

Reconsidering Political Trust

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Abstract

Political scientists and pundits frequently lament the generally low levels of political trust among Americans and express near universal concern in the recent decline in trust. The (often implicit) assumption is that American democracy would be healthier if its citizens were more trusting. Much political science research has been motivated by the desire to find ways to boost trust, believing that doing so will benefit democracy. I argue, however, that much of this research is based on questionable assumptions about the extent to which political trust benefits democratic society. Democratic theory suggests that a healthy skepticism—rather than blind trust—is beneficial to democracy. Citizens have a vital role to play as watchdogs of government, given the propensity of the government to obtain (and abuse) power if left unchecked. Traditional measures of political trust have exacerbated the misperception that political trust is dangerously low and in a precipitous decline. I find that those who register “low” trust on these measures have attitudes about government that are actually quite comparable to those who register as more trusting. In short, the normative expectations of political trust are too high, and contemporary measurement is biased low, propagating the misperception that the current level of political trust bodes ill for the health of American democracy. This research concludes with suggestions for better measuring political trust and determining *extent* to which it trust benefits democracy.

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Trust in government is a precisely unscientific balancing act between blind faith, healthy skepticism, and guarded apathy. That begs the question: How much trust—and distrust—is healthy for democracy?

—Patricia McGinnis
The Council for Excellence in Government

Rethinking Political Trust

Political scientists and pundits frequently lament the generally low levels of political trust among Americans and express near universal concern that trust is in decline. The (often implicit) assumption is that American democracy would be healthier if its citizens were more trusting. Much research has been motivated by the desire to boost trust, believing that doing so will benefit democracy. Other research has focused on explaining how the perceived low levels of political trust negatively impact American democracy. In this paper, however, I argue that much of this research is based on questionable assumptions about the extent to which political trust benefits democratic society (and, conversely, the extent to which distrust is harmful). When viewed from the perspective of good citizenship, I argue that most Americans exhibit a level of trust that is both reasonable and bodes well for the health of American democracy.

The Importance of Political Trust

It is often argued that political trust is helpful, if not essential, for democratic government. In fact, democratic society is unlikely to emerge without political trust (Dahl 1971). Trust makes everyday life easier, less complex, and more orderly—increasing democratic stability and lowering citizen angst (Barber 1983). In addition, trust increases voluntary compliance with laws, without which democratic government would be untenable (Tyler 1990, Levi 1997). For example, trusting citizens are less likely to cheat on their taxes (Scholz and Lubell 1998) and

more likely to comply with conservation measures (Tyler and DeGoey 1995). Trust helps citizens to organize politically and to pressure government for needed policies. In short, it makes democracy work (Putnam 1993). In fact, the benefits of political trust may be so obvious to some researchers that they see no need to justify explorations into its causes (see, for example, Williams 1985).

Low levels of political trust have been argued to have wide-ranging effects on core democratic attitudes and behaviors. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) note that distrust may negatively affect citizens' likelihood of casting a ballot on Election Day. Continued distrust may breed further distrust and may, ultimately, undermine support for democratic government (Gamson, 1968; Hetherington, 1998), which in turn raises questions about a government's legitimacy (Easton, 1965). Distrust may make it more difficult for government to expend the necessary resources for addressing societal problems, especially those addressing social welfare programs (Hetherington 2004). This may, in effect, leave many citizens with little support from government when they need it the most.

One reason for the abundant attention focused on political trust is concern over its decline. For example, Citrin and Luks (2001, p. 25) note that "anxiety about the consequences of declining political trust is one motivation for diagnosing its causes." Alford (2001, p. 28) strikes a similar chord, noting the "rising chorus of vocal concern about [declining trust's] impact on the future of American political life."

Fried and Harris (2001, p. 157) note that "all previous explanations" for distrust have assumed that it is an "unfortunate consequence" of Americans' dissatisfaction with some aspect of government and that distrust may actually result from intentional efforts by politicians shaping public opinion for their personal political advantage. Regardless of the cause, their sentiment

remains the dominant theme in research on the topic: since political trust is beneficial to democracy, the lack of trust and its decline is therefore quite troubling. I argue, however, that political *distrust* plays an important and often ignored role in ensuring democratic health.

