

# The Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Trust in Government\*

Keith Nicholls, *University of South Alabama*

J. Steven Picou, *University of South Alabama*

*Objectives.* To explore the impact Hurricane Katrina on citizens' trust in government. Of primary interest is the relationship between poor governmental performance in the aftermath of the storm and low levels of political trust. In addition, levels of trust are related to respondents' predictions regarding the time it will take their communities to recover. *Methods.* Relationships are investigated through an analysis of data from a survey of residents in the Katrina-affected areas of Louisiana and Mississippi. For this initial exploration, bivariate analysis is used to elaborate relationships between measures of trust in government and the experiences and attitudes of survey respondents. *Results.* Analyses reveal interesting and significant relationships among the variables. Negative experiences during and after Hurricane Katrina are correlated with low levels of political trust. Also, low levels of trust are associated with pessimistic predictions of the time it will take communities to recover from the storm. *Conclusion.* Given the importance of political trust for the long-term health of the political system, it is critical that governments at all levels enhance their effectiveness in dealing with such disasters.

Trust in government, as a topic of empirical research, has a long tradition in the literature of social science. Primary research questions have involved definition and measurement issues, levels of political trust in the mass public, determinants of trust and distrust,<sup>1</sup> and the impact of trust on public perceptions and political behavior. This article contributes to the literature with an examination of the impact of the Hurricane Katrina experience on the political trust of affected citizens.

While the causes and consequences of political trust have been approached from a wide variety of theoretical and empirical perspectives, the importance of

\*Direct correspondence to Professor Keith Nicholls, University of South Alabama, 5591 USA Drive North, Room 226, Mobile, AL 36688 (knicholls@usouthal.edu). Keith Nicholls shall share all data and coding for replication purposes. Funds for data collection were provided by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation funded through the Social Science Research Council. The authors acknowledge the support and encouragement provided by Kai T. Erikson. The comments provided by anonymous reviewers improved the overall quality of this article. The authors are solely responsible for all content and interpretations.

<sup>1</sup>It may be that mistrust would be a better choice of words. A review of the varying definitions and usage of the terms reveals that mistrust may connote a more active suspicion of malfeasance. But there does not appear to be consensus on this, and as distrust is more commonly used in the literature, we will use it here.

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trust for the long-term health of the political system appears to be universally accepted. The rationale for this acceptance is well stated by Warren (1999):

A society that fosters robust relations of trust is probably also a society that can afford fewer regulations and greater freedoms, deal with more contingencies, tap the energy and ingenuity of its citizens, limit the inefficiencies of rule-based means of coordination, and provide a greater sense of existential security and satisfaction (2).

Thus, a trusting citizenry is viewed as a critical ingredient of a successful political system, contributing to its optimum performance and long-term stability.

The shocking devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the sensational and controversial role of government in dealing with its aftermath provide a unique opportunity to expand our understanding of the impact of such experiences on political trust. Indeed, the Katrina experience provides an excellent example of an event that has raised contingencies, demanded the energy and ingenuity of citizens, exposed inefficiencies, and called into question our sense of security and satisfaction. As much as any other event in modern American history, it might be expected to have a significant impact on citizens' trust in government.

Of primary interest is whether levels of trust in the areas affected by Katrina are lower than levels in the general population, and the extent to which respondents' low levels of trust are related to the high levels of stress and devastation experienced during the storm. In addition, levels of trust in government are used to help explain respondents' projections regarding the time it will take their communities to fully recover from the hurricane.

