Trust and Social Bonds: Faith in Others and Policy Outcomes Reconsidered*

Eric M. Uslaner

Department of Government and Politics

University of Maryland–College Park

College Park, MD 20742

euslaner@gvpt.umd.edu

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Social capital is reputed to be a magic elixir for what ails our societies (Putnam, 2000). It makes us healthier, wealthier, and perhaps even wiser. It is the font of a communitarian spirit that makes us look out for our fellow citizens and to work with each other, rather than *against* each other. Its benefits have likely been oversold–and particularly the source of these benefits seems misspecified.

The linkage between membership in civic groups and more redistributive policies seems murky at best. Why should lots of people joining bowling leagues (or local Republican party organizations) lead to better outcomes for minority groups? The logic here is not clear. But there is a more direct link with generalized trust, which I have elsewhere (Uslaner, 2002, 1) called "the chicken soup of social life." Generalized trust encompasses the belief that people who are different from us nevertheless are part of our "moral communities." We have a responsibility for taking care of the less fortunate; and countries with high levels of trust spend more on transfer payments from the rich to the poor and more on "redistributive" programs such as education (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 7, 8).

Rodney Hero (2004) challenges these assumptions. He argues that social capital may be a blessing but its benefits accrue mostly to the majority (white) members of society. He presents hitherto unexplored data on outcomes for minority populations in the American states and argues that higher levels of social capital do not *consistently* lead to better outcomes for minorities. Sometimes high levels of social capital are associated with *more racial policy inequality*.

Hero's article is an important contribution and it clearly points out some limitations in the

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development of the literature on social capital more generally and trust in particular. Using his data set (which he graciously shared with me) and another data set that gives reliable estimates of African-American political participation in the states, I suggest that Hero may be too pessimistic about the impact of trust on better outcomes for minorities. Yes, there are some anomalous correlations: Sometimes when states with high levels of trust do have worse outcomes for minority populations, but in more fully specified models, trust is not significant. Second, for measures of political participation, all of the aggregate state-level correlations for measures of political activity and trust are positive, whether I use trust for the entire population or just for African-Americans. Third, at least one of the anomalous results Hero presents (for the black/white school suspension ratios), seems to stem from the construction of his dependent variable . When the data are reconstructed, the anomaly vanishes.

Fourth, Hero uses Putnam's state-level measure of social capital. This indicator is a veritable dog's dinner, as the English call it, containing a bit of this (honesty, which isn't quite trust) and that (all sorts of measures of political participation). There is no effort to separate cause and effect in these surveys, or even to determine whether there is any rationale for a causal relationship among the components of the index. A more direct measure of trust is a better test of the underlying thesis that communitarian sentiments should lead to better outcomes for minorities.

Trust and Concern for Others

My view of trust (as opposed to social capital more generally) is that it is a moral value that we learn early life and is largely independent of *adult* experiences, including membership in voluntary associations. Moralistic (or generalized) trust is based upon "some sort of belief in the goodwill of the other" (Seligman, 1997, 43; cf. Yamigishi and Yamigishi, 1994, 131). It is *trust*

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in strangers, not trust in people we already know (which is strategic trust). *It is trust in people who are likely to be different from ourselves, rather than trust in people like ourselves* (which is also strategic trust and may well come from membership in associations marked by a common interest; see Stolle, 1998).

Generalized trust rests on a foundation (at the individual level) of optimism and control: The world is a good place, it is going to get better, and I can help make it better. At the aggregate level, the roots of trust rest most clearly on economic equality: Across time and states in the United States and across nations (without a legacy of communism), economic equality is the strongest determinant of trust (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 6, 8; Uslaner and Brown, 2002). The connection with economic equality rests on two foundations: First, optimism closely tracks levels of economic equality over time. Second, and more critically, high levels of economic inequality tear apart the bonds that bind people in a society together. As inequality increases, the belief that we have a shared fate–we are part of the same moral community--becomes untenable.

This egalitarian basis of trust (see also Seligman, 1997) leads us to care about people who are different from ourselves. Trusters are tolerant and supportive of rights for minorities that have faced discrimination (African-Americans, immigrants, women, gays, and Jews, among others). They favor programs that will make outcomes more equal, because they see American society (in particular) as marked by a common set of values and a linked fate among its many groups. Societies with high levels of trust (especially the Nordic nations such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland) spend more on transfer payments from the rich to the poor and on social programs such as education (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 7 and 8).

