

The Skeptical American: Revisiting the Meanings of Trust in Government and Confidence in Institutions

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This paper critically analyzes the survey literature on trust in government and confidence in institutions. It highlights the gap between theoretical understandings of trust which encompass trust, lack of trust, and distrust, next to empirical realizations which fail to consider active distrust of government. Using a specially tailored survey designed for this project, the paper is the first which directly compares competing operationalizations of trust *and* distrust. The most frequently used measures, both from the National Election Studies and the General Social Survey, tend to exaggerate the level of disaffection compared to a new measure especially designed to run from active trust, which anticipates that the government will do the right thing, to active distrust, the expectation that it will do the wrong thing. Multivariate analyses reveal statistically significant differences in the underlying determinants of these measures. The conventional NES measure in particular is more influenced by short-term evaluations of political events and leaders; our new measure of active trust/distrust taps a more deeply seated orientation toward government.

Americans, according to today's conventional political science wisdom, are deeply distrustful of governmental and social institutions. Books with titles such as *The Malevolent Leaders* (Craig 1993) or *Congress as Public Enemy* (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995) or *Why Americans Hate Politics* (Dionne 1991) suggest a high level of political alienation. Unable to ascertain robust predictors of trust or confidence, social scientists depict a contemporary zeitgeist of suspicion and cynicism:

A situation of widespread, basic discontent and political alienation exists in the U.S. today. (Miller 1974a, 951)

Social scientists analyzing these surveys continue to perceive in them alienation, distrust, lack of confidence, and the attribution of low levels of legitimacy to social and political institutions. . . . (Lipset and Schneider 1987, 3)

The evidence to be reviewed in this book . . . suggests that our traditional *ambivalence* toward politics gave way in the 1960s and 1970s to a deeper and more pervasive *negativism*. (Craig 1993, 2; emphasis in original)

Political unhappiness of all sorts has mushroomed during the past three decades . . . Today's cynical views may or may not be more accurate than the Pollyannaish views of the early sixties, but they undermine the political confidence necessary to motivate and sustain political involvement. (Putnam 2000, 47)

There is one finding that is seemingly impervious to measurement choices. Regardless of the precise wording . . . the most common public attitude toward government is clearly discontent. (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001, 5)

Self-proclaimed political outsiders promising to shake things up . . . become enveloped in the pessimistic fog of distrust, cynicism, and contempt that surrounds the public image of government. (Farnsworth 2003, 2–3)

Such conclusions are so familiar that it is surprising how little we know about the meaning of the low trust in government and the low confidence in institutions reported time and again in public opinion surveys. Given accumulating evidence of the predictive power of such measures,¹ we need to figure out just what they mean. Some scholars, like Uslaner (2002), visualize trust as a moral worldview that develops during early socialization. Trust is deeply ingrained and difficult to change. Others, such as Hardin (2002), depict trust as a set of interests existing between individuals that develop through life experiences. Trust is easily altered by personal interactions or new social and political conditions. These disagreements over interpersonal trust mirror scholarly disputes between “socialization” and “performance” explanations of trust in government and confidence in institutions.

Does today's low level of trust and confidence represent profound disaffection or more superficial dissatisfaction with current politics? Empirical investigation cannot say, because the measures taken from the National Election Studies (NES) and General Social Survey (GSS) are incomplete. Low trust in government or low confidence in institutions does not automatically mean distrust, cynicism, or alienation even though the vast majority of analysts using these data employ such terms freely (cf. Abramson 1983, 195n3). We instead suggest that low trust in government and low confidence in institutions reflects *skepticism*, an unwillingness to presume that political authorities should be given the benefit of the doubt.

The GSS question does not allow the respondent to report an expectation of mistreatment:

I am going to name some institutions in this country. As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say that you have a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, only some confidence, or very little in them?

¹For instance, higher trust in government is associated with compliance with the law, pro-incumbent voting, support for domestic policy liberalism, and opposition to governmental reforms such as term limits for elected officials (Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn 2001; Hetherington 1998, 1999; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, Scholz and Lubell 1998). Similarly, confidence in the three branches of government affects civic participation and interpersonal trust, both key elements in the array of attitudes that constitute social capital, currently a strong research interest in political science (Brehm and Rahn 1997).

As for the trust-in-government measures, recall Citrin's incisive point:

... the cynical responses to the CPS political trust items are hardly extreme. To believe that the government wastes "a lot" of money, can be trusted to "do what is right only some of the time," and includes "quite a few" people who are "crooked" or "don't know what they're doing" need not bespeak a deep-seated hostility toward the political system. (1974, 975)

The lowest category on each set of questions cannot distinguish between one person who is deeply cynical and expects a malicious response from another who is simply skeptical and withholds prejudgment.

We develop here a new measure designed to capture a fuller range of trust and distrust. We compare it to the familiar standards: the "trust-in-government" question from the NES dating from 1958 and the "confidence in the leaders of institutions" questions from the GSS dating from 1973. We examine the distributions of the measures against each other and construct equations that allow us to designate predictors enabling us to thereby plumb the particular meaning of the given question. This inquiry has the side benefit of allowing us to compare the NES measures against the GSS measures. No one, to our knowledge, has ever put the measures together in the same survey asking the same respondents and comparing the distributions. In turn, we can inquire if these measures—all of which ask "how much do you trust . . ."—fail to tap distrust (as distinct from lack of trust) of leaders of institutions or of government. Such inquiries allow us to gauge more completely whether Americans trust, distrust, or are simply skeptical.