We address these questions using data from a survey of residents in the Katrina-ravaged areas of Louisiana and Mississippi. The target population included all adults (over 18) in two counties in Mississippi (Hancock and Harrison) and five parishes in Louisiana (Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, and St. Tammany). The sample was constructed using standard RDD procedures and supplemented with approximately 10 percent cell phone numbers. Interviews were conducted by the USA Polling Group<sup>2</sup> from April 16, 2008, to September 2, 2008. A total of 2,333 interviews were completed, yielding an overall margin of error of  $\pm 2$  percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

The first task here is to review definitions of trust from previous literature to serve as a guide for this research. Secondly, various ways in which trust has previously been measured will be reviewed and the measure used here will be described. Following is a general review of the literature on the determinants and consequences of political trust, which will serve as a framework for expectations of relationships to be explored in the Katrina survey data. Next is

<sup>2</sup>USA Polling Group is a multi-disciplinary survey research center located on the University of South Alabama's main campus in Mobile, Alabama. Over its 17-year history, the Polling Group has conducted over 600 surveys using a state-of-the-art computer-assisted telephone interview system.

a discussion and elaboration of such expectations, followed by a preliminary analysis of the impact of the Katrina experience on trust in government and the impact of political trust on predictions for the future. Finally, findings are summarized and plans for future research are described.

## **Defining Political Trust**

It is important to note that political trust is conceptually distinct from social trust (sometimes referred to as interpersonal trust or generalized trust). Political trust, as one might expect, involves dispositions and attitudes toward government, including the democratic system writ large, as well as the institutions, processes, policies, and actors that make up the system. Unfortunately, many of the contributors to the literature on political trust make no attempt to explicitly define the concept, under the assumption, perhaps, that we all generally know what it means. But as Hetherington (2005) reminds us, “Political trust, in general, is a concept that people think they understand until they are asked to define it.” Hetherington goes on to use the definition offered by one of the pioneers in the empirical study of the determinants of political trust, Arthur Miller:

Political trust can be thought of as a basic evaluative or affective orientation toward the government. . . . The dimension of trust runs from high trust to high distrust or political cynicism. Cynicism thus refers to the degree of negative affect toward the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations (1974a:952).

In this definition, Miller equates distrust with political cynicism, claiming that if there is sufficient disapproval of government functions and outputs over time, the basic dispositions of citizens will change from positive (trusting) to negative (not trusting). For Miller, then, the concept of political trust reflects basic dispositions and deeply held attitudes toward government. While levels of trust may change over time, they do not change quickly or easily in response to fleeting political issues or personalities. This conception of political trust, while reasonable and relevant, is not universally accepted.

In a response to Miller’s work, Citrin (1974) initiated a widely referenced debate in the literature. Citrin claimed that political trust reflects short-term evaluations of governmental policies and the performance of public officials, rather than stable dispositions. Miller (1974b) responded by equating political trust with legitimacy and lack of trust with alienation, again claiming that these are deeply held dispositions, rather than fleeting attitudes. Such distinctions are important when it comes to measurement and model specification (as discussed below), but for definitional purposes, they need not be considered mutually exclusive.

It is also important to note that when it comes to trusting, individuals may: (1) actively trust, expecting that government will do what is right; (2) withhold judgment on whether or not government can be expected to do what is right; or (3) actively distrust government, expecting that government will not do what is right (for discussion, see Cook and Gronke, 2005). Such consideration must be taken into account when approaching the task of measuring political trust.

These differing perspectives tend to suggest that political trust is multi-dimensional: it begins with fundamental predispositions toward government stemming from early childhood socialization; it incorporates evolving dispositions based upon experiences with government over-time; and it includes a running affective tally based upon regular evaluations of governmental processes and outputs. Thus, political trust reflects normative expectations of what government ought to do and how it ought to do it, tempered by the recognition of reasonable constraints. Leaning toward the conceptualization favored by Citrin, we propose that trust varies according to the extent to which government meets such expectations. Since it is clear that government performance during and after Hurricane Katrina did not meet reasonable expectations, a contention discussed more fully below, our goal here is to demonstrate that the Katrina experience had a significant negative impact on levels of trust.

### **Measuring Political Trust**

Consensus on the appropriate means of measuring political trust has been elusive. Much research in the area, especially in the early years, used five items from the National Election Study that were initially designed to measure general feelings of favorability toward government (Stokes, 1962):

1. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?
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?
3. Do you think that people in the government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or do not waste very much of it?
4. Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people who usually know what they are doing, or do you think that quite a few of them do not seem to know what they are doing?
5. Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked at all?

