Motivating Cooperation and Compliance with Authority

The Role of Institutional Trust

Brian H. Bornstein • Alan J. Tomkins
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Chapter 8
Political Trust in Polarized Times

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, Dona-Gene Barton, and Michael W. Wagner

Two features of the American political landscape stand out in the early twenty-first century. One is the low level of trust Americans have in their government. When asked if the government can be trusted to do what is right, the overwhelming answer is “no.” Less than a quarter of Americans (24%) said they could trust their government most or all of the time in 2012, compared to 61% in 1966. The decline in political trust over the past 50 years has been dramatic (Alford, 2001; Hetherington, 1998). Just as dramatic, though, has been the second prominent feature—the increase in party polarization. The two major parties in Congress are further apart today than they were in the 1870s, after the Civil War (McCarty, Poole, & Rosenthal, 2006; Voteview.com, 2014). Not only are Democrats and Republicans in Congress very far apart, but the American people are showing symptoms of polarization as well. According to a recent Pew Research Center report, Americans are more likely to view the opposing party as a threat to America’s well-being, to want to live near and be close friends with people in their own party, and to say they would be unhappy if a family member married someone from the other party (Pew Research Center, 2014). One of the drivers of polarization is not an increasing identification with one’s own party, but an increasing antipathy toward the other (Abramowitz, 2014).


E. Theiss-Morse (✉) • D.G. Barton
Department of Political Science, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE, USA
e-mail: etheissmorse1@unl.edu; dbarton4@unl.edu

M.W. Wagner
Department of Political Science, School of Journalism and Mass Communication,
University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, USA
e-mail: mwagner8@wisc.edu

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In fact, people are more likely to discriminate against someone from the opposing party in a job interview than someone from a different race (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014). This is especially true for those individuals who hold either consistently liberal or conservative positions across both economic and social issues (Carmines, Ehlley, & Wagner, 2012a).

Miller (1974) and Citrin (1974) debated the meaning of the decline in trust at an earlier time when trust had dropped precipitously, from 1964 to the early 1970s. Miller argued that the distrust was deep and reflected cynicism toward the institutions and political system as a whole based on discontentment with conservative government policies. Citrin countered that Americans were disenchanted with the incumbent authorities, not with the political system, suggesting that changes in elected officials could shift sentiment toward the government. An important feature of the Miller–Citrin debate is that it occurred during a period of unusually moderate partisan conflict. McCarty et al. (2006) show that lower levels of polarization than has been the norm in American politics characterized the era from the 1950s to the 1970s. However, the story of much of our history has instead been one of polarization at the elite level. In light of the rising levels of polarization since the debate’s inception, we contend that it is important to revisit the question of whether declining trust levels are a reflection of the public’s assessment of the political system or their evaluations of elected officials. In this chapter, we focus our attention on political trust during one of these periods of deep, often intractable differences between the two parties that has characterized recent years. What happens to political trust when there is heightened animosity between the two parties? And what are the consequences of political trust, particularly during highly polarized times, for both policy outcomes and democratic processes?

We begin with a discussion of the concept of political trust, drawing on political scientists’ understanding of the concept. Trust has been defined in both rational and psychological terms. We bring the two together. We then focus specifically on party polarization and how political trust responds to the party in the White House. Finally, we heed Citrin’s (1974) call for more research on the consequences of political trust. We review the excellent work that has been done on the impact of declining trust on policy outcomes. Miller (1974) argued that disenchantment with policies that were not liberal enough led to greater distrust. Hetherington, Rudolph, and others have turned this around, demonstrating that greater distrust has led to less liberal policies. We also address Miller’s contention that distrust has a deeper, more systemic meaning. In a novel approach to the consequences of trust, we test whether political trust predicts support for democratic processes. In particular, we take account of the tone of polarization in the information environment to build on previous work suggesting that as information environments become saturated with contentious, polarized politics, politicians can improve their performance at the ballot box by strategically tapping into individuals’ distrust in government (Wagner, Wells, Friedland, Cramer, & Shah, 2014). If political trust affects people’s support for how democracy works, then there is reason to think that declining trust might affect not just policy but the political system as a whole.

**Understanding Political Trust**

The primary framework used by political scientists to understand political trust comes from theorizing about trust within interpersonal relations. On an interpersonal level, the trustee is a self-interested actor who must decide whether the other person (the trustee) will act in the trustee’s best interest, and this depends on the trustee’s interests and motivations (Hardin, 1999). If the trustee has perfect knowledge of the trustee, it is a simple decision whether to trust or not. Without perfect knowledge, however, the trustee must use what knowledge is at hand to determine expectations of the trustee’s likely behavior and to assess the risk involved in trusting the other person (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). The decision to trust leaves the trustee vulnerable; the trustee might act against the trustee’s best interest, revealing that it would have been best not to have trusted.

The decision whether or not to trust in this interpersonal domain therefore involves knowledge, expectations, risk, and interests. The trustee has knowledge about the other person based on direct experience or through indirect sources. The trustee uses this knowledge to develop expectations about the trustee’s likelihood of acting in the trustee’s best interest. The trustee assesses the risk of the likelihood that the trustee will act against his or her best interest and whenever that risk is greater than zero, the trustee leaves himself or herself vulnerable to the actions of the trustee.

Researchers working in the domain of political trust often draw on the same basic logic and concepts—knowledge, expectations, risk, and interests—but the argument has to be modified. Two modifications become especially pertinent: the understanding of what is in the person’s best interest, and the complexity of the calculations people must make.

