

Where You Stand Depends Upon Where Your Grandparents Sat:

The Inheritability of Generalized Trust*

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Generalized trust is a stable value that is transmitted from parents to children. Do its roots go back further in time? Using a person's ethnic heritage (where their grandparents came from) and the share of people of different ethnic backgrounds in a state, I ask whether your own ethnic background matters more than whom you live among. People whose grandparents came to the United States from countries that have high levels of trust (Nordics, and the British) tend to have higher levels of generalized trust (using the General Social Survey from 1972 to 1996). People living in states with high German or British populations (but not Nordic populations) are also more trusting (using state-level census data). Italians, Latinos, and African-Americans also tend to have lower levels of trust, but it is not clear that country of origin can account for these negative results. Overall, there are effects for both culture (where your grandparents came from) and experience (which groups you live among), but the impact of ethnic heritage seem stronger.

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Political culture is enduring. It lasts generations, perhaps even thousands of years (Almond and Verba, 1963; Putnam, 1993). A key part of political culture is social capital and especially generalized trust.

There are at least two views of trust, an experiential and a moralistic. One sees trust as reflecting others’ trustworthiness. Offe (1999:56) states: “Trust in persons results from past experience with concrete persons.” Hardin (2002:13) is even more emphatic: “...my trust of you must be grounded in expectations that are particular to you, not merely in generalized expectations.” On this account, trust is fragile, since new experiences can change one’s view of another’s trustworthiness (Bok 1978: 26; Hardin 1998:21). Trust, Levi (1998:81) argues, may be “hard to construct and easy to destroy.” Trust might not be so stable over time, on this view. If we do see continuity in trust, it is because some societies have more trustworthy people than others—and there are fewer situations where people exploit each other for private gain.

Societies with high levels of trust have lower crime rates (Halpern, 2001; Uslaner, 2002, 244-245). Low trust societies have high levels of corruption (Gambetta, 1993). And there is some evidence that the relationship between trust and corruption—and perhaps crime more generally—is reciprocal: Trusting societies show greater obedience to the law—and more honest societies have higher levels of trust (Uslaner, 2005). So living in an honest society may lead to more trust.

The alternative view of trust is that *generalized* trust, the belief that “most people can be trusted,” is learned early in life from your parents and school. It is largely stable throughout

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one’s life (Stolle and Hooghe, 2004; Uslaner, 2002, chs. 2, 4).¹ This view of trust is more of a cultural approach, since in the extreme one can trace parental trust back to grandparents’ trust, further and further back, until we reach Putnam’s (1993, ch. 5) hundreds of years. While this may be rather extreme, the approach suggests that trust has deep cultural roots that ought to last over time and space. So when immigrants from a trusting country come to their new homes, they will carry on their cultural traditions of trust rather than simply “adapt” to the new realities of their adopted environment.

The experiential view of trust holds that trust should be higher where there are lots of trustworthy people. The alternative (cultural) view sees trust as a more enduring value that is not so dependent upon others’ behavior. I shall test these alternative accounts here, using the General Social Survey from 1972 to 1998 to investigate how trust “travels” across geographic boundaries.² Data on trust levels in other countries from the 1990 and 1995-96 World Values Survey permit comparisons with ethnic groups’ trust in the United States to the trust levels of their families’ country of origin (included in the World Values Survey). The cultural account would predict that the most trusting people in the United States would be of Nordic background, regardless of where they live.

People from Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are the most trusting in the world, so we would expect that people of Nordic background in the United States would also be the most trusting. Protestant countries generally have higher levels of social trust than Catholic countries. The Catholic church is organized hierarchically and this makes trust difficult. There is also a strong in-group identity in most Catholic countries—and again this depresses trust in strangers (Delhy and Newton, 2005; LaPorta *et al.*, 1997, 336-337; Putnam, 1993, 107). So it is

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not surprising that in addition to the Nordic countries, we find high levels of trust in countries with mostly Protestant populations (Great Britain) or a large Protestant share of the population (Germany) while strongly Catholic countries such as Italy, France, and Latin American nations have much lower levels of trust (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 8). Ireland, which is a Catholic country but shares many cultural traditions with Britain, is a relatively high trusting nation. Communism made trust in others a very risky gamble, so it is hardly surprising that former Communist countries such as Russia or the states in Central and Eastern Europe are substantially less trusting. Moreover, many of these countries have long histories of either authoritarian rule or ethnic conflict, both of which reduce trust (Gibson, 2001; Sztompka, 1999; Uslaner, 2003).

African-Americans have high in-group trust, but low generalized trust, for “[t]he history of the black experience in America is not one which would naturally inspire confidence in the benign intentions of one’s fellow man” (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976, 456; cf. Uslaner, 2002, ch. 4). It should hardly be surprising that their African ancestors—going back much further than the grandparents of other Americans in the analysis below—would also have low levels of generalized trust. Their experiences with people who are different from themselves—whites in particular—were not based upon trust, but upon colonization and exploitation.

The experiential approach would agree that Nordic folk are trusting. Yet, it is not simple Nordic identity that promotes trust, but living among trustworthy people, who may happen to be Nordic. The Nordic population may serve as a surrogate for the proportion of a state’s population that is trustworthy. The Nordic share of a state’s population, rather than simple ethnic identity, ought to be a stronger prediction of trust. Similarly, living in a mistrusting environment

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should make people more wary of strangers. So if living in an area with mistrusting people, who happen to be Italians, French, or Latinos, might make you less trusting.