Although these items have been used, both individually and combined as a scale, by numerous researchers (Miller, 1974a, 1974b; Citrin, 1974;

Citrin and Green, 1986; Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn, 2000; Anderson and LoTempio, 2002; Hetherington, 2005; etc.), their use has been criticized on various grounds. In the first place, these measures tend to reflect more symbolic attitudes: positive answers (trusting) represent diffuse support for the political system, while negative answers (distrusting) are viewed as synonymous with cynicism. This is not an unreasonable approach, but it represents only one of a number of ways to conceptualize political trust. The items would not be so useful when measuring trust as a reflection of specific support for governmental policies and officials (for discussion, see Weatherford, 1987). Even if one focuses more narrowly on Item 1, which specifically mentions trust, there is a problematic lack of symmetry. The response categories for this National Election Study (NES) Item 1 include: just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time. There is no option for trusting government none of the time.<sup>3</sup>

The NES series also mixes two different dimensions of political trust as it relates to the protection of interests. Specifically, governments may betray the public's interests in ways which fall into two broad categories: malfeasance and misfeasance. In the area of malfeasance, the public's interest in an honest, ethical, and just government is betrayed when government officials wantonly participate in immoral acts, such as financial corruption, influence peddling, or extra-marital affairs and other sexual peccadilloes. This type of interest is also betrayed through unethical and unjust institutionalized bias, such as making "separate but equal" the law of the land without any pretense toward equality. These concepts are captured in the NES scale with Items 2 and 5 (above).

When it comes to misfeasance, trust is betrayed when governmental officials are incompetent and governmental procedures are inefficient, both of which can result in diminished governmental performance and the waste of scarce government resources in the form of hard-earned tax dollars. Evaluations of this sort of misfeasance are captured in the NES Items 3 and 4.

It is easily conceivable that some individuals may not trust government when it comes to misfeasance, while fully trusting government when it comes to malfeasance—bureaucrats are not bad people, they are just incompetent. One could also make the opposite case, that bureaucrats may be efficient, but they are bad people—Nazi Germany would serve as a good example. Thus, the use of these measures as parts of the same scale may serve more to cloud the issues than to provide clarity.

Even though researchers regularly acknowledge such problems, some continue to use these measures. Hetherington, for example, admits, "These survey questions have come under a great deal of criticism, much of it justified" (2005:14). He then goes on to use them throughout his book. Their continued use despite their obvious shortcomings is due to the fact that much

<sup>3</sup>Subsequent iterations of the NES utilized four points that allowed respondents to opine that the government could be trusted to do what is right: all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, or never.

of the work in this area consists of secondary analyses of existing data sets; thus, researchers use them not because they are ideal, but because they are available. In addition, use of the items is a necessary evil when attempting to track changes in political trust over time—changes in the questions could significantly diminish the potential for comparability.

This is not to suggest that the NES questions are the only measurements used in the literature. For example, Weatherford (1992) includes additional items in the trust scale that require respondents to rank the institutions of government (Congress, Supreme Court, President, political parties) according to which are most trusted to do what is right. Other researchers use measures of confidence in governmental institutions as surrogates for political trust (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Cook and Gronke, 2005; Zmerli and Newton, 2008). Still others have used general approval of governmental institutions as surrogates for trust (Bowler and Karp, 2004).

While confidence and approval are certainly related to political trust, for our purposes, it seems more appropriate to focus explicitly on the concept itself. If the key issue involves the extent to which people trust government, why not ask them directly? In addition, it is important to insure that response options allow respondents to indicate a complete lack of trust. Based on these considerations, we used the following measure in the Hurricane Katrina Survey:

For these next set of questions, please indicate your level of trust in (*alternatively*: local government; state government; federal government): Do you have: a great deal of trust; a good deal of trust; some trust; very little trust; or, no trust at all?

