



SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRUST: A LONGITUDINAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Patrick Sturgis School of Social Science, University of Southampton

Nick Allum Department of Sociology, University of Essex

Sanna Read Department of Epidemiology & Population Health,
London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Roger Patulny Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

Background

Citizen trust in social and political actors and institutions is currently a key area of concern for policy makers, social commentators and academic scholars around the world. The 2005 UK General Election, in which 'the trust issue' dominated the campaign, provides a recent example of the importance that trust, or lack of trust, in political leaders can have in mobilising electoral support. Yet, it is not just in the realm of electoral politics that the notion of trust has been postulated as key to a range of important outcomes at the social and individual level. Trust has been advocated as key to, *inter alia*, the efficiency of markets and economic growth (Coleman, 1988; Knack and Keefer, 1997), rates of criminal offending and victimisation (Halpern, 2001), morbidity and mortality (Kawachi, *et al.*, 1999), quality of life (Putnam, 2000) and the stability and responsiveness of democratic systems of government (Putnam, 1993; Newton 1999).

This programme of work has made use of the rich array of variables pertaining to different dimensions of trust across the ESRC's core large-scale data sets as well as a range of other national and international data sets. By analysing a range of different indicators of social and political trust, their inter-relationships, associations with theoretically linked concepts and cross-country and temporal variation, we have sought to provide some much needed clarity in the debate regarding the individual, social and historical factors which affect and are affected by the development of trust over time and across cultures.

Key research questions

- What are the characteristics of individuals and societies which influence social and political trust? Do individual level predictors of trust vary as a function of societal conditions?
- How are different dimensions of social and political trust related to theoretically linked concepts such as political sophistication, social and political engagement, and efficacy?
- Does increasing social integration at the individual level over time lead to higher levels of expressed social trust?
- What underlies over-time change in social and political trust in Britain?
- What are the mechanisms for the inter-generational transmission of trust?

Methods

We have used a wide variety of statistical models in addition to a range of descriptive and graphical techniques, including:

- structural equation models of the relationship between social and political trust using the European Social Survey, with social and political trust specified as latent variables;



- latent growth curve models of the causes of trust, using the British Household Panel Survey;
- ACE modelling of twin data, using MX structural equation modelling software to decompose variability in trust into additive genetic, common environmental and unique environmental influences;
- multi-level models to examine the influence of neighbourhood ethnic diversity on individual level trust;
- cohort analyses of repeated cross-sectional surveys, to decompose aggregate change/stability in trust into age, period, and cohort components; and
- ordered logit models applied to repeated measures of data using the birth cohort studies.

Key results

Changes in trust over time

A key aspect of our research in this project has been to provide a firmer basis for understanding long-term trends and patterns in trust. Figure 1 shows the proportion of respondents reporting that ‘most people can be trusted’ from a range of surveys conducted in Britain, stretching back to 1959. Previous investigations of the trend in social trust in Britain have argued that trust declined steeply between the 1950s and the late 1990s (Hall, 1999) and that trust declined between the 1950s and 1990s but has largely ‘recovered’ since this low water mark (Grenier and Wright, 2006). Our conclusion is somewhat different. The three data points that support the conclusion of decline are circled in Figure 1. If these are removed from the time series of data points, the picture is one of general stability around a long-term average of around 40% from 1981 to 2008.

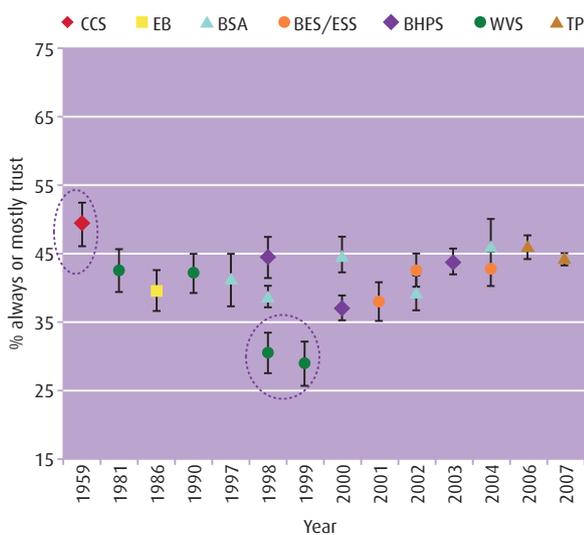


FIGURE 1. SOCIAL TRUST IN GREAT BRITAIN, 1959-2008

Sources: Civic Culture Survey of 1959; EB Eurobarometer survey; BSA, British Social Attitudes survey; BES/ESS, British Election Survey/European Social Survey; BHPs, British Household Panel Survey; WVS, World Values Survey TP, Taking Part survey.

Why should these data points be discarded? The World Values Survey (WVS) estimates (1998 and 1999) are the only surveys in this series that do not employ a random sample design. Additionally, very little information is available about how these surveys were conducted, so it is difficult to evaluate whether they are methodologically comparable to the other estimates in the series. As they are also so out of kilter with the estimates from ‘gold standard’ surveys conducted at the same time — British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) and British Household Panel Survey (BHPs) — the validity of these two estimates is, in our view, highly questionable.