Data and Methods

We report on a national telephone survey specially tailored to address these questions, conducted between March 11 and April 30 of 2002.² Our survey was designed to capture Americans' responses to government six months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While the survey presents a snapshot of opinion at a starkly unusual moment in American politics, the indicators of one of our central questions—trust in government—had already returned to levels similar to those prior to the attacks, suggesting that we can generalize beyond the time frame of the spring of 2002 (we comment further on this below).

The survey included two batteries of questions dealing with trust in government: the NES trust battery and the GSS confidence in institutions battery. We added a new measure of active trust-distrust to allow respondents to express the expectation that government will do what is wrong. To do so, we require a measure similar to one used by Mishler and Rose in nine formerly Communist Eastern European countries:

There are many different institutions in this country, for example, the government, courts, police, civil servants. Please show me on this seven-point scale, where 1 represents great distrust and 7 represents great trust, how much is your personal trust in each of the following. (Mishler and Rose 1997, 421)

²The survey was conducted by the Public Policy Research Lab, Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs, Louisiana State University.

Mishler and Rose report that while “there is very little positive trust in any civil or political institution in any of the post-Communist societies . . . the levels of distrust are generally moderate” (1997, 422). In fact, by recoding the values so that 6 or 7 signifies active trust, 1 or 2 refers to active distrust, and 3, 4, or 5 is a measure of skepticism, Mishler and Rose conclude that “skepticism, rather than positive trust or active distrust, dominated evaluations” (1997, 424).

To our knowledge, an equivalent question has not been asked of the same sample asked the trust-in-government and confidence-in-leaders-of-institutions measures in the United States. However, Mishler and Rose’s measure is not directly comparable to the trust in government measure that is the central focus for political scientists. Contrasts between the Mishler-Rose measure and the NES measure might then be attributable to, say, the focus of the trust-in-government question on what government is doing. To provide closer comparison, and to ensure that the only differences we would see were due to the explicit lengthening of the scale to encompass active distrust, we devised a different approach. We asked the respondents to put themselves on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 meant very strong distrust of government to do the wrong thing, 10 meant very strong trust of government to do the right thing, and 5 meant that the respondent neither trusted nor distrusted the government. A second advantage of this measure over the Mishler-Rose measure is that the midpoint explicitly provides the respondents an opportunity to say that they “neither trust nor distrust government.”

A related battery of items probed the multidimensional nature of institutional confidence and approval: we queried about the approval of institutions as such as well as the current crop of institutional actors.³ Finally, we included a large set of measures which concerned the media, political indicators (partisanship, ideology, assessment of national and personal financial situation) and demographics (education, income, race, etc.).⁴

³We had been initially concerned that asking about confidence and trust in a variety of ways might tax our respondents. However, debriefing the staffers who asked the questions revealed that few indicated that they had already answered the question or complained about repetitiveness.

⁴The sample was drawn via random digit dialing, and the survey conducted over the telephone. Our cooperation rate was 47%, following AAPOR guidelines for calculation (The American Association for Public Opinion Research. 1998. *Standard Definitions: Final Dispositions of Case Codes and Outcome Rates for RDD Telephone Surveys and In-Person Household Surveys*. Ann Arbor: AAPOR). We have 1,059 completed interviews. In order to determine if there were significant differences between our respondent pool and those who refused, we provided a “short form” option for respondents who initially refused to cooperate. While we have a limited set of demographic and attitudinal indicators for these 194 respondents, the only statistically significant difference between those who refused to cooperate and those who agreed to take the survey was in work status (more of the partial refusals reported working full- and part-time). These results assure us that those who refused were not substantially different from those who cooperated. Compared to the 2000 Census estimates, our sample is too female (57% in our sample vs. 50.9% in the Census), too old (44.5 vs. 35.3), and a bit less African American (9.73% in our sample vs. 12.3%) and Hispanic (4.25% vs. 12.5%, although the Census allows individuals to identify themselves into both racial and Hispanic/Latino categories). 3.74% of our sample either refused or did not know their race. Our sample is overeducated, with

In the following sections, we report descriptive statistics on levels of trust in government, confidence in institutions, and active trust/distrust, focusing in on comparisons between the various measures. Next, we look at the associations of the three variables, trust in government, confidence in institutions, and active trust/distrust, highlighting important differences between these distinct ways of conceptualizing attitudes toward government. Finally, we report a set of parallel multivariate analyses, to gauge the predictors, and ascertain the meanings, of the competing measures.

Levels of Trust and Distrust

Before we examine levels of trust in government and confidence in institutions, however, we must examine our results against other estimates of trust, by different measures focused on different objects, as well as over time. In particular, the timing of this survey on the six-month anniversary of the September 11 attacks might create an unreliable snapshot of public opinion, given the huge upward bump in trust in government that followed September 11.

When asked “do you trust government to do what is right,” most of those (54%) responding said either “only some of the time” or “almost never.” Asked whether “government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or if it is run for the benefit of the people,” 63% of those responding said “run by a few big interests.” In short, in the spring of 2002, public opinion regarding trust in government was back to the relatively low levels where it had been prior to the attacks. These results are in line with those researchers who trumpeted a “return to normalcy” by the summer of 2002 (Bowman 2004; Center for Public Service 2002; Clymer 2002; Langer 2002; Pew Center for the People and Press 2002) and reassure us that, in terms of political trust and confidence, we are not examining an anomalous, ungeneralizable moment.⁵

nearly 50% reporting some college or a college degree and 14% reporting a postgraduate degree, compared to 41% and 8.9% in the Census.