### **Determinants and Consequences of Political Trust**

Scholarly interest in the determinants of political trust heightened dramatically in the 1970s as levels of trust in the mass public declined. In just 6 years between 1964 and 1970, the proportion of Americans who trusted the government in Washington to do what is right “just about always” or “most of the time” dropped from three-fourths to only slightly over one-half (Miller, 1974). It was this precipitous decline that initiated the debate over the competing explanations of Miller (1974a, 1974b) and Citrin (1974). One might expect that their disagreement would be resolved by subsequent changes in levels of trust (or the lack thereof) relative to political developments. But while changes have occurred, they have not provided any definitive resolution. Levels of trust (measured as noted above) dropped to 40 percent in 1974 and to under 20 percent in 1980. But after recovering to around 35 percent in 1984, trust hit historic lows of just over 10 percent in the early 1990s (Chanley et al., 2000). Then it recovered again in the mid-1990s, only to reach new lows in the later 1990s (Brooks and Cheng, 2001). This instability seems to suggest that levels

of trust respond to short term political events (per Citrin). The fact that they have stayed so low relative to the early 1960s might alternatively be cited to support Miller. While the controversy has not been resolved, it has generated extensive empirical research that enhances our understanding.

The findings of Miller and Citrin that negative evaluations of governmental policies and performance diminish political trust have been confirmed in a number of studies (Hetherington, 1998; Owen and Dennis, 2001). But results tend to vary according to how trust is measured. It would appear that measures asking explicitly about trusting government to do what is right are more strongly related to short-term evaluations, such as approval of Congress and whether the country is on the right track, while measures that reflect confidence in governmental institutions seem to reflect longer-lasting predispositions (Cook and Gronke, 2005; Zmerli and Newton, 2008). This tends to further validate our approach in directly asking respondents how much trust they have in government.

A number of other political variables have been related to trust. Sharing political party identification with those in political power increases trust in government (Citrin, 1974; Gershtenson et al., 2006), while having voted for losers in an election diminishes political trust (Anderson and LoTempio, 2002). Also, changes in partisan control of Congress and the presidency impact trust (Keele, 2005). Conversely, trust declines with the extent to which people believe that governmental processes are inconsistent with their preferences (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001). Declining levels of political trust have also been related to the incidence of governmental and political scandals (Chanley et al., 2000; Bowler and Karp, 2004) and exposure to high-conflict television programming in the political arena (Foregette and Morris, 2006).

Another approach to investigating the causes of declining political trust has been to attempt to connect it with declining levels of social trust (generalized levels of trust in others), often within the framework of social capital theory (Keele, 2007). While there does appear to be a relationship between the two concepts, the results are mixed. A number of studies have found political trust only weakly correlated with social trust (Craig, 1993; Orren, 1997; Newton, 1999; Mishler and Rose, 2005). Other analyses have yielded much stronger relationships (Jagodzinski and Manabe, 2004; Zmerli et al., 2007; Denters et al., 2007), and especially in cross-national comparisons when countries are treated as the unit of analysis (Zmerli and Newton, 2008).

Other concepts that have been found to impact political trust include individual circumstances, such as one's personal economic situation (Cook and Gronke, 2005; Newton and Norris, 2000; Lipset and Schneider, 1987), and general societal conditions, such as state of the economy (Hetherington, 1998; Chanley et al., 2000) and concern about crime (Chanley et al., 2000).

The impact of demographics on political trust has also been studied, but results are mixed. Some researchers have found minimal impact of demographic measures on trust (Lawrence, 1997; Citrin and Luks, 2001; Hetherington, 2005). Others have found that, depending on time, context,

and measurement, political trust may be affected by race (Howell and Fagan, 1988; King, 1997; Brooks and Cheng, 2001; Cook and Gronke, 2005), sex (King, 1997; Cook and Gronke, 2005), education (King, 1997; Brooks and Cheng, 2001; Cook and Gronke, 2005), religiosity (Cook and Gronke, 2005), and income (King, 1997).