I test for the effects of ethnicity on trust in this paper. The cultural view would expect that ethnicity shapes trust through socialization: People whose families came from high (low) trusting countries will continue to be trusters (mistrusters) generations later. Trust becomes a cultural heritage, much as we “inherit” our religion and ethnic traditions from our families. The experiential view of trust leads us to expect that your family background should not be as important in shaping your trust as your day to day experiences. So living among people who behave honestly and are trusting is more likely to shape your own level of faith in other people than is your ethnicity. Your own ethnicity reflects the cultural foundation of trust; the ethnicity of people living near you (in your state) reflects the experiential foundation of trust. Which matters more: Whether your ancestors came from a trusting society or whether you live among people who are likely to be trusting? Are you better off being a Nordic or living among them?

I estimate models of trust and include both ethnicity and statewide ethnic populations. There are substantial effects for several ethnicities: Nordic, German, and British heritage lead to greater trust, African and Spanish/Latino background to less trust. These effects are often powerful. The impact of state ethnic population shares is more uneven. Most ethnic shares have little impact on trust, *including Nordic shares of statewide population*. Shares of German and British heritage are exceptions. Living among descendants of German and British immigrants does seem to boost trust. But for Nordics and Germans there is a surprising effect from the standpoint of the experiential thesis: The boost in trust from surrounding yourself with Nordics (Germans) is much greater for fellow ethnics (Nordics or Germans) than for out-groups.

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The boost in trust that comes when you surround yourself with fellow ethnics might make sense if the issue were trusting people like yourself. However, the generalized trust survey question—“Generally speaking, do you believe that most people can be trusted, or can’t you be too careful in dealing with people?” *reflects a faith in strangers, of people who may be very different from yourself* (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 3). To be sure, living among British immigrants does boost others’ trust, and so does living among people of French or African background. But these latter findings seem less compelling than our expectations for other groups. And using data on corruption and crime rates in the states, there is little evidence that living among honest people creates more trust among others in the society—or that states with higher levels of crime and corruption are associated with low-trusting ethnic groups.

Overall, it seems that *where your ancestors came from matters more for trust than who your neighbors are now*. Yet, even this conclusion must be nuanced against the finding that trust levels for the ethnic groups in my sample vary considerably by region in the United States. People of Nordic, German, and British extraction are not equally trusting wherever they live. Trust is lower in the South for all groups—and a drowning tide seems to sink all boats. So ethnicity is but a part of the story of trust—and we must look beyond either social background or trustworthiness to explain variations in trust across both individuals and regions.

The Stability of Trust

If trust is in some way “inherited” from your ancestors, then it must not vary dramatically over time. If trust is fragile, easily broken, then there would be less reason to believe that ethnic heritage, rather than immediate experiences, should shape current levels of trust.

The belief that “most people can be trusted” is, as a cultural approach would suggest,

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stable over time. The aggregate levels of trust across countries from 1981 to 1990 are strongly correlated ($r^2 = .81$, $N = 22$). From 1981 to 2001, despite some suspiciously low values of trust for English-speaking countries (see n. 2 above), we still see remarkable stability ($r^2 = .726$, $N = 18$; $r^2 = .711$, $N = 36$ between 1990 and 2001). In the United States, trust demonstrates remarkable stability across panel surveys. For the 1972-74-76 American National Election Study (ANES) panel, there is strong support for trust in people as a stable predisposition. Of 17 questions considered, social trust ranks fourth in overall stability. Across the three waves of the panel, about 75 percent of the respondents take the same position. Only party identification, when abortion should be allowed, and whether one can run one’s life as you wish have generally higher percentage agreements across time.

Additional evidence comes from Elizabeth Smith’s (1999) survey of 389 tenth grade students in the fall and spring of 1996 and an ANES panel from the 1998 election survey and a 2000 pilot survey on trust. Smith reports a “stability coefficient” of .82 for trust, higher than that for “locus of control,” “self-concept,” political efficacy, political knowledge, political discussion, civic duty, and political trust. In the 1998-2000 ANES panel, 79.2 percent gave consistent answers on trust.³

There is also evidence that trust is stable over extended periods of time and across generations. Uslaner (2002, 164, 102) reports that high school students’ levels of trust shapes their faith in others as adults 17 years later, from the Niemi-Jennings parent-child socialization panels. The 1965 level of trust was one of the strongest predictors of 1982 faith in others. Even controlling for one’s own trust in 1965, *parental trust in 1973* remained a powerful predictor of faith in others for these young adults. Of course, parental trust was a key determinant of young

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people’s trust while they were in high school.

If trust is stable—across a generation, then it should not be surprising to find that it has an even longer lineage. Rice and Feldman (1997) and Putnam (2000) have argued, similar to my claim here, that a cultural account of trust has a longer time horizon—and it is reflected in one’s ethnic heritage. Putnam (2000, 294) has noted that social capital is higher in states with large shares of Nordic immigrants (Minnesota and the Dakotas). Rice and Feldman (1997) have made the most explicit argument about the inheritability of social capital—using the General Social Survey (GSS) to track linkages across cultures and family background in the United States. The GSS makes such a study possible for two reasons: It has asked the generalized trust question continuously since 1972, permitting a large sample; and it asks respondents their ethnic heritage (country of immigration of ancestors).⁴

