

POLITICAL TRUST AND THE HEALTH OF DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES. RETHINKING TRADITIONAL MEASURES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Confianza política y vigor de la democracia en los Estados Unidos. Repensar las medidas tradicionales e interpretaciones

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Abstract

Assumptions that higher levels of trust in government are always beneficial to democracy may be inappropriate, and the extent to which residents of the United States (US) trust government is often underestimated due to common interpretations of public opinion data. Reexamining the widely used American National Election Studies (ANES) data, we find that US citizens are more trusting than is generally portrayed and typically have attitudes and behaviors that are healthy for democracy. We also outline shortcomings with the ANES trust question. Using an alternative measure of political trust, we demonstrate that the ANES question hides important variation in citizens' levels of trust and tends to understate levels of trust. In sum, the often-expressed concern over current levels of political trust in the US is likely misplaced and researchers there and elsewhere should give careful consideration to measuring and interpreting trust.

Keywords: political trust, ANES, democracy, measurement

Resumen

Las asunciones que los niveles más altos de la confianza en el gobierno siempre son beneficiosos para la democracia pueden ser inadecuadas, y el grado de confianza en el gobierno que tienen los residentes de los Estados Unidos (EE.UU) a menudo se subestima debido a interpretaciones comunes de datos de opinión pública. Reexaminando los datos de American National Election Studies (ANES) de uso común, encontramos que los ciudadanos estadounidenses son más confiados que generalmente se retrata y típicamente tenga actitudes y comportamientos que son sanos para la democracia. También perfilamos defectos con la pregunta de confianza de ANES. Usando una medida alternativa de la confianza política, demostramos que la pregunta ANES esconde la variación importante en los niveles de los ciudadanos de la confianza y tiende a subestimar niveles de la confianza. En la suma, la preocupación a menudo expresada por niveles actuales de la confianza política en los EE.UU probablemente se extravía e investigadores allí y en otra parte debería dar la larga deliberación a medición e interpretación de la confianza.

Palabras clave: confianza política, ANES, la democracia, mensuración

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At some level, democratic legitimacy depends on positive citizen evaluations of its government. Therefore, it is no surprise that political scientists and pundits frequently evaluate the extent to which residents of the United States (us) trust their government, typically concluding that trust is too low. The recent decline in political trust reinforces the gloomy perception that political trust has reached dangerously low levels. As just one example, a recent article in the *Washington Post* (Cillizza and Blake, 2013) speaks of “the depressing reality” of long-term downward trends of trust in government and suggests “that there is no obvious cure for what ails the body politic these days.” Given perceptions such as this, it is unsurprising that much research has focused on how low levels of political trust negatively impact democracy, or on how to boost trust and improve democracy in the process.

We concur that very low levels of political trust bode ill for the health of a democratic society. However, we take issue with the (often implicit) assumption that presupposes democracy is at its healthiest level when trust is maximized. We argue that the constitutional framework undergirding us democracy is based on the belief that government should not always be trusted. Thus, the powers of government are both divided and shared among various political actors to ensure that power is not abused and that civil liberties are not violated, with citizens given important watchdog responsibilities through elections to ensure that government officials are operating in the public interest. In sum, we believe that very high levels of political trust can be just as troubling for democratic health as very low levels. Overly high levels of trust can lead to a concentration of powers in the hands of a few government officials and an abdication of watchdog responsibilities by the public—characteristics that form the core of us democracy.

Furthermore, we argue that public opinion data on political trust is often misinterpreted and that trust is likely higher than commonly portrayed. Although trust has likely declined in recent decades, we demonstrate how an alternative interpretation of the data can lead to a different conclusion about levels of trust. We argue that the standard misinterpretation of the existing data works in tandem with the improper normative assumption that the more one trusts the government the healthier the democracy is. These theoretical and empirical issues work together to draw the standard picture, that we argue is much gloomier than is appropriate.

We also argue that quirks in the wording of the most commonly used (in the us) political trust question contribute to the perception that political trust is dangerously low. Among other things, the traditional measure of political trust, that employed in the American National Election Studies surveys, uses response options of unequal range and employs normatively loaded language implying that greater trust is healthier. Thus, researchers typically interpret the most trusting response as the most normatively desirable and focus on the extent to which citizens fail to live up to this idealized expectation. Consequently, decline in trust is interpreted as evidence of unhealthy democratic decay. We argue that imperfections in measuring political trust and the ensuing mis-

interpretations of trust levels can be overcome with an improved survey item. In this research, we present the results of a public opinion survey that employs an improved measure and compare the results with those of the standard trust measure.

