The Roots of Trust

Eric M. Uslaner

Department of Government and Politics

University of Maryland

College Park, MD 20742-7211

USA

Senior Research Fellow, Center for American Political Science and Law,

Southwest University of Political Science and Law, Chongqing, China

Honorary Professor of Political Science, University of Aarhus

euslaner@umd.edu

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Trust is a concept that is generally seen as at the heart of social capital. However, more effort has been spent using the concept than understanding its meanings. There are common (mis-)understanding that trust depends upon interactions with people you know personally, that it is fragile, that it depends upon reciprocity, and that it is the foundation of much that is good within and across societies. And there is also a widespread argument that trust is difficult to measure—and that the existing measures are poor.

The most common view of trust is that it rests upon information and experience. Claus Offe (1999:56; cf. Putnam, 1993, 170) states: “Trust in persons results from past experience with concrete persons.” Russell Hardin (2002:13) goes even further: “...my trust of you must be grounded in expectations that are particular to you, not merely in generalized expectations.” Hardin’s (2002:55-56) view is that trustworthiness is more important than trust.

There is also a widespread perception that trust is fragile (Coleman, 1990, 310; Dasgupta, 1988, 50; Macy and Skvoretz, 1998, 650). It is easily broken. If I give my trust to you—say I loan you $10—and you don’t pay me back, my faith in you will be shattered. Trust is thus a three-way relationship, between two people and some objective: A trusts B to do X (Hardin, 1992, 154).

Of course, trustworthiness is important in our interpersonal relations. However, it is far from clear that it matters for the sorts of collective action that have played such a key role in the academic and even popular literature. Putnam (1993, 170) argues: “Trust lubricates cooperation. The greater the level of trust within a community, the greater the likelihood of cooperation.” LaPorta *et al.* (1997) find that higher levels of trust in a country lead to greater economic growth, better governance (lower corruption, a more efficient bureaucracy, a more efficient judiciary), greater tax compliance, more civic participation, better infrastructure, and lower levels of infant mortality. People who trust others are more likely to buy stocks (Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales, 2008), to have more friends and to visit with them more often and to join voluntary associations (Putnam, 2000, 288).

If trust is based upon personal experience, we should be able to measure it as “trustworthy” behavior. In “trust games” in game theory, one player sends money to another and the level of trust is determined by how much the first player sends and how much (if anything) the other player sends back. But some claim (Glaeser *et al.*, 2000) that outcomes of the trust game do not track subjects’ answer to the “standard” trust question in survey research—so that we have largely failed to measure trust well in settings outside the laboratory. Nannestad (2008, 417) argues that the standard question—“Generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted, or can’t you be too careful in dealing with people?”—is unclear, with different people asserting different meanings to the instrument. Others such as Beugelsdijk (2006) argue that measures of trust are simply surrogate measures of the quality of a country’s institutions: Countries with strong institutions have a lot of trust. There is no “independent” meaning to trust.

I offer an alternative to each perspective. Of course, there is a form of trust that depends upon experience. I call it “strategic trust.” But there is also another type of trust, which I call “moralistic” trust. It is trust in strangers. Trust in people you know is important, but it really doesn’t help us solve collective action problems. You should all be pleased to know that I trust my wife, but you will also wonder how this helps either of us find common ground with people who are different from ourselves—people we don’t know who may think rather differently from ourselves.

Moralistic trust is a value learned early in life—from your parents—and is stable over time and across generations, and it is not fragile. It is *not* based upon personal experience, nor does it depend upon reciprocity. Nor does it depend upon a society having “good” institutions. If anything, it leads to greater institutional quality rather than stemming from structural foundations. We cannot measure this type of trust by outcomes of strategies selected by players in a laboratory situation—where trust is *defined* as the outcome of a game where the context changes with each play. And while trust has many positive consequences, it is not a cure-all for all of the ills of a society.

I present an analysis of the concept of trust first. Then I move to an analysis of measuring trust, to what does (and does not) lead to confidence in others, and to a brief summary of its consequences.

**An alternative view of trust**

Moralistic trust is a value that rests on an optimistic view of the world and one’s ability to control it. Moralistic trust is not a relationship between specific persons for a particular context. It is the belief that others share your fundamental moral values and therefore should be treated as you would wish to be treated by them. Francis Fukayama (1995:153) states the central idea behind moralistic trust: “...trust arises when a community shares a set of moral values in such a way as to create regular expectations of regular and honest behavior.” It is not a statement about how people behave or how we react to negative outcomes: It is a belief about how people *should* behave.