While not so extensive as the literature on the determinants of political trust, the consequences of declining trust have received considerable attention. Lack of trust results in lack of support for governmental policies (Hetherington, 1998, 2005; Chanley et al., 2000; Hetherington and Globetti, 2002; Rudolph and Evans, 2005), as well as negative evaluations of governmental effectiveness and diminished approval of incumbent politicians (Howell and Fagan, 1988; Hetherington, 1998; Chanley et al., 2000). In addition, political distrust increases support for challengers and third party candidates (Peterson and Wrighton, 1998; Hetherington, 1999). Trust even affects the willingness of citizens to pay their taxes (Scholz and Lubell, 1998). In the international arena, political trust affects international trust which in turn affects support for various foreign policy positions, such as isolationist attitudes, diplomacy preferences, and support for military intervention (Brewer, 2004; Brewer et al., 2004).

### **Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Trust**

In speculating about the impact of Hurricane Katrina on levels of trust in government, this literature provides needed guidance. A critical aspect of the hurricane experience was poor governmental performance, both in the lead-up to the hurricane (building and maintaining levees, contingency planning, evacuations, etc.) and in the aftermath of the hurricane (rescuing victims, providing for survivors, and rebuilding communities, etc.). If governmental performance matters when it comes to political trust, and if poor government performance in the Katrina disaster is a given (and we believe it is), then the extent to which poor performance actually affects an individual should be related to political trust. Since direct evaluations of government performance are not available in the survey data, the relationship between government performance and trust must be tested indirectly. The assumption is that direct negative experiences with the failures of government and extensive media coverage of those failures cause negative evaluations of performance, which in turn result in diminished political trust.

The extensive failures of the government in the response to the hurricane, especially the federal government, were widely publicized by the media; coverage was extensive and overwhelmingly negative (Sommers et al., 2006; Barnes et al., 2008; Littlefield and Quenette, 2007). Further, Littlefield and Quenette (2007:27) demonstrated that “the media stepped outside their role of objective observer and assumed a privileged position to point blame toward those with legitimate authority.” This attitude was interestingly illustrated by



the howls of indignation over President Bush's surreal comment to the then head of FEMA, Michael Brown, on his performance during the crisis, "You're doin' a heck'uv'a job, Brownie." It has also been suggested that the media exaggerated various aspects of post-Katrina conditions, including lawlessness and racial profiling (Voorhees, Vick, and Perkins, 2007; Koven, 2010), while under-reporting on effective disaster management (Barnes et al., 2008). All of these findings tend to support our expectation that citizens would likely have very negative perceptions of governmental performance in dealing with Hurricane Katrina.

It also bears repeating that evaluations of the performance of the federal government include not only the slow and inept response in the aftermath of the hurricane, but also the failure of the levee system that precipitated the flooding in New Orleans, since the levees were designed, built, and maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It was the federal government's failures in these areas that received the lion's share of negative attention in the national media (Littlefield and Quenette, 2007); thus, one would expect the federal government to receive the lowest level of trust.

In exploring the impact of Hurricane Katrina on political trust, our first step is to present basic survey finding on levels of trust compared to levels in the general population.<sup>4</sup> There are some complications with these comparisons as presented in Table 1. The two surveys used slight variations in response categories, such that the middle categories on the Katrina Survey ("Good deal" and "Some") are combined and compared to "Fair amount" in the Gallup Survey. In addition, the Gallup question dealt with trust in the federal government to deal with domestic problems, rather than general trust in government as asked in the Katrina Survey. However, since Hurricane Katrina was clearly a domestic problem and the Katrina question was asked in that context, this should serve to enhance, rather than detract from, comparability.

Focusing first on trust in the federal government as presented in Table 1, we find that when compared to the general population, those affected by Katrina have significantly lower levels of trust. Perhaps the most striking difference is that Katrina survey respondents are 15 percent less likely than the general population to have no trust in the federal government (25 percent compared to 10 percent). Conversely, only 4 percent of survey respondents trust the federal government a great deal, half as many as the 8 percent found in the general population. Based on these comparisons, it would certainly appear that the Hurricane Katrina experience had serious negative consequences for political trust in the federal government.