These aspects of trust lead us to believe that there should be a powerful relationship

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between trust and policies designed to help minorities. We might also expect outcomes to be more equitable in states with higher levels of trust. Hero analyzes these policies and outcomes for the American states using Putnam's measure of social capital (rather than a direct measure of trust) and often finds little support for this argument. I argue that there is more support than he suggests.

Trust and Racial Policy Inequality

First, I discuss some data issues and then move to an analysis of some racial policies and policy outcomes in Hero's data set (including some measures he did not discuss). Then, I move to an examination of African-American participation in American politics, as estimated from the Roper Social and Political Trends archive.

The measure of trust is an aggregate, by state, using a wide range of surveys.¹ I use the standard survey question, "Generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted, or can't you be too careful in dealing with people?" captures this sense of the goodwill of others rather well (see my discussion of a 2000 American National Election Study pilot survey asking people to interpret the trust question in Uslaner, 2002, 72-74). I estimate trust by state for all respondents (for 41 states) and, for a smaller share of states (26), for African-Americans. The overall trust measure I use is for 1980 (which has the largest number of respondents). The African-American trust measure has too few observations to break down by decade, so I use all available surveys to measure black trust. The data on African-American political participation come from the Roper Social and Political Trends Archive. The Roper poll queried 10,000 Americans each year between 1973 and 1994 on a variety of political activities. This large data base (over 200,000 cases) permits me to estimate African-American participation by state (see

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also Brady, 2003, for another estimate of statewide participation rates from this data archive).

For a variety of Hero's indicators of policy and outcomes, I estimate regressions with trust levels, economic inequality, and the African-American turnout rate by state in the 1992 Presidential elections (in Hero's data set). I expect that trust and turnout will have positive effects on "good" policy outcomes (African-American per capita income and Aid to Families with Dependent Children payments per recipient) and negative effects on "bad" policy outcomes (high incarceration or poverty rates, among others). I expect the reverse signs for economic inequality (the Gini index measured for the 1980s). Since trust and inequality are highly correlated at the state (and other levels), I estimate some equations without economic inequality as well.

Before discussing these results, I turn to a data anomaly. Hero (2004) argues that the *relative* outcomes for blacks and whites are more critical than the "simple" results for either. A relative outcome of particular importance is the black/white suspension ratio in schools (how many African-Americans are suspended from schools compared to how many whites). He reports a positive relationship (significant at p < .05 for a two-tailed test, at p < .01 for a one-tailed test) between the black/white suspension ratio and social capital. I plotted the measure of the black/white suspension ratio and found that the highest ratios came in states with tiny African-American populations (the Dakotas) and the lowest ratios came in states with the largest black populations (the South). (See Figure 1.) So using his data base, I recalculated the black/white suspension ratio, using the total numbers of African-Americans for 1992 suspended divided by the total number of all suspensions. I made a similar calculation for whites for each state and then divided the black ratio by the white. The results changed dramatically. Figure 1 shows that the original ratios (for 1998) and recalculated ratios are *not* strongly related: $r^2 = .011$.² And Figure

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2 shows that trust is strongly *negatively* related, as expected, with the recalculated black suspension ratio: $r^2 = .558$ with a clearly negative slope.

Figures 1, 2 about here

I report the regressions in Table 1. Trust is strongly significant for the black/white suspension ratio. Hero (2004) argues that the black-white suspension ratio is more critical than the rate for either race individually. Yet, looking at the two rates is suggestive. The simple black suspension rate has a *stronger negative relationship with trust* than the black-white ratio. And the white ratio is *positively* related to trust, although the Gini index drives the coefficient to insignificance in this estimation. Trust is also negatively related, often strongly so, to a variety of other measures of African-American policy outcomes-the rate of emotional disturbances among school children, the share with special learning disabilities, the black poverty rate, the overall poverty rate. For both measures of poverty (overall and for African-Americans), it makes little sense to include the Gini index, since the dependent and independent variables are so close. When I exclude the Gini index, the coefficients for trust become much stronger.

African-Americans fare better in states with high levels of generalized trust. They have lower poverty rates, have fewer emotional disturbances and learning disabilities, and are less likely to be suspended from school. Also, AFDC payments per recipient are *higher* in states with higher levels of trust. And while black per capita income is also higher in more trusting states, the relationship is no longer significant when the Gini index is included in the equation.

There are a couple of other anomalies in the data analysis in Table 1. Consistent with Hero's analysis, the black incarceration ratio is *positively* related to the level of trust in a state.