With regard to political trust, the picture is less clear still. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents to the BHPs who either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement ‘Governments can be trusted to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own party’ between 1992 and 1995. Three separate lines are displayed in Figure 2, differentiating respondents by their party identity in 1992 (only supporters of the three main parties are shown). Two features of Figure 2 are of particular note: (i) there is generally a high degree of distrust in Government and (ii) trust in Government fluctuates considerably over this relatively short time period. While this pattern could be taken as supporting the widely held views that the public hold politicians in low esteem and that trust is easily lost through perceived misdeeds (‘sleaze’ during the early 1990s and Iraq during the early 2000s), a problem with this interpretation is also apparent — trust in Government closely mirrors the general popularity of incumbent Governments.

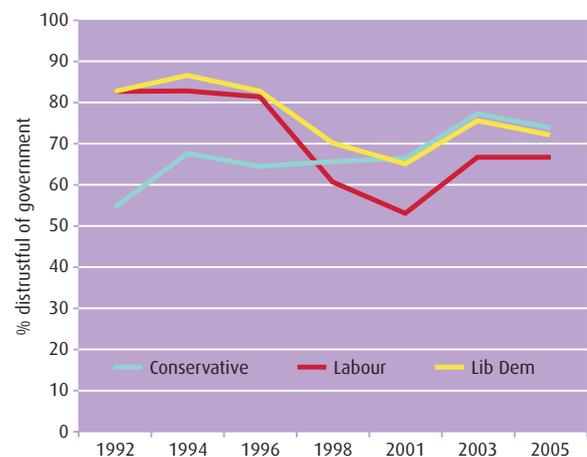


FIGURE 2. POLITICAL TRUST IN BRITAIN, 1992-2005 Source: BHPs

Distrust increased during the final years of the highly unpopular Major administration, then declined following New Labour’s victory in the 1997 General Election, only to drop off again as the Blair Government became increasingly unpopular following the 2001 election and the onset of the conflict in Iraq. The point is that this question about ‘trust in Government’ is more or less a proxy for satisfaction with the incumbent party is made even more forcefully by the crossing of the Labour and Conservative lines in Figure 2 after the 1997 Labour election victory. In short, our research shows that there is



little empirical evidence to support the notion of a general decline in generalised trust nor in trust in political institutions in Britain.

Social integration and trust

A key component of social capital theory relates to the role of associational membership and informal social interaction in fostering interpersonal trust. Yet, despite this centrality, the empirical evidence linking 'joining' with trusting is rather inconsistent. While many investigators have found a positive association between trusting and joining at both the country and individual level, others have found no relationship at all, once appropriate controls are introduced. However, a serious limitation of the evidence marshalled in support of the 'joining' hypothesis relates to the indeterminacy of the data and statistical models generally employed in the study of trust for disentangling causal relationships. We cannot discount the possibility that the causal arrows between trust and social integration may be pointing in the wrong direction.

To address this problem, we applied latent growth curve models to repeated measures of trust and a host of theoretically related background variables, using the BHPS. Our results demonstrate substantial differences between random and fixed effects specifications. In particular, while associational membership showed a substantial and statistically significant relationship with trust using random effects, the coefficient was non-significant and close to zero using the fixed effects model. We conclude from this that the association between joining and trusting that is frequently observed using cross-sectional data is not causal in nature. Rather, it is due to the correlation between both variables and other characteristics of individuals that are generally unobserved in these models.

A second way in which social integration has been argued to influence trust is through the ethnic diversity/homogeneity of areas. Generally, the conclusions of empirical analysts in a range of contexts have been quite pessimistic about the effect of ethnic heterogeneity on trust; area level indices of diversity have been found to be correlated with lower levels of public goods, civic behaviours and trust (cf. Putnam, 2007). As part of our research into the effects of social integration on trust, we analysed the UK Taking Part survey. We use a multi-level modelling approach to estimate the effect of ethnic diversity on trust in people in the local area and trust in people in general.

Counter to research conducted in the US, our results show no effect of ethnic diversity on trust in people in general. We do find a small but significant association between diversity and trust expressed in people in the local area. This relationship, however, is strongly conditioned by the social and economic characteristics of individuals and neighbourhoods. This complex and conditional relationship can be seen in Figure 3, which shows predicted values of trust as a function of area ethnic diversity, neighbourhood deprivation and personal contact with neighbours. The panel on the right of Figure 3 shows that, at the highest levels of deprivation, and high contact with neighbours, ethnic diversity can actually *increase* trust at the individual level.