Its roots are twofold. At the individual level, moralistic trust is based upon the beliefs that the world is a good place (optimism) and that you can help make it better (control). Optimism and control reduce the risks in putting faith in strangers. At the societal level, trust depends most strongly on the level of economic equality in a society. When there are high levels of inequality, the rich and the poor do not see each other as part of the same moral community; what happens to one group does not happen to others. Optimism and control are greatest when economic inequality is low.

The distinction between strategic and moralistic trust implies that there is no single idea of trust. One key distinction is between generalized trust and particularized trust. Generalized trust is an encompassing notion of trust, with no clear boundaries. Particularized trust is *only* faith in people like yourself—however you define your own in-group (Yamigishi and Yamigishi, 1994). Particularized trust is based either on experience or on in-group positive stereotypes. Additionally, institutional trust is very different from trust in people. I present in Table 1 (reproduced from Uslaner, 2002, 54) results from a factor analysis of one of the most extensive trust surveys ever conducted—the 1996 Metropolitan Philadelphia (USA) Survey of the Pew Center for The People and The Press (Kohut, 1997).

Table 1 about here

There is clear evidence that trust in strangers, including the generalized trust question, forms a different dimension from both trust in people we know well (our family, our co-workers, people at work and at church) and trust in government. Not only are these dimensions independent, but they also have fundamentally different foundations. Generalized trust is shaped by optimism and a sense of control. Minorities are less likely to believe that “most people can be trusted,” but trust increases sharply with the level of education. Particularized trusters are pessimistic, more likely to be religious fundamentalists, and to come from minority groups—who may develop a sense of in-group solidarity in the face of discrimination (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 4). Generalized and particularized trust are thus two very different forms of faith in others—one very broad and the other very narrow.

Some early discussions of trust—and some recent ones as well—link trust in people with confidence in government. Rosenberg (1956, 694) held that “...the way a man looks at people has a bearing upon the way he looks at certain political matters...low faith in people is related to distrust of the public...”. Lane (1959, 164) argued similarly: “...those with a relatively greater faith in people are psychologically prepared to accept the democratic process and to believe that they, and others like them, may be effec­tive in elections....Trust in elected officials is seen to be only a more specific instance of trust in mankind.” More recently, Zmerli and Newton (2009, 719) found that “generalized social trust, political confidence, and satisfaction with democracy are indeed tied together in a tight three-cornered syndrome” (cf. Brehm and Rahn, 1997).

The factor analysis in Table 1 indicates that trust in government is largely independent of either generalized or particularized (friends and family) trust. And this should not be surprising. Trust in government goes up and down with the state of the economy (Citrin, 1974) and the evaluation of national leaders. In the United States, confidence in government rose dramatically under President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s even as generalized trust remained low. Generalized trust is *not* shaped by ideology or partisan attachments, but supporters of the governing party are far more likely to have confidence in government (Anderson *et al.*, 2005). Trust in government is far more a form of strategic trust than of faith in people (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 5).

Generalized trust is a stable value. It doesn’t change much over time. Across the 1972-74-76 American National Election Studies (ANES) panel, about three quarters of people gave consistent responses to the trust question over time, making trust the fourth most stable question of 17 issues repeated over the three waves of the panel. Across the 1965-1973-1982 panel study of high school students and their parents conducted by Richard Niemi and M. Kent Jennings, 72 percent of parents and 64 percent of students gave consistent responses over the 17 years–so trust ranked as tied for fourth in stability among 17 questions (Uslaner, 2002, 60-65). In the 2006 ANES Pilot survey, 75 percent of respondents gave the same response as they did two years earlier (Uslaner, 2012b). And in the General Social Survey (GSS) 2006-2008 panel, 80 percent of respondents gave the same response in both years. Trust is learned at an early age, from one’s parents, and remains stable. In the Niemi-Jennings parent-child panel, how trusting your parents were in 1965 (when the children were high school students) was the was one of the strongest determinants of trust when the children became young adults in 1982 as well as during their youth (Uslaner, 2002, 101-106, 162-165).