In sum, we provide an alternative interpretation of the extent to which political trust is desirable, an alternative assessment of the public's trust in government using the existing measure, and an alternative measure of political trust that avoids many of the pitfalls that have plagued research on political trust. Using these alternative interpretations and measures, we find that most US residents exhibit a level of trust that is consistent with normative requirements for good citizens and bodes well for the health of US democracy. These findings offer important lessons for researchers in the US and other countries interested in measuring and interpreting citizens' trust in their governments.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL TRUST IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

It is often argued that political trust is helpful, if not essential, for democratic government, and there is much research in the US examining the importance and consequences of trust. At the systemic level, Dahl (1971) argues that democratic society is unlikely to emerge without political trust. Gamson (1968) argues that political trust is necessary to build support for democratic government, and Easton (1965) suggests that trust promotes democratic legitimacy. Barber (1983) argues that trust increases democratic stability and lowers citizen angst. Others have found that trust increases voluntary compliance with laws (Tyler 1990, Levi 1997, Scholz and Lubell 1998, Tyler and DeGoey 1995). In short, political trust improves the quality of democratic government.

On the flip side, researchers have argued that low levels of political trust have wide-ranging, deleterious effects on core democratic attitudes and behaviors. For example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) note that distrust may negatively affect citizens' likelihood of casting a ballot on Election Day. Likewise, Hetherington (2004) argues that distrust may hinder government's attempts to address various social welfare problems.

In general, many scholars exhibit angst about the low levels of political trust witnessed in recent years. For example, Citrin and Luks (2001, 25) note the "anxiety about the consequences of declining political trust" while Alford (2001, 28) points to the "rising chorus of vocal concern" about low and declining levels of political trust. Similarly, Fried and Harris (2001, 157) note that "all previous explanations" for distrust have assumed that it is an "unfortunate consequence" of dissatisfaction with some aspect of government. The dominant sentiment is clear: since political trust is beneficial to democracy, the lack of trust and its decline are quite troubling.

We argue, however, that high levels of political trust may not necessarily be beneficial for democratic health. As Ruscio (2004, 4) puts it, "[a] pathology of democratic life occurs when trust shades too far into unquestioned acceptance of a leader's dictates." Although blind faith may be uncommon, it has the potential to crowd out skepticism and hinder the ability of the public to act as an effective watchdog.

That government should not always be trusted is not a new notion—just an underappreciated one. In fact, much of the debate in 1787-1789 surrounding the proposed US Constitution related to the issue of whether it contained sufficient checks and balances to prevent any one component of government from becoming too powerful. James Madison writes in *Federalist 51* that “ambition must be made to counteract ambition” and that it is the role of the citizens to “control the abuses of government.” In *Federalist 64*, John Jay argues that the Constitution does all it can to ensure that its leaders can be trusted, but that the people ultimately have control through the electoral process. The Anti-Federalists were even more skeptical that they could trust the new government under the Constitution, and only signed it when it was agreed that a bill of rights would be amended to the document to further check the power of government.

The idea that skepticism of the government may be healthy has important implications for assessments of changes in trust over time. In particular, declines in political trust should not automatically be bemoaned, as they might be reasonable responses to political events (Page and Shapiro 1992). Rather than indicating a democracy in decline, they may indicate a vibrant democracy whose citizens are willing to extend or retract trust when appropriate. Declining political trust in the 1960s and 1970s may have been a reasonable response to the increased media skepticism of government activity in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate. Likewise, the decline in political trust in the past few years may be a reasonable response to the “perfect storm of conditions associated with distrust of government—a dismal economy, an unhappy public, bitter partisan-based backlash, and epic discontent with Congress and elected officials” (Pew Research Center for the People and Press 2010, 1). Both of these declines may properly be interpreted as evidence that citizens are keeping a watchful eye on their elected leaders, especially in rough times—a key attribute for a healthy democratic citizenry. It is also worth noting that upticks in political trust may receive less attention than downticks, as Hetherington and Globetti (2003) note the underreporting of the increased political trust observed in the 1990s.

Furthermore, there are other potential benefits that flow from political skepticism. For example, Hetherington (1998, 1999) finds that less-trusting citizens are also less approving of the president and more likely to exercise their distrust at the ballot box by supporting opposition or third-party candidates. Similarly, Citrin and Luks (2001, 26) note, “rising mistrust, if based on realistic assessments of governmental performance, may contribute to the maintenance of democratic accountability thorough electoral change.” Low-trust citizens are also more likely to support term limits (Karp 1995), a change to the *status quo* that supporters believe will improve democratic performance. For all the hype about the (apparently) low levels of trust in the US, Moore (2002, 10) notes, “there appear to have been no demonstrable consequences to the operation of democracy in America,” while Citrin and Luks (2001, 26-27) state that “there is little evidence that lower levels of political trust have produced a nation of scowflaws.” In a similar vein, the *Deconstructing Distrust* report issued by the Pew Research Center (1998) notes that public support for government programs, regard for the law, patrio-

tism, and levels of government service have remained unchanged. Thus, although we remain in the minority, we join with others who argue that low levels of political trust may amount to much ado about nothing.