Rice and Feldman (1997) construct a “civic culture” index for 11 European countries and the United States. They construct their measure from the World Values Survey for the European countries and from the General Social Survey for people whose ethnic heritage stems from these same countries. As with Putnam’s (2000, 291) aggregate statewide index, their measure is a veritable “dog’s dinner” (as the British call the melange of things canines like to eat). The index includes trust, civic engagement, voting turnout, perceptions of governmental responsiveness, postmaterial values, honesty, and fairness. Even so, the aggregate measures across the 11 countries and ethnic groups in the United States are strongly related ($r^2 = .75$). The civicness of the old country follows immigrants to the United States (Rice and Feldman, 1997, 1154). The level of trust in a respondent’s “home country” is a strong predictor of faith in people in their individual-level analysis. Moreover, *how recently immigrants came to the United*

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States does not seem to matter (Rice and Feldman, 1997, 1156, 1162). The year of immigration of one’s grandparents may not be an ideal measure of the durability of the level of trust “imported” from the home country—it is likely to be filled with measurement error due to faulty memory. I do not seek to examine *how long “inherited trust” persists, but merely whether it does*. And there is clear evidence that trust does “follow the flag” in the American melting pot, even more so than in multicultural Canada.⁵

Rice and Feldman (1997, 1159) argue:

...American descendants of European immigrants retain at least a portion of the culture from their home country despite living outside that country, often for generations. This has much to say about the portability of culture...it also underscores the durability of culture.

How durable, then, is culture?

I shall show that “inherited trust” does matter for a wide range of ethnic groups—and what your background is matters more than who are your neighbors. Trust reflects your background and does not seem to “rub off” on others in your environment. But why should trust inhere in immigrants whose grandparents may have come from a very different world than their contemporary countrymen?

It would be nice if we could match the levels of trust in the home countries of when grandparents immigrated to the United States with contemporary estimates of how trusting people are in Sweden, Italy, Germany, or Latin America. But we can’t. There were no public opinion surveys in the 1890s or 1920s, so there is no firm way to establish a direct link between grandparents’ homeland experiences and their successors’ beliefs in the United States. In some

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cases there are contradictory indicators of how we might characterize grandparents’ trust levels. Sweden in the 1920s was marked by a world record for days lost in labor disputes and strong class conflict, suggesting a low level of generalized trust. But the leaders who ultimately brokered a historic conflict that ended the labor strife and led to the creation of the famed Swedish welfare state was built on a “spirit of trust” and honest, uncorrupt institutions (Elvander, 1980; Rothstein, 2005). Since low corruption is strongly connected with high trust (Uslaner, 2005), Sweden may have been a far more trusting society than the labor conflicts suggest.

How, then, can I make the argument about the inheritability of trust? Without clear evidence on what happened long ago, the most plausible account seems to be the continuing importance of ethnic identity in the United States. In the 1996 General Social Survey, 78 percent of respondents said that they felt “close” or “very close” to their ethnic group; in the 2002 survey, 58 percent indicated that their ethnic identity was “important” or “very important” to them—and in the same year 83 percent agreed or strongly agreed that “society should recognize the right to ethnic traditions.”

Ethnicity persists in the American melting pot. Americans have high rates of attendance at religious services—and religious identification often follows ethnicity: Germans and Nordics are Lutherans, the English Episcopalians, the East Europeans and Russians Orthodox. The large Catholic population—from Latin countries, Italy, France, among others—prays in churches dominated by others from their home country. And churches are strongly segregated by race, so African-Americans are not likely to encounter Germans or English people in the pews. The socialization in religious life undoubtedly plays a large role in shaping world views such as trust.

Other forms of cultural heritage, such as neighborhood associations and the approach of

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each community’s dominant faith toward outsiders may shape the trust levels of American ethnic groups. Two of the most trusting ethnic groups are Nordics and those of English background. Nordics are overwhelmingly Lutheran and in these countries the Lutheran Church’s charities gave their bounty directly to the state, which distributed these resources without respect to religion and with no evangelical message. The Anglican Church in the United Kingdom has also stressed the importance of working with, and giving to, people of different backgrounds and faiths.⁶ *Continuing identification with the home country may lead to the absorption of current levels of trust as well as the historical legacy of one’s cultural heritage.*

Going back even further, Sweden’s parliament in the 16th century was comprised of representatives of the aristocracy, the clergy, the burghers (land holders), *and the peasants*. Representation of peasants was highly unusual that far back—and the contemporary link between economic equality and high trust (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 2, 4, 6, 8) may have some foundation in the construction of the 16th century parliament.

Does Trust Travel Well?

I use the GSS data to examine how well trust travels across generations. But ethnicity may shape trust in two ways. First, being Nordic (or German or British) may make you more trusting. Second, living among Nordics may make you more trusting, even if you have a different background. Assume that people from Scandinavia and Finland come from cultures stressing trust and honesty—and that they themselves are more trusting and honest. Then, we might expect a “contagion effect”: If you live in an area where most people are trustworthy and honest, it makes more sense to trust others. The ethnic populations of the states are surrogates for trustworthiness.

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I obtained estimates for the shares of ethnic populations for many groups from several webs sites.⁷ Statewide estimates are a surrogate for experience. It would be nice to be able to match ethnic populations to specific communities or neighborhoods—theoretically possible by culling census data, if tedious practically. However, the General Social Survey does not provide data on a respondent’s community.⁸ A data set that does have sufficient numbers of cases to gather data at a more local level—the Social Capital Benchmark Survey—has no information on ethnic heritage. State level estimates of ethnic populations are the best available surrogate for experiencing different groups.