**Measuring trust**

One of the most contested areas of research on trust is how to measure the concept. Three issues stand out. First, does the “standard question” really tap trust? Second, should we use one question or a scale, as proposed by Rosenberg (1956)? Third, is the standard dichotomy too imprecise to get a good measure of trust? Ought we to have a broader range of scores? I consider each critique in turn—and argue that each is misplaced.

On the question more generally, Glaeser *et al.* (2000) argue that this question does not predict cooperation in a student sample playing a trust game in a laboratory. Sturgis and Smith (2010) claim that the question doesn’t distinguish between faith in people you know and strangers. When people are asked who “most people” are, they give responses that include close associates and people they don’t know. Nannestad (2008) worries that the question is too vague to have any meaning at all.

None of these objections is damning. The Glaeser *et al.* critique is rather beside the point. Trust games (as all games) require strategies. They depend upon expectations of what the other player will do—and this changes from one opponent to the next. Moralistic trust is *not* about strategic responses to others’ behavior (see below). General orientations such as trust can be relevant to longer-term collective action problems, including experimental games (Bendor and Swistak, 1997). However, such optimal strategies are not simple responses to other players’ contributions in a trust game.

If Nannestad is correct that people don’t understand the question, it is odd that we should find so much stability in panel surveys—notably the 80 percent stability in the most recent panel. If respondents didn’t understand the question, their responses should be random.

Sturgis and Smith (2010) claim that the question really doesn’t discriminate between people we now and people we don’t know. They make this claim by examining a survey (from the United Kingdom) in which respondents are asked whom they mean when they think of “most people.” The problem with this approach is simple: If you ask respondents to name names, they will comply. And they do. A more straightforward approach is to ask people what they think the question means. This question was asked as part of a “think aloud” experiment in the pilot survey of the ANES in 2000.

The responses are rather different. As I show in Table 2 (from Uslaner, 2002, 74), 72 percent of respondents who gave an answer to the question referred only to a general world view, and not to particular people. These general responses include statements such as: “Still an optimist about people and you try to trust people first” and “Well, you can't be too careful in dealing with people. The fact is that a lot of them are thinking of themselves and they are after one thing and one thing only and that's what is going to benefit themselves” (quoted in Uslaner, 2002, 73). The answers to interpretations of the trust question are very different when people are not prompted to give names.

Table 2 about here

The “think aloud” experiment together with the factor analysis of the Pew Metropolitan Philadelphia survey suggest strongly that there are different dimensions of trust. And this is strongly confirmed by Freitag and Traunmuller (2009) and Newton and Zmerli (2011), who show that there are indeed “spheres of trust.” Trust is not a simple unitary concept: Trust in people we know and trust in strangers are distinct from each other—and you can’t get to trust in strangers from trust in people you know (Uslaner, 2002, 145-148).

The “think aloud” experiment does not automatically lead to general responses rather than answers that focus on personal experiences. We see this when we consider the other components of Rosenberg’s “misanthropy” scale, which has been used as a measure of trust by many, including Brehm and Rahn (1997). Zmerli and Newton call the scale “generalised social trust” and Reeskens and Hooghe (2008) claim that the index is better than the single item. The other two items are fairness (whether most people are fair or would take advantage of you) and helpfulness (whether people would be helpful or are just looking out for themselves).

More is better, isn’t it? Not always. While the three items often scale well, they have different meanings. And they don’t track each other over time in the United States, nor do they always scale so well. In the 2000 “think aloud” experiment, 56 percent of respondents gave general answers to the fairness question and 39 percent to the helpfulness item. So people *do* think about these items on the misanthropy scale differently. On the helpfulness question, one respondent gave an answer based upon personal experience: “Most part people try to be helpful, thinking of people in general, thinking of people opening doors for you if your hands are full and at the grocery store, people will reach something for you if you can’t reach it and just in general” (quoted in Uslaner, 2002, 73).

Trust, helpfulness, and fairness are *not* the same thing. In the American General Social Survey from 1972 to 2010, the three measures do not scale well. A factor analysis gives a seeming one-dimensional solution, indicating that the three indicators do cluster together. However, the eigenvalue is only .67 and the three measures have a scalability coefficient (alpha) of only . 49. Moreover, the three indicators don’t track each other well over time. In the time series from 1960 to 2006 (employing both the ANES and the GSS), neither trust nor fairness correlates even moderately with helpfulness over time. There is general consensus that trust has fallen sharply over time in the United States ( r = -.857, N = 31). However, neither helpfulness nor fairness show such a drop–and there has been a sharp increase in fairness over time ( r = .745 after 1971).

