPI) is strongly correlated with our survey respondents’ perceptions of public corruption in their nation (r = .82). Perceptions of corruption measured in the ISSP surveys are also highly correlated with World Bank measures of the quality of a nation’s regulatory system (-.78), and governmental effectiveness (-.90). Furthermore, we see people in Japan and South Korea, where massive bribery scandals have rocked governments, are more likely to perceive public officials as corrupt. People in Portugal and the Czech Republic, with the lowest CPI ranking of the nations in our study, have the highest reported perceptions of corruption. Finland and Denmark, ranked as the world’s two cleanest political systems, have citizens with the lowest perceptions of official corruption.

Figure 6 about here

Perceptions of corruption - and actual corruption - are also important as they probably affect trust by conditioning attitudes about the responsiveness of government. Figure 6 illustrates a strong negative relationship between national levels of trust in government and perceptions that government “doesn’t care much about what people like me think” (r = -.72). This sentiment that government doesn’t care is associated with perceptions of public corruption (r = .57). We also find these feelings of unresponsive government associated with the objective corruption index (CPI) measure (r = .52).
The Role of Social Capital

Social forces, as well as these political factors, might affect national-levels of trust in government. Many commentators have promoted the idea that the health of a political system flows from social capital - a macro level resource that enhances a polity’s ability to act collectively (Coleman 1990: 302). Drawing on de Tocqueville, Robert Putman (2000) defines social capital as the ‘norms of reciprocity and trust’ arising out of social networks and voluntary associations. People may learn how to act collectively as citizens, learn ‘public-spiritedness, and learn to trust others, in part, by joining and participating voluntary groups such as sports clubs, church groups, arts clubs and the like (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). Early comparative studies of mass attitudes about democracy (Almond and Verba 1961) noted the importance of civic volunteerism.

Newton and Norris (1999) also found aggregate levels of social trust and confidence in government to be strongly associated in 17 “trilateral democracies.” Echoing Putnam (1993), they argue that social trust can build effective social and political institutions, which, in turn, helps government perform better and encourages confidence in government. Social participation in arts clubs, choir groups, sports clubs and other voluntary groups are associated with political engagement and participation in Europe (Bowler, Donovan and Hanneman 2003) and New Zealand (Donovan et al 2004). Recent studies suggest that membership in voluntary associations is in decline (Putnam 1995; Putnam et al 2004). Low rates of participation in voluntary groups may correspond with less social capital, less trust, and less political activity. Putnam suggests that high levels of political cynicism and distrust may be the effect of an erosion of social capital - an erosion he attributes to people now spending their leisure time watching TV, rather than working with others in groups.

Figures 7 and 8 about here

Bean (2001; 2005) demonstrates that social or interpersonal trust appears to be a better indicator of social capital than political trust (or trust in government) , and that social trust promotes political participation. Indeed, social capital theory holds that trust of other people is a pre-requisite for trust in government, and that trust in people is learned via activity in voluntary, non-political groups.
Figure 7 illustrates the first part of the relationship between social group activity and inter-personal trust. Here we see evidence that participation in social groups is associated with more social capital at the national level - with social capital measured by the percentage of people in a nation who report that other people can always or usually be trusted. Interpersonal trust is greater in nations where more people interact with each other in sports groups ($r = .57$). Levels of interpersonal trust are also higher in countries where more people participate in other (unnamed) voluntary associations ($r = .46$). Additional analysis of the cross national data reveals that nations with higher rates of participation in sports, leisure and cultural groups have fewer people reporting that they feel taken advantaged of by other people ($r = -.72$). Higher participation in church groups, in contrast, has no clear relationship with a nation’s stock of inter-personal trust ($r = -.05$).

Figure 8 demonstrates the second part of the social capital thesis: the relationship between interpersonal trust and trust in government. Here we see that nations with more people who trust other people tend to have higher levels of trust in government ($r = .60$). Part of America's relatively high levels of trust in government, then, may reflect a relatively healthy stock of interpersonal trust (social capital) that is maintained by active participation in voluntary social groups, such as sports clubs and cultural groups - at least when the United States is compared to Portugal, Spain, Taiwan, Poland, Latvia and Chile.

There are also forces that inhibit the growth of interpersonal trust. As we demonstrated above (Figure 5), perceptions of corruption in public life both play an important role in explaining trust in government. Corruption, both actual and perceived, has a corrosive effect on trust in government (Figure 5) and on perceptions of governmental responsiveness (Figure 6). We also find that inter-personal trust is lower where perceptions of corruption is greater ($r = -.76$), where there is more actual corruption ($r = .58$) is and where more people think that politicians are only in office for selfish purposes ($r -.78$). This likely reflects a complex causal relationship between social capital and the performance of democratic institutions reflected in Putnam’s idea (1993) that democratic governments have difficulty functioning without some basic reservoir or interpersonal trust.
Citizenship and Participation

But what are the political consequences of low (or high) levels of trust in government? If trust in government also reflects general support for a political system (Muller and Jukman 1977), or the legitimacy of a country’s political system (Easton 1965), then we should expect to see behavioral or attitudinal consequences. Public opinions data is ill-suited for measuring attitudes or behaviors that represent a serious rejection of a nation’s political system (such as willingness to riot, or propensity toward rebellion). However, the ISSP Citizenship module includes some measures of how people are oriented to their political system, including attitudes about how important it is that citizens obey laws and regulations, and pay their taxes. These data also include measures of various modes of political participation. If trust in government does somehow represent acceptance of the legitimacy of a political system, we may expect to see that people attach more importance to obeying laws, and more willingness to participate in politics, in nations where more people trust their government.