In addition to the measure of trust in the federal government, our survey also included measures of trust in state and local governments. These findings reveal that state and local governments are trusted at very similar levels,

<sup>4</sup>General population data come from a Gallup Survey of 1010 adults U.S. nationwide; conducted on September 14–16, 2007; margin of error is  $\pm 3$  percent at 95 percent confidence level.

TABLE 1  
Trust in Government

Level of trust	General Population %	Katrina Affected Area		
		Federal (%)	State (%)	Local (%)
None at all	10	25	17	17
Very little	38	27	26	26
Good/fair/some amount	44	41	48	46
Great deal	8	4	7	7
DK/NA	1	3	3	3
Total	101*	100	101*	99*

\*Due to rounding.

somewhat higher than levels of trust in the federal government. This suggests that, at least for some, the referent for trust is not government generally, but is differentiated based on some apportionment of blame. It also confirms our expectation that extensive negative media attention in the aftermath of the hurricane would have the most significant impact on trust in the federal government.

While our primary interest is in the impact of poor government performance on trust, the literature also suggests that economic loss and financial difficulty, as well as the shared experience of living in a community struggling without basic services for an extended period of time could all be expected to diminish trust. Of course, this reflects the experiences of many of those affected by Hurricane Katrina. However, the dynamics of these relationships are relatively complex. It is not the experience itself that has a direct impact on political trust. It is that experiences affect trust indirectly by lowering evaluations of governmental performance, which in turn lower trust. The four survey items which measure the actual impact of the hurricane on respondents are as follows:

1. Thinking of your residence when Katrina hit, which of the following best describes the damage from the storm: No damage; Minor damage; Moderate damage; Major damage; Totally destroyed? (coded 0, no damage, to 4, totally destroyed)
2. For those who were separated from family members because of the storm: How long did this separation last? (measured in weeks)
3. How would you complete this sentence? Hurricane Katrina has caused my family to have . . . Severe financial problems; Some financial problems; Minor financial problems; No financial problems; My financial situation has improved since Katrina (coded -1, improved, to 3, severe).
4. Next we want to get the total dollar value of your losses from Katrina. This would be your initial losses less any grants or insurance

TABLE 2

## Pearson Correlations of Trust in Federal Government with Hurricane Experiences

Trust in Government at	Federal Level	State Level	Local Level
Assessment of damage	-0.062**	-0.121**	-0.136**
Separation from family	-0.094**	-0.097**	-0.092**
Financial problems	-0.179**	-0.206**	-0.190**
Actual dollar loss	-0.063**	-0.057**	-0.096**

\*\*Significant at 0.01.

reimbursements. It would also include lost wages or profits from a business. What would you estimate your total loss to be? (measured in dollars)

With responses for all the items recoded to reflect ascending order, negative correlations are expected: the greater the severity of the hurricane experience, the lower the level of trust. For purposes of the analysis, the trust variables were assigned numeric codes from 0 (no trust at all) to 4 (a great deal of trust). Since it was the federal government generally and a federal agency in particular, FEMA, which took the most prominent roles and received the most negative media attention, once again, we expect the relationship to be strongest when it comes to trusting the federal government.

Based upon the simple correlations used in this analysis as presented in Table 2, all of these measures are related to political trust at all levels of government. In each case, the correlations are statistically significant and in the expected direction. Financial problems yield the highest correlations with trust at federal, state, and local levels, with coefficients of  $-0.179$ ,  $-0.206$ , and  $-0.190$ , respectively. And although the correlations are relatively weak, they clearly demonstrate that negative experiences with the hurricane are related to diminished political trust. If those negative experiences, combined with extensive negative media attention, are associated with negative evaluations of governmental performance, as surely they are, we have another indirect confirmation that negative evaluations of government performance reduce political trust.