Can we put such great confidence in a single measure, especially a dichotomy? In the late 1990s, the Swiss Household Panel and the Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy (CID) cross-national surveys in Europe shifted to an 11-point scale using the same questions as for the dichotomies. Shortly thereafter the new European Social Survey (ESS) adopted the 11-point scale as well.

Scherpenzeel (n.d., 1) argued:

Scales with relatively few response alternatives force respondents to categorize their reaction towards an attitude object instead of directly mapping it onto the response continuum, thus causing information loss....respondents differentiate more between objects when offered response scales with greater numbers of categories...

Zmerli and Newton (2008) and Reeskens and Hooghe (2008) argue that the 11-point scale marks a great improvement over the dichotomous measure of generalized trust.

There is, however, a problem with the 11-point scale: the social psychological version of “regression to the mean,” or what I call “clumping” (Uslaner, 2009). Clumping is the tendency of people to respond to questions with multiple alternatives by “clumping” their answers around the mean–at values of 4, 5, or 6 on the 11-point scale. The first two waves of the ESS and the Community Involvement Democracy surveys all use 11-point scales for both trust in people and confidence in government.

In the ESS, the share of respondents choosing the three middle values ranged from about 35 percent for trust in the police to almost 50 percent for trust in the European parliament. In the United States CID, clumping ranged from about 25 percent for trusting neighbors to about 50 percent for confidence in Congress and political parties (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figures 1 and 2 about here

Now this would not be so much of a problem if we had evidence that people actually saw themselves in the center on issues of trust, However, when we restrict the sample to those respondents who place themselves at 4, 5, or 6 on the scales, respondents don’t discriminate well in the scores they assign. For clumpers, the average correlation for confidence in different institutions is about .17. The average correlation across trust in people and confidence in institutions for clumpers is .07. So assigning a score of 4, 5, or 6 is not consistent across institutions or trust in people. For non-clumpers, the average correlations range from .410 for trust in people to .670 for trust in parliament.

We can see the problem more clearly by examining the CID survey for Romania. Since I was part of the team that designed the Romanian survey, I was able to ensure that this survey included both the dichotomy and the 11-point scale. The results are not heartening: The relationship between the two measures is modest ( r2 = .164). Seventy-six percent of Romanians scoring 4 on the 11-point measure are mistrusters on the dichotomous measure, as are 69 percent directly in the middle at 5, and even 58 percent who scored a 6 on the expanded measure.

While the 11-point scale is widely seen as an improvement over the dichotomy, the problem of clumping may suggest otherwise. The simple trust question seems to tap consistent and meaningful responses and the dichotomy may be the best way to measure trust that we have developed so far. Alwin and Krosnick (1991, 164) investigated the reliability of scales with between two and nine response categories. While in general they found that reliability increased up to seven points–with no significant differences between seven- and nine-point measures–they found a notable exception:

The 2-category scales are a major exception to this pattern, as they have relatively reliable responses....2-category questions unambiguously measure the direction of attitudes only, with no pretense of measuring intensity, whereas 4 and more category response scales presumably are intended to measure both direction and intensity. The direction of attitude responses may...be more reliably assessed than the intensity of responses....

Intensity may be easier to measure on ideology or policy alternatives, where people may have clear and fixed views.

**Where trust comes from—and where it doesn’t come from**

Generalized trust rests upon a foundation of optimism and control. Optimism makes trusting strangers less risky—and control—the belief that you are the master of your own fate— protects you against being too trusting with those who might exploit you (cf. Lane, 1959, 163-166, Rosenberg, 1956). Optimism is the belief that tomorrow will be better than today. But it is not really “tomorrow.” It is the longer-term future. You would be foolhardy to place faith in strangers by the value of the stock market today—or even this year. Instead, trust rests upon a much longer term upbeat view—notably the claim that life will be better for the next generation than for your own. The best way to understand the importance of control is to realize that people who fear outsiders see dark forces as trying to control and manipulate their lives (Uslaner, 2002, 98-107). Short-term economic trends lead to less trust in government, not to lower trust in people (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 5).

Beyond optimism and control, education, race and religiosity are key determinants of generalized trust. Virtually every study of generalized trust, in every setting, has found that education is a powerful predictor of trust. Some see education as a form of social status, similar to income. Higher status people have more trust (Putnam 1995). Yet income does not show up as significant in many models–and this suggests a different role for education. Education, especially through university, broadens one’s perspective on the world–and brings one into contact with a wider variety of people.