MEASURING AND INTERPRETING POLITICAL TRUST WITH THE AMERICAN NATIONAL ELECTION STUDIES

Most measures of political trust employed by US researchers have been derived in some fashion from four questions that were first included in the American National Election Studies (ANES) in 1958 and have been used in repeated iterations of the survey since:

- 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?
- Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all people?
- Do you think that the people in government waste a lot of the money we pay in taxes, wastes some of it, or don't waste very much of it?
- Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked?

Frequently, researchers using the ANES have created a trust index by converting responses for each question to a zero-to-one scale and then averaging across questions. Some have taken issue with this approach, as there is debate about whether this index conflates the causes of political trust, the effects of political trust, and the underlying concept of political trust (Craig 1993; Owen and Dennis 2001). In part to avoid this problem, a growing body of research has taken a more straightforward approach and used the single question, “*How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right?*” This question measures the latent concept of a citizen’s general orientation to government (Owen and Dennis 2001) and, as a single question, it is easier to include on public opinion surveys. Therefore, it has been used in several recent studies (e.g. Alford 2001; Citrin and Luks 2001; Hibbing and Smith 2003; Cook and Gronke 2005).

Yet this single-item trust measure is far from perfect. We argue that the available response options contribute to the misperception that political trust is dangerously low. This occurs because the “only some of the time” response option is almost always considered to be an “untrusting” response, an interpretation that we argue is misguided. More specifically, the question contains two response options that clearly indicate generally trusting attitudes (“just about always” and “most of the time”), yet it does not contain a response option for generally untrusting attitudes. (The ANES does, however, record the responses of those who volunteer that they never trust the government.) The only remaining response option is “only some of the time,” which is much more expansive and unwieldy. For example, some respondents may actually have very little

trust in government while others are likely fairly trusting, but not quite willing to claim that they trust the government most of the time. Thus, the “only some of the time” response option almost certainly conflates generally untrusting citizens with those who are generally trusting.

The ANES Cumulative Data File contains 36,270 valid responses (including the volunteered “never” response) to the trust item from surveys conducted between 1958 and 2008. The distribution of responses is included here as Figure 1 and shows that most of the variation in political trust that occurs over time is in the “most of the time” and “some of the time” categories. In the early years of the ANES, about 15 percent of respondents indicated that they trusted government just about always, but this figure dropped to about three percent by the mid-1970s and has remained fairly constant ever since. The percentage who volunteer that they never trust government has consistently hovered around two to three percent since the survey was first administered in 1958. Figure 1 also shows that the “only some of the time” response is almost always the most popular category. Since it likely contains both trusting and untrusting respondents, it is clear that the treatment of this category will have a strong impact on the interpretation of the data. The standard practice of treating these “only some of the time” responses as untrusting clearly depresses reported levels of political trust. Indeed, Cook and Gronke (2005) note that this trust question is unable to distinguish between cynical citizens who seldom trust the government and skeptical citizens who sometimes do.

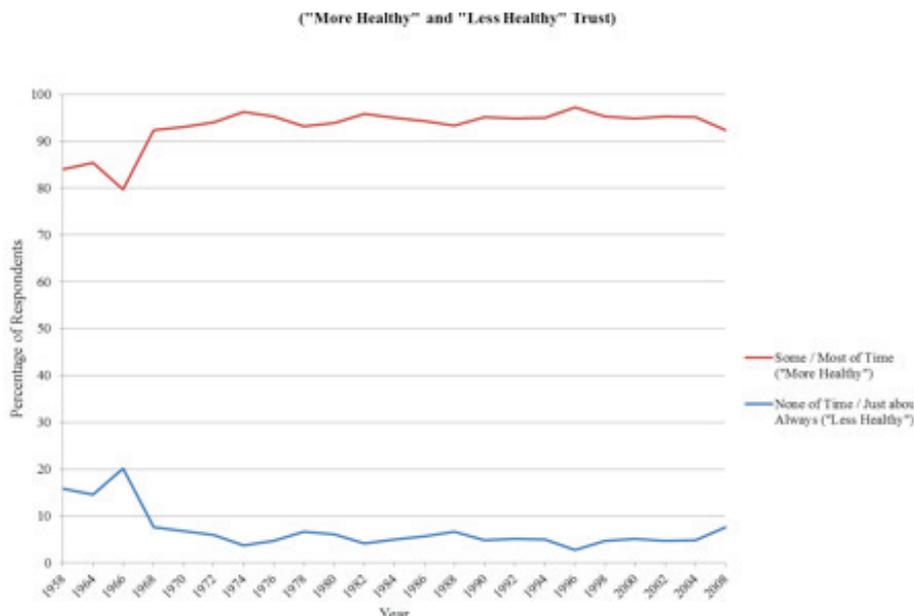
Figure 1. Trust Government to Do What Is Right



Traditional interpretations of the trust data also fail to distinguish between attitudes that are likely healthier for democracy and those that are likely less healthy. The stan-

dard interpretation that greater trust is always better often results in grouping together the “just about always” and the “most of the time” categories and considering them trusting. Likewise, researchers tend to add the volunteered “never” responses to the “only some of the time” responses and to consider them untrusting. Interpreting political trust in this way relies on a normative assumption that those in the trusting category have attitudes that are beneficial to democracy, while those in the distrusting category do not. We believe this assumption is unwarranted and unwise. From the standpoint of democratic theory, the “just about always” responses are potentially as troubling as the “never” responses. To the extent that citizens “just about always” trust the government, there is a danger of blind faith in government and a failure to act as watchdogs of the democratic process. Conversely, citizens who trust the government some of the time or most of the time—they “trust, but verify,” as Ronald Reagan might say—have attitudes that can be regarded as most desirous in a democratic citizenry.