The Importance of Political Distrust

While some degree of political trust is, indeed, important for democratic health, so is some degree of distrust. Unbridled trust, if left unchecked, is dangerous for any society. In an extreme example, cult followers who exhibit “blind faith” in their leaders may be placing their own lives in danger. Likewise, Adolf Hitler’s murderous rampage was facilitated by a German citizenry that was all too willing to trust in the Führer’s leadership. As Ruscio (2004, p. 4) puts it, “A pathology of democratic life occurs when trust shades too far into unquestioned acceptance of a leader's dictates.” While, these examples illustrate the dangers that trust can pose under extraordinary circumstances, some political distrust is vital for any democratic society. Rather surprisingly, very little attention has been focused on the positive effects of distrust—and almost no attention has been given to the balance between trust and distrust that best nurtures democracy.

That government should not always be trusted is not a new notion—just an underappreciated one. In fact, much of the debate surrounding the American founding focused on how the proposed Constitution had built-in checks and balances that would prevent any one aspect of government from becoming too powerful. As Madison writes in *Federalist 51*, “ambition must be made to counteract ambition.” He notes that it is the role of the citizens to “control the abuses of government.”

In *Federalist 64*, Jay argues that the Constitution does all it can to ensure that its leaders can be trusted, but that the people have the ultimate control through the electoral process. In fact, both the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists thought that some degree of distrust in government was necessary, with their disagreement over the extent of distrust that was necessary. The Anti-Federalists were quite skeptical of government under the Constitution, only signing on when it was agreed that a bill of rights would be amended to the document to further protect the distrustful citizens from infringement on their liberty by an overzealous government.

There are other benefits that flow from political distrust. For example, Hetherington (1998, 199) finds that distrustful citizens are less approving of the president and are more likely to vote for the opposition party in two-candidate contests and third-party candidates when a viable alternative to the two major parties exists. Opting for change is a reasonable reaction from citizens who are dissatisfied with the operation of government under the current administration. “Rising mistrust, if based on realistic assessments of governmental performance, may contribute to the maintenance of democratic accountability through electoral change” (Citrin and Luks 2001, p. 26). In further assessing the implications of decreased trust, they note that distrust may work to instigate beneficial policy change. Yet in the very next paragraph, they return to the typical refrain, addressing potential changes that might increase political trust, failing to take solace in the potential benefits of political distrust. Distrustful citizens are also more likely to support changes to the status quo such as term limits (Karp 1995), again showing that citizens who are unhappy are ready, willing, and able to take action that has the promise of restore confidence in government.

Declining political trust may also be a reasonable response stemming from questionable government action, starting with Vietnam and continuing through Watergate, Clinton’s ethical

lapses (and Congress's response to them), and the Bush administration's changing rationale for the war in Iraq and its handling of the war's aftermath. The decline in political trust may be evidence that citizens are keeping a watchful eye on its elected leaders, exercising their role as democratic watchdogs. As politicians have become less trustworthy, citizens have become less trusting—a sign that democracy is working and that recent concerns about declining political trust are overblown. In sum, the Constitution works because it encourages its citizens trust government, while also asking them to maintain diligence and a healthy skepticism of government. Without this safeguard, government has the potential to run amuck, violating citizens' civil liberties in the process. Viewed in this light, a recent decline in political trust may actually indicate a vibrant democracy.

Measuring Political Trust

Despite the attention paid to political trust, there remains no consensus on how to measure the underlying concept. A persistent concern, stemming partly from the vaguely worded questions, is the specific referent respondents have in mind when indicating the extent of their political trust—is it the national government in general, the policy outcomes, the incumbents, the process, or something else that citizens are dissatisfied with (Miller 1974a, 1974b; Citrin 1974; Citrin and Green 1986; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995)?

The milieu of measurement possibilities certainly contributes to this confusion, with most measures derived (in some fashion) from the battery of five questions included in the National Election Studies (NES) since 1958: trust the government to do what's right, whether government is run by a few big interests, how much tax money the government wastes, whether

those running government are crooked, and whether those running government are smart.

(Appendix A contains the specific question wording for these trust items.)

Some of the earliest research by Citrin (1974) and Miller (1974a, 1974b) employed a trust index comprised of five questions. The bulk of the research on political trust has used a “standard” four-item NES index, omitting the question about whether government officials are smart which was only asked until 1980 (e.g. Hetherington 2004). Others, however, have variously used three (e.g. Bennett 2001), two (e.g. Citrin and Green 1986), or one item to construct their measure (e.g. Alford 2001), usually with minimal justification for using one measure over another. Given this mishmash of measures, it is not surprising that debate continues over whether the trust index conflates the causes and effects of political trust with the underlying concept (Craig 1993; Owen and Dennis 2001).