While generalized trusters rate their own kind highly, they are less committed to their in-groups than particularized trusters. Thus, people who abjure contact with outsiders, such as religious fundamentalists, will be less trusting. Minority groups that have long suffered discrimination, such as African-Americans, will quite naturally have lower levels of generalized trust (Brehm and Rahn 1997; Putnam 1995). African-Americans have high *in-group* trust but low trust of people in general (whites). Yet, this mistrust *does not depend upon individual experiences such as discrimination or success in life*. Neither predicts trust for African-Americans at the individual level. Rather, the effects of discrimination are more nefarious: Success in life does not solve the *collective discrimination* African-Americans face.

What does not lead to greater trust: (1) reciprocity; (2) social interactions, including membership in voluntary associations and (3) better government.

Adam Selig­man (1997, 47) makes a telling distinction: “...the unconditionally of trust is first and foremost an unconditionali­ty in respect to alter’s response ....Were the trusting act to be dependent (i.e., conditional) upon the play of reciprocity (or rational expectation of such), it would not be an act of trust at all but an act predicated on [one’s expectations of how others will behave]” (but see Putnam, 2000, 21 for a contrary view). The 1996 Giving and Volunteering survey of the INDEPENDENT SECTOR in the United States asked respondents whether they had been helped by someone else when they were young, whether their family had helped someone, or whether someone they admired had helped someone. If trust depends upon reciprocity and experience, then being helped or seeing someone close to you assist others should matter mightily for your own views. But they don’t: 38.5 percent of people who had been helped by someone when they were young believe that most people can be trusted compared to 38.3 percent who were not the beneficiaries of beneficence; 38.7 percent of people whose family helped someone when they were young trust others, compared to 37.8 of people whose family provided no assistance. And marginally fewer people who saw someone they admire provide aid place their faith in others (38.5 percent compared to 38.8 percent).

It has become received wisdom that we learn to trust by interacting with people, in our social networks and especially in voluntary organizations. Putnam (2000, 137; cf. Brehm and Rahn, 1997) makes a bold claim:

...people who trust others are all-around good citizens, and those more engaged in in community life are both more trusting and more trustworthy....the critically disengaged believe themselves to be surrounded by miscreants and feel less constrained to be honest themselves. The causal arrows among civic involvement, reciprocity, honesty, and social trust are as tangled as well-tossed spaghetti.

There are multiple reasons to doubt this link. First, there is little reason to believe that mistrusters (or particularized trusters) don’t have friends. Racists and outlaw bikers have their own social networks (Levi, 1996). Second, the evidence is at best mixed about group membership and trust. Claibourn and Martin (2000) find no support for the claim that group membership leads to higher levels of trust. Stolle (1998) finds that Swedes, Germans, and Americans who have belonged to voluntary associations for many years develop more *in-group trust* (trust in fellow group members). However, they do *not* become more trusting of strangers. Third, Newton (1997) argues that we don’t spend enough time in voluntary organizations to build up trust in people outside the organization.

Fourth, if Putnam is correct and the causal arrows are “as tangled as well-tossed spaghetti,” you can’t just test to see if civic engagement leads to trust. You have to model a simultaneous relationship between group membership and trust (trust leads to group membership and group membership enhances trust). But only one study actually considers such a two-way relationship—my 2002 book (Uslaner, 2002, 125-141)—and I find no support for *either* linkage (through two-stage least squares).

There is some evidence that trusters are more likely to talk to more neighbors–but they are *less* likely to see their best friends often and *less* likely to spend a lot of time with parents and relatives. They are no more likely to go to parades, sports events, or art shows often; spend a lot of time with friends from work or simply to hang out with friends in a public place; visit chat rooms on the World Wide Web a lot, or even to play lots of team sports. People who trust folks they know–their neighbors–*are* more likely to go to parades and join sports teams frequently. But overall, the major reason why people socialize a lot is that they have many friends, not that they trust strangers. Misanthropes have friends too (Uslaner, 2002, 12-125).