We contend that citizens with healthy democratic attitudes are trusting at times, but retain a dose of skepticism. These are best represented by the “most of the time” and “only some of the time” responses. In contrast are citizens that trust the government “just about always” or provide the volunteered “never” response. Therefore, we merge responses to visually depict citizens with more and less healthy democratic attitudes and report the results as Figure 2. The proportion of the population with more healthy trust attitudes is fairly high and quite stable, remaining over 90 percent in most of the years since the trust question was first asked in 1958. Responses to the standard trust question do not support the contention that American democracy is plagued with less healthy trust attitudes; instead, we maintain that democratic health remains vibrant.



To be sure, some of those citizens who respond that they trust the government “only some of the time” may have very little trust in government, especially since the “never” response must be volunteered. At the same time, others of those who trust the government “only some of the time” may maintain significant skepticism about government and have attitudes and behaviors that are beneficial for democracy. Extant research, however, assumes that those who trust “only some of the time” will exhibit other attitudes and behaviors that hinder (or at least don’t help) democracy. To examine this possibility, we again turn to the ANES Cumulative Data File. We analyze citizens’ interest in the election, the extent to which they follow government and public affairs, and whether or not they voted according to their response to the trust in government question and report the results at Table I. If the “only some of the time” respondents have attitudes similar to those who trust the government “most of the time,” then the purportedly low levels of political trust observed in previous research may not be as problematic for the health of democracy as is often suggested.

TABLE I. TRUST IN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE ANES CUMULATIVE FILE

	Interest in Campaigns ¹			Follow Government and Public Affairs ²			Self-Reported Turnout ³			
	% Very Much	(n)	Mean	% Most of the Time	(n)	Mean	% in Pres. Election Years	(n)	% in Midterm Election Years	(n)
<i>“Standard” Trust⁴</i>										
None of the Time (Vol.)	28.3	(554)	1.85	31.2	(564)	2.62	62.5	(261)	44.0	(318)
Only Some of the Time	30.2	(18,904)	2.04	28.5	(18,793)	2.80	73.8	(10,636)	57.0	(9271)
Most of the Time	31.1	(12,866)	2.08	30.6	(11,832)	2.89	77.5	(7392)	61.4	(6032)
Just about Always	32.9	(1742)	2.07	29.5	(1476)	2.78	69.9	(924)	55.7	(873)

Notes: Data from ANES Times Series Cumulative Data File.

¹ “Some people don’t pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you, would you say that you have been/were very much interested, somewhat interested, or not much interested in the political campaigns this year?” Coded 1-3 with higher values representing greater interest.

² “Some people seem to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there’s an election going on or not. Others aren’t that interested. Would you say you follow what’s going on in government and public affairs most of the time, some of the time, only now and then, or hardly at all?” Coded 1-4 with higher values representing following more closely.

³ “In talking to people about the election we often find that a lot of people weren’t able to vote because they weren’t registered or they were sick or they just didn’t have time. How about you, did you vote in the elections this November?”

⁴ “How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right -- just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?”

Table I shows citizen involvement in politics by level of trust in government, as demonstrated by interest in the campaign, following government and public affairs, and

self-reported voter turnout. For each measure of involvement, we include the percentage of those who indicate the greatest involvement across responses to the standard trust question. We then indicate the mean level of involvement within each trust response.

The first section of Table 1 shows that the percentage of respondents indicating they were “very much interested” in the year’s political campaigns increases modestly across trust responses, with about 28.3 percent of those volunteering that they never trust the government maintaining a great deal of interest in campaigns compared to 32.9 percent of those who “just about always” trust the government maintaining a great deal of interest. The trend is clear, but what is most noteworthy is the small magnitude of the differences across trust categories. That is, although extant research might lead one to expect that those with low trust would be considerably less interested in the campaign than those with high trust, the substantive difference is actually quite modest at just 4.6 percentage points.¹ Furthermore, those who trust the government “only some of the time” are nearly as interested as those who trust government most of the time, with a scant 0.9 percentage points separating the two responses (30.2 percent and 31.1 percent, respectively). Mean interest shows that although the “none of the time” respondents are the least interested in the election (1.85), those who trust the government “some of the time” have interest in the election that is fairly similar to those with who trust the government “most of the time” or “just about always” (2.04, 2.08 and 2.07, respectively).² Thus, there is little evidence to support the notion that those who trust the government “only some of the time” also have so little interest in political campaigns as to hinder the quality of democratic engagement.