Perhaps the best question of the bunch is the one that asks citizens bluntly, “how much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” This question has the advantage of measuring the latent concept of a citizen’s general orientation to government (Owen and Dennis 2001) and has recently fallen into favor among some political scientists (e.g. Alford 2001; Citrin and Luks 2001; Hibbing and Smith 2003). As Cook and Gronke (2002) point out, the other questions tap into attitudes that may be closely related to political trust, but that are clearly distinct.

While this trust question may be the best measure of political trust in widespread circulation, it still falls far short of being a good measure, for it contributes to the to the misperception that political trust is dangerously low. Part of the problem rests with the response options respondents have been given since 1968: they can trust government to do what is right just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time. In addition, since 1964 the NES

has recorded the responses of those who volunteer the off-the-scale response that they trust the government none of the time.

Among research that uses this single item to measure trust, the typical procedure is to convert the responses into a dichotomous trust/distrust variable. This is usually done by considering those who trust the government “just about always” or “most of the time” as trusting, and considering those who trust the government “only some of the time” or volunteer that they never trust the government as untrusting. There are several problems with the procedure. First, information is lost when two response categories are merged into one. This is particularly troubling given that so few response options are given in the first place. Second, the volunteered “none of the time” category is treated as if it were an explicit option, with little thought about the implications of doing so. Third, and most relevant for this research, it makes a normative assumption about which responses are trusting and which are untrusting. This assumption, I argue, is ungrounded, or at least made in haste, and leads directly—and I argue incorrectly—to the conclusion that political trust is low and declining precipitously.

From the standpoint of democratic theory, the response that might be most alarming is trusting the government “just about always.” Such citizens are unlikely to fulfill their duties as watchdogs of the democratic process. Yet, such citizens are typically lumped into the trusting category. Even worse, when the trust question is not dichotomized such individuals are considered the *most* trusting, an assumption with which I take issue. The greater the proportion of citizens with nearly complete trust in government, the greater the proportion that is shirking its duty to safeguard the system.

The next category, trusting the government “most of the time,” is also problematic. Again, since Democratic theory stresses the importance of both trust and distrust (with little

discussion of the proper balance between them), trusting government most of the time may still indicate too great of trust. In fact, the difference in frequency between events that occur “just about always” and “most of the time” is unclear, but is likely to be small. For example, a student who shows up for class just about always may only have one or two absences during the course of a semester. One who shows up for class most of the time may have three or four absences. Both students, however, are typically in attendance on any given day. Likewise, those who trust the government “just about always” or “most of the time” exhibit a degree of trust that may well be too high for a vibrant democracy.

This leaves a wide swath of the trust/distrust spectrum covered by the expansive “only some of the time” response option. Some who select this category might be fairly trusting of government, but are not quite willing to claim that they trust the government most of the time. Others, however, may have very little trust in government. Recall, too, that the “none of the time” response must be voluntarily offered by the respondent. Therefore, those lacking trust who nonetheless want to follow the survey directions are likely to select the “only some of the time” option. (Indeed, when “almost never” was included as an explicit response option in 1966, the proportion selecting this response soared when compared to 1964 and 1968.) Not only is the degree of trust within this response option expansive, but it likely captures many who have a healthy skepticism of government rather than a lack of trust (also see Cook and Gronke 2002). Yet nearly all research on the subject relegates those citizens who trust the government “only some of the time” to the distrusting category and consider their attitudes as deleterious to democracy.

In short, the typical measures of trust are fraught with problems. Even the best among them may not ultimately capture what it aims to. These measurement issues exacerbate my

normative concern that political scientists and pundits have unreasonably high expectations of the level of political trust that constitutes a healthy democracy. In short, the normative expectations of political trust are too high, and contemporary measurement is biased low, propagating the misperception that the current level of political trust bodes ill for the health of American democracy.

The Exaggerated Decline of Political Trust

Political scientists and pundits often lament the decline in political trust. Figure 1 graphs the distribution of the trust in government question for the duration of its appearance on the NES. An examination of the time series distribution of political trust does, indeed, yield some cause for concern. Concerned observers point to the decline in the proportion of the population who trusts government most of the time. In 1964, over 60% of Americans showed such high levels of political trust, with an additional 15% trusting government just about always. By 1980, however, scarcely more than 20% of Americans trusted the government most of the time, with a corresponding drop among those trusting government just about always.