Political trust shifts the understanding of interest from the individual self-interest focus of interpersonal trust (e.g., can Person A trust Person B to pay back the $20 A lent to B) to a broader take on interests. As the literature on economic voting has shown, people are much more reactive to the state of the national economy than to the state of their own pocketbooks (see, e.g., Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000; Markus, 1988). Personal economic self-interest is not as a big a part of people’s considerations as broader, national concerns. Rather than expecting trust in government to rise or fall based on direct experiences with government and the fulfillment of personal interests, researchers look at broader expectations. For example, Citrin and Muste (1999, 465) define political trust as “confidence that authorities will observe the rules of the game and serve the general interest.” If a scandal erupts in Washington, DC, whether due to, say, corruption or to illicit sexual relations, people do not react because they have personally been hurt but because the elected official has broken the rules or gone against the interests of the nation or the people as a whole. Political trust is not necessarily about self-interest, then, but about collective interests.

Political trust is also much more complex than interpersonal trust. At a very basic level, the trustee shifts from being an individual to being the government as a whole, an institution of government, or a large group of people in the government.
Further bolstering Hardin's assertion that most Americans lack sufficient knowledge to make well-informed trust assessments of the government is the extent to which the electorate is interested in and attentive to political affairs. Americans' knowledge about what is going on in their country and in the world is quite low, and often significantly lower than is the case for Western Europeans (Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996). If Grimmell & Hutton (2012, p. 55) is right that greater knowledge "allows one to make relatively confident predictions regarding the likelihood that the object of trust is indeed trustworthy," then Americans should definitely lack confidence. But Popkin (1991) has argued that people easily gain knowledge through their everyday experiences. Going to the grocery store and finding that the cost of milk or bread has increased significantly says something about the economy. People can then use this information to decide whether the government should be trusted. Moreover, institutional structures (such as the news media) can help individuals overcome a lack of knowledge when deciding whom to trust because the institutions can penalize individual actors, like politicians, for lying (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998).

Knowledge can also be gained through direct experience with government officials. People have direct experience with government officials fairly regularly, such as when they go to the post office or when the mail carrier delivers mail to their house or apartment. These direct experiences seem to be positive ones for most Americans (Yiannakis, 1981). According to a Washington Post poll, most Americans (about three-quarters of those polled) thought the federal officials with whom they had come into contact had done a good job (Rein & O'Keefe, 2010). The problem with relying on direct experience, however, is that people apparently do not connect these interpersonal experiences with trust in government as a whole. The leap is simply too large to go from positive experiences with, say, someone who works behind the counter at the Post Office to having the knowledge to make good risk predictions about the federal government as a whole.

People can also gain knowledge about the government indirectly, most often via the mass media and through education. Many scholars point to the media as the culprit for low political trust in the United States because of their extensive negative coverage of government, especially Congress (Capella & Jamieson, 1997; Morris & Clawson, 2005; Mutz & Reeves, 2005; Patterson, 1993; Robinson, 1976). If the only knowledge people gain about the government through the media is negative, then it is no wonder that people distrust their government. Others view the media's influence as more conditional, however, with the type of medium and pre-existing trust levels affecting the impact of the media on trust (Avery, 2009; Norris, 2000), especially since public esteem of the media has been on a steep decline for decades (Ladd, 2012).

The bottom line is that Americans are not highly informed about politics, and their lack of interest in and attention paid to politics makes trust calculations particularly onerous. Consequently, we know that, as with other political evaluations, individuals often rely on heuristics when it comes to political trust decisions. Political scientists have drawn on the work of psychologists to understand how people make decisions when they clearly do not go through the complex cognitive computations.
required in rational models of decision making (Simon, 1957; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Heuristics are "cognitive shortcuts, rules of thumb for making certain judgments or inferences that considerably less than the complete search for alternatives and their consequences that is dictated by rational choice" (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006: 25). The idea is that people use heuristics to simplify problem solving and decision making in such a way that they do not have to utilize complicated calculations. Some political scientists have also discussed heuristics as an alternative to having full information (see, e.g., Bartels, 1996), although Druckman, Kuklinski, and Sigelman (2009: 494) point out that people can have little information but still use complicated, rigorous computations. On the flip side, people can also have a lot of information and still use heuristics to simplify the judgment process.

One of the main heuristics people use when it comes to politics is the party identification. It is easy and widely available. People naturally categorize stimuli and use the preexisting content of the category to draw inferences about the stimuli quickly and efficiently. People are aware of and pick up a party identification at a young age (Jennings & Niemi, 1968), making party an easy-to-use category that has ample content. The content is the stereotypes and knowledge people have about the political parties. Given the ubiquitous nature of partisanship in politics, it makes sense that people would turn to party identification as a heuristic. In fact, research shows clearly that people use party stereotypes to make sense of politics (Conover & Feldman, 1989; Lodge & Hamill, 1986), and they use party identification as a shortcut even when they have other information available to make judgments. For example, Rahn (1993) has shown that people readily use candidates' policy stands, attend to their messages, and draw inferences based on this information when party identification is not available as a cue. When candidates' partisanship is available, however, people "neglect policy information in reaching evaluations; they use the label rather than policy attributes in drawing inferences; and they are perceptually less responsive to inconsistent information" (p. 492).