The cooperation rates are less than optimal, although recent work indicates that our cooperation rates and demographic differences are typical. For instance, Keeter et al. (2000) find that there are only marginal differences in attitudinal measures as a result of response rates, with the main differences being in demographics (see also Curtin, Presser, and Singer 2000).

The descriptive statistics, charts, and correlations reported here are based on post-survey weighted data, using Census tables of age by gender by education level to calculate the appropriate weights. Because these variables are included in our multivariate analyses, it is not appropriate to weight these data (Lyberg and Kasprzyk 1997).

All survey information, including sampling information, the questionnaire, and the weighting formula, can be obtained from the authors.

⁵The temporary nature of the spike is illustrated most extensively by Bowman (2004). There was, indeed, a lasting rally that extended well into the spring of 2002 on evaluations of the president. However, as a comparison of the GSS measures for confidence in various institutions reveals, there were few significant differences between confidence levels in 2000 and 2002. The most enduring changes after 9/11 include higher levels of confidence in the military and endorsement by the public

Can we equate lack of trust with active distrust? As shown in Figure 1, few respondents were actively distrustful. Only 23% put themselves at the lowest end of the scale below five (a more inclusive category than what Mishler and Rose used), another 28% put themselves at the midpoint, leaving the rest at the higher end of the scale (40% of the respondents answered 6, 7, or 8). Thus a majority of our sample was disaffected from government only if disaffection included those at the midpoint who neither trust nor distrust government. The vast bulk of our sample did not expect that government will do something wrong.

How does this “active trust-distrust” measure correspond to the NES trust-in-government measures? Here, we focus our attention on the most commonly used question, “(h)ow much of the time do you think that the government in Washington can be trusted to do what is right?”⁶ There is a correlation, fairly substantial ($r = .34$), between our measure of active trust-distrust and the NES trust-in-government measure. This serves to provide a validity check that our measure of active trust-distrust is actually close to measuring a similar but not identical concept. Figure 2 shows separate histograms for each response of the trust-in-government measure. There is a clear association: the more trustful by each measure do correspond. But the lowest level on the trust-in-government measure encompasses responses running all the way from active distrust to the midpoint of neither-trust-nor-distrust.

In other words, lack of trust in government cannot be equated with active distrust in government. The trust-in-government measure used by the NES is truncated. Compared to the active trust/distrust measure, the lowest, least trustful category combines together convinced cynics and more open-minded skeptics.

Comparing Trust in Government, Active Trust-Distrust, and Confidence in Institutions

How do the trust-in-government and active trust-distrust measures perform when set against questions about the confidence in leaders of institutions taken from the GSS? We replicated the GSS questions for the same set of 13 institutions.⁷ Fearing that intercorrelations of these variables might be inflated due to a

of governmental activities designed to ensure American security, whether that includes domestic security or wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. To our knowledge, no one has yet made a case that 9/11 changed the *causes* of trust in some significant way.

⁶We did also ask the question “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?” However, since some scholarship suggests the latter question measures responsiveness more than trust (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2001), and since others have defended using simply the single “trust-to-do-what-is-right” question (Alford 2001) as the measure that is most commonly repeated over a longer period of time, we have chosen to focus our analysis here on that question.

⁷Banks and financial services; major companies; organized religion; education; executive branch of the federal government; organized labor; press; medicine; TV news; U.S. Supreme Court; scientific community; Congress; and the military. “TV News” is our one break from the GSS which asks about “TV,” which respondents might interpret as either news or entertainment.

