

1975

The Social Basis of Trust in Government

Ghulam M. Haniff
St. Cloud State College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Haniff, G. M. (1975). The Social Basis of Trust in Government. *Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science*, Vol. 41 No. 1, 37-39.

Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.morris.umn.edu/jmas/vol41/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Minnesota Academy of Science by an authorized editor of University of Minnesota Morris Digital Well. For more information, please contact skulann@morris.umn.edu.

and liquor law violators adjusted adequately in group home settings than did other types of violators. Ten (83.3%) of the drug and liquor law violators adjusted adequately while two (16.7%) adjusted inadequately, whereas 17 (29.8%), of those who committed serious offenses adjusted adequately with 40 (70.2%) adjusting inadequately. Some 33 (34.0%) of the minor offenders adjusted adequately and 64 (66.0%) adjusted inadequately.

Despite the lower rate of successful adjustment in most serious offense categories, three offenders guilty of arson adjusted satisfactorily and only one arsonist failed to adjust. Of the two assault offenders, one adjusted adequately and the other did not. Analysis of characteristics of minor offenders revealed the fact that juveniles committed for "incurability," "runaway," and "vandalism" tended towards inadequate adjustment in group home settings. Because the greater proportion of females came from unstable homes which offered little support, supervision, and affection, they usually demonstrated delinquency by "incurability" and "runaway."

Further data sought

While this Minnesota sample is relatively small, some of the findings are reported here to open discussion and to encourage the reporting of data from other programs.

A notable difference in successful adjustment appears in the Minnesota data by type of offense: serious offenses being correlated with the lowest adjustment rates; violation of drug and liquor laws being correlated with the highest. It is also noted that apart from violation of drug and liquor laws, only assault, arson, tampering, truancy and miscellan-

ous minor offenses were correlated with a 50% or better adjustment rate.

The data suggest that types of offenses may be part of total life patterns which, in turn, are particularly susceptible to community based treatment. To actually conclude this from the Minnesota sample on other than most tentative grounds, would be premature. However it does at least, open discussion.

References

- GRIGGS, B. and MCCUNE, G.R., "Community-Based Correctional Programs: A Survey and Analysis" *Federal Probation*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, June 1972.
- HIRSCHBACH, ERNEST, *Group Homes For Children*, (Ottawa, Canada; Canadian Welfare Council) 1965.
- MCBROOM, ELIZABETH, "The Socialization of Parents," *Child Welfare*, March 1967.
- MCCORD, JOAN; MCCORD, WILLIAM; and THURBER, EMILY, "The Effects of Foster-Home Placement in the Prevention of Adult Antisocial Behavior," *Social Service Review*, December 1960.
- The National Probation and Parole Institutes, *Uniform Parole Reporting, One Year of Experience*, Jan. 1968.
- PALMER, TED; PEASON, JOHN; and HAIRE, SHARLENE, *Selected Instruments Used in the Group Home Project* (Sacramento; California Human Relations Agency) 1968.
- The U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, *Agency Operated Group Homes, A Casebook*, 1965.

The Social Basis of Trust in Government

GHULAM M. HANIFF*

ABSTRACT — The relationship between the attitude of trust in government and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents is examined. Survey research data permit an empirical assessment of political trust as the dependent variable. The concept of political trust is operationalized through an interview question, and the independent variable is given empirical reference by the use of demographic data. The evidence suggests that a low level of political trust is pervasive throughout all the segments of the American society and that trust in government is not highly correlated with any social group.

Public opinion polls have shown a consistent decline of trust in the United States government. In a 1958 study, 22 percent of the total adult population felt that they could not "trust the government in Washington to do what is right" all or most of the time. That figure had risen to 45 percent by the fall of 1972 (Miller, 1974). Lack of credibility in governmental institutions was further exacerbated by the Watergate revelations and the continued unearthing of political scandals in Washington. There are convincing indications in national survey data that widespread, basic discontent and political disaffection now exist in the United States (Harris, 1975).

It has not been known whether this skepticism towards the government in Washington is pervasive throughout all the segments of the society or whether only certain social groups have become alienated from the nerve center of the

national politics. This study attempts to correlate social background variables with political trust, and to determine whether some groups show more or less trust in the government than others.

Review of structural approaches

Generally, formal structures of a political system are constructed so as to promote a high degree of confidence in the political institutions. Political scientists of both normative and empirical persuasion are agreed that trust in government is an essential ingredient of its legitimacy, promoting stability within the system, and granting a wide latitude of discretionary powers for leaders to act on behalf of citizens. For democratic political systems, the attribute of political trust as a condition for the continued equitable allocation of authoritative values is crucial, since distrustful behavior on the part of its citizens may be an indication of loss of legitimacy by the government in power. In virtually every democratic political system the paramount concern of government in office is to encourage voluntary acceptance

*GHULAM M. HANIFF is a faculty member in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies at St. Cloud (Minnesota) State University.

of its decisions, generally by being responsive to the divergent needs of its citizens. Democratic governments, on a more general level, interpret trustful behavior on the part of their citizens as a basis for continued governance, and as enjoying the mandate of the people. Nurtured by the ideals of democratic theory, democratic governments eagerly solicit consent and compliance to the decisional output, both of which are central attributes of political obligation and good citizenship. The demand for consent is the demand that the government be more than self-appointed and, in some significant way, be the chosen instrument through which the body politic and community act (Tussman, 1960).

