Unpacking Trust: Understanding How General Measures of Trust in Government are Related to Component Measures in Specific Policy Areas

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Since 1960, Americans’ trust in the federal government to handle domestic problems has fallen from roughly 75% to about 30% (Pew Research Center, 2021)
### Lack of trust:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of trust:</th>
<th>Reduces support for government action and for compromises on policy, making it harder to solve problems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increases political polarization</td>
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<td>Raises concerns about the deconsolidation of democracy and greater openness to democracy’s alternatives</td>
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<td>Raises transaction costs and creates inefficiencies</td>
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<td>Influenced by partisan perceptions</td>
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</table>
Understanding Trust

Reasons for decline in trust

- Cultural
- Government performance
- Mass and social media; negative ads
- Disproportionate reliance on technical expertise and interest groups

Criticisms of survey questions

- ANES question: “How often do you trust the federal government in Washington to do what is right?”
- Trust vs. mistrust – two ends of a continuum or distinct concepts?
- Most questions only indicate the presence or absence of trust and fail to measure within a continuum (Van de Walle and Six, 2014)
Four Elements of Trust

• **Appropriate** for government to be involved
  • “The federal government needs to...”

• **Transparency**
  • “The federal government is clear and transparent about how it...”

• **Competency**
  • “The federal government has the expertise and resources needed to...”

• **Reliability**
  • “The federal government is reliable when it comes to...”
Questionnaire

Trust questions repeated for five areas of federal government regulation

• Regulate banks
• Protect people from COVID-19
• Oversee immigration
• Environmental protection
• Maintain military forces

Test for priming effect on Gallup general trust question:

• “How much trust do you have in our federal government in Washington when it comes to handling domestic issues?”
• Split sample experiment – 50% asked before policy area questions; 50% after
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about regulating banks?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Neither agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banks need to be regulated by the federal government</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The federal government is clear and transparent about how it regulates banks</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The federal government has the expertise and resources needed to regulate banks</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The federal government is reliable when it comes to regulating banks</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey Responses

- **CINT** national non-probability panel
- 51 items
- All trust rating on scales from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)
- 1,234 initial responses
  - No consent, n=66
  - Response not complete, n=64
  - **Recaptcha** score <.5, n=16
  - Speeders (<120 seconds) n=19
    - Speeder warning
- 1,022 completes from April 1–April 7, 2022
- Median completion time 6.5 minutes
- Cost: $2.35 per response
Raking Weights

- 2015-2019 ACS 5-year estimates
- 2020 Presidential vote outcome
- STATA ipfraking procedure for:
  - Sex, age, education, Hispanic ethnicity, race, Census division, HH income
  - 2020 vote for President
    - 1=Trump  2=Biden  3=Other  4=Did not vote
- Weight range=.102 to 11.6; Mean=1; Median=.63
Regulating Banks
COVID-19 Response
Overseeing Immigration
Protecting the Environment
Maintaining Military Forces

[Graph showing weighted mean with 95% CI for different trust components: Appropriate, Transparent, Expertise, Reliable, Trust.]
No Effect on General Trust from Priming by Policy Areas

“How much trust and confidence do you have in our federal government in Washington when it comes to handling domestic problems -- a great deal, a fair amount, not very much or none at all?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First</th>
<th>Last</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A great deal</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fair amount</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very much</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None at all</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>13.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>511</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>1,021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>100.00</td>
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</tbody>
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Conclusions

Overall trust most closely related to transparency and reliability

Higher ratings for appropriateness and expertise

No evidence of a priming effect on general measure of trust

Results point less to a crisis for democracy and more toward a problem with perceptions of government performance
References