FIGURE 1
Active Trust/Distrust

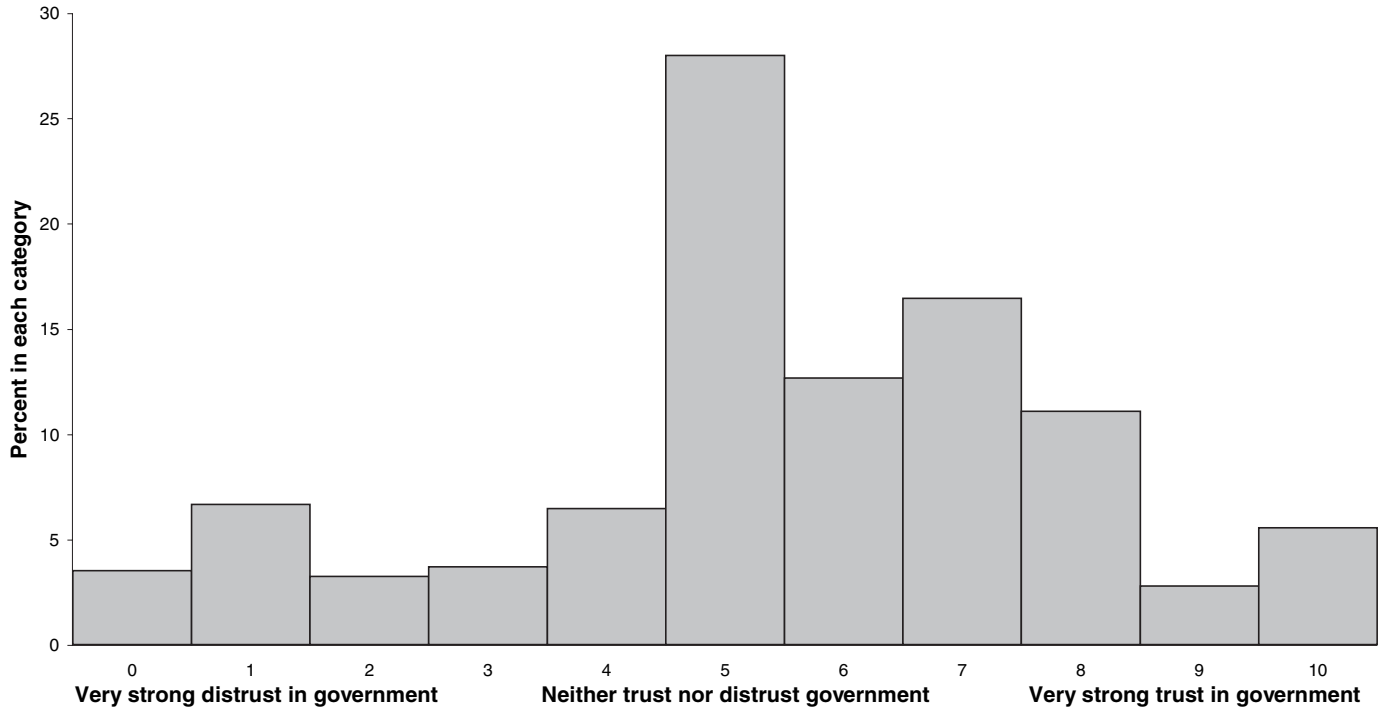
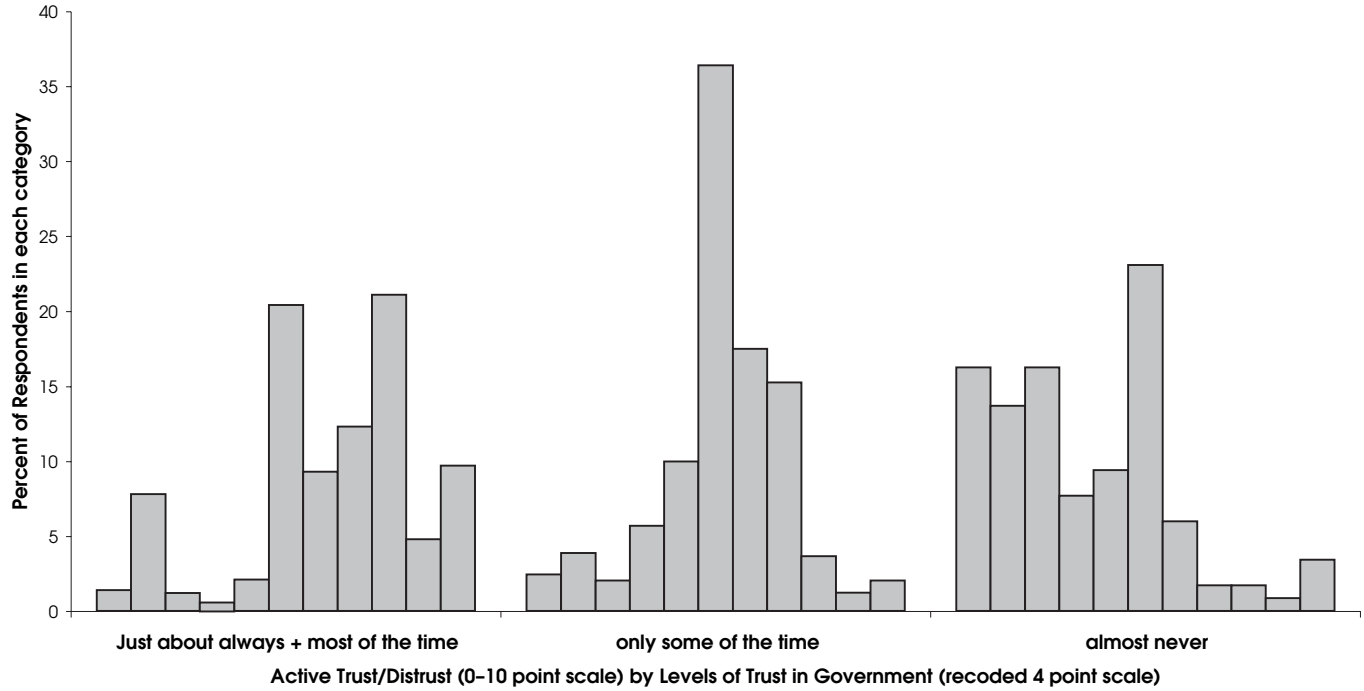


FIGURE 2

Active Trust/Distrust Compared to Traditional Government Trust



response set bias, we broke the questions into two sections separated by a large block of questions and randomly ordered them within each section. To maximize variation, we opted for the four-point scale that the Gallup organization has used with these questions rather than GSS's 3-point scale.

In past work, we found, through confirmatory factor analysis, that a two-factor solution fits the data well: one represents institutions of order, another represents institutions of opposition, most notably the press, television, and labor unions (Cook and Gronke 2001). We found similar results in the 2002 data. The first factor was defined primarily by confidence in the executive branch, the Supreme Court, the military, Congress, and, at somewhat lower levels, organized religion and major companies, and a second factor was defined (negatively) by the press, television news, labor unions, and, in an illustration of the precarious situation of the institution, Congress. We created factor scales based on the loading of the 13 institutions on the first factor to generate a generalized confidence variable.⁸ Brehm and Rahn (1997) have proposed an alternative measure of confidence in governmental institutions drawn from the GSS questions on Congress, the executive branch, and the Supreme Court. They argue that one downside of this generalized confidence measure is that it brings together so many institutions that it cannot represent trust in *political* institutions. We replicated Brehm and Rahn's measure, which we call "confidence in the three branches."