In Table 1, I present levels of trust among people of several nationalities in the 1972-1998 General Social Survey and the mean levels of trust in their “home countries” in the World Values Survey (as well as the home countries I used for each aggregation). The most trusting groups are the Nordics, the British, and the Germans, all above the national mean of .434 over the almost three decade period. Overall, trust does seem to be “inherited”—especially from the Nordic countries, Germany, Britain, Ireland, Italy, Spain/Latin America, and African-Americans. People who come from high trust countries are more trusting in the United States.

Immigrants from France, Eastern Europe, and Russia are more trusting than people from their homelands. Immediate alternative accounts—these immigrants are more highly educated or otherwise of higher status (or Jewish in the case of Russian or Eastern European immigrants)—do not help in explaining these higher levels of trust. There is some evidence that context matters: Most groups are at least slightly more trusting in the United States than we would “expect” if trust were perfectly inheritable. However, there does generally seem to be a connection between trust levels of your ethnic heritage and your ancestors’ homelands.

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Table 1 about here

Yet there is also strong evidence that trust is not simply a function of who your ancestors were. In Table 2, I present data from the GSS on trust levels by the regions that the GSS uses. And here we see some unsurprising results—trust levels are highest in the West North Central states, such as Minnesota and the Dakotas—where there are many Nordic and German immigrants. And trust is lowest in the Southern states, which have large shares of African-Americans and also have high levels of economic inequality. Inequality depresses trust by striking at two of the key roots of generalized trust: optimism for the future and the belief that people have a shared fate (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 2, 4, 6, 8).

Within each region, we see that the most trusting ethnic groups—Nordic, German, and British—have greater faith in their fellow citizens. Yet, there is a strong regional effect as well. The level of trust among each group in the South is far lower than elsewhere—especially in the West North Central States. A Nordic immigrant in the South Atlantic will have a mean probability of trusting others of .468, compared to .694 for the West North Central states. People of German and British heritage in the South are also less trusting than people of similar background elsewhere. African-Americans in the South are less trusting than their northern brethren. The range of variations among Italian immigrants is smaller and does not follow any recognizable pattern, but this largely stems from small sample sizes in the South and the overall lower level of trust among Italians.

Table 2 about here

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So ancestry is important but it does not appear to be the only (or even the dominating) force in shaping levels of trust. What else matters?

Being Nordic or Living among Nordics?

It is clear that Nordics are more trusting. But so are people from the West North Central more generally, including African-Americans and Italians. Are people trusting because they come from Nordic stock or because they live near a relatively small Nordic population? While the Nordic population is a relatively small share (16.7 percent) of even the West North Central states, the combined share of Nordics and Germans, another trusting nationality, is 47.9 percent of the GSS sample for that region. Across the 50 states, people of Nordic and German ancestries tend to live in the same states ($r = .727$). The three Southern regions have much smaller shares of people with Nordic or German heritage (below 20 percent). So these lower levels of trust in the South may be attributable to the low density of ethnic groups who come from trusting cultures. If so, we would expect that the share of these groups should boost individuals' level of faith in others. And the prevalence of less trusting ethnicities should depress faith in others.

I test these expectations in a model of trust derived from Uslaner (2002, ch. 4) in Table 3. The model includes two measures of optimism (“the lot of the average person is getting worse,” “it is not fair to bring a child into the world”), one of control over the environment (confidence in science),⁹ a measure of elite responsiveness (“officials not interested in the average person”), a measure of social connectedness (satisfied with friendships), an interaction between fundamentalist religious views and the frequency of attendance at religious services,¹⁰ as well as demographics standard in trust models. Education is consistently one of the strongest (often the strongest) and Putnam (1995) argued that college education is more critical than high school

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education. So I include two variables for education—one is a measure of high school education set at zero for respondents who had more or less than a high school education and the number of years of education for people who had been through high school and the other is a measure of college education, set at zero for below 13 years of education and the number of years of education for the college educated. Younger people are less trusting (Putnam, 1995; Uslaner, 2002, ch. 4), so I include age. Since income generally drops out when measures of optimism and control are included, I do not add income to the equations. Nor do I include inequality in the estimates shown here—it was also consistently insignificant in the models I estimated—but the reason is likely different. Inequality is an aggregate level indicator and it tracks levels of trust very well at the state, national, and cross-national levels as well as over time in the United States (Putnam, 1995, 65-78; Uslaner, 2002, chs. 2, 4, 6, 8).¹¹

I include nine measures of ethnicity (*in italics*) in the equation. I expect that African-Americans, Spanish/Latinos, Italians, French, and Eastern Europeans, and Russians to have lower levels of trust, based upon their countries of origin or histories in the United States. In contrast, people of Nordic, German, or British ancestry should have *higher levels of trust*. The GSS codes for ethnicity are broader, but I used only these nine groups for two reasons: (1) the small numbers for many groups (such as Dutch, Swiss, Japanese ancestry); and (2) including composite measures of Western European ancestry (Dutch, Swiss, Belgian) and a straightforward dummy variable for Irish ancestry led to collinearity with the first nine indicators.

An alternative way of testing for the transmission of cultural values is to replace the dummy variables for ethnic groups with the proportion of trusters in the respondent’s native country. This has the virtue of creating a single variable, trust by ethnic heritage, instead of the

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many dummy variables for ethnic heritage. It limits what we can conclude about any specific ethnic group, but it will give us a good idea of the overall power of the cultural transmission of values. I use the World Values Surveys to estimate the share of trusting people from each ethnicity.¹² Since not every ethnicity has a match in the two surveys, the sample size is somewhat reduced for trust by ethnic heritage (from 6309 to 5704). Since this cultural variable will necessarily be highly correlated with the heritage dummies, I estimate two equations—one with the dummies and a second with the trust by ethnic heritage measure.