Alongside the pervasive party heuristic, Hetherington (2005) has argued that trust in government is another widely used heuristic. Rather than spending effort and time gathering the necessary knowledge to make an informed decision about whether to trust the government, people rely on their "baseline feelings... arrived at on a gut level" (p. 51). When confronted with a policy proposal or a government action of some sort, people do not need to go through the complicated trust calculations determining risks and expectations. Rather, they can easily figure out from where the proposal is coming and determine if they trust that source. If they trust the source, they will support the policy or action. If they do not trust the source, they will oppose the policy or action.

People use the trust heuristic as the fallback position until some future action leads to a shift in the status quo. Because trust relationships are usually not a one-shot deal, involving instead interactions over time, it is clear that the trust developed at r1 has an impact on whether the person trusts at r2. To maximize cognitive efficiency, individuals may rely on the trust heuristic as a central tendency or anchor from which slight adjustments may be made depending on new information.

In other words, trust (or distrust) becomes the default because it is not rational to repeat the calculations each time a trust judgment is needed. This argument can easily be brought into the political realm. If a person trusts the government to do what is right, she is likely to use that standing decision to interpret the government's actions. Because people have a running history of interactions with the government, even if those interactions are through what is learned via the media, these standing decisions are likely to be fairly stable. Although perceptions of government actions affect trust judgments, it is highly likely that a person's current standing decision on trust affects his or her perception of current government actions. In short, standing trust decisions likely color perceptions of government actions.

In polarized times, when the animosity between the two parties is especially pronounced, it is likely that the party and trust heuristics are highly intertwined. Trust as a heuristic allows people to use their standing decision, their trust shortcut, when making a judgment about the government. They do not need to calculate the trust decision every time they see the government taking action. But when partisan polarization is a salient feature of the political environment, the default towards trust or distrust is likely to depend on which party is associated with the government action. The party of the president or the majority party in the House or Senate is likely to be more salient to people, and their trust in government actions is likely to be highly sensitive to the party in power. If the opposing party is proposing a particular policy, the gut reaction is distrust. If one's own party is proposing the policy, the default is trust. In other words, attitudes toward the political system and evaluations of public officials are both at play in determining trust levels. We turn now to a fuller discussion of the effects of polarization on political trust.

**Polarization and Its Impact on Political Trust**

Our argument about polarization and trust assumes that the public is polarized. A large body of evidence suggests that political elites have become more polarized along both ideological and party lines in recent decades (Hetherington, 2001; McCarty et al., 2006; Poole & Rosenthal, 1984, 1997). The increased polarization in Congress is quite stunning. As Fig. 8.2 shows, both the House and the Senate were highly polarized in the aftermath of the Civil War but experienced a period of partisan cooperation in the mid-1900s. From the 1980s on, polarization in Congress has increased dramatically. In fact, in recent years, polarization is higher than it was shortly after the Civil War. The two parties in Congress cannot get along (Mann & Ornstein, 2008).

However, there is substantial disagreement among political scientists as to whether the mass public has followed a similar path. Arguing against the mass polarization hypothesis, Fiorina and his colleagues suggest that the mass public does not hold ideologically polarized positions and are primarily political moderates (Dalton, 2013; Fiorina & Abrams, 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2010).
In support of this contention, people have neither become more ideological in their thinking about politics in recent years, nor are they more willing to express political beliefs that are extremely liberal or extremely conservative (DiMaggio, Evans, & Bryson, 1996; Evans, 2003). In contrast, proponents of the mass polarization hypothesis suggest that people have followed elite polarization to see the world increasingly through an ideological lens (Hetherington, 2001). Empirical support for this claim includes the fact that people are more divided on social, religious, and cultural issues (Abramowitz & Saunders, 1998, 2005, 2008). People are also more likely to perceive the parties as ideologically distinct and to hold political views that correspond closely with their partisan affiliations (Jacobson, 2000; Layman & Carsey, 2002; Levendusky, 2009, 2010). In these polarized times, partisan elites provide clearer and more consistent issue cues, making them easier for the mass public to use (Layman & Carsey, 2002; Levendusky, 2009; Wagner, 2007).

One attempt to reconcile these competing accounts argues that each perspective on polarization contains a kernel of truth, but neither comprehensively explains the structure of American public opinion because each perspective assumes that individuals organize their attitudes along a single "left-right" (liberal to conservative) dimension. Carmines et al. (2012a, 2014) demonstrate that individuals organize their attitudes across two dimensions—economic issues and social issues. Polarization in the electorate, they show, is conditional upon whether individual views on social and economic issues line up with the issue positions offered by the elected officials in each major party (Carmines et al., 2012b). Citizens who have either liberal or conservative views on both economic and social issues are polarized, while those with liberal views on one set of issues and conservative positions on the other are stuck in between two parties that do not perfectly match their views. These people often self-identify as moderates.

But polarization is not just about how distant the parties are from each other on political issues or the extent to which voters adopt partisan positions; it is also about the culture of brinkmanship that polarization produces. In a polarized, competitive environment, intergroup dynamics become more pronounced. Partisans feel both angry and anxious when confronted with the possibility that the opposing party will win the presidential election (Huddy & Mason, 2008). Partisan reactions to having the opposing party win the election (and therefore control the presidency for four years) are much more pronounced in the polarization era compared to the pre-polarization era, when who won was simply less threatening. The potential for an outgroup win is not just a minor upset; it is a threat to the ingroup (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). Accordingly, ingroup members react to outgroup threat by becoming more cohesive as a group, exhibiting greater ingroup bias, playing up ingroup stereotypes, and behaving defensively against the outgroup (Branscombe et al., 1999). Polarization increases the risk people associate with having the opposing party lead the nation while simultaneously decreasing the risk associated with one's own party being in charge.

