

Trust and Terrorism: Reflections on a Theoretical Framework and Some Empirical Findings

Eric M. Uslaner, Professor of Government and Politics, University of Maryland–College Park, College Park, MD 20742 euslaner@gvpt.umd.edu , <http://www.bsos.umd.edu/gvpt/uslaner>

Generalized trust is a value that we learn early in life (but is not immutable). It means trusting people who are different from ourselves—whom we don't know. Generalized trust is the sense of shared fate with others. It is not simply trust based upon our experience with particular people, with whom we interact regularly. Trust is based upon a world view of optimism and control. The world is a good place and we can make it better. Generalized trust creates bridges to people with whom we may have little in common. It is the foundation of a spirit of cooperation and tolerance. Trusters seek common ground rather than confrontation with their adversaries. They see people of different views and different backgrounds as creating new opportunities for interactions rather than as threats. These ideas are developed further in my book, *The Moral Foundations of Trust* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Trust is an important mechanism in coping with terrorism and in promoting reconciliation rather than militancy in the face of terrorism. I have examined the surveys after the 9/11 terrorist attacks conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the National Tragedy Surveys in 2001 and 2002. Trust is an important coping mechanism. I estimated either probit or ordered probit analyses for a large range of symptoms of stress in the National Tragedy Study, including age, education, race, income, gender, confidence in government, and the frequency of prayer as factors shaping stressful responses, in addition to generalized trust. **Trust was consistently an important factor in coping with stress, with more significant coefficients than any other variable.** Generalized trusters were less likely to feel depressed, **to be “bothered by things,”** to feel fearful, **to sleep restlessly,** to have sweaty hands, to keep forgetting things, to feel nervous, **to worry about your own safety,** to worry about your own life as endangered, to change your behavior in the face of terrorism, **to avoid crowds,** to cancel air trips, to discard mail, to take extra care in handling mail, **to ask a doctor for medicine to calm down,** and to avoid government buildings downtown. Symptoms in bold are those for which trust had greater effects *than any other variable*. Generalized trust continued to be a important coping strategy a year later for feeling nervous and avoiding government buildings (most questions were asked only in 2001).

In work with Daphna Canetti-Nissim and Ami Pedazhur of Haifa University (a just completed paper, “Terrorism and Trust: Sustained Violence and the Social Fabric in Israel”), we find that people who trust strangers are *less likely to advocate militant solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict*. We also find that persistent threats of terrorism not only increase militancy and nationalistic patriotism, but also lead to a diminution of generalized trust. We support these claims with seven surveys of the Israeli public conducted by Haifa University between 2000-2003; to test the reciprocal effects of trust, patriotism, and militancy, we estimated two-stage least squares regression models for each wave of the survey. *Trust is thus both a coping strategy for dealing with terrorism, but persistent attacks (rather than the unique events of 9/11 in the U.S.) lead to a waning of the society's social fabric.*