The intercorrelations between the trust-in-government, active trust-mistrust, generalized confidence, and confidence in the three branches measure are all positive and statistically significant, but none are so high as to cause concern that we are tapping a single underlying construct. The correlation between generalized confidence and trust-in-government is somewhat higher ($r = .36$) than between trust-in-government and active trust-distrust ($r = .28$) or between generalized confidence and active trust-distrust ($r = .22$), suggesting a similar truncation in both the trust-in-government and generalized confidence measures.

Predicting Trust-in-Government, Active Trust-Distrust and Confidence in Institutions

To compare the four measures of trust and confidence more fully, we turn to multiple regression, predicting responses to the measures using the same set of independent variables. The moderate covariation between these variables may simply reflect errors in measurement. However, any significant contrast in predictor variables would indicate that these assessments may be driven by distinct sets of political considerations. These estimates will help us examine the meaning of trust, confidence, and distrust: do these measures tap deep, more stable con-

⁸This measure represents an individual's predisposition to approve or disapprove of institutions in general, without reference to any specific institution. For a similar approach, see Lipset and Schneider 1987.

victions based on longstanding attitudes or do they occasion shallower, more ephemeral responses to contemporary political and economic conditions? We thus take up a challenge Miller presented years ago: "Questions of validity and focus can only be answered through an examination of the relationship between the trust scale and other political indicators" (1974b, 990).

Each of our four measures of trust and confidence, we theorize, are determined by three sets of predictor variables (a more detailed description of the variables is included in the appendix). Under the rubric of "connectedness," we suggest that those respondents who report being more strongly linked to other persons or to particular institutional arrangements will also be more trusting. Interpersonal trust encourages faith in larger social entities, even if recent inquiries have suggested weaker connections (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Lipset and Schneider 1987; Newton 1999). We also include a measure of interpersonal trust, drawn from items replicated from the NES. Individuals who are more closely connected to and/or participate in political and social activities tend to have more positive attitudes about society (Brehm and Rahn 1997). We include two such measures here. The first is strength of partisanship (Lipset and Schneider 1987), which we interpret as an expression of loyalty to an existing political institution. We include respondents' self-report of how often they attend religious services as a proxy for close ties to a religious institution. Attendance at religious services (more so than one's own estimate of the strength of religious affiliation) is a particularly important determinant of a variety of political attitudes and behavior (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1996). Following the logic of social capital that the politically engaged would be more trusting of government and confident in institutions, we included standard measures of political interest and whether the respondent reported having talked about politics within the last day or so.

Our second set of predictor variables turns from institutional engagement to the evaluations of the current political, social, and economic circumstances. We posit that individual life satisfaction—here measured by the respondent's approval of his or her personal economic situation—will be positively associated with confidence in institutions, as has been demonstrated elsewhere (Lipset and Schneider 1987; Newton and Norris 2000). Respondents who assess the specific performance of political actors and institutions more favorably should also be more positive in their generalized evaluations. We include four such variables. One asks about the individual's approval of the performance of the President; another is a parallel item asking about the performance of Congress. We also included an item querying respondents about national economic conditions, and another asking them: "Do you think things in this country are generally going in the right direction or are they seriously off on the wrong track?"

Our third set of measures encompasses longstanding partisan and ideological commitments, since these are strong predictors of confidence in a variety of insti-

TABLE 1
The Determinants of Trust and Confidence in Government

Variable	Active Trust-Distrust		Trust in Government		General Confidence		Confidence in Three Branches	
	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)	B	(SE)
<i>Connectedness</i>								
Interpersonal Trust	.020	.008	.014	.008	.010	.007	.015	.008
Strength of Partisanship	.014	.009	.026	.008	.009	.007	.015	.008
Attend Relig. Services	.014	.004	.007	.004	.005	.003	-.001	.003
Interested in Politics?	.027	.011	-.010	.011	.007	.009	-.006	.010
Discuss Politics?	-.021	.021	-.032	.020	-.011	.017	-.032	.019
<i>Current Evaluations</i>								
Personal Financial Situation	.014	.014	.049	.013	.010	.011	.008	.013
National Financial Situation	-.018	.013	.021	.013	.010	.010	.011	.012
Bush Approval	.031	.026	.055	.025	.082	.021	.077	.024
Congress Approval	.057	.013	.107	.013	.083	.010	.132	.012
Right/Wrong Track	.072	.024	.089	.023	.091	.019	.088	.022
<i>Party and Ideology</i>								
Partisanship (Republican = High)	.009	.005	.001	.005	.011	.004	.013	.005
Ideology (Conservative = High)	.014	.009	-.013	.007	.009	.007	.015	.008
<i>Demographics</i>								
Female (1 = Female)	.039	.019	.015	.018	.002	.015	.003	.017
Black (1 = Black)	-.007	.033	-.002	.032	-.008	.026	-.011	.030
Education	-.001	.005	-.007	.005	-.010	.004	-.009	.004
Constant	.037	.068	.083	.067	.080	.055	.026	.062
N of Cases	635		635		635		635	
Adjusted R-squared	.15		.26		.28		.32	

Notes: Reilly Center Poll, March–April 2002. For ease of comparison, all dependent variables have been recoded to the 0–1 range. Boldface entries are significant, $p < .05$. Entries are OLS regression estimates obtained in Stata 8 (active trust-distrust and trust in government were estimated in SUREG; see text for details). Variable coding information is in the appendix.

tutions in cross-national inquiries (Newton and Norris 2000). Party affiliation and ideology are especially intriguing, as we might expect Republicans and conservatives to be either more hostile to government or more favorable to existing power structures led by their partisan and ideological allies. Finally, we added a set of demographic controls, including gender, race, and education.