The expectation that the relationship would be strongest at the federal level, however, is not confirmed in the data. The highest correlations are at the state level, ranging from  $-0.097$  to  $-0.206$ , while correlations at the federal level range from  $-0.062$  to  $-0.179$ . Generally speaking, however, there is not much difference in the magnitude of these correlations. It is likely the case that differences in predispositions, hurricane experiences, and subsequent media exposure tend to generate wide variation in both the amount and focus of distrust in government. Thus, some people greatly trust all levels and some totally distrust all levels, with the remainder trusting or distrusting the varying levels to varying degrees. To capture this variation, a scale of trust was

TABLE 3

## Pearson Correlations of Trust in Federal Government with Hurricane Experiences

Trust in Government by	Sum of All Levels
Assessment of damage	-0.125**
Separation from family	-0.101**
Financial problems	-0.227**
Actual dollar loss	-0.084**

\*\*Significant at 0.01.

constructed by simply summing the scores for trust across all three levels of government, resulting in scores from 0 (no trust in any level) to 12 (great deal of trust at all three levels). This scale was then correlated with the measures of hurricane experience. The results, as presented in Table 3, again reveal weak correlations, only slightly stronger than the correlations by individual level of government. Again, we find the strongest correlation (-0.227) between financial problems and trust; the weakest is between actual dollar loss and trust (-0.084).

It might also be the case that hurricane experiences have an additive impact on trust, such that the more negative experiences one has and the more severe those negative experiences, the lower the level of trust in government. To test this idea, a scale was constructed by summing the scores across all four measures of hurricane experience. This scale was then correlated with the scale for political trust. The result was a correlations coefficient of -0.262 (statistically significant at the -0.01 level). This is a higher correlation than any of the individual variables and provides the most convincing evidence for the proposition that hurricane experiences will impact trust in government indirectly through negative evaluations of governmental performance.

While this indirect approach to testing the relationship between hurricane experiences and political trust may not be ideal, it does have one distinct advantage. It should serve to diminish potential problems of reciprocity that might confound an analysis of the direct relationship. As demonstrated in the literature reviewed above, governmental performance has an impact on trust, but the literature also suggests that this relationship may be reciprocal, that trust may have an impact on evaluations of governmental performance (Weatherford, 1992; Hetherington, 1998; Claibourn and Martin, 2000). While it makes sense to propose that negative hurricane experiences result in negative evaluations, which in turn lower political trust, it makes no sense to propose that lack of trust or negative evaluations contribute to the severity of the hurricane experience. One might, however, argue that trust could still be an intervening variable between experiences and evaluations. When it comes to general evaluations, such as whether the nation is on the right track or whether government acts in the interests of common people, this argument

TABLE 4

Tell Me How Long You Believe It Will Be before Your Community Is Completely Recovered from the Impact of Hurricane Katrina?

	Frequency	Percent
Already recovered	229	9.8
1–2 years	235	10.1
3–5 years	393	16.8
6–10 years	647	27.7
More than 10 years	342	14.7
Will never fully recover	188	8.1
DK/NA	299	5.6
Total	2,333	100

seems reasonable, as the evaluations themselves are somewhat symbolic. But when it comes to evaluations based upon extensive and traumatic personal experiences, compounded by extensive negative media coverage, as was the case with Hurricane Katrina, the argument is much harder to make.

### **Impact of Trust on Expectations**

Given that political trust does have consequences, it seems reasonable to suggest that levels of trust would be related to expectations for the future. In the case of those living in the hurricane-ravaged areas of Mississippi and Louisiana, perhaps the most important such expectation would involve community recovery. If government is instrumental in the recovery and people do not trust government, they will be more pessimistic about how long the recovery will take. This assumes, of course, that people view the role of government as instrumental in the recovery of the hurricane-ravaged areas. Given the scale of the devastation and the billions of federal dollars already appropriated to the recovery, this assumption seems warranted. Results on the expected length of recovery, measured in years and collapsed into categories, are presented in Table 4.