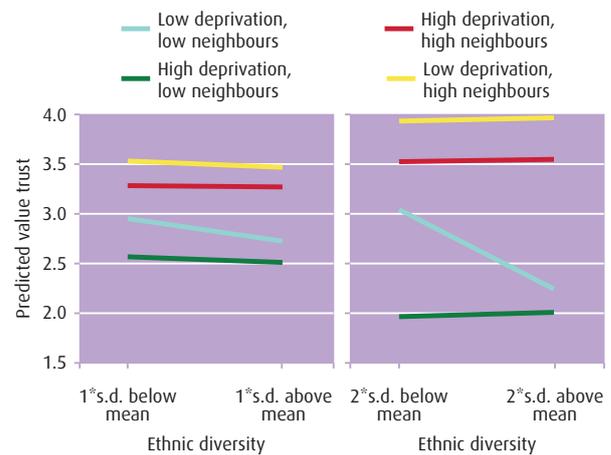


FIGURE 3. PREDICTED VALUES OF TRUST IN PEOPLE IN LOCAL AREA

Source: Taking Part survey

Linking trust to other theoretically related concepts

Counter to commonsense expectations that trusting those we do not know is a sign of gullibility, Yamagishi (2001) contends that intelligent social actors are able to successfully manage both economic and non-pecuniary transactions to their ultimate advantage. These individuals reap the benefits of reciprocity by carefully endowing their trust only in those who are unlikely to betray it. This type of social intelligence can thus be viewed as a benign form of Machiavellianism (Parales-Quenza, 2006), in that socially astute individuals are rewarded by exerting a high degree of control over the conditions in which they are willing to sanction trust.

As part of our research into how trust is related to cognitive and affective moderators of social and political information, we tested Yamagishi's 'social intelligence' hypothesis by evaluating whether a 'default' position of inter-personal trust in adulthood is positively correlated with intelligence measured in childhood. Using the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 Birth Cohort Study (BCS), we found intelligence measured at age 7 and 10 to be highly predictive of trust at ages 34 and 46, net of a broad range of theoretically related covariates. Predicted probabilities for different levels of trust as a function of intelligence at age 10 are shown in Figure 4, for the NCDS analysis.

Origins of social trust

In many ways, all of our research in this project speaks to the broad issue of the origins of trust. However, one piece of research undertaken as part of this project tackles this crucial question in a particularly direct manner. It also challenges some of the axiomatic assumptions regarding the origins of social trust within the social sciences. For, as our earlier review demonstrates, researchers within the social sciences have focused almost exclusively on social-developmental and political/institutional features of individuals and societies as the primary causal influences. In this part of the project we investigated the intriguing possibility that social trust might have a genetic, as well as

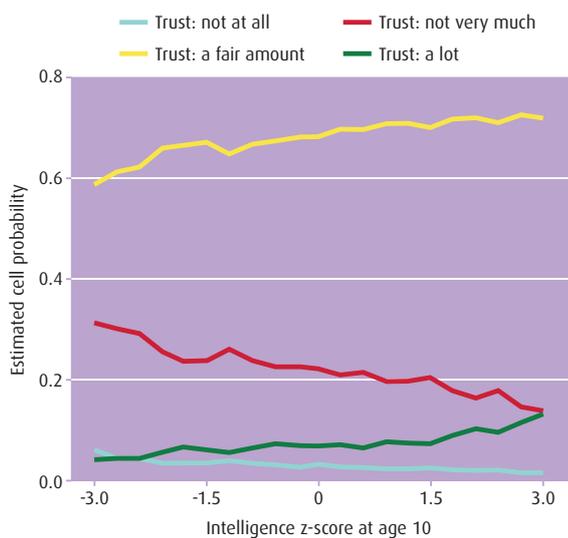


FIGURE 4. PREDICTED PROBABILITIES OF TRUST BY COGNITIVE ABILITY AGED 10

Source: National Child Development Survey (NCDS)

an environmental basis. We used data collected from samples of monozygotic and dizygotic twins to estimate the additive genetic, shared environmental, and non-shared environmental components of trust.

Our results show that the majority of the variance in a multi-item trust scale is accounted for by an additive genetic factor. On the other hand, the environmental influences experienced in common by sibling pairs have no discernable effect; the only environmental influences appear to be those that are unique to the individual. Our findings call into question the widely held view that the development of social trust occurs through processes of familial socialization at an early stage of the life course.

Trust as shared value similarity

In this part of the project we tested a particular theorisation of institutional trust in relation to science and, more specifically, GM food risk. Trust in scientists and regulators has become a 'hot issue' for the governance of science and technology. One theory of trust in social or political actors sees it as matter of social cognition; we trust people who we think are like us, or would do what we would do in a specified situation. So, rather than deducing trustworthiness from direct evidence, people infer it from information shortcuts that signal similarity or dissimilarity and that obviate the need

for detailed appraisal. In this paper, a structural equation model fitted to data from a YouGov internet panel survey provides support for this hypothesis, but also reveals that, independent of perceived value similarity between publics and genetic scientists, an appraisal of the *competence* of scientists is also important for understanding the effect of trust on the perception of GM food risk.

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Contact details of authors

Patrick Sturgis, Department of Social Statistics, University of Southampton
Email: p.sturgis@soton.ac.uk

Nick Allum, Department of Sociology, University of Essex
Email: nallum@essex.ac.uk

Sanna Read, Department of Epidemiology & Population Health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
Email: sanna.read@lshtm.ac.uk

Roger Patulny, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales
Email: r.patulny@unsw.edu.au

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