Trust doesn’t lead to civic participation nor does group membership produce trust. The only exceptions are altruistic deeds—giving to charity and volunteering time. But *not just any charitable contributions or time spent helping others matters*. Only altruism designed to help out-groups, notably people who are in great need and different from the donor—depends upon trust and in turn produces more faith in others, or what Andreoni (1989) calls a “warm glow.” The single-equation estimations of the connections between trust and group membership are misspecifications.

Finally, there is little reason to believe that joining a group will lead you to trust people who are different from yourself. We select our friends and we join groups to be with people like ourselves—known in sociological research as “homophily” or more simply, birds of a feather flock together (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001). As Allport (1954, 17-18; cf. Uslaner, 2002, 40-42) argues:

People mate with their own kind. They eat, play, reside in homogenous clusters. They visit with their own kind, and prefer to worship together. We don’t play bridge with the janitor.

As Rosenblum (1998, 48) argues:

...there is the tendency to adopt a simplistic “transmission belt’ model of civil society, which says that the beneficial formative effects of association spill over from one sphere to another....The “transmission belt” model is simplistic as a general dynamic. It is one thing to say that within face-to-face rotating credit associations “social networks allow trust to become transitive and spread: trust you, because I trust her and she assures me that she trusts you,” and quite another thing to show that habits of trust cultivated in one social sphere are exhibited in incongruent groups in separate spheres.

Yet some believe that there *is* a transmission belt—from trust in people you know to people you don’t know. Clark, Putnam, and Fieldhouse (2010, 142-143) argue that:

...stronger intra-racial bonds and stronger interracial bridges can be positively, rather than negatively, correlated....the same American or Brit who has more ties to others of their *own* racial and ethnic group is actually *more* likely, not less likely, to have more social bridges to other racial or ethnic groups....American whites who trust whites more tend also to trust Latinos more, not less than whites who distrust whites.......our research tends to support public policies which foster the building of strong bonds within ethnic groups...because that could be an important prelude to the broader social bridging we seek....A social salad bowl is thus a better ideal than a homogenizing melting pot....

Clark, Putnam, and Fieldhouse focus primarily on trust in one’s neighbors rather than generalized trust. In Putnam’s Social Capital Benchmark Survey, I examined the interrelationship among generalized trust and dichotomized measures of trusting one’s neighbors and trusting your own race. For whites, the modal category is trusting other whites and your neighbors but not “most people” (43.7 percent). Only 3 percent have faith in “most people” but not in their neighbors. The simple correlation between the two measures is modest (tau-b = .225), at least in part because so many people trust their neighbors (85 percent). About two-thirds of whites trust other whites, but less than half (46 percent) of those who trust people of their own race believe that “most people can be trusted.” Eighty nine percent of whites have faith in others of their race and 86 percent of them also trust their neighbors.

Forty six percent of African-Americans trust their neighbors but not people in general, while 30 percent do not trust either their neighbors or “most people.” Two-thirds of African-Americans trust blacks but not “most people,” while almost 60 percent trust blacks *and* trust their neighbors. *For whites and especially for blacks, the modal pattern is to trust their neighbors and their own racial group but not people in general*.

The same pattern holds for the UK. In the 2007 Citizenship Survey, the modal pattern (56 percent) for all respondents is to trust their neighbors (a dichotomized measure) but *not* people in general. The pattern again is particularly strong for minorities, with approximately two-thirds of blacks, Africans, South Asians, and Muslims giving particularistic trust responses. Almost twice as many minorities trust only their own kind as have faith in people in general and their in-group. Fifty-two percent of whites, who are far more trusting overall, have faith in their neighbors but not people in general.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Trusting people like yourself is not part of a “transmission belt” to faith in people unlike yourself. Faith in in-groups is primordial, trusting out-groups is not. Strong in-group trust often, indeed usually, crowds out faith in strangers, especially for minorities who are more likely to have faced discrimination.

What happens when we do have contact with people who are different from ourselves? There are two widely known accounts about what to expect: conflict and contact theory. Conflict theory puts a premium on in-group identity. People prefer to interact with folks like themselves—and shy away from others. Alesina and LaFerrara (2000, 850, 889) elaborate how in-group preference leads to both demobilization and to negative social attitudes toward minorities:

...individuals prefer to interact with others who are similar to themselves in terms of income, race, or ethnicity...diffuse preferences for homogeneity may decrease total participation in a mixed group if fragmentation increases. However, individuals may prefer to sort into homogenous groups...For eight out of nine questions concerning attitudes toward race relations, the effect of racial heterogeneity is strongest for individuals more averse to racial mixing.