Both normatively and in actual practice government in a representative democracy is conceived as an instrument for the execution of the collective will. A citizen goes through a long gestation period under a variety of societal institutions to realize that government is established to serve his interests. Despite overt and covert socialization processes meant to inculcate positive cognitive and evaluative attitudes towards government, however, there are always people in the political system who harbor feelings of distrust. Usually, within the democratic framework, the existence of distrustful groups is considered to be a dysfunctional condition for the polity, since negative contributions may well question the legitimacy of those in power. A belief that the government does not serve the interest of all the people may prove to be an insurmountable barrier to the realization of the democratic ideal (Almond and Verba, 1963). It is not unlikely that distrustful citizens may engage in behavior contrary to the interest of the larger social whole, much as the recent events in American society has shown (Aberback and Walker, 1970).

Political leaders often rely on the level of trust shown to them for the pursuit of their policies. When the level of trust is high "the authorities are able to make new commitments on the basis of it and, if successful, increase such support even more. When it is low and declining, authorities may find it difficult to meet existing commitments and to govern" (Gamson, 1968). If there is a widespread trust for the governmental authorities, decisions may be made quickly and policies implemented for the attainment of collective goals. With the loss of trust even by a small group, the system power to commit resources is reduced.

Actually, governmental trust is a blank check given to the authorities in power so that decisions may be made concerning the expenditure or investment of resources under conditions of uncertainty so that returns in the form of public goods may be assured for the welfare of the society. In its everyday activity, then, governmental trust is a source of collective power that may be invoked either for favorable or unfavorable decisions.

Despite considerable efforts by governmental authorities in virtually every society, the level of trust fluctuates. In democratic political systems the nature of partisan attachment may structure one's feelings of trust towards the government. Moreover, in a pluralistic, heterogenous society such as in the United States, variegated social experiences may create differential levels of trust towards the government. Greater social cohesiveness provides the authorities in power the option of pursuing a greater number of strategies, but when level of trust and allegiance follow the lines of social cleavages, then there is a great danger of political fragmentation.

Hypothesized relationships tested

In order to assess the distribution of trust towards the United States government, an analysis of the SRC election studies data of a national cross section of eligible voters for 1968 was carried out. The surveys conducted by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center includes a battery of questions dealing with a wide variety of issues, among them, foreign affairs, public policy and domestic problems. A wealth of data is generated by the research instruments used in these surveys, enabling one to test a variety of hypothesized relationships between political issues and social or personality characteristics.

This study was designed to test the relationship between political trust as a dependent variable and socio-economic characteristics as the independent variable. It was hypothesized that there would be a consistent relationship between social background variables and political trust, in particular strong positive correlations between trust and education, as well as trust and income.

Political trust was operationalized by the use of this statement contained in the SRC questionnaire schedule: "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?" The dimension of trust runs from high trust to low trust. Political trust can be conceptualized in evaluative terms as having a basic affective or judgmental orientation towards the government (Stokes, 1962). The "government" in this study refers to the national decision-making system in Washington, a highly visible structure. Actually, political trust is a statement of belief that the government is either functioning or not functioning in accordance with individual expectations of political outputs.

Due to conceptual and measurement difficulties implicit in the notion of trust, empirical research does not present a consistent picture of the relationship in which we are interested. One study found a positive correlation between social status and governmental trust (McCloskey, 1974), but Stokes did not find any relationship of significant nature. It thus appears that levels of trust vary according to the setting of research study. Political trust or lack of it may be a function of the community norm being differentially acquired in different political milieu (Litt, 1963). Basing his analysis on data gathered from two different communities, Litt states that trust can be traced to political milieu as the major explanatory variable.

Since the early sixties much work has been devoted to the study of racial characteristics of social groups and their feeling towards the government. Aberbeck and Walker in Michigan found the blacks to be less trusting of the government and more willing to take action outside of the legitimately instituted political structures in order to ameliorate their conditions. This accords with the plausible explanation that the socially disadvantaged are more distrustful than the advantaged because status and skills which can bring them societal rewards and honors are denied to them.

Negative association observed

Although we had hypothesized that income would be positively related to governmental trust, our findings showed, using gamma as the measure of association, that not only is

TABLE 1: Age Controlling for Race

Trust	White					Black				
	Under 25	25-39	40-54	55-69	70+ Over	Under 25	25-39	40-54	55-69	70+ Over
Always	6.5	8.1	6.7	7.2	5.5	33.3	10.6	8.1	0	25.0
Most of the Time	63.4	63.4	55.4	45.8	46.9	66.7	66.0	43.2	48.0	33.3
Some of the Time	30.1	28.5	37.6	46.6	47.6	0	23.4	48.6	52.0	41.7
Don't Know	0	0	0.3	0.4	0	0	0	0.1	0	0
Column	8.0	29.8	30.9	20.3	11.0	4.7	37.0	29.1	19.7	9.4
Total (N)	(93)	(347)	(359)	(239)	(128)	(6)	(47)	(37)	(25)	(12)

there a lack of relationship between the two, but they are negatively associated ($\text{Gamma} = -0.08$). This means that we cannot use income as an independent variable in order to predict governmental trust as the dependent variable.