We report four equations in Table 1, predicting active trust-distrust, the NES trust-in-government measure, the index of generalized confidence in leaders of institutions, and the Brehm-Rahn measure of confidence in the leaders of the three branches of government. All of the estimates are ordinary least-squares regression coefficients, estimated via seemingly unrelated regression (SUR). We employed SUR in order to test whether coefficients are significantly

different (larger or smaller) across the four equations.⁹ To facilitate comparisons across the columns, we have recoded all of the dependent variables to the 0–1 range.¹⁰

Statistically significant predictors change from one equation to the next. Only two variables consistently predict all four measures of trust or confidence. Importantly, both refer to short-term evaluations—of the condition of the United States (the right direction/wrong track question) and the approval of Congress (evaluation of the members of Congress). This latter variable, consistently among top predictors of trust or confidence, reinforces the validity of our new measure of active trust-distrust.

Let us take each column in turn. Beginning with our active trust-distrust measure, we see that while there are short-term political influences upon it (the assessment of current conditions and of members of Congress), this equation differs from the rest in exhibiting stronger connections to early socialization and its attendant longer-lasting predispositions. For instance, gender, political interest and interpersonal trust significantly predict active trust-distrust whereas these variables are either insignificant or, in the case of interpersonal trust, only marginally significantly related to any of the other three measures. Men, the less politically interested, and individuals expressing lower interpersonal trust are significantly more likely to express active distrust, but are not impelled to similarly distrustful responses on our three other measures. Religiosity (self-reported frequency of attendance at religious services) is also a strong predictor of active trust-distrust. Active trust-distrust is also distinguished from the other three in what does *not* influence it: the assessment of George W. Bush as president, or any indication of the respondent's partisanship or ideology (including the strength thereof in each case). In short, active trust-distrust reflects a more stable approach to government and is less influenced by transient political and economic circumstances.

The NES trust-in-government scale is not significantly related to any demographic characteristics (for similar results, see Citrin and Luks 2001). It is, however, significantly influenced by assessments of economic circumstances—from the respondent's characterization of his/her personal financial situation

⁹The SUR model, when all of the equations have identical regressors, is identical to single-equation ordinary least squares. SUR is used so that we can test whether coefficients are discernibly different across the equations. The result of this test is distributed as an F; the associated test statistic is a χ^2 . The test is also recognized as a Wald statistic (Greene 2000, 614–22). The results in the table were obtained using Stata 8's SUREG command followed by the TEST command. It should be noted that this technique is identical to “multivariate regression” and multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). All are special cases of the family of observed variable structural equation models (Bollen 1989, chapter 4).

¹⁰Active trust has 11 points, and the two confidence measures are factor scales, so multiple regression is appropriate. Trust in government, however, has only four response categories, and is more appropriately modeled using ordered probit. We used multiple regression so as to allow “eyeball” comparisons across the columns. Significant predictors do not change when trust in government is modeled using ordered probit (results available from the authors).

rather than the national economy as a whole¹¹—and current political and social conditions. By contrast, evaluations of economic circumstances had no impact upon the other three measures. Trust-in-government, perhaps because of its emphasis on what the government is “doing,” is unique among these four measures in being shaped by current assessments of the economy.

Confidence in institutions is uniquely shaped by the respondent’s education and partisanship, which do not significantly affect either active trust-distrust or trust-in-government. The less educated have more confidence in the leaders of the three branches and of a full range of political and social institutions but do not trust government more. Similarly, Democrats express less confidence in political and social institutions but are not inclined to trust government less or to express active distrust. And in an indication of how different the results can be with different measures, our measure of conservatism was *negatively* related to trust-in-government and *positively* to confidence in the three branches. This makes sense: conservatives are presumably less favorably inclined to “government” but may be more so toward the political institutions they are in charge of. But the finding reinforces our concern that the choice of measurement of trust and/or confidence is far from inconsequential.

In order to compare and contrast these equations more fully, Table 2 reports a series of Wald tests, which gauge whether the differences between two coefficients in the SUR equations are indeed statistically significant. Any boldface entries in this table indicate that the chi-square statistic has passed the critical threshold of $p < .05$, allowing us to reject the null hypothesis that the coefficients are identical across the two equations. We are thereby able to see more clearly if a given variable has a different effect on alternative measures. We impose a high hurdle for a unique effect of a variable, the coefficient for which must be statistically significantly different from zero in the particular equation *and* statistically significantly different from the coefficient for the same variable in another equation.

There are especially strong differences in the predictors of active trust-distrust on one hand, and of trust-in-government and confidence in the three branches of government on the other. Political interest and religiosity affect active trust-distrust more substantially than they affect trust-in-government or confidence in the three branches. Ideology and the subject’s personal financial situation are more influential upon trust-in-government than upon active trust-distrust. Approval of Congress is a more powerful determinant of trust-in-government and confidence in the three branches than on active trust-distrust, even while the coefficient in each equation is statistically significantly different from zero. By contrast, statistically significant differences are fewer when comparing the

¹¹This might surprise those students of voting who have found much more evidence of “sociotropic” rather than “pocketbook” voting. But in fact, the particular variable which has been most influential on trust in government has varied from one election year to the next. See Citrin and Luks (2001).