Putnam (2007, 147-148) argues:

...inhabitants of diverse communities tend to withdraw from collective life, to distrust their neighbours, regardless of the colour of their skin, to withdraw even from close friends, to expect the worst from their community and its leaders, to volunteer less, give less to charity and work on community projects less often, to register to vote less, to agitate for social reform more, but have less faith that they can actually make a difference, and to huddle unhappily in front of the television.

Advocates of contact theory are more optimistic. While there is a widespread belief that contact with people of diverse backgrounds builds tolerance, the arguments of Allport (1958) and Pettigrew. 1998) suggest a more nuanced effect of interactions. Contact, they argue, must be both frequent and be accompanied by “equal group status within the situation, common goals; intergroup cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom” (Pettigrew, 1998, 66). These are commonly known as Allport’s “optimal conditions” for contact to lead to greater tolerance.

Context matters here. When people live apart from people different from themselves, they won’t have much contact with them, and almost certainly not on the basis of equal status. Allport (1958, 251): “Where segregation is the custom contacts are casual, or else firmly frozen into superordinate-subordinate relationships...such contact does *not* dispel prejudice; it seems more likely to increase it...”. I argue that to create trust, you must live in an integrated community *and* have friends of different backgrounds (Uslaner, 2012a). Simple contact is not enough—it may not be based upon equal status. Nor is living in an integrated neighborhood sufficient—you can live among people of different backgrounds yet turn your head when you see them on the street.

I tested this argument in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Sweden (Uslaner, 2012a). I found considerable support for my argument in each country, though with some differences. The effects were greatest in the United States, which is by far the most segregated society. Except for Sweden, living in an integrated community with friends of different backgrounds matters far more for majority whites than for minority groups. Minorities typically (except in Sweden, Australia, and Canada) have lower levels of trust but more contact with people of different backgrounds. Sweden has a more universalistic political and social culture, thus encouraging assimilation while at the same time leading toward more equality for minorities (immigrants).

In each country, segregation, not diversity, leads to lower levels of trust. Across nations, segregation also has a greater effect on trust than does diversity (cf. Alesina and Zhuravskaya, 2011). People don’t burrow into their own worlds if they live in integrated communities (or nations) and have friends of different backgrounds. Segregation is more important in leading to less trust than is diversity because segregation, across countries and neighborhoods, is strongly linked to inequality. Anderson (2010, 2) writes: “Segregation of social groups is a principal cause of group inequality.” Bowles, Loury, and Sethi (2009, 11) argue that “...when segregation is sufficiently great, group equality cannot be attained even asymptotically, no matter what the initial conditions may be.”. There is a close connection between segregation and inequality, both cross-nationally and across communities in the United States. The ties between racial and economic segregation have become stronger in recent years in the United States, where residential isolation is by far the greatest. Ironically, the overall level of residential segregation has declined modestly for African-Americans (Iceland and Weinberg with Steinmetz, 2002, 110), leaving the poor behind in the inner cities. While segregation is strongly linked to inequality, diversity—which is really just a proxy for the non-white share of a community’s population—is more closely tied to poverty (Uslaner, 2012a, ch. 2).

It is not so simple to build trust, however, by engineering integrated neighborhoods. Most attempts to create such neighborhoods in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden have had limited success. The initial positive outcomes in the United Kingdom and Sweden foundered when much of the public housing became privatized—and poor minorities were priced out of the market. There was never more than a handful of experimental integration programs in the United States.

Integration remained an illusive goal in much of the United States. Negative stereotypes of African-Americans are a key reason whites don’t want to live among African-Americans (Charles, 2006, 139, among others). For blacks, the ideal neighborhood is half African-American and half white (Zubrinsky and Bobo, 1996, 358). African-Americans who favor neighborhoods with greater shares of blacks are not expressing strong in-group loyalty, but rather fear that whites will “treat them as unwelcome intruders” (Krysan and Farley, 2002, 969-970; Charles, 2006, 55).