While the potential relationship between trust and polarization has gone largely unaddressed, the few studies examining partisanship and trust in tandem have come to somewhat different conclusions. King (1997) suggests that the parties' increasing polarization has encouraged distrust among political moderates and weak identifiers but has actually increased trust among strong identifiers. This pattern remains the same regardless of which party is in power. Hetherington (2008) finds that trust is unrelated to ideology in most years, but in 2000 and 2004, political trust dropped significantly among moderates and liberals and soared among self-identified conservatives (Hetherington, 2008: 20–21).

To the extent that the parties have sorted along ideological lines (Levendusky, 2009), it makes sense to predict that Democrats and Republicans differ in their level of trust in government depending on which party controls the White House, and that these differences would be more pronounced the greater the polarization among the mass public. The further apart people perceive the two parties to be, the higher the risk of having the opposing party in power. The opposing party is less likely to have the national interest at heart in the way one's own party would, leading to the expectation that the opposing party will make bad choices when it comes to policies. The nation, and therefore oneself, is left vulnerable. It makes little sense to trust the government to do what is right when the president is from the opposing party. When one's own party controls the presidency, on the other hand, the obvious expectation is that it will make good choices, thereby lowering the risks. Without having to go through all of these calculations, though, people can simply rely on their trust and party heuristics; they can trust the government to do what is right when their own party is in charge and distrust the government when the opposing party is in power.

Figure 8.3 breaks down political trust over time by the party identification of the respondent. Overall, the political trust of people in both parties tends to move in tandem. The general ups and downs of political trust reflect reactions to the
times—whether the economy is strong, the country is at peace, there is a strong external threat, etc.—among other factors, but there is also a partisan aspect to political trust. The figure identifies the president and indicates, with red or blue, the president’s party. When a Democratic president is in office, Democrats are more trusting of the government than Republicans. When a Republican holds the presidency, on the other hand, Republicans have more trust in the government than Democrats. People are most aware of which party holds the presidency, with many fewer Americans recalling which party controls the houses of Congress, and they clearly trust government to do what is right when their own party is at the helm.

To get a better sense of the partisan differences in trust and to see if these differences have become more pronounced as the parties have become more polarized, we subtracted the mean political trust score of Republicans from the mean political trust score of Democrats for each survey year. Figure 8.4 shows the absolute value of these difference scores. Aside from the 12-point difference in 1966, shortly after President Lyndon Johnson pushed major civil and voting rights legislation through Congress, Democrats and Republicans were on average between six and seven points apart in their political trust up until Bill Clinton won the presidential election in 1992. From 1992 to 2000, the average difference was under three points. In two of the last three ANES surveys, however, the difference again reached 12 points. Republicans had much more trust in the federal government than Democrats in 2004, and Democrats had much more trust in the federal government in 2012. In 2008, at the end of the George W. Bush presidency, Democrats and Republicans were equally distrusting. Looking at Figs. 8.3 and 8.4, there is clear evidence that partisanship affects trust and that this effect has, in very recent years (with the exception of 2008), become more pronounced.

**Consequences of Political Trust in an Era of Polarization**

Much of the discussion of political trust concerns what causes trust to go up or down. One dominant explanation is that people become more trusting of the government when policy outcomes match people’s expectations. People have expectations about what the government should be doing. When the policies produced by the government do not meet those expectations, people react by lowering their trust in the government (see, e.g., Hetherington, 2005; Schoon & Cheng, 2011). The clearest example of this tendency concerns the economy. People expect the government to pass the legislation necessary to strengthen the economy (e.g., by decreasing unemployment or inflation or by increasing economic growth). When the economy turns sour, they blame the government for not having taken the steps necessary to secure a strong economy. That is, their trust in the government decreases because the government did not serve the general interests of its citizens.

A second explanation concerns political process. People have expectations about how the government should do its job, and they become less trusting when these expectations are not met. Drawing on Tyler’s (1990) notion of procedural justice, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995, 2002) have argued that political trust is not as much about gaining specific policy outcomes as it is a reaction to the political processes used to come to policy decisions. The more people see special interests influencing members of Congress, the use of special perquisites by elected officials, and a yawning gap between how ordinary people live and how members of Congress live, the less they trust the government. Support for many reforms largely reflects
these process concerns (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995). Term limits would force members of Congress not to get too comfortable in Washington, DC. Decreasing the congressional salary would force members to live like regular Americans. Getting rid of interest groups and political parties would force members to pay more attention to constituents. Perceptions of process matter when it comes to trust in government.

Although the causes of political trust are important, the consequences of trust are equally if not more important. Many scholars introduce their research on political trust with the claim that understanding trust is important because it gets at the heart of democracy, yet few have put these consequences to empirical test. The research that has focused on the consequences of political trust has pointed to the ways it is important. We focus on two consequences: policy outcomes and support for democratic processes.

**Policy Outcomes**

Policy concerns affect trust in government. Within the realm of government, people have certain expectations about what the government will do, including keeping the economy strong and crime under control. When the government is not able to make these two things happen, people trust the government less. Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn (2000) found this to be the case. Negative perceptions of the economy and concern about crime rates, along with congressional scandals, decreased people’s trust in government. They also found, however, that political distrust led to less support for government spending and government interventions. That is, when people distrust the government, they do not want the government to be involved in trying to solve societal problems.