The middle portion of Table 1 shows how one’s propensity to follow government and politics varies by level of political trust. Again, the results suggest little substantive difference in political engagement between those who trust the government “some of the time” and those who trust the government “most of the time.” About 28.5 percent of those who trust the government “some of the time” indicate that they follow politics “most of the time,” while 30.6 percent of those who trust the government most of the time do—a difference of only 2.1 percentage points. Although individuals never trusting the government rather surprisingly were more likely to report the highest level of following politics, the mean values reveal a more anticipated result. Namely, those who never trust government have the lowest mean value for following government and public affairs (2.62), while the remaining three categories (representing those who trust the government at least some of the time) each have mean values for following poli-

¹ In discussing our results in this section, we rely on interpretations of the substantive significance of similarities and differences in attitudes and behaviors across individuals with different levels of trust in government. Given the nature of the ANES cumulative dataset with its large number of respondents, substantively small differences are often significantly significant. Furthermore, the relative infrequency of “never” and “just about always” responses means that substantively important differences involving these responses are sometimes statistically insignificant.

² Strictly speaking, neither the interest in the campaign nor the following government and politics variables are interval level in nature. Thus, computing means is not entirely appropriate. While recognizing this, we offer mean values here as a way to expand and facilitate the analysis.

tics between 2.78 and 2.89. The results for both 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. The results also show that those who trust the government just about always are no more involved than those who trust the government most of the time, and may in fact be less involved.

To determine whether these similarities between “some of the time” responses and “most of the time” responses carry over into political behavior, we examine voter turnout by level of political trust and present the results in the final third of Table 1. If those who trust the government “only some of the time” are disengaged from the political process, as is often suggested by extant research, they should also be less likely to vote. The evidence simply does not support this contention. For both presidential elections and midterm elections, those who trust the government some of the time vote at about the same rate as those who trust the government most of the time. The lowest turnout rates are found among those who never trust government, with only 62.5 percent reporting voting in presidential years and only 44.0 percent reporting voting in midterm years—about 10 percentage points less than for those with at least a modicum of political trust. This is consistent with the notion that many of those who report trusting the government “only some of the time” are maintaining a healthy balance of both trust and skepticism—a balance that is conducive to participation in elections. It is also interesting to note that those who “just about always” trust the government vote less frequently than do those who trust the government some or most of the time, a pattern that holds across presidential and midterm congressional elections. If citizen participation is regarded as an important part of democracy, these findings are consistent with our argument that trusting government “just about always” may, in fact, be harmful.

On the whole, the evidence presented here points to the fact that those who trust government only some of the time have similar attitudes and behaviors as those who trust the government most of the time. Thus, the practice of considering “never” and “only some of the time” responses as distrusting is likely misguided. Furthermore, conclusions reached by previous research that uses this practice may need to be reevaluated. Perhaps trusting the government “only some of the time” should not be regarded as an impediment to democracy, but as beneficial to it.

MEASURING POLITICAL TRUST: BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL ANES MEASURE

While the ANES is widely used and there is “concrete evidence of the ANES as gold standard” (Aldrich and McGraw, 2012, 5) in survey research, we have pointed out some shortcomings with the standard ANES trust question and its interpretation. In particular, we have argued that many observers offer overly pessimistic assessments of political trust levels. This is due to the often implicit assumption that more trust is better and that individuals indicating that they trust government “only some of the time” should be treated as untrusting (and grouped with those volunteering that they never trust the

government). Instead, we maintain that some skepticism of the government is healthy for democracy, and we have shown that those who trust the government “only some of the time” are nearly as engaged as those who trust the government most of the time.

We argue that there are additional quirks with the standard ANES trust question that also contribute to interpretation difficulties. First, the response options are of unequal range. The response option “just about always” is fairly narrow, and the “only some of the time” option is fairly broad and, thus, likely includes some respondents with very little trust as well as others who are considerably more trusting. The responses options are also unbalanced, as they permit citizens to report that they trust the government “just about always” and “most of the time,” but do not explicitly permit “just about never” and “little of the time” responses. Respondents must venture outside the stated response options to indicate that they rarely trust government, but they are given two on-the-scale options for indicating that they usually trust government. While the concept of political trust is clearly continuous, these factors make it difficult to treat the standard trust question as a reasonable approximation of a continuous variable.

We are not the first to note shortcomings with the ANES trust measure. For example, Ulbig (2004) and Cook and Gronke (2005) maintain that the ANES question fails to tap into active distrust of the government and they propose an alternative measure. Similarly, Gershtenson and Plane (2012) offer a critique of the traditional ANES measure and examine an alternative measure included in the 2006 ANES Pilot Study. Here we employ a question similar to Gershtenson and Plane’s, one that asks respondents to indicate the percentage of the time that they trust the government in Washington to do what is right.³ The responses, therefore, fall along a 101-point scale ranging from 0 percent of the time to 100 percent of the time. Whereas the standard ANES question asks “how much of the time” respondents trust the government, our alternative measure asks “what percentage of the time.” Other than this change in wording and the available response options, the questions are identical. Both ask respondents to report how often they “trust the government in Washington to do what is right.”