TABLE 2

Comparing the Determinants of Active Trust-Distrust, Trust in Government, and Confidence in Institutions

Variable	Wald Test of Difference in Coefficients					
	Trust in Govt.		Generalized Confidence		Confidence in Three Branches	
ACTIVE TRUST COMPARED TO:	Chi-square	p-value	Chi-square	p-value	Chi-square	p-value
Interpersonal Trust	.35	.56	1.56	.21	.23	.63
Strength of Partisanship	1.28	.26	.40	.53	.03	.87
Attend Relig. Services	3.50	.06	6.34	.01	11.85	.00
Interested in Politics?	7.78	.01	2.79	.09	5.79	.02
Discuss Politics?	.15	.70	.56	.46	.10	.75
Personal Financial Situation	4.29	.04	.01	.93	.12	.72
National Financial Situation	7.34	.01	3.26	.07	4.10	.04
Bush Approval	.57	.45	1.54	.21	1.90	.17
Congress Approval	10.50	.00	.80	.37	21.78	.00
Right/Wrong Track	.35	.55	.03	.86	.31	.58
Partisanship (Republican = High)	1.73	.19	.00	.98	.45	.50
Ideology (Conservative = High)	7.50	.01	.02	.89	.47	.49
Female (1 = Female)	1.16	.28	2.46	.12	2.26	.13
Black (1 = Black)	.02	.89	.01	.93	.01	.94
Education	1.64	.20	1.66	.20	1.77	.18
All	87.39	.00	32.33	.01	78.66	.00
TRUST IN GOVT COMPARED TO:	Generalized Confidence		Confidence in Three Branches			
	Chi-square	p-value	Chi-square	p-value		
Interpersonal Trust	.49	.48	.01	.93		
Strength of Partisanship	3.64	.06	.98	.32		
Attend Relig. Services	.45	.50	3.18	.07		
Interested in Politics?	1.54	.22	.08	.78		
Discuss Politics?	1.50	.22	.00	.95		
Personal Financial Situation	4.65	.03	6.31	.01		
National Financial Situation	1.02	.31	.37	.54		
Bush Approval	.26	.61	.50	.48		
Congress Approval	6.58	.01	2.86	.09		
Right/Wrong Track	.21	.65	.00	1.00		
Partisanship (Republican = High)	2.11	.15	4.29	.04		
Ideology (Conservative = High)	7.97	.00	4.31	.04		
Female (1 = Female)	.26	.61	.26	.61		
Black (1 = Black)	.06	.81	.05	.82		
Education	.00	.99	.01	.91		
All	47.28	.00	29.16	.02		

TABLE 2 *continued*

Variable	Wald Test of Difference in Coefficients	
	Chi-square	<i>p</i> -value
GENERALIZED CONFIDENCE COMPARED TO:		
	Confidence in Three Branches	
Interpersonal Trust	2.27	.13
Strength of Partisanship	2.64	.10
Attend Relig. Services	5.26	.02
Interested in Politics?	3.19	.07
Discuss Politics?	4.80	.03
Personal Financial Situation	.89	.35
National Financial Situation	.48	.49
Bush Approval	.20	.65
Congress Approval	67.66	.00
Right/Wrong Track	.73	.39
Partisanship (Republican = High)	1.95	.16
Ideology (Conservative = High)	1.41	.23
Female (1 = Female)	.00	.96
Black (1 = Black)	.00	1.00
Education	.06	.80
All	114.48	.00

coefficients predicting the equations for generalized confidence and active trust-distrust.

The differences in the strength of the predictors between trust-in-government and our two measures of confidence in leaders of institutions are less striking. The respondent's personal financial situation is again significantly more influential upon trust-in-government than on either confidence measure. The effect of ideology on trust-in-government is also significantly different from those on either confidence measure. Finally, the differences in the equations predicting generalized confidence and confidence in the three branches of government are, surprisingly, the largest of all—because of a massive effect of approval of Congress on the three-branch measure.

To sum up, all four of our measures, to some extent, reflect evaluations of contemporary social and political conditions. In that sense, each measure draws, at least in part, on a performance explanation for trust, distrust, and confidence. This finding again raises doubts over the possibility, theoretically or empirically, of distinguishing between Easton's famous "diffuse support" and "specific support" (Craig 1993; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995). *Confidence* in institutions, in particular, seems very closely related to *approval* of institutions, as suggested by the sizable effect of the respondent's approval of Congress upon all four of our trust-distrust measures.

Mishler and Rose (1997) conclude that we need not distinguish between a socialization explanation and a performance explanation. Current trust, they say,

is “a legacy of past political trust . . . as modified by evaluations of more recent experiences” (1997, 435). All four of our equations include measures that draw on socialization as well as on performance explanations. Of the four equations, the active trust-distrust measure captures most strongly aspects of early socialization. The NES trust-in-government question is most highly affected by assessments of contemporary political and especially personal economic circumstances. The two confidence measures are somewhere in between. We can then not agree that “the foundations of trust in government, then, are *largely* political in nature” (Citrin and Luks 2001, 24, emphasis added), unless we rely exclusively on the NES trust-in-government measure which is unusually sensitive to current conditions.

Conclusion

Over 50 years ago, Berelson wrote, “In a democratic society, the political sphere must not be widely viewed as unclean or degraded or corrupt” (1952, 316fn1). In the half-century since, Berelson’s dictum has become a standard presumption among political scientists who suggest that low levels of trust in government and confidence in institutions represent at least the potential for a crisis in governability if not democracy in the United States. Yet the empirical evidence of such a crisis has not always been so evident.

We hope to have made several contributions to the examination of trust in government and confidence in institutions. Methodologically, we have shown how different measures of trust and confidence are empirically distinct. By comparing and contrasting the NES measure of trust in government, the GSS measures of confidence in leaders of institutions, and a new measure designed to run the full continuum from active trust of government (that it will do what is right) to active distrust of government (that it will do what it is wrong), we have a clearer understanding of the underlying determinants of trust and confidence, and a clearer theoretical awareness of the processes leading to different conceptualizations of trust and confidence.