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States with higher levels of trust are more likely to incarcerate blacks than whites. However, the zero-order relationship is not strong ($r^2 = .164$) and the coefficient is not significant in multivariate regressions. The minority infant mortality rate is correctly signed, but also insignificant.

Table 1 about here

The message in the table is that trust matters much of the time, seemingly much more often than not. And when it is significant, it brings about declines, often dramatic, in negative outcomes for racial minorities (at least for African-Americans). We should not be so quick to dismiss trust. To be sure, it is not the whole story and it may not even be the most important part of the story. African-American political mobilization, as measured by the turnout rate in the 1992 Presidential election, is more consistently significant. And its effects seem much stronger than those of trust. Yet, the story of Table 1 is that both political mobilization and trust seem to matter. Political mobilization puts the politicians on warning that they must not forget their constituents and trust provides the moral sentiments to remind people of their obligations to those with fewer resources.

Trust and Political Participation

The Roper Social and Political Trends archive asked over 200,000 respondents from 1973 to 1994 about their levels of participation in a dozen "uncommon" political activities ranging from signing a petition (most common, performed by 26 percent of respondents in 1994) to running for office (least common, accounting for fewer than one percent of respondents in 1994). Ordinarily, there is little reason to expect a strong relationship between trust and political activity. Trust taps

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cooperative sentiments. Most political activity thrives on mistrust of authority (Warren, 1996). And there is little reason to believe that political activity depends upon trust in fellow citizens (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 7, esp. 202).

However, there may be reasons to assume that there might be a link between these activities and trust. First, most of these activities are not commonly performed. In 1994, with the exception of signing a petition, no activity engaged more than 12 percent of the public; 8 of the 12 now had participation levels below 6 percent. Also, many of these activities are not as confrontational as most political activities. Writing an article for a newspaper, writing a letter to the editor, attending a public meeting, organizing a committee, serving as an officer in an organization, and making a public speech may be the mark of a public leader who can bring people together. There is some evidence that for the entire sample, states with higher levels of trust have more participa tion on these Roper items.

There is evidence in Table 2 that African-American participation (which is less than white participation) is also strongly connected to generalized trust. We have reliable measures of black participation and trust for 29 states and the correlations range from .290 for running for office to .744 for writing a letter to the editor and .751 for comntacting public officials. The lowest correlations are for the most confrontational activities (running for office and working for a political party) and the highest are for more communal activities. When we substitute trust among African-Americans, our N drops to 17, but the correlations fall precipitously: None is higher than .490 (contacting public officials) and seven of the 12 are below .3. Ironically, perhaps, trust is most strongly related to the more confrontational activities (working for a party and running for office). The overall message is that trust among both blacks and whites seems to shape African-

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American political and social engagement more than simply trust among blacks. African-Americans are more likely to participate in civic life where the social environment is more inclusive.

We see a similar pattern in Table 3, where I report the impact of trust and civic engagement in simultaneous equation regressions for both blacks and whites.³ The message once again is: Much of the time, there is no significant relationship between civic participation and trust. But when there is, it is *always positive*. In states with higher levels of trust, African-Americans are more likely to make public speeches, to join good government organizations, and especially to write letters to the editor of newspapers and articles for the press. While trust boosts civic participation at least modestly, economic inequality strongly depresses such engagement for blacks. On all 12 of the Roper measures, states with higher levels of economic inequality have lower rates of civic engagement, often sharply so. For whites, trust matters more and economic inequality less. Trust is far lower among African-Americans than among whites: Both across states in the 1990s and in the individual-level General Social Survey from 1990 to 2002, 38 percent of the total population believes most people can be trusted, compared to 15 percent for African-Americans. And these lower levels of trust do not go as far in stimulating civic engagement. Economic inequality depresses participation among blacks far more than it does among whites-and this should hardly be surprising.

Tables 2 and 3 about here

There is an additional story not told in these tables: What matters for African-American participation is *not* the level of trust among blacks–or the distribution of income *within* the

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African-American community. Black generalized trust and black Gini coefficients are only sporadically significant in models of African-American civic engagement. It is the *relative* status of blacks in American society that depresses civic engagement, not economic strains within the African-American community. Similarly, when trust matters for African-American participation, it is trust in the larger community matters more than trust among African-Americans in shaping both civic participation–and racial policy outcomes.⁴

Reprise

Rodney Hero has performed two great services to the study of policy-making. First, he has introduced (and shared) an important and novel data set with policies and policy outcomes for minorities, especially African-Americans. There has been too little attention paid to these issues and Hero's data are an important step forward. Second, Hero reminds us that social capital is hardly a cure-all for the ills of society. Yet, we should be loathe to jettison too quickly perhaps the most important component of social capital, generalized trust.