We included this alternative trust question alongside the traditional trust question (with the two items being separated on the survey by a number of other items) in a survey conducted by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut in 2006. The CSRA completed interviews with a national sample of 503 adult citizens in the week following the 2006 midterm elections, with a total of 271 respondents answering the relevant trust questions due to a split-sample design. The specific question wording for the alternative 101-point trust question follows:

- Now I would like to ask your opinion about the government in Washington. On a scale from 0 to 100, what percentage of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?

³ Gershtenson and Plane’s question uses “percent” rather than “percentage and asks respondents about trusting the government “to do what is best for the country” rather than “to do what is right.”

The alternative trust question overcomes four specific shortcomings of the standard ANES trust measure. First, the alternative question allows for respondents to select from a range of 101 response options, whereas the traditional measure allows minimal gradations with only the three on-the-scale response options and a fourth volunteered “never” response. Second, by explicitly referring to percentage of time, the response options for the alternative measure are much more specific, while the standard question wording allows for considerable room for interpretation over what each option means. This is especially problematic for the expansive “only some of the time” response which likely contains some respondents who are generally trusting and others with nearly no trust. Third, the responses on the 101-point trust question are balanced, with just as many response options available at the trusting end of the spectrum as at the untrusting end. Fourth, the 101-point alternative trust question eliminates the “only some of the time” response option which is normatively biased in a way that might influence responses and interpretations, since it implies that less trust is undesirable.

We have argued that the response options used with the standard trust question are vague and leave considerable room for interpretation from respondent to respondent, and that this problem is likely greatest for the “only some of the time” response. The CSRA data allows us to examine how much variation exists within each of the response options of the standard trust question. To accomplish this, we have grouped the responses from the 101-point trust question into ten categories and cross-tabulated them with the responses from the standard trust question. The results are reported as Table 2 and do, indeed, show considerable variation in the percentage of time that respondents trust government within each of the standard trust categories.

Our discussion here focuses on the “only some of the time” and the “most of the time” categories, as that is where 256 of the 271 observations can be found. About one quarter (24.0 percent) of respondents who indicated that they trusted the government “only some of the time” also indicated that they trusted the government more than 50 percent of the time. Another quarter (24.0 percent) indicated that they trust the government between 41 and 50 percent of the time. The remaining half (52.0 percent) indicated that they trusted between 0 and 40 percent of the time. Thus, it appears that the “only some of the time” categories does, indeed, contain some generally trusting respondents and some generally untrusting respondents, with another large group in the middle. To be sure, there are twice as many “only some of the time” respondents on the untrusting half of the scale as on the trusting. Nonetheless, these results suggest the difficulty of the standard trust measure in distinguishing generally trusting citizens from generally untrusting citizens.

Furthermore, Table 2 points to the existence of considerable variation even within those respondents on a given side of the scale. For example, there are 104 respondents on the untrusting side of the 101-point trust scale (those who report trusting government no more than forty percent of the time) who also reported trusting the government “only some of the time.” Of these respondents, 22 reported trusting government between 0 and 10 percent of the time while 31 individuals reported trust between 31 and

40 percent of the time. Similar variation also exists within the ranks of the trusting (who reported trusting government more than 50 percent of the time). This variation within both untrusting and trusting individuals is not detectable using the standard trust measure and may have important implications for assessments of trust levels and the desired magnitude of trust. For example, in thinking about the extent to which individuals display “healthy” democratic attitudes and behaviors, we might anticipate significant differences between those “only some of the time” respondents who trust no more than 10 percent of the time and those who trust closer to 40 percent of the time. We presume that the former are likely to exhibit similarities to individuals volunteering that they “never” trust the government on the standard question and that if one were able to exclude these individuals, the remaining government skeptics (those trusting only some of the time) would appear to be even healthier than indicated in our analyses of Table 1.

TABLE 2. CROSS-TABULATION OF TRUST IN GOVERNMENT WITH “STANDARD” AND IOI-POINT (GROUPED) ITEMS IN THE 2006 UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT STUDY