We agree with Citrin and Luks (2001) that the threatening consequences of the decline in the NES measure of trust in government have been grossly exaggerated. But we do not see this point as the end of the story. Our analysis reveals that the NES trust-in-government question is unusually sensitive to contemporary political and economic circumstances, considerably more so than is the case with a generalized confidence measure drawn from the GSS, let alone the new measure of active trust/distrust. This conclusion would be important for methodological reasons alone. Substantively, too, we have new insight into Americans’ attitudes toward their government. On the basis of our survey, we cannot equate cynicism (not to mention distrust, mistrust, alienation, disaffection, and estrangement, to cite a few commonly used) with a low score on the NES question of trust in government or a low score on the GSS battery of questions on confidence in institutions.

From one dictionary we pulled off a shelf, a cynic is “one who believes that human conduct is motivated wholly by self-interest.”¹² Being cynical is “being contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives; . . . [and] implies having a sneering disbelief in sincerity or nobility.” The NES trust-in-government measure and the GSS confidence-in-leaders-of-institutions questions run from high trust or confidence to a lack of trust or a lack of confidence. But a lack of trust or a lack of confidence bundles together a range of responses. While Citrin (1974) long ago pointed out that different sorts of cynics are found in the lowest category, we would point out it combines *cynics* with *skeptics*. The results from our new measure of active trust-distrust clearly show that the cynicism of the American population has been greatly exaggerated. Recall that a strong majority of our sample placed itself at the midpoint or toward the more trustful end of the continuum, even while the same sample voiced low responses to the NES trust-in-government measure.

This distinction between cynicism and skepticism is rarely ventured in empirical studies.¹³ But the separation to us seems key. To return to the same dictionary, cynicism differs from skepticism, defined as a “doctrine that true knowledge or knowledge in a particular area is uncertain; the method of suspended judgment, systematic doubt, or criticism characteristic of skeptics.” In fact, the dictionary specifically separates skepticism on one hand from suspicion and mistrust on the other by noting, “skepticism implies unwillingness to believe without conclusive evidence; suspicion stresses lack of faith in the truth, reality, fairness or reliability of something or someone; mistrust implies a genuine doubt based upon suspicion.” Does the American public actually have high suspicion of the government and political authorities? We see no evidence that the NES and GSS measures can conclude that to be the case.

Our snapshot from the spring of 2002 is a first effort at going beyond the NES and GSS measures to a fuller understanding of Americans’ attitudes toward their government that encompasses possibilities beyond trust and lack of trust, beyond confidence and lack of confidence. Our conclusion is necessarily preliminary. We invite more research over a longer period of time and across a variety of political and economic contexts. Additional innovation is clearly warranted in extending our one measure of active trust-distrust to other ways of gauging the relationship of public, government, and institutions.

Nevertheless, this prospect that the American public is more skeptical than cynical raises a tantalizing possibility. Might it be the case that Americans are now a nation of Missourians—that is to say, that Americans all come from a “show-me state”? Under such circumstances, Americans would not expect that the government will do the right thing, but neither would they anticipate that government will do the wrong thing either. Instead, Americans would be willing to suspend their presumptions and to watch the workings of politics and judge insti-

¹² Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (1970).

¹³ Again, the signal exception is Mishler and Rose (1997).

tutions and political actors accordingly. In this light, the decline over the past 30 to 40 years of trust in government in the NES and of confidence in leaders of institutions in the GSS would not necessarily be bad news. It would represent the rise of a public that is—and perhaps as they should be—skeptical of many forms of power.

Appendix

Variables Used in the Tables and Figures

All variables were recoded to the 0–1 range.

- “Active Trust/Distrust”: 11-point trust in government item, described in detail in text
- “Trust in Government”: 4-point trust in government item, as used in NES
- “Generalized Confidence”: factor scale created from 13 items asking whether the respondent had confidence in the leaders of various political and social institutions
- “Confidence in Three Branches”: factor scale created from three items asking whether the respondent was confident in the leaders of Congress, the executive branch, and the Supreme Court
- Education: 8-point scale, running from less than high school (1) to postgraduate (8)
- Approval of Bush, Congress: 4-point scale (disapprove strongly, disapprove, approve, approve strongly)
- National and personal economic situation: 3-point scale (worse off, same, better off)
- Interpersonal trust: additive scale ($\alpha = .7213$) of three dichotomous trust items (Brehm and Rahn 1997)
- Partisanship: 7-point scale from strong Democrat to strong Republican
- Strength of partisanship: 4-point scale, party identification folded around its midpoint
- Ideology: 5-point scale from liberal to conservative
- Attend religious services: 9-point scale from “never” to “more than once a week”
- Interest in politics: 4-point scale from “not very interested” to “very interested”
- Discuss politics: 1 = yes, discuss politics with friends or family in last day

Acknowledgments

Our thanks above all to the Reilly Center for Media & Public Affairs at Louisiana State University and its director, Adrienne Moore, for funding the survey. The Corbett Student-Faculty Research Fund of Reed College also provided partial support for this research. Thanks to Harvey Palmer for an acute critique of an earlier draft, to Kirby Goidel for methodological advice and encouragement, to

the editor and reviewers of the *Journal of Politics* for astute suggestions, and to Aaron Rabirotff for research assistance.

Manuscript submitted July 1, 2003

Final manuscript received November 22, 2004

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