I also include aggregate measures for Nordic, German, British, and Italian populations in the state of residence for the respondent (**in bold**). While there is considerable collinearity with the German and Nordic measures, it was important to include them both since they are two of the highest trusting groups in both the United States and in their home countries. Including other indicators led to severe collinearity, so I dropped Irish, French, Spanish/Latino, Italian, Eastern European, and African. There are basically three clusters of ethnic concentration in the American states: German/Nordic, Italian/Irish, English/French, and Latino (with African-Americans scattered throughout each). So it is difficult to include too many measures without having all of them fall to insignificance. I later estimate the impacts of other groups on their fellow ethnics and others and here include measures for the relevant group in expanded regressions.

[Tables 3 and 4 about here](#)

I estimate the trust model by probit analysis.¹³ Since probit coefficients are not readily interpretable, I focus on the “effect” (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993) of each variable, which is

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the change in probability from the minimum to maximum values of the independent variable, letting all of the other variables take their “natural” values. For age, I restrict the range of the computed effects from 18 to 75 since very few respondents are above that age. The model in Table 3 shows that all of the core variables are significant, mostly at $p < .0001$. This is not surprising given the large sample, but it is reassuring. The largest effects come from satisfaction with friendships, age, college education, believing that it is not fair to bring a child into the world (negative), and confidence in science (the measure of control).

African and Latino ethnicities are less trusting. Given the lower socioeconomic status and the discrimination faced by minorities, this is hardly surprising. Being a Latino makes you only 5.5 percent less likely to have faith in others ($p < .05$), but being black leads to people to be almost 17 percent less trusting ($p < .0001$)—an effect greater than any single measure of optimism or control and approaching that of age.

Nordic ancestry, on the other hand, does lead to greater trust. If your heritage is Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, or Finnish, you will be almost 10 percent more likely to believe that “most people can be trusted” ($p < .0001$). And British heritage makes you almost five percent more likely to trust others ($p < .001$). There are no significant effects (even with such a huge sample) for people with Eastern European, Russian, French, Italian, *or even German* ethnicity.

The aggregate measures tell a somewhat different story. Being Nordic may matter, but living among Nordics does not seem to increase trust. The big positive boosts come from living among Germans, which is about as powerful as *being of Nordic ethnicity* (effect = .100, $p < .01$). Living in an area with many people of British heritage boosts trust by about seven percent, but this measure is only marginally significant ($p < .10$). The Nordic population does not influence

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the level of trust, but this is due to the collinearity with the German population measure. If I include one or the other, then each is significant—and the effect for the Nordic share is marginally larger (.135) than that for German population (.123). Clearly, *living in a state with a high German or Nordic population leads to greater levels of trust*. So the trustworthy Germans, Nordics, and British do create an atmosphere for generalized trust. On the other hand, living among many Italians leads to less trust, though the effect is small (three percent) and barely significant ($p < .10$).

In Table 4, I repeat this estimation, substituting trust by ethnic heritage for the ethnic dummy variables. Most of the results barely change—the share of Italian-Americans in a state, barely significant in the first estimation, now falls to insignificance. The overall fit of the model is by one criterion worse: the standard measure of significance, -2 times the log likelihood ratio, is much smaller for the second model than the first: 2220.55 compared to 7472.31—though both are significant at any conceivable level. Their predictive power is about the same—both models correctly predict about 69 percent of the respondents and the estimated R^2 is about the same (.280 versus .269). This suggests that the single cultural variable, trust by ethnic heritage, does about as good a job in accounting for why some people are trusting as the ethnic dummies. *Even more critically, trust by ethnic heritage has the largest effect of any variable in this model* *People of Norwegian background are 26 percent more likely to believe that most people can be trusted than are people of Puerto Rican or Filipino heritage*. Only age and satisfaction with friendships come close to having the effects of trust by ethnic heritage—and none of the aggregate measures of ethnic population have anywhere near the effect of this cultural variable.

How Does Trust Spread?

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Context cannot be dismissed. Nordics and Germans living in the South are far less trusting than their fellow ethnics in other parts of the country, especially in the Midwest (East and West North Central states). Do highly trusting ethnicities such as Germans, British, and Nordics become even more favorably disposed to others when surrounded by people like themselves? Do people in states with large numbers of people with German, British, and Nordic ancestries become more trusting because they emulate the law-abidingness of these cultures? Does the “honesty” of Swedes, for example, “rub off” on the rest of the population? Is there evidence that living among Italians *lowers* levels of honesty?

I present evidence in Table 5 that tries to answer these questions more directly.¹⁴ I estimated equations identical to the one in Table 3 for members of each ethnic group and the rest of society. For groups where aggregate scores were not included in the model in Table 3, I added the statewide scores for the models.