		“Standard” Trust ¹				
		None of the Time (Vol.)	Only some of the Time	Most of the Time	Just about Always	Total
IOI-Point Trust ²	0-10	83.3 (10)	11.0 (22)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	11.8 (32)
	11-20	8.3 (1)	7.5 (15)	3.6 (2)	0.0 (0)	6.6 (18)
	21-30	0.0 (0)	18.0 (36)	1.8 (1)	0.0 (0)	13.7 (37)
	31-40	8.3 (1)	15.5 (31)	3.6 (2)	0.0 (0)	12.5 (34)
	41-50	0.0 (0)	24.0 (48)	14.3 (8)	0.0 (0)	20.7 (56)
	51-60	0.0 (0)	12.5 (25)	8.9 (5)	0.0 (0)	11.1 (30)
	61-70	0.0 (0)	7.0 (14)	12.5 (7)	0.0 (0)	7.7 (21)
	71-80	0.0 (0)	4.0 (8)	35.7 (20)	66.7 (2)	11.1 (30)
	81-90	0.0 (0)	0.5 (1)	19.6 (11)	0.0 (0)	4.4 (12)
	91-100	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	0.0 (0)	33.3 (1)	0.4 (1)
Total		100.0 (12)	100.0 (200)	100.0 (56)	100.0 (3)	100.0 (271)

Notes: Cell entries are column percentages of valid responses; number of respondents in parentheses. Data from 2006 University of Connecticut Study.

1 “How much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time or only some of the time?”

2 “Now I would like to ask your opinion about the government in Washington. On a scale from 0 to 100, what percentage of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?”

Like their “only some of the time” counterparts, the “most of the time” respondents exhibit considerable variation in the percentage of trust, though three-quarters (76.7 percent) of such respondents also reported trusting government more than 50 percent of the time. In contrast, it is also worth mentioning that those who volunteer that they never trust government usually also report that they trust the government zero to 10 percent of the time. With only twelve responses in this category, however, we should be

sure not to read too much into this result. Taken as a whole, the evidence summarized in Table 2 suggests that our concerns regarding what respondents mean when they answer the standard measure of political trust are well founded, especially for those who indicate that they trust the government “only some of the time.”

To more directly and visually compare the 101-point alternative trust question with the standard trust question, we use the data to present histograms for responses to each question and impose normal distribution curves on the results. The histogram for the standard trust question is presented as Figure 3A and the histogram for the 101-point alternative trust question (using five-point intervals) is presented as Figure 3B. A few observations are worth noting. First, while the responses are clumped in the “only some of the time” category in the standard trust measure, they are more widely distributed in the 101-point alternative measure. Second, the vast majority of respondents have some degree of trust in the government without trusting it all the time. That is, they have attitudes that we have argued are healthy for democracy. Third, mean trust values in the 101-point question appear to be higher than in the standard trust question. This is consistent with our argument that the standard measure underestimates political trust.

Figure 3A. "Standard" Trust in Government in 2006 University of Connecticut Study

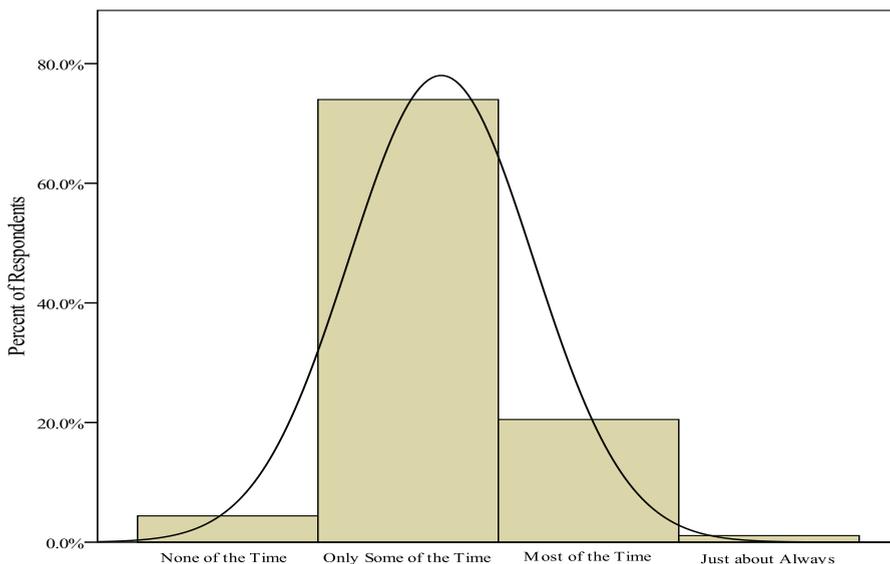
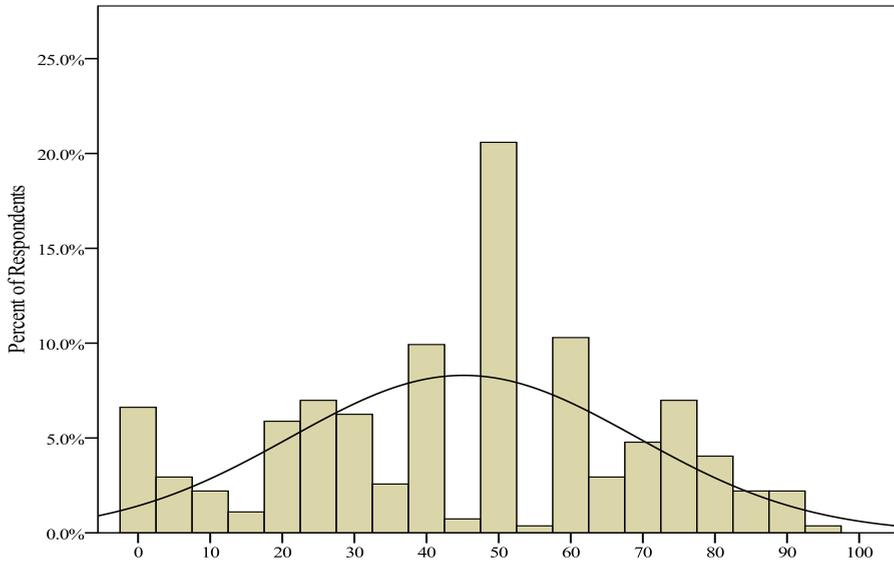