Marc Hetherington and Thomas Rudolph, together and independently, have examined in depth the impact of political trust on policy outcomes. Hetherington (2005) finds that trust’s impact on policy outcomes holds for redistributive policies, such as welfare and affirmative action programs, but not for distributive policies, such as Social Security and spending on public schools. He argues that the distinction between the two types of policies is important for understanding the differential effects of political trust. On the one hand, trust is less likely to play a role in the case of distributive policies where the beneficiaries of the policy also bear the costs involved. On the other hand, trust is required in the case of redistributive policies that entail sacrifice because most people who bear the costs of these policies, through taxes, do not receive direct benefits, such as in the case of welfare payments. “When people know for certain that they will not readily or materially gain from a program but that they will have to help pay the costs, it is essential that they trust the agent asking such sacrifice” (Hetherington, 2005, p. 48). To use the logic and concepts of trust we discussed earlier, they are taking a risk (in the sense that the program might be poorly run, the recipients might misuse the money, or the outcomes might not be what was expected), and they therefore need to trust the government to do what is right. The less people trust the government, the less willing they are to bear the sacrifice or the risk.

The trust heuristic is especially important for understanding support for policy outcomes. If people distrust the American government, which they have in recent years, they will likely be opposed to the policies coming out of that government. People usually associate government programs and spending with liberal and racialized programs (Gilets, 1999), so distrust of government likely leads to less support for liberal policies and more support for conservative policy outcomes. Chanley et al. (2000) found that political trust leads to swings in the ideological leanings of the American public. When trust is low, Americans become more conservative. When trust is high, they become more liberal. Hetherington (2005, p. 53) further found that political trust affects actual policy outcomes: “When political trust is high, ...politicians provide more liberal public policy. When political trust is low, ...politicians provide more conservative public policy.” However, when people associate government programs with national security, as they did after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, they increase their support for government defense spending and military intervention (Hetherington & Husser, 2012).

Rudolph and his colleagues (Rudolph & Evans, 2005; Rudolph & Popp, 2009, 2011) have shown that political trust has an impact beyond redistributive policies. Rudolph and Evans (2005) find that the sacrifice Hetherington emphasizes does not need to be material. It can also be ideological. Conservatives have traditionally been ideologically opposed to government intervention in domestic politics whereas liberals favor such intervention. When asked to support such policies, whether distributive or redistributive, conservatives are being asked to sacrifice more ideologically than liberals. Conservatives certainly perceive greater risk. Trust as a heuristic is activated and plays a more important role for conservatives than liberals because of the greater ideological sacrifice or risk. The party of the president therefore matters a great deal. Democratic presidents face low levels of trust from conservatives and therefore are pressured to support less government spending and interventions. Republican presidents, on the other hand, tend to be trusted by conservatives and therefore “face pressure not to spend too little” (p. 661).

Polarization likely amplifies this dynamic. In fact, Hetherington and Rudolph (2014) show that the political trust of partisans depends heavily on which party controls the White House and that this negatively affects the likelihood of public consensus forming around policy areas. Rather than being willing to accept ideological sacrifices and therefore trust a Democratic president to do what is right, Republicans “follow the cues of their favored political elites and oppose everything that Democrats propose” (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2014, p. 4). Democrats likely react the same way when they are asked to make ideological sacrifices. In any event, Hetherington and Rudolph contend that the lack of any public consensus developing on policy contributes to the gridlock in Washington, a prominent feature in recent years.

Understanding the impact of political trust on policy outcomes is not just important theoretically but in the real world of politics. People who rely on the trust heuristic are increasingly using distrust as the default, especially when the opposing party is in power. Trusting the government in these conditions is too risky and the
expectations people hold for the government are usually negative. If people perceive government as never doing anything right, then they will not trust the programs or policies that come out of that government. Government, as Republican President Ronald Reagan argued, is perceived as the problem, not the answer, which limits ideas for dealing with national and world problems.

Support for Democratic Processes

Although political scientists have become increasingly interested in the impact of political trust on policy outcomes, research on perceptions of political processes has almost exclusively focused on them as a cause of trust, not a consequence. Fully understanding political trust demands that attention focus not just on policy outcomes or on processes as a cause of trust but also on how trust affects what people think about the processes used by government officials. These processes are at the intersection of individual authorities in government and the political institutions in which they reside and come down to two components: procedural efficiency and procedural equity (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 1995, p. 14). Procedural efficiency is the idea that laws should be made in an expeditious, straightforward, transparent manner without undue delays and unnecessary diversions. Prolonged debates and behind-the-scenes compromises, also known (less charitably) as partisan bickering and selling out on principles, are anathema to procedural efficiency. Procedural equity, which is comparable to the notion of procedural justice (Tyler, 1990), is the idea that all aspects of the process should be fair, unbiased, and open to everyone's input, not just to the influence of special interests. As Tyler (1990) points out in his work, people respond more favorably to a court decision that goes against their self-interest if they think the decision process was fair.

The two political processes that have been of special concern during increased polarization in Congress are debate and compromise. The U.S. political system in particular was set up to allow for many interests to work their way through the government and for elected officials to filter the good ideas from the bad through debating the issues and through reaching compromises that reflect the best of the broad array of interests (Madison in Federalist #10). Debate and compromise, given Madison's argument, suggest a recognition that interests different from one's own are valid, that they should be tolerated even if they are “wrong.” What polarization has done is to heighten the view that others' interests are not valid and that, therefore, debate is unnecessary (because only one interest is obviously right) and compromise is actually bad (because the other side is not only wrong but probably immoral or evil). Why would anyone debate and compromise with evil (Wagner, Barton, & Theiss-Morse, 2011)?