In the United States and the United Kingdom—the two countries where I could examine attitudes on residential choice—people (notably whites) who trust strangers (and who are have more tolerant racial attitudes) are more likely to prefer living in integrated neighborhoods. Once I consider the simultaneous effects of trust on residential choice and residential choice on trust (through two-stage least squares), the positive effects of Allport’s “optimal conditions” on trust are sharply reduced for whites in the United States and eliminated for non-whites in the United States and for both whites and minorities in the United Kingdom. Living in an integrated neighborhood with friends of diverse backgrounds does not do much (if anything) to increase trust *because it is trusting people who choose to live in integrated communities in the first place*. Residential preferences of whites thus *reinforce the inequality of segregation. They stem from low generalized trust and reinforce particularized rather than generalized faith in others.*

Does government matter? There is little evidence that democracy leads to more trust—or that democratization (after the fall of Communism) led to greater trust (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 8). Where trust is low, institutional change does not seem to be the route to increase it. What government can do is to pursue policies that lead to greater equality—that will in turn lead to greater trust, but even here it is unclear how to engineer such social policies without trust (Rothstein and Uslaner, 2005; Uslaner, 2008, ch. 9). Nor does strong law enforcement lead to more trust: it is easy to confuse compliance with voluntary acceptance, to confuse the law abiding people of Singapore with those of Sweden. Coercion, Gambetta (1988, 220) argues, “falls short of being an adequate alternative to trust....It introduce an asymmetry which disposes of *mutual* trust and promotes instead power and resentment”

**Reprise**

Trust is an important concept in social capital—perhaps the most important. We can measure it—and, perhaps surprisingly, the standard measure used for almost 60 years—seems to be best indicator of the concept. People understand it—and they largely give the same response over time. The consistency of responses is powerful evidence that the concept of trust is not simply an ephemeral notion with unknown consequences—or roots. In Uslaner (2002, ch. 3), I show that there are clear distinctions among generalized trust, particularized trust, and confidence in institutions (see also Freitag and Traunmuller, 2009 and Newton and Zmerli, 2011).

Generalized trust rests upon a foundation of equality, optimism, and a sense of control. It does *not* depend upon reciprocity or group membership. And since most people congregate with people like themselves—and prefer to remain in communities made up of folks of their own background—there does not seem to be a simple route for building trust through social interactions.

Trust has many positive consequences, but it is not a cure-all. If there is, as Putnam (2000) argues, a decline in civic participation in the United States (and elsewhere), we cannot trace it to a decline in trust. Nor would an increase in trust lead to a revival of community.

Trust matters most where inequality matters. It leads to greater acts of charity and volunteering to aid people different from yourself. It leads to less grand corruption—the sort of malfeasance that enriches the already wealthy and powerful. Trusting people are more tolerant of minorities, women, and gays—and do not fear that immigrants will take their jobs or will have negative effects on a nation’s culture (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 5).

Trust has many positive consequences for a society. It is not a cure-all, nor is it easy to establish.

Table 1

Factor Analysis of Trust Measures in 1996 Pew Philadelphia Study

Trust Measure Trust Strangers Trust Friends/Family Trust Government

Trust People Meet on Street **.484** -.245 -.309

Most People Can Be Trusted **.446** -.224 -.134

Trust People Where You Shop **.430** -.391 -.231

Trust Neighbors **.414** **-.481** .195

Trust People at Work .157 **-.619** -.203

Trust Your Boss .071 **-.589** -.236

Trust People at Church .159 **-.576** -.157

Trust People at Your Club .328 **-.534** -.104

Trust Your Family .129 **-.391** .011

Trust Fire Department .117 **-.318** .142

Trust Schools .148 -.306 **-.339**

Trust City Government .215 -.208 **-.631**

Trust State Government .065 -.147 **-.706**

Trust Federal Government .061 -.077 **-.741**

Others Trust You .137 -.240 -.122

Trust People Your Own Age\* .029 -.035 .025

Entries are rotated (Varimax) factor loadings.

\* Question is whether it is easier or more difficult to trust people one’s own age.

Table 2

“Thinking Aloud” About Trust, Fairness, and Helpfulness

**Misanthropy Measure** **% Response % Response (Adjusted)**

Trust General: 57.8 General: 72.0

No Content: 19.7 Experience: 28.0

Experience: 22.5

Fairness General: 43.6 General: 56.0

No Content: 22.2 Experience: 44.0

Experience: 34.2

Helpfulness General: 29.0 General: 39.2

No Content: 26.0 Experience: 60.8

Experience: 44.9

Figure 1: Clumping Proportions in European Social Survey



Figure 2: Clumping Proportions in US Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy Survey

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NOTES

1. This section comes from Uslaner (2012a, ch. 2). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)