In relating religion to governmental trust the contingency coefficient measure of association showed a slight positive correlation ($C = 0.15$), but this is not meaningful for sustained generalization. There is remarkable similarity among the three religious groups, Protestants, Catholics, and Jewish, as to governmental trust. The study also indicated that individuals with no religious preference were almost exactly like those who indicated a religious choice in their attitude towards government.

Our hypothesized relationship between education and governmental trust did not hold. We had anticipated a positive relationship indicating that those with more education would be more trustful of government, but there was in fact a slight negative relationship ($\text{Gamma} = -0.10$). Most surprising, those with graduate or professional education are not much different from those with less than eighth grade education in their trust of government.

Another surprise was the relationship between class identification and governmental trust. Much like the income variable, it too showed a slight negative correlation ($\text{Gamma} = -0.12$), exhibiting virtually no meaningful differences between the social classes on the governmental trust dimension. In many ways there was a marked similarity between the income variable and the class identification variable in their relationship to governmental trust, showing close measures of association, both values of gamma and contingency coefficient being alike.

Party identification and governmental trust showed a very weak positive relationship ($\text{Gamma} = 0.11$) which is surprising in view of some earlier studies which show Democrats to be more distrustful of government (Aberback, 1969). That Democrats had more trust in government than Republicans in 1968 is understandable since there was a Democratic administration in the White House at that time.

Taken together, neither race nor sex seemed to be related to governmental trust in any meaningful way. In fact, both carried a contingency coefficient value of 0.03. Earlier, a study was cited in this report showing blacks to be more distrustful of the government. The data on which that research was based came from a community with a history of racial conflict, while our other data came from a national sample of all adults. Again, it might be pointed out that different political milieu contributes to the differential development of political attitudes.

Despite the complexity and size of the United States, there seems to be a uniform pattern of learning of social and political values. Our data suggests that regions do not make any difference ($C = 0.09$) regarding trust in govern-

ment, even though different political attitudes and behavior have been generally associated with different parts of the country. It can only be surmised that modern systems of communication, together with education and mobility, diminished relative isolation of regions and has contributed to development of uniform behavior throughout the nation.

There is no evidence that age in any way is related to governmental trust, although there seems to be a slight distrust of the government ($T_b = -0.07$) by the older citizens. This is in sharp contrast to much of recent folk literature, although it is also plausible that older people, being generally Republicans, did not trust a Democratic administration in 1968.

In controlling for sex, there is no substantial difference between the male black and white and female black and white, though male blacks seem to be more trustful ($C = 0.07$) than female blacks ($C = 0.01$). In controlling for race, and relating age to governmental trust, the younger blacks seem to be more trustful of government than older blacks ($T_b = -0.25$), a similar but not very meaningful pattern was exhibited by the whites ($T_b = -0.05$). In controlling for sex, and relating it to age, there was no discernible difference between the males and females ($T_b = -0.08$ v/s -0.07).

It becomes evident from this study of the 1968 election that socio-economic characteristics are not consistently related to governmental trust and would constitute poor predictors of political trust. It is apparent, however, that all segments of the society are equally distrustful of the government in Washington. Though this study is based on a national sample, the findings are at variance with some earlier studies conducted in disparate localities. Erratic empirical findings of this phenomenon would suggest a reconceptualization of the notion of political trust that would perhaps yield more conclusive results. More studies to determine if there is a consistent pattern between social characteristics and the attitude of trust which could be of scientific value.

References

- MILLER, ARTHUR H., "Political Issues and Trust in Government: 1964-1970" *American Political Science Review* 68 (September 1974).
- Harris Survey on the Congress and the Presidency, *Minneapolis Tribune* (March 31, 1975).
- TUSSMAN, JOSEPH, *Obligation and Body Politics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).
- ALMOND, GABRIEL A., AND SIDNEY VERGA, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).
- ABERBACK, JOEL D., AND JACK L. WALKER, "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," *American Political Science Review*, 64 (December 1970).
- GAMSON, WILLIAM A., *Power and Discontent*, (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey, 1968).
- STOKES, DONALD E., "Popular Evaluations of Government: An Empirical Assessment" in *Ethics and Bigness: Scientific, Academic, Religious, Political and Military*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962).
- McCLOSKEY, HERBERT, "Consensus and Ideology in American Politics," *American Political Science Review*, (June 1964).
- LITT, EDGAR, "Political Cynicism and Political Futility," *Journal of Politics*, (May 1963).
- ABERBACK, JOEL D., "Alienation and Political Behavior," *American Political Science Review*, (March 1969).