Table 5 about here

_____ For many groups, there is no effect of population density on trust at all. Living among the Irish, Spanish/Latinos, or Eastern European has no significant effects on the level of trust of either in-groups or out-groups. There is some evidence that non-Italians living in areas with high density of Italian-Americans *are less trusting*, though the reason why is not clear. There is a negative relationship between the shares of Italian-Americans and Nordic Americans ($r = -.270$). People of non-French background living in areas with high shares of people of French ancestry are *more* trusting. This makes sense since French-Americans are more trusting than average—but

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it does not support an “inheritability” argument since France is a *low-trusting country*. One possible explanation for this finding—that people who are not French will be 9 percent more likely to have faith in others if they live in states with large populations of French heritage—may be a “New England” effect. Outside of Louisiana, the states with large French populations are in New England (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire in increasing order). These states also have lower levels of economic inequality (*and among the highest shares of British Americans*). High concentrations of British-Americans also lead to a greater level of trust among out-groups, by 11.2 percent.¹⁵

While African-Americans have low levels of trust, when whites live in areas with high concentrations of blacks, they are *more* trusting by almost 10 percent (although this effect is significant only at $p < .10$). This might reflect the finding of Marshall and Stolle (2004) that people living in more diverse environments are more trusting.

The most dramatic findings come for Nordic and German population densities. Living in areas with large German-American populations makes both Germans and non-Germans more trusting, *but the effect is almost twice as large (15 percent) for Germans as for the out-group (eight percent, both $p < .05$)*. **A person of Nordic background will be almost 20 percent more likely to trust others if she lives in a state with lots of her fellow Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, or Finns ($p < .05$)—but “Nordic trust” does not “rub off” at all on people of different heritage.** These results are generally consistent with the interaction models discussed above, though they are not identical. These models, comparing in- and out-groups, seem more precise.¹⁶

The restriction of significant effects for these two cases to in-groups is puzzling, because the “Nordic” case was presumably the most clear-cut test of the impact of how experiences with

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honesty might lead to greater trust. What sorts of experience lead to greater trust? To the extent that trust *does reflect experience*, the foundation of trust seems to reflect honesty (Baker, 1987, 2; Dasgupta, 1988; Rothstein, 2001, 492). Indeed, Putnam (2000, 135-136) uses honesty as a surrogate measure for trust.

So there is good reason to expect a “spillover” effect for Nordics and Germans. The Nordic countries and (West) Germany rank among the highest of any countries on trust, confidence in the legal system, and the impartiality of the legal system.¹⁷ States with high proportions of each group have *lower levels of political corruption and lower rates of assault* (high Nordic shares also lead to lower rates of robbery).¹⁸ So larger Nordic and German populations do lead to more honesty. But there is only minimal evidence that living in an honest state with honest people leads to greater trust. States with large English populations (also states with lower robbery rates, but not less corruption or fewer assaults or less larceny) have higher levels of trust for non-Anglophones.

But there is little reason to expect that people living in states with high Italian populations are less trusting because these states are “more crooked.” The correlations of the share of Italian-Americans in a state with corruption, honesty, larceny, robbery, or assault rates are small. There are similar minuscule correlations for states with high shares of people of French heritage (where there seems to be a spillover effect) or with many Eastern Europeans (no effects at all). African-Americans live in states with higher crime rates (assault and robbery), as do Spanish/Latinos (assault, larceny, and robbery). Yet, in one case, there is a *positive* spillover to other groups on trust (for blacks) and in another no effect. ***Whatever is driving these aggregate effects, it does not appear to be levels of honesty.***

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Reprise

There is evidence, though perhaps not as strong as Rice and Feldman (1997) or Putnam (2000) found, that trust is inherited across space and time, but through cultures. People of Nordic, German, and British background are more trusting than other Americans. African-Americans and Spanish/Latinos have less faith in their fellow citizens. Since each of these more trusting groups also is more optimistic for the future and believes that people have greater levels of control over their lives, the effects of cultural history are probably greater than I have reported here.

However, there seems to be less evidence that all cultures carry over so clearly. French, Eastern Europeans, Russians, Irish, and Italians do not appear to be less trusting in the United States even though people in their native lands rank lower on faith in others. However, the tests I have applied are rather strong, since they test for ethnicity effects *over and beyond other factors that shape trust*. Trust also varies by region in the United States. So local conditions (mostly economic inequality) can shape people’s faith in others as much as where their grandparents came from. There also seems to be only modest support for the argument that living among people from high trusting cultures with low levels of crime and corruption leads you to emulate their values. Inheritability, when it does occur, seems to be transmitted through cultural traditions, not from mimicking their values. Overall, there is considerable evidence that at least some ethnicities (Nordic and British) boost trust while others (Latino and African) depress trust. Clearly the latter groups have faced discrimination over long periods of time, so the effects of the collective (as opposed to individual) experiences of these groups may be more critical than the longer-term effects of one’s historic “homeland.” But the positive effects for Nordics and the

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British cannot be so easily dismissed. Perhaps the positive heritage of trust carries over more than the negative.

Overall, there is evidence for both culture and context. Where you live shapes your level of trust. But the evidence is far stronger that where your grandparents came from shapes your values. No matter how I measure culture—either through ethnic dummy variables or through trust by ethnic heritage, who you are matters more than who your neighbors are.