[Figure 1 about here]

By 2000, the proportion trusting government most of the time had crept back up to 40% (still a full 20% below its zenith) before rebounding to near 50% in the wake the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Rather than celebrate the return of a more trusting population, researchers have tended to focus on what they continue to perceive to be its suboptimal level—after all, it is a full 10 points below its zenith in 1964, with an even greater difference evident when lumped together with the “just about always” responses. Or, they attribute it a short-lived rally-‘round-the-flag effect in the wake of September 11th (Hetherington and Globetti 2003).

I contend, however, that these interpretations of the data do not tell the full story. While there has clearly been a decline in political trust, the magnitude of the decline is exaggerated (and its recent rebound largely underreported). As the proportion that trusts the government most of the time goes down, the proportion that trusts the government only some of the time increases. Either category, however, indicates a healthy democracy. The categories more clearly dangerous to democratic health (trusting government just about always or none of the time) remains fairly constant. This is presented graphically in Figure 2. Here, the two categories that suggest a more vibrant democracy by exhibiting some degree of trust and some degree of distrust (trusting government some or most of the time) are combined into one category indicating attitudes that foster democracy. As is clearly shown in Figure 2, these healthy attitudes are quite prevalent in the population and have remained fairly stable over the last three decades.

[Figure 2 about here]

The change that does occur seems to be from trusting government most of the time to trusting government some of the time. Not only is this decline rather small (as argued above), but it may also indicate a healthy democracy. As Page and Shapiro (1992), aggregate public opinion tends to respond in reasonable ways to changes in the political environment. This appears to be the case for political trust, as well. The aggregate swing from trusting government most of the time to trusting it only some of the time came in the wake of Vietnam and during the heat of Watergate, a time when it became obvious that citizens needed to be more diligent in their duties to oversee their elected officials.

These sentiments are echoed by Moore (2002). He argues that the reported decline in political trust is due to poor question wording. Although Americans appear to be relatively untrusting of government, Gallup questions show considerably greater confidence in government

(except for presidential confidence in 1974, the year Nixon resigned). For all the hype about the low levels of trust among Americans, Moore notes, “there appear to have been no demonstrable consequences to the operation of democracy in America” (p. 10). Citrin and Luks (2001, p 26-27) note that “there is little evidence that lower levels of political trust have produced a nation of scofflaws” and find comfort in the evidence suggesting that distrust “is not always malign.” The *Deconstructing Distrust* report issued by the Pew Research Center (1998) echoes these sentiments, noting that public support for government programs remains unchanged, as does regard for the law, patriotism, and government service. In short, the apparent decline in political trust has not brought about the feared demise of democracy. Or, as Moore argues, the decline may be more illusionary than real.

Assessing Democratic Attitudes and Behaviors by Trust in Government

I have argued that some degree of political distrust is beneficial for democracy and that current measures of trust in government may not be taking this into account. Specifically, the “low” category for the trust in government item (trusting government only some of the time) may actually contain many citizens with rather healthy democratic attitudes and behaviors, namely those maintaining a healthy skepticism about government activities.

Distrust is only dangerous if it is absolute, widespread, or affects citizen participation in activities viewed as beneficial or essential for democracy. Do those who respond that they trust the government “only some of the time” exhibit these attitudes more than do other citizens? To address this question, I use the cumulative NES data from 1958 to 2002 to examine citizens’ interest in the election, the extent to which they following government and public affairs, and their voting behavior according to their response to the trust in government question. If the

“only some of the time” respondents have attitudes similar to those who trust the government “most of the time,” then their responses may, indeed, be indicative that democracy is rather healthy.

Table 1 shows citizen interest in the election by level of trust in government. The cell entries are row percentages. As expected, the response pattern among those who trust the government only some of the time is similar to those who trust the government most of the time. Twenty-nine percent of those with only some time remain very interested in the election, whereas 31% of those who trust the government most of the time are very interested in the election. Comparing interest in the election among those who trust the government some of the time with those who never trust the government yields considerable differences, with the “none of the time” crowd being much less interested. Thus, it appears that “some of the time” respondents have interest in the election that is comparable to those with greater trust in government.

[Table 1 about here]

Similar results are found for the extent to which citizens follow government and public affairs among the various response options for trust in government, as shown in Table 2. Once again, those who trust the government only some of the time appear just as likely to follow politics as those who trust the government most of the time. Those who trust government none of the time, however, exhibit a considerably different pattern of responses. The results for interest in the election and following government suggest that those who trust the government only some of the time have political attitudes that are just as beneficial for democracy as those with more trusting responses.