Yet this is precisely where trust comes into play. If people have developed a standing decision to trust the government, they are more likely to think that government actions, including debate and compromise, are probably all right, that they potentially lead to better outcomes. Those who have a standing decision to distrust the government, on the other hand, are likely to accept the rhetoric and therefore the idea that debate and compromise with the opposing party are wrong. In other words, a standing decision of trust or distrust will likely affect perceptions of government processes, with trust leading to more support for these basic democratic processes and distrust leading to less support.

The bottom line is that trust can dampen the negative effects of polarization. Distrust, on the other hand, can heighten the negative effects by increasing people's skepticism about debating and compromising with the opposing party. The American National Election Studies do not ask about the democratic processes of debate and compromise, making it impossible to test the relationship between trust and support for these processes over time. A survey that we administered in early 2012 via Mechanical Turk included questions on democratic processes and political trust as well as an experiment that included as a condition vitriolic rhetoric (see the Appendix for question wordings). We can therefore test whether support for democratic processes is affected by political trust when people have been primed to think about how far apart the political parties are. Respondents to the online survey saw a video with a (fictional) member of Congress discussing economic policy in the United States. The supposed member of Congress, Richard McCoy, criticized the economic policy of the opposing party and praised the economic policy of his own party in varying terms of vitriol. The three rhetoric conditions were disagreement (simply disagreeing with the opposing party), incivility (using rude, disrespectful language aimed at the opposing party), and vilification (calling the opposing party evil and dangerous). Regardless of the level of rhetoric used, we think it likely that people were primed to think about how polarized American politics is when they heard the video. We therefore include rhetoric level in the analysis, but we believe that polarization is primed by any of the levels of disagreement.

Our primary independent variable of interest is political trust. Respondents were prompted to indicate their trust level by the following question: "On a scale from 1 to 7 where ‘1’ means ‘Never’ and ‘7’ means ‘Always,’ how much would you say you trust the American government?" If political trust is a heuristic that people use to make judgments about the government, then we expect political trust to be positively related to support for debate and compromise. People who trust the government have more positive expectations when the government is involved in things and they assume the risks of trusting will be low. That is, their standing decision on trust will lead them to be positive about key democratic processes. We also include in our analysis party identification as a control variable. The sitting president in 2012 was Barack Obama, a Democrat. We therefore expect Democrats to be more trusting of the government than Republicans. Including party identification as a control variable removes the variance in trust explained by party, which is important for understanding how trust relates to support for democratic processes. Finally, we included as control variables age, gender, race, and education level. To facilitate comparison of the coefficients across the independent variables, all were rescaled to range from 0 to 1. We begin by regressing support for compromise (over standing on principles) on trust in government, party identification, rhetoric type, and the demographic variables using binary logistic regression.
Table 8.1 Political trust and support for democratic processes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(a) Compromise vs. principles (binary logistic regression)</th>
<th>(b) McCoy compromising (ordinal regression)</th>
<th>(c) McCoy debating (ordinal regression)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political trust</td>
<td>.710**</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>1.001***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td>−1.105***</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td>−.437***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetoric level</td>
<td>−.006</td>
<td>.039</td>
<td>−.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.423</td>
<td>.222</td>
<td>.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Ref. category: female)</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.083</td>
<td>−.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (Ref. category: people of color)</td>
<td>.418***</td>
<td>.110</td>
<td>−.429***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>.548**</td>
<td>.204</td>
<td>.429***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−.350</td>
<td>.200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model chi-squared</td>
<td>120.52***</td>
<td></td>
<td>66.06***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagelkerke R squared</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.032</td>
<td>.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2,570</td>
<td></td>
<td>2,201</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Vilification Survey (2012)
Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Specifically, respondents were asked: “Would you prefer that members of Congress stand up for their principles come what may or compromise with their opponents in order to get something done?” Response options were coded 0 = stand up for their principles and 1 = compromise with their opponents. The results, in column (a) of Table 8.1, suggest that trust matters a great deal in whether people support the basic democratic principle of compromise. People who are more trusting of governance are much more likely to say members of Congress should compromise to get things done rather than stand up for their principles. Having Congress compromise to get things done is not as fearful a prospect among those who trust the government compared to those who distrust the government. The rhetoric people heard did not affect support for compromise, perhaps because people need little reminder that the country is polarized. Party identification, as expected, is strongly related to support for compromise, with Democrats preferring that members of Congress come to a compromise to get things done and Republicans preferring that members of Congress stick to their principles.

It may be, however, that people responded more to the “get things done” idea rather than to compromise. As Hetherington (2005) has shown, people who trust the government like the idea of government intervention. Perhaps respondents to our survey were simply indicating support for government intervention. Another question asked of the survey respondents is a cleaner measure of support for compromise. Respondents had just watched the video of Representative McCoy criticizing, in cooler or hotter terms, the opposing party for their economic policy. We asked respondents if they would support Congressman McCoy compromising with the opposing party on economic policy: “On a scale from 1 to 4 where ‘1’ means ‘I do not support at all’ and ‘4’ means ‘I support completely,’” which number best reflects your view if Congressman McCoy compromises with the [Republicans (when McCoy is a Democrat)/Democrats (when McCoy is a Republican)] on economic policy?” We regressed support for McCoy compromising with the opposing party on political trust, party identification, rhetoric level, and the demographic variables using ordinal regression. Column (b) in Table 8.1 shows that even with this cleaner measure, political trust is strongly and positively related to support for compromise. Party identification remains highly significant as well; Democrats favor compromise much more than Republicans. Regardless of how support for compromise is measured, then, political trust enhances support for this basic democratic principle.