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TABLE 1

Ethnic Groups and Their Levels of Trust

Group	Home Countries of Ethnicity	Trust by Ethnicity	Home Countries In Aggregation	Mean Trust by Home Countries
Nordic	Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark	.592	Sweden, Norway, Finland, Denmark	.580
German	West Germany, Austria	.465	West Germany	.420
British	England, Scotland, Canada, Australia	.535	Great Britain, Scotland, Welsh	.440
Irish	Ireland	.488	Ireland	.470
French	France, French Canadian	.478	France	.230
Italian	Italy	.393	Italy	.350
Spanish	Spain,	.301	Spain, Latin America	.213
Eastern European	Czech, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania, Yugoslavia,	.470	Armenia, Czech, Croatia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine	.257
Russian	Russia	.479	N.A.	.240
African	Africa	.183	African-American percentage	.167

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TABLE 2

Levels of Trust by General Social Survey Regions and Ethnicity

Region	Full Sample	Nordic	German	British	Italian	African
New England	.490	.676*	.557	.567	.432	.263
Middle Atlantic	.416	.615	.467	.532	.369	.193
East North Central	.453	.582	.489	.550	.415	.18
West North Central	.533	.694	.547	.580	.507*	.176
South Atlantic	.355	.468	.416	.491	.363	.187
East South Central	.284	.429*	.363	.412	**	.117
West South Central	.338	.455*	.328	.509	.481*	.207
Mountain	.488	.551	.44	.645	.404*	**
Pacific	.450	.538	.488	.567	.369	.205
National sample	.434	.592	.465	.525	.393	.183

* Fewer than 50 respondents.

** Fewer than 20 respondents.

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TABLE 3
Trust by Ethnicity and State Ethnic Populations: Probit Analysis

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t ratio	Effect
Lot of the average person getting worse	-.296****	.037	-7.95	-.103
Not fair to bring child into the world	-.377****	.039	-9.74	-.132
Officials not interested in average person	-.320****	.038	-8.46	-.111
Confidence in science	-.192****	.029	-6.67	-.131
Satisfied with friendships	.109****	.015	7.25	.216
Service attendance*fundamentalist	-.016****	.004	-4.07	-.088
High school education	.017****	.004	4.18	.071
College education	.028****	.003	8.94	.195
Age	.011****	.001	10.29	.208
<i>African ethnicity</i>	-.508****	.080	-6.38	-.169
<i>Spanish/Latino ethnicity</i>	-.163**	.082	-1.98	-.055
<i>Italian ethnicity</i>	-.098	.077	-1.26	-.033
<i>French ethnicity</i>	-.018	.094	-.19	-.006
<i>British ethnicity</i>	.140***	.052	2.71	.048
<i>Nordic ethnicity</i>	.287****	.083	3.46	.096
<i>German ethnicity</i>	.043	.051	.48	.014
<i>Eastern European ethnicity</i>	-.066	.074	-.89	-.022
<i>Russian ethnicity</i>	-.084	.145	-.58	-.028
Nordic population in state	.004	.004	1.07	.049
German population in state	.007**	.002	3.00	.100
British population in state	.006*	.005	1.41	.070
Italian population in state	-.005*	.004	-1.33	-.031
Constant	.064	.122	.53	

* p < .10 ** p < .05 *** p < .01 **** p < .0001

Estimated R² = .280 -2*Log Likelihood Ratio = 7472.31 N = 6309
Percent Predicted Correctly: Probit: 69.1 Null: 52.0

Effects calculated at minimum and maximum except for age, where effect is calculated from 18 to 75.

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TABLE 4

Trust by Ethnic Trust and State Ethnic Populations: Probit Analysis

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t ratio	Effect
Lot of the average person getting worse	-.300****	.039	-7.74	-.105
Not fair to bring child into the world	-.380****	.041	-9.33	-.134
Officials not interested in average person	-.351****	.040	-8.87	-.122
Confidence in science	-.206****	.030	-6.79	-.141
Satisfied with friendships	.108****	.016	6.78	.217
Service attendance*fundamentalist	-.017****	.004	-4.14	-.092
High school education	.017****	.004	4.18	.076
College education	.028****	.003	8.33	.190
Age	.011****	.001	10.39	.217
<i>Trust from country of heritage</i>	1.311	.160	8.18	.263
Nordic population in state	.003	.004	.91	.041
German population in state	.007**	.003	2.78	.094
British population in state	.007*	.005	1.38	.070
Italian population in state	-.004	.004	-.95	-.023
Constant	-.399***	.139	-2.87	

* p < .10 ** p < .05 *** p < .01 **** p < .0001

Estimated R² = .269 -2*Log Likelihood Ratio = 2220.55 N = 5704
 Percent Predicted Correctly: Probit: 68.5 Null: 52.0

Effects calculated at minimum and maximum except for age, where effect is calculated from 18 to 75.

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TABLE 5

Impact of Ethnic Density on Trust by Ethnic Status

Ethnicity	Effect on Own Group	Effect on Other Groups
Nordic	.185*	.019
German	.149**	.080**
British	.109	.112**
Irish	.173	.017
French	-.057	.090**
Spanish/Latino	-.065	-.007
Italian	-.052	-.045**
Eastern European	-.149	.049
African	-.045	.099*

* p < .10 ** p < .05

Effects are from probit analyses with the same predictors as the probits in Table 3 except for the ethnic identity variables. Each ethnic identity variable served as a filter for the “own group” and “other group” equations in this table. The equations all include the aggregate shares of Italians, British, Germans, and Nordics and the specific group for each equation.

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NOTES

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- 1. There are differing positions on *how* stable trust is. Stolle and Hooghe (in press) believe that later experiences also shape trust much more than Uslaner (2002) does. But both hold that the roots of trust begin early in life.
- 2. The years included here are 1972 through 1978, 1980, 1982 through 1991, 1993, 1994, and 1996. Years not listed had no General Social Survey: After 1996, many of the key determinants of trust were not included in the survey.
- 3. For 1972-74, 73.1 percent gave the same responses to the trust question ($\tau\text{-}b = .426$, $\gamma = .762$); for 1974-76, 76.1 gave the same response ($\tau\text{-}b = .521$, $\gamma = .826$); for 1972-76, 73.4 percent gave the same response ($\tau\text{-}b = .473$, $\gamma = .784$). For 1998-2000, $\tau\text{-}b = .590$, $\gamma = .882$, $N = 26$.
- 4. The variable ETHNIC asks “From what countries or part of the world did your ancestors come?” Clearly, many people come from mixed heritages. However, the answer to this question indicates the ethnicity with which people identify.
- 5. Soroka, Helliwell, and Johnston (in press) report that “parental trust” for immigrants is a

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strong predictor of generalized trust, but the effect “wears off” more quickly than in the United States.