More than half of respondents (a total of 59.2 percent) believe recovery will take more than 5 years from the time of the survey (2008), and an additional 8.1 percent claim that their community will never fully recover. Clearly, people are pessimistic, but is that pessimism the reflection of low levels of political trust or does it stem from other factors? Correlation of political trust at the three different levels of government with estimates of the time it will take for recovery are presented in Table 5. Here we find weak, but statistically significant correlations ranging from a low of  $-0.090$  at the federal level to a high of  $-0.114$  at the local level. As predicted, the less people trust

TABLE 5

Pearson Correlations of Recovery Predictions with Trust in Three Levels of Government

Length of Recovery by Trust in	Pearson Correlation
Federal Government	-0.090**
State Government	-0.098**
Local Government	-0.114**
Sum of all levels	-0.117**

\*\*Significant at 0.01.

government, the longer they expect recovery will take. And as with political trust, the correlations are similar across the three levels of government.

When predictions are correlated with the scale of political trust that includes all three levels, also presented in Table 5, we find another weak, but statistically significant correlation. At  $-0.117$ , it is the largest correlation, but the differences in magnitude are so small as to be irrelevant. Thus, trust in government does have an impact on people's prediction for hurricane recovery, but it is relatively minor.

### Summary and Conclusions

The goal of this research is to investigate the extent to which the negative evaluations of governmental performance in Hurricane Katrina will diminish political trust in the affected populations and whether low levels of political trust will result in pessimistic predictions for the future recovery of the affected areas. This is accomplished with survey data collected in the areas most affected by the hurricane: the two coastal counties in Mississippi and the five parishes surrounding New Orleans, Louisiana.

Analysis of the data confirms the expectation that negative evaluations of governmental performance do result in diminished levels of political trust. But since direct evaluations of the government's performance in Katrina are not available, this proposition was tested indirectly. The conclusion reached here rests upon the assumption that direct negative experiences with the failures of government and extensive media coverage of those failures cause negative evaluations, which in turn result in diminished political trust. The analysis also demonstrates the importance of political trust when it comes to expectations for the future. Lower levels of trust are associated with pessimistic predictions for the length of time it will take for the communities ravaged by Hurricane Katrina to fully recover. Given the importance of political trust for the long-term health of the political system, it is critical that governments at all levels enhance their effectiveness in dealing with natural disasters.

While the expected relationships are confirmed in the data, the correlations reported are relatively weak. We believe it would be unrealistic to expect strong relationships. Even though governmental failures played a significant role both in the lead-up to the hurricane and in its aftermath, people recognize that the storm itself was a natural disaster. Thus, it would be unreasonable to hold the government solely responsible for all of the negative consequences of the hurricane. In addition, other factors that have been shown to affect political trust, such as demographic, psychological, and political variables, would predispose some people to trust or distrust more than others regardless of hurricane experiences. The shared culpability for the disaster combined with predispositions pulling in different directions would act to diminish the strength of the relationships that might be expected between negative hurricane experiences and political trust. We must also acknowledge that 3 years had elapsed between the hurricane (2005) and the survey (2008). During this time, respondents may have had many experiences and interactions with government agencies that would tend to complicate and perhaps obfuscate these relationships.

Finally, we believe that future research in this area can be enhanced in a couple of ways to more fully elaborate these relationships. First, the Hurricane Katrina survey project is a panel study. In follow-up rounds of interviewing, additional questions could be included to better capture the predispositions of respondents. These might include the following: measures of social or interpersonal trust; political variables, such as partisanship and political participation; other measures of political trust such as confidence in institutions; and psychosocial measures of alienation, cynicism, and apathy. In addition, it would be helpful to include direct evaluations of governmental performance. Secondly, more sophisticated statistical techniques could be used to model the relationships. The development of multiple regression models would likely be most appropriate. Model specification might include those measures noted above, plus demographic variables such as age, education, sex, race, income, and state of residence. This approach would allow for a more precise assessment of the individual impact of experiences on trust, and of trust on future expectations.

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