We have focused so far on support for compromise, but debating is also an important democratic process. Many Americans view debate in Congress as partisan bickering with no positive purpose, yet debating issues is important to good public policy. It is through debate that people can hear the arguments of the opposing side and, theoretically, find where interests overlap and where they diverge. We asked our respondents if they would support Congressman McCoy if he engaged in debate with the opposing party on the issue of economic policy: “On a scale from 1 to 4 where ‘1’ means ‘I do not support at all’ and ‘4’ means ‘I support completely,’” which number best reflects your view if Congressman McCoy engages the [Republicans (when McCoy is a Democrat)/Democrats (when McCoy is a Republican)] in a debate about economic policy?” The more people trust how government works, the more likely they should favor debating major policy ideas. Column (c) in Table 8.1 shows support for this line of thinking. Respondents who were more trusting of the government were significantly more likely to say they would support Representative McCoy if he debated with the opposition. And once again, party identification mattered. Democrats were more supportive of McCoy debating with Republicans than Republicans were of McCoy debating with Democrats. Political trust is an important heuristic used in specific political contexts to make judgments about the government and its members.

Conclusion

Miller (1974) and Citrin (1974) laid the groundwork for how to think about the meaning of political trust. The ongoing debate remains relevant but we believe it needs to be revisited in light of increasing levels of polarization—among federal and state lawmakers as well as nontrivial portions of the public. Is political trust about the political system or about the incumbent politicians? Our answer to the question is that it is some of both. By relying on the trust heuristic, people are able to make judgments about the government quickly and easily by turning to their default level of political trust. The actions of incumbent politicians can play into political trust calculations causing slight shifts around a general tendency. But it is important to consider that in an era of heightened polarization, the party and trust heuristics become intertwined. Rather than focusing on incumbent politicians,
people respond more strongly now to the party of the president when deciding whether to trust the government. It matters a great deal to many people which party controls the presidency, and when the outparty is in control, the president can do no right. It is much easier to relax when the inparty controls the White House. During heightened levels of polarization, changes in party control have even more consequential effects on political trust calculations.

But political trust is about the political system as well. Hetherington and Rudolph have shown convincingly that political trust affects the public’s preference for and the government’s passage of policy outcomes. With less trust in government, people do not support government intervention in a wide array of areas, including the economy (Rudolph & Popp, 2011) and Social Security (Rudolph & Popp, 2009). And why would people want to pay taxes if they do not trust the government to spend it well (Rudolph, 2009)? A consequence of declining political trust, then, is a shrinking of the American political system. A lack of support for government involvement means that the government does less.

The political system is also affected by political trust through its impact on support for democratic processes. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) have argued that many Americans do not particularly like democracy; they tend to support “stealth democracy” over real democracy because they do not want to see democratic politics in action, and they would rather not have to get involved in politics if they do not have to. Declining political trust heightens this problem. People who distrust government are less likely to support the basic democratic processes of debate and compromise. They do not trust the government and therefore do not want to see the government in action. Debate and compromise are core features of a democratic political system, especially for a political system as large and diverse as the United States. Declining political trust directly affects support for these democratic features of the political system and may even incentivize lawmakers to avoid debate and compromise for fear of a public reprisal at the ballot box.

In other words, the interaction between political trust and partisan polarization may have the perverse effect of actually increasing polarization among elites. House and Senate incumbents enjoy very successful re-election rates, but they may worry that their districts would not remain so safe if they start compromising with an opponent that the majority of their constituents do not like or trust. Lawmakers watching the 2010 midterm election returns saw Democrats in marginal districts who supported the highly contentious and polarizing Affordable Care Act perform systematically worse at the ballot box than those Democrats who voted against the measure (Nyhan, McGhee, Sides, Masker, & Greene, 2012). Those whom the White House had targeted as possible Republican votes, such as Iowa Senator Charles Grassley, were also targeted by the Tea Party in polarizing, contentious town hall meetings in advance of the health care vote. The lack of trust shown by citizens speaking out at these rallies appeared to have made an impression on lawmakers being asked to compromise with “the enemy.” None did.

Because people rely on trust as a heuristic, and trust is intertwined with party in this era of polarization, the consequences of declining trust are likely to be around for a while. The standing decision on trust can change—people clearly become

more trusting when a president from their own party is in the White House and when economic times are good—but Fig. 8.1 shows an overall downward trend. Distrust is the easier default option because it leaves people less vulnerable. Increasing trust in government is difficult because it is not easy to move people off of the distrust default. For people who want to see more government intervention in various policy areas and more debate and compromise on political issues, it might be time to highlight the risks associated with the government not intervening and not debating and compromising on the issues. Gridlock in Washington, deteriorating infrastructure, and heightened security issues are obvious places where distrust and polarization should be put aside; if not, the situations will only worsen.