Figure 9 about here

At the aggregate level, political trust is correlated with multiple forms of political participation. Trust in government across the 29 democracies corresponds with higher levels of support for the idea that citizenship requires that people always vote \( r = .33 \), and higher trust of government in a nation corresponds with more respondents from that nation reporting voting in the last election \( r = .28 \). Likewise, we find that more people report “contacting or attempting to contact a politician or civil servant to express your views” in nations with higher trust in government \( r = .40 \). This result should be considered in light of the relationship between political trust and corruption discussed above. It suggests that an ill-functioning public service not only discourages people from trusting government, but also discourages them from contacting public officials. Indeed, there is a robust negative relationship between perceived corruption and the proportion of citizens in a nation who report contacting public officials \( r = -.62 \). We also find a similar correlation between the Transparency International measure of actual corruption, and the percentage of people who contact officials \( r = -.64 \). Figure 9 illustrates that citizens in nations with lower levels of trust in government also have distinct attitudes about the need for citizens to engage in civil disobedience if they oppose government
actions \( (r = -0.51) \). Support for the idea that democracy requires citizens disobey government acts they oppose is highest in new democracies with high corruption and low trust in government (Slovakia and Poland).

**Democratic Performance vs. Political Culture**

We have demonstrated that trust in government depends on evaluations of how well democracy is performing, on perceptions of political efficacy, frustration with the scope of citizen input into the political system, and on evaluations of governmental responsiveness. Higher levels of political trust appear to correspond with better performing (less corrupt) political systems, and political trust is associated with social capital.

Results from these surveys of citizens in 29 democracies reveal that levels of trust in government, and interpersonal trust, vary widely across nations with similar cultures, and similar levels of trust appear in nations with vastly different histories and cultures. Levels of trust in government found in the United States are as similar to Spain and the Netherlands as they are to Great Britain. Likewise, interpersonal trust among Americans is closer to what we find in Hungary and Germany than new Zealand, Canada and Australia. We find nearly identical (low) levels of trust in France and Japan. Likewise, Germany and South Korean post nearly identical (low) levels of trust in government. Cross national differences in social and political culture, or the British-influence that America shares with Australia, Canada, and New Zealand seem somewhat inadequate for explaining relatively high levels of trust found in the United States.

These findings should offer some optimism for emerging democracies and established democracies that face a crisis of political trust, as they suggests that political outcomes and democratic performance, rather than immutable national culture, are associated with democratic prospects. Culture may be far less malleable than democratic institutions and political or economic outputs. If political trust is determined by deeply-rooted cultural norms, it may take several generations to build democracies that function well. However, if trust flows from the performance of institutions, then better institutional performance (fewer scandals, less corruption) may build political trust. Likewise, the growth of participation in civil society may also build interpersonal and
political trust. Governments may be able to generate trust by eliminating corruption, improving the performance of democratic institutions, and, perhaps, by addressing public perceptions of inadequate opportunities for citizen input.

There are, of course, other components of trust that we have not accounted for in this analysis. As Anderson et al (2005: 67), trust of government in America is associated with whether a person supported the party that controlled government. This result has been found in cross-national studies of trust as well, but it is a short-term effect: supporters of parties out of power come to trust government more once their party is in power. As we noted above, economic performance, measured by GDP per capita, is only weakly related to trust in government. This result may reflect that the set of democracies considered here are all relatively affluent. Analysis of opinions in newer, less affluent democracies illustrates that people are more trusting of government where economic performance is stronger (Mishler and Rose 2001; Chanley et al 2000). Economic performance can be seen as a system output, however. Improvements in the economy may thus offer some promise for building trust.

American Expectionalism?

Although it is somewhat common to note that Americans are cynical about politics, and that most do not trust their government, when these attitudes are examined in a cross-national perspective Americans' assessments of democracy appear modestly optimistic. Compared to most other rich democracies, the United States experiences fairly high levels of trust in government, a public who approves of how well democracy is working, very high levels of personal (internal) efficacy - although the effects of these things on building trust may be offset by (relatively) high levels of perceived political corruption. Nonetheless, Americans place more value on obeying laws, honesty in tax payments, and voting than citizens of most other nations examined here. We do find that Americans are slightly more likely to say that their political parties don’t offer “real policy choices,” and they are much more likely to say that people should be given more opportunities to participate in public decision-making. This suggests that aggregate distrust of government in America is not likely a reflection of those with anti-system
views or anti-democratic views, but a reflection of people who, as Dalton (1999) notes, want to risk more democracy.