Figure 3B. 101-Point Trust in Government in 2006 University of Connecticut Study



We confirm our visual observations that the two questions yield substantively different responses by rescaling responses for both items to a zero-to-one scale and performing a paired samples t-test.⁴ The mean value for standard trust is 0.39 and the mean value for the 101-point alternative is 0.45, a difference that is statistically significant at the .01-level. For this analysis, we have including the volunteered “never” responses as if they were an on-the-scale responses rather than treating them as missing values or as “only some of the time” responses. Either of these less conservative approaches would have yielded substantially greater differences between the standard trust question and the 101-point alternative question. These observations support our belief that the alternative 101-point measure of political trust better captures the underlying concept of political trust. They also bolster the argument that there is a healthy degree of political trust in the United States; it does not appear dangerously low or dangerously high.

In Table 1 we argued that those who trusted the government “only some of the time” were no less involved in politics than those who trusted the government “most of the time.” This evidence was used to support the contention that many of those in the “only some of the time” category were somewhat trusting and had attitudes and behaviors that were generally considered beneficial to democracy. Although we would have liked to repeat this analysis for the 101-point alternative question for comparison purposes, the CSRA data does not contain questions measuring political involvement.

⁴ As with interest in the campaign and following government and politics, the trust variables are ordinal, not interval-level variables. Again, however, we offer mean values and conduct the t-test to aid the analysis.

Much research assumes that democracy is best served by maximizing political trust. We argue, however, that too much trust can be just as hazardous for democracy as too little trust. Ideal democrats should be somewhat trusting, while also remaining skeptical. And, our analyses suggest that some individuals typically regarded as untrusting display attitudes and behavior about equally as “healthy” as those treated as trusting. Not only are normative assumptions about political trust often misguided, quirks in the standard measure of political trust from the ANES result in interpretations that tend to understate trust. Combined, these factors lead to overly pessimistic assessments of citizens’ trust in government and resulting poor prognoses for the health of democracy in the US. Our interpretation of responses to the standard trust measure in the ANES is much more sanguine. We regard citizens who never or always trust the government as posing the most danger to democratic health, as they have either given up their watchdog role or given up hope that the political system works properly. The good news is that both of these groups of citizens are relatively rare. In contrast, the bulk of the population indicates trusting the government “only some of the time,” a response we believe reflects a sensible and “healthy” attitude.

While we argue that some degree of trust mixed with some degree of skepticism is desirable, it remains unclear the *extent* to which citizens should have these attitudes. That is, we still have a long way to go to answer the question posed by Patricia McGinnis, who notes, “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?” (The Council for Excellence in Government 2004, i). Undoubtedly, understanding what degree of trust is desirable is a necessary precursor to determining whether trust needs to be improved. It is also worth considering if the desirable level of trust varies by country or, more generally, by political context. For example, should citizens in countries with a history of political corruption naturally be less willing to exhibit trust in their governments? Similarly, is the desired level of skepticism greater (i.e. desired trust level lower) in countries that have experienced only a couple peaceful transitions of power through free and open elections than in countries with a longer record of such transitions?

Of course, determining what one is to regard as a “healthy” level of trust is rather futile in the absence of an ability to measure and interpret trust well. We argue that the traditional ANES measure presents challenges in this regard. In particular, it contains some normatively loaded language and presents response options that are unbalanced, fail to cover the full spectrum of trust/distrust, and are overly expansive. Our alternative trust measure illustrates that the ANES measure misses significant variation in citizens’ trust levels and thereby has serious potential limitations in terms of its usefulness in assessing the mix between trust and skepticism. The alternative measure also suggests that the ANES question tends to understate the level of trust in the US. Thus, while the ANES may still represent the gold standard in survey research in the US, our research sug-

gests it should not be used without careful thought and reflection. Alternative measures of trust and other political attitudes may be preferable, even if it means the loss of temporal continuity and the ability to make direct longitudinal comparisons. In countries lacking long-term established national surveys, researchers should take advantage of the opportunity to develop measures now that incorporate findings such as those presented here with regard to political trust.

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