[Table 2 about here]

To determine whether these similarities between “some of the time” responses and “most of the time” responses carry over into political behavior, I examine voter turnout by level of political trust and report the results in Table 3. Two interesting patterns emerge. First, those who trust the government some of the time, most of the time, or just about always have considerably higher turnout than those who never trust the government and those who said “don’t know” or “it depends.” This is consistent with the notion that many of those who report trusting the government “only some of the time” are maintaining a good balance between trust in government and healthy skepticism—a balance that is conducive to voter turnout. Second, among the three on-the-scale categories of political trust, those who “just about always” trust the government turnout to vote less frequently than do those who trust the government some or most of the time, a pattern that holds across self-reported and validated turnout and across presidential and congressional elections. This, too, is consistent with my argument that trusting government just about always may, in fact, be harmful to democracy. I have presented evidence consistent with my argument that those who trust government “only some of the time” contribute to the overall health of American democracy and should not be labeled as “distrusting” and assumed to be a hindrance to a healthy democracy.

[Table 3 about here]

Reconciling Measurement with Democratic Theory

Democratic theory suggests that we should not automatically assume that greater trust is always desirable. Unfortunately, this is just the assumption behind typical measures of trust. Not only are the typical normative expectations of political trust too high, the standard trust measure is biased low. This results in a disproportionate number of respondents labeled as

distrusting. Because distrust is perceived to hinder democracy, the prognosis is frequently poor. That is, not only does the concept of trust need to be rethought, but so does the measure.

In this section I propose alternative survey questions for measuring political trust that are more consistent with democratic theory and that more accurately measure the latent concept. I begin by laying out a few criteria for such questions. First, political trust needs to be measured on a scale that allows for greater variation in response options. The current trust in government question allows for no more than four response options, and even these are typically distilled to a dichotomous trust/distrust variable. Second, the relative sizes of the categories should equal. The current trust question obtains the unwieldy and expansive “only some of the time” category, but also the rather narrow “just about always” category. Third, the question should directly assess the underlying concept of political trust, rather than trying to get at through related concepts such as attitudes about politicians, current government policies, political institutions, or a myriad of other backdoor entrances. By asking respondents whether they trust the government “to do what is right,” the current measure shifts the focus from the underlying construct to the public policies that result. Finally, the question should be sure to use language that does carry normative implications about the worth of the response. Again, the current measure fails this test by asking respondents whether they trust the government *only* some of the time. By adding “only” to the some-of-the-time response option, the question underscores the normative assumption that less trust is bad for democracy. I propose three new measures of political trust that I believe fulfill these criteria:

- Question 1: “Now I'd like to ask you how much you distrust or trust the government in Washington by using a thermometer that runs from 0 to 100 degrees. A rating of 0 means that you completely distrust government. A rating of 100 means that you completely trust government. And a rating of 50 means that you are not particularly distrusting or particularly trusting. You may use any number from 0 to 100 to tell me how much you distrust or trust the government in Washington.”

- Question 2: “On a scale from 0 to 100, what percentage of the time would you say that you trust the government in Washington?”
- Question 3: “On a scale from 0 to 100, what percentage of the time would you say that you distrust the government in Washington?”

These questions have the virtues outlined previously as desirable for measuring political trust. Each of them allows for far greater variation in response options with 101 different choices, and categories are distributed equally throughout the continuum. Each of these questions directly tap into the underlying trust dimension rather than inferring political trust from responses to related variables and they avoid drawing respondents attention to criteria on which they should make their assessments (such as “doing the right thing.”) Finally, none of questions carries a normative implication of which responses are desirable.

In addition, these questions contain additional advantages over the typically-used trust measures. Administering one or more of these questions on a survey that also contains the standard NES single-question trust measure would have the additional benefit of letting researchers determine just exactly what citizens have in mind when they indicate they trust the government some of the time, most of the time, or just about always. Question 1 also acknowledges that citizens may be simultaneously trusting and distrusting, and explicitly states that the opposite of complete trust is complete distrust, rather than simply the absence of trust (Cook and Gronke 2002, Ulbig 2004). In addition, Questions 2 and 3, when used together, have these same additional advantages. Question 2 may be the most comparable to the standard NES trust question, which does not explicitly state that distrust may be different from the absence of trust and, therefore, may be advantageous to use under some circumstances.