Still, this begs the question of why Americans are more trusting of their government compared to Japanese, Germans, Poles, Czechs, French, Austrians and Norwegians. Moreover, if social capital and the performance of democratic institutions (corruption) build trust in government, what has changed in the United States in the last few decades that might depress political trust? Many of the structural features that might make America exceptional - no 20th Century experience with fascism, no socialist revolution, an enduring party system, very high wealth, etc. - have not changed since lower levels of trust were measured in the 1970s and 1980s.

We can only speculate about what it is about the United States that may lead to lower levels of trust today than 40 years ago. Opinions measured in 2004 may somehow reflect a period of war, and memories of 9/11. Measures from previous decades may reflect less anxiety about security and terrorism. Current measures of trust in America may reflect, at least in part, a healthy economy. The American economy was certainly performing better in 2004 than in the late 1970s, and in some nations trends in trust correspond with economic performance. In Germany, for example, trust declined as economic performance weekend after unification. It is more difficult, however, to assess if contemporary levels reflect whether democratic institutions are performing better, or worse: we cannot tell if there are higher levels of perceived corruption today than before.
Table 1: Trust in Government, 2004

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Note: Cell entries are the percent of respondents in each nation who strongly agree or agree to the statement: “Most of the time we can trust people in government to do what is right.”

Figure 1: Trust Government to do the Right thing, by Evaluations of how well democracy works today.

Note: Respondents were asked “On the whole, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 is very poorly and 10 is very well, how well does democracy work in (COUNTRY) today? The x-axis depicts the percent of respondents responding 7 or higher. r = .80.”
Figure 2: Trust in Government, by personal efficacy (as measured by per cent saying they understand political issues).

Note: Efficacy measured as the per cent of respondents who strongly agree or agree that “I feel I have pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing (COUNTRY). r = .46.
Figure 3: Trust in Government, and demands for more citizen involvement (as measured by per cent saying it is very important people have more opportunities to participate).

Note: Respondents were asked, “There are different opinions about people’s rights in a democracy. On a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is not important and 7 is very important, how important is that people be given more opportunities to participate in public decision-making?” The x-axis represents the per cent of citizens rating more citizen involvement at 7 (that is, rating it as very important). r = -.44.
Figure 4: Trust in Government and Discontent with Party Choices

Note: Respondents were asked, “thinking now of politics in (COUNTRY), to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements; Political parties do not really give voters real policy choices.” The x-axis plots the per cent who strongly agreed and agreed. $r = -.30$. 
Figure 5: Trust in Government and Perceptions of Official Corruption (as measured by the per cent who say ‘a lot’ or ‘almost everyone’ in public service is corrupt).

Note: Respondents were asked, “How widespread do you think corruption is in the public service in (COUNTRY). Response categories included: Hardly anyone is involved; a small number of people are involved; a moderate number of people are involved; a lot of people are involved, almost everyone is involved. The x-axis plots the per cent of respondents who replied “a lot of people” or “almost everyone,” r = -.60.
Figure 6: Trust in Government and Perceptions of Governmental Responsiveness (as measured by the per cent who say they don’t think government cares about ‘people like me’).

Note: The y-axis plots the per cent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “I don’t think government cares much what people like me think.” $r = -0.72$. 
Figure 7: Interpersonal Trust and per cent of people who are members of sports, leisure, or cultural groups.

Note: People were asked, “People sometimes belong to different kinds of groups or associations. For each type of group, please indicated whether you, belong and actively participate, belong but don’t participate, used to belong but do not anymore, or have never belonged. The x-axis plots the per cent of people who reported belonging and actively participating in “a sports, leisure or cultural group.” Data on the y-axis are described in Figure 8. r=.60.
Figure 8: Trust in Government and Inter-personal Trust (per cent who trust other people).

Note: Respondents were asked, “generally speaking, would you say that most people could be trusted, or that you can’t be too careful dealing with people.” Response categories include, “people can almost always be trusted; people can usually be trusted; you usually can’t be too careful in dealing with people; you almost always can’t be too careful in dealing with people.” The x-axis plots the per cent of people who reported the first two responses. $r = .60$. 
Figure 9: The Need for Civil Disobedience (per cent who say it is important to disobey when you disagree with government), and Trust in Government.

Note: Y-axis represents the percent of respondents who responded 7, when asked; “There are different opinions about what it takes to be a good citizen. As far as you are concerned personally, on a scale of 1 to 7 with 1 is not important at all and 7 is very important, how important that citizens may engage in civil disobedience when they oppose government actions.” The X-axis is the pre cent who trust government. r = -.51.
References