It is reassuring to see that trust functions in the American states pretty much as it supposed to do: It often leads to more redistributive policies that benefit those most at risk. And there seems to be a direct pay-off in many policy outcomes. Trust also has *some* positive effects on civic engagement–and, most critically, it never has negative effects. When we look beyond the handful of variables in Hero's tables, we have more reason to believe that trust does matter, and in a positive way.

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Figure 1



Uslaner, "Trust and Social Bonds" (13)

Figure 2



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Table 1

Regressions for Racial Inequality Policy and Outcome Variables

Policy or Outcome Variable	Trust	Economic Inequality	Black Turnout Rate	R ²
Recalculated black/white suspen- sion ratio, 1992	-1.908***	9.720**	.011*	.622
Black suspension rate 1992	841****	1.934*	.005***	.636
White suspension rate 1992	.170	-4.733***	004*	.465
Black serious emotional disturbance	657***	1.094	.005	.396
Black special learning disabilities	518***	1.627*	.341****	.606
Minority infant mortality rate	-4.790	-26.964	.190***	.215
Black incarceration rate	4.365	-39.298	156**	.116
Overall poverty rate 1990	-6.056*	159.22****	.107***	.770
Overall poverty rate 1990 without inequality	-23.98****		.107**	.533
Black poverty rate	-21.197*	87.619	.104	.219
Black poverty rate without economic inequality	-31.057***		.104	.219
AFDC payments per recipient	1533.65**	-8799.80**	-13.640**	.462
Black per capita income 1989	1671.384	-45385.21**	-6.271	.248

* p < .10 ** p < .05 *** p < .01 **** p < .001

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Table 2

Zero-Order Correlations Between Measures of Political Participation for African-Americans in Roper Social and Political Trends Archive and Measures of Trust

Participation	Generalized Trust (All)	Generalized Trust (Blacks)
Attend rally	.641	.262
Write article for newspaper	.578	.234
Write letter to editor	.744	.276
Contact public official	.751	.490
Sign petition	.728	.405
Attend public meeting	.627	.091
Member, good government organization	.705	.408
Organize a committee	.635	.238
Run for office	.290	.424
Work for political party	.400	.407
Make public speech	.692	.238
Officer in organization	.635	.238
Ν	29	17

All correlations for generalized trust (all) significant at p < .0001. Correlations for generalized trust (blacks) significant only for running for office and contacting public officials (p < .05) and for signing petitions, membership in good government group, and working for a political party (p < .06).

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Table 3

Summary of Effects of Trust and Inequality on Measures of Political Participation in Roper Social and Political Trends Archive

	Not Significant	.10	.05	.01
Trust	Attend rally Public meeting Office Organize committee Organization officer Petition Party work	Speech (+)	Organization member (+)	Letter (+) Article (+)
		•	•	
Economic		Article (-)	Public meeting	Attend rally (-)
Inequality			(-)	Office (-)
1 0				Organization officer (-)
			Organize	Petition (-)
			committee (-)	Party work (-)
				Speech (-)
			Letter (-)	Organization member (-)

African-Americans

Whites

	Not Signifi-	.10	.05	.01
	cant			
Trust	Office	Attend rally (+)	Organize committee (+)	Public meeting (+)
	Petition	Party work (+)		Letter (+)
	Speech		Organization officer (+)	Article (+)
				Organization member
				(+)
Economic	Attend rally		Public meeting (-)	
Inequality	Office			
	Letter		Organize committee (-)	
	Petition			
	Party work		Organization officer (-)	
	Speech			
	Article			
	Organization			
	member			

* Entries are significance levels from two-stage least squares estimation of trust and measures of participation.

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NOTES

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in government survey (1995), the Quality of American Life Survey (1971); and the New York Times Millennium Survey (1999).

2. The raw data for 1998 were not included in the data set.

1.

3. The trust equations include economic inequality and an aggregated estimate of whether people have no say in politics (from American National Election Studies over time). The participation equations include trust, economic inequality, the level of education in a state

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as measured by the highest year of high school completed, the share of fundamentalists in a state's population, and an aggregated measure (from the General Social Survey) of whether peoiple believe that the "lot of the average person is getting worse." See Uslaner and Brown (2002) and Uslaner (2002, chs. 4 and 7) for the logic of these models.

4. Details of these estimations will be provided upon request.