6. On optimism and control, see Uslaner (2002, chs. 2, 4). I owe the interpretation of Lutheran charitable giving to Marja Liisa Swantz of the University of Helsinki (private conversation, June 18, 2005). On the Anglican outlook, see <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/lambeth/lc015.html>. Even the stories that parents tell their children, reflect tales of optimism and trust (or, perhaps, pessimism and struggle). African-American stories reflect this struggle and mistrust. The Swedish story of Pippi Longstocking, on the other hand, reflects sunny optimism, as do most English fairy tales. Russian tales, on the other hand, may have happy endings, but they often reflect good luck rather than the optimism and sense of control that underlies trust. The message of the Russian stories comes from discussions with students at Novosibirsk State Technical University in Russia in May, 2005. A group not considered here is the Jewish population, which in the United States (and elsewhere other than Israel) are far more trusting than the average. Jewish tradition teaches treating the stranger as oneself (“We were strangers in the land of Egypt so we should welcome the stranger into our midst”) and optimism even in the face of danger (a Chanukah song gives the optimistic message that “in every age a hero or sage arose to our aid”)
7. The web site with most of the data is <http://www.euroamericans.net>. For Italian-Americans, I obtained data from http://www.niaf.org/research/2000_census_4.asp; for Latinos and African-Americans, from <http://www.eagleton.rutgers.edu/News-Research/NewVoters/Ethnicity.html>. The

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ethnicity data are only available for the 2000 census. However, there is little reason to believe that there would be much variation in *any* ethnic group’s share of a state population from 1980 or 1990, except for Latinos. And, even here, the states with the largest Latino populations in 1980 and 1990 would also be those with the greatest share of Latinos (including new immigrants) in 2000.

8. I am grateful to Robert D. Putnam for providing the state-level codes with the kind assistance of Tom W. Smith of the National Opinion Research Center.
9. See Uslaner (2002, 100-101) for a discussion of why confidence in science is a good measure of personal control.
10. Religious fundamentalists will regard people outside their own circle as heathens. Fundamentalists believe that the Bible is the literal word of God and hold that a key tenet of the Scriptures is that humans are born with original sin. The interaction with frequency of attendance at religious services is designed to distinguish *active* fundamentalists from active members of mainline Christianity—who have often been at the forefront of movements such as the civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s that have fostered trust (Uslaner, 2002, 87-88; 105-106).
11. On the level of analysis problem as it relates to inequality and trust, see Uslaner and Brown (in press).
12. The countries/regions/territories that have matches from the World Values Survey and the General Social Survey ethnicity codes are: Africa, Austria, Belgium, French Canadians, English Canadians, Czech Republic, Denmark, England (and Scotland), Finland, France, (West) Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Mexico, the

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Netherlands, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia (Serbia). See Uslaner (2002, 225, n. 6) for the years of the World Values Survey employed for specific countries.

13. I also considered estimating the models through hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) to account for the multilevel structure of the data (individual and state-level effects). However, HLM requires at least 150 cases for each unit at the “higher” level (the state) and only 13 states met this criterion. The model would have lost many of its cases and the results would be problematic. I also estimated the models in the text, clustering respondents by state (using Stata 8.2's cluster option after a probit). The results hardly changed. Clustering does not lead to different results for the estimated effects.
14. I also estimated a model to test for joint contextual and individual effects. This model is similar to that in Table 4 but replacing the aggregate shares of ethnic groups in a state with an interaction between ethnic shares and ethnic identities (results not shown). These results show that Nordics living in states with high Nordic populations, Germans living in states with large German populations, and people of English background living among many of their fellow Anglos are all more trusting than when each group is surrounded by fewer of their fellow ethnics. These impacts *control for trust by ethnic heritage (also in the model)*—and are greater for Nordics (18 percent) than for Germans (six percent), or the English (ten percent). Italians living surrounded by *paisans* are no less trusting.
15. Louisiana is a relatively high trusting state among Southern states. However, it has the highest level of economic inequality of *any* state and also has the fourth lowest share of British-Americans. As in many realms, Louisiana remains a puzzle.

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16. The in-group effect is similar for Nordic Americans and British Americans as in the interaction analysis (ethnicity * share of ethnic populations). However, it is much larger for German-Americans than for the probit with the interaction variables. The effect for British Americans is also no longer significant. The large numbers of people of British and German backgrounds in the sample may bias the interaction models upward and downward.
17. Aggregated scores for trust and confidence in the legal system are modestly correlated ($r^2 = .165$, $N = 41$), while trust and the impartiality of the courts are more strongly related ($r^2 = .346$, $N = 63$). Confidence in the legal system is aggregated from the World Values Surveys, while court impartiality comes from <http://www.freetheworld.com>.
18. The corruption measure comes from Boylan and King (2001). The crime measures come from data on the State Politics and Policy web site (I aggregated the data by decade) at <http://www.unl.edu/SPPQ/datasets/crime.xls>.