Next, I propose survey questions that will help answer the question posed by Patricia McGinnis and included at the start of this paper: “How much trust—and distrust—is healthy for democracy?” (The Council for Excellence in Government 2004, p. i). Surprisingly, this

question is seldom given serious attention and despite McGinnis's call, the Council's report, *A Matter of Trust*, does little to bridge this gap. Rather, the Council's answer to this question seems to be no more specific than "some degree of trust greater than we have now."

Undoubtedly, this question deserves a more thorough answer since understanding what degree of trust is desirable is a necessary precursor to improving trust, the (often unstated) motivation behind much of the research on political trust. Assumptions that greater trust is always desirable may be misguided. To this end, I propose several questions that I believe will get at this rarely asked (and even less frequently answered) question:

- Question 4: "Now I'd like to ask you some questions about good citizenship. For each question, using a scale from 1 to 7 please tell me how important it is for a good citizen to have the following characteristics, with 1 indicating that the characteristic is completely unimportant for good citizenship and 7 indicating that the characteristic is extremely important for good citizenship. How important is it for good citizens to trust the government in Washington?"
- Question 5: "How important is it for good citizens to be skeptical of the government in Washington?"
- Question 6: "Is it more important for good citizens to trust the government in Washington, or is it more important for good citizens to be skeptical of the government?"
- Question 7: "How important is it for good citizens to have faith and confidence in the people running the government in Washington?"
- Question 8: "How important is it for good citizens to keep a watchful eye on the people running the government in Washington?"
- Question 9: "Is it more important for good citizens to have faith and confidence in the people running the government in Washington, or is it more important for good citizens to keep a watchful eye on them?"
- Question 10: "How important is it for good citizens to have faith and confidence that the government in Washington is doing the right thing?"
- Question 11: "How important is it for good citizens to be suspicious that the government in Washington may not be doing the right thing?"
- Question 12: "Is it more important for good citizens to have faith and confidence that the government in Washington is doing the right thing, or is it more important for good citizens to be suspicious that the government may not be doing the right thing?"
- Question 13: "How important is it for good citizens to have faith and confidence that the government in Washington is making decisions in a fair and honest way?"

- Question 14: “How important is it for good citizens to doubt that the government in Washington is making decisions in a fair and honest way”?
- Question 15: “Is it more important for good citizens to have faith and confidence that the government in Washington is making decisions in a fair and honest way, or is it more important for good citizens to doubt that the government in Washington in making decisions in a fair and honest way?”

Each of these questions is designed to gauge tradeoffs between competing values that citizens may feel are important to exercising good citizenship. Questions 4, 5, and 6 are designed to measure the extent to which a general trust in government should be balanced with skepticism. These questions are designed to measure the underlying political trust dimension, or what Owen and Dennis (2001, p. 211) have described as “the more general, gut-level feelings about government.” Questions 7, 8, and 9 are designed to examine the extent to which confidence in the people running government is good for democracy. Questions 10, 11, and 12 examine the extent to which attitudes about government may be driven by policy outcomes. And the final three proposed questions measure citizens’ normative expectations about the policymaking process. I believe that these proposed questions would go a long way toward answering McGinnis’s (2004) basic question: just how much trust in government is desirable? Only after answering this question can I then turn to assessing Americans’ trust in government and contemplating what can or should be done to improve the situation.

Conclusion

I believe that citizens in a healthy democracy should be somewhat skeptical of government. Most political science research, however, assumes that greater trust is beneficial to democracy. Because of this, I argue, political scientists and pundits alike improperly (or at least prematurely) bemoan the “lack” of trust among Americans. The first step in addressing my

concerns, therefore, is to determine how much trust and skepticism is healthy for democracy. To this end, I propose a series of survey questions that will help answer this preliminary question.

Only after this question has been addressed can I assess my claim that that political scientists and pundits make unrealistically high assumptions about the level of political trust that is most beneficial to democracy. Not only is the desirability of political trust overstated, but the extent to which Americans do trust government is underestimated. Working together, these two tendencies paint a far drearier picture of the health of American democracy than I believe is appropriate. I argue that that the current level of political trust (when properly conceptualized measured) and its recent decline indicate a vibrant democracy. Using the questions proposed here, I hope to uncover evidence that supports my view of the importance of political *distrust* for a healthy democracy. I then hope to use better measures to political trust to more precisely see how the American public measures up to my normative expectations.

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