It may also be time for supporters of government intervention to highlight stories of government success after a hotly contested policy battle. As noted above, the health care reform debate of 2010 was a barnburner. While the rollout of the government’s health care website was rocky, to say the least, more recent attention to the Affordable Care Act refers to the law as a major success (Chait, 2014; Klein, 2014; Long et al., 2014; Rau & Appleby, 2014). Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the same lawmakers who aired scores of television ads calling for the “repeal of Obamacare” in 2010 and 2012 did not do so in the same in the 2014 midterms. On the other hand, the Democrats who voted for the bill and then largely remained quiet about it have not started speaking up about their vote and the law’s early successes either, perhaps squandering an opportunity to build political trust for the time the next major partisan battle comes along. In summary, it is important to recognize that political trust levels are responsive to and consequential for the political context. Specifically, political trust levels are affected by information environments that are saturated with high levels of partisan polarization, but they also contribute to heightened polarization. By pointing out several avenues for future research as well as potential real-world implications, it is our hope that scholars will pay greater attention to political trust dynamics in the face of partisan polarization.

Appendix

American National Election Studies Surveys

The Political Trust Index is from the ANES Time Series Cumulative Data File (1948–2012), available at http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/download/datacenter_all_datasets.php. The Political Trust Index ranges from 0 (low trust) to 100 (high trust). Each of the four questions that contribute to the index were asked from 1964–2012. (1) “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” (VCF0604). Response options were: 4=Just about always, 3=Most of the time, 2=Only some of the time, 1=Never; (2) “Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?” (VCF0605). Response options were: 1=Run by a few big interests or 2=Run for the benefit of
all the people; (3) “Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don’t waste very much of it?” (VCF0606). Response options were: 1 = Waste a lot of money, 2 = Waste some of it, or 3 = Don’t waste very much of it; (4) “Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?” (VCF0608). Response options were: 1 = Quite a few people running the government are crooked, 2 = Not very many are, or 3 = Hardly any are. The index was created by recoding the responses as follows: VCF0604 1 = 0, 2 = 33, 3 = 67, 4 = 100; VCF0605 1 = 0, 2 = 100; VCF0606 and VCF0608 1 = 0, 2 = 50, 3 = 100. The sum of the recoded values was divided by the number of valid responses and then rounded.

Vilification Survey

Political Trust: “On a scale from 1 to 7 where ‘1’ means ‘Never’ and ‘7’ means ‘Always’, how much would you say you trust the American government?” Response options were recoded to range from 0 = never to 1 = always. This recoding maintains the continuous nature of the original scaling but adjusts the range to be from 0 to 1.

Party Identification: “Do you consider yourself a Democrat, a Republican, an Independent or something else?” For those who answered Democrat or Republican, respondents were asked, “Do you consider yourself a strong Democrat/Republican or a not so strong Democrat/Republican?” For those who answered Independent or something else, respondents were asked, “Which of the two major parties do you lean toward?” The traditional seven-point scale of partisanship (with categories strong Democrat, weak Democrat, Independent leaning Democrat, Independent, Independent leaning Republican, weak Republican, and strong Republican) was recoded to range from 0 = strong Democrat to 1 = strong Republican.

Rhetoric Level: Coded 0 = disagreement, 5 = incivility, 1 = vilification.

Compromise vs. Principles: “Would you prefer that members of Congress stand up for their principles come what may or compromise with their opponents in order to get something done?” This indicator variable contained two response options that were coded 0 = stand up for their principles and 1 = compromise with their opponents.

McCoy Compromise: “On a scale from 1 to 4 where ‘1’ means ‘I do not support at all’ and ‘4’ means ‘I support completely,’ which number best reflects your view if…Congressman McCoy compromises with the (opposing party = Republicans when McCoy is a Democrat and = Democrats when McCoy is a Republican) on economic policy.” Response options coded 0 = I do not support at all to 1 = I support completely. Note: In one set of the experiment’s conditions, McCoy is portrayed as a Republican and in the other McCoy is portrayed as a Democrat. Thus the question wording, specifically whether the Republicans or Democrats were mentioned in the question wording, varied depending on the condition.

References


Chapter 9

The Epistemic Contract: Fostering an Appropriate Level of Public Trust in Experts

Robert J. MacCoun

Scintia nihil aliud est quam veritas imago. (Science is but an image of the truth.)

Francis Bacon

Back off man. I'm a scientist.

Francis Bacon

Bill Murray, playing Dr. Peter Venkman, in the movie Ghostbusters.

These quotes nicely capture traditional views about the authority of science. Like Ghostbuster Dr. Peter Venkman, practicing scientists would like to wear the mantle of authority that the word “Science” conveys in post-Enlightenment culture. Like Bacon, we can try to justify that authority by invoking the idea that we are able to speak truth—or rather, that when we act as scientists, we are a pure lens that allows truth to shine through us.

In the postmodern era, this Baconian (or Mertonian [1938], or Venkmanian) view of science still has some currency (as we shall see), but it has lost some of its luster, and perhaps appropriately so. This essay might have been titled “Fostering Public Trust in Experts,” but that wording implies that trust in experts is lower than it should be, and that the public therefore needs to be persuaded to trust us more. Both points are debatable. Surely, the optimal level of public trust in experts is below 100%—perhaps well below 100%. Public trust in experts is a two-way street, an exchange relationship requiring something from each side if the potential benefits are to be achieved. Experts have to deserve trust.

2 http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087332/quotes

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R.J. MacCoun (Ed.)
Stanford University, Stanford, CA, USA
e-mail: maccoun@law.stanford.edu; mmaccoun@stanford.edu

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