

Political Trust in the American States

State and Local Government Review
2015, Vol. 47(1) 26-34
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DOI: 10.1177/0160323X15569547
slgr.sagepub.com



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Abstract

This article illustrates that trust in state government varies considerably across states. Using newly available public opinion data, the authors investigate the effects of political polarization, corruption, income inequality, unemployment, state fiscal conditions, median income, ideology, state size, tax rates, and social capital on differences in trust in state government. A number of these variables have statistically significant effects on trust in state government, including state fiscal conditions, unemployment, state ideology, and corruption. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for policy makers and elected officials.

Keywords

political trust, state government, trust in government, public opinion, trust

Introduction

Political scientists and journalists have long expressed concern about public trust in government. Concern has only heightened in the past few years. One article recently published in *The Washington Post* asked “Are we in the end times of trust in government?” and concluded that “The end times of trust in government may well be upon us” (Cillizza and Blake 2013). Such pessimistic assessments are based on polls that have consistently documented a decline in trust in the federal government over time. Throughout much of the 1960s, about 70 percent of the American public expressed trust in the federal government. In contrast, recent polls have indicated that less than 20 percent of the public express trust in the government in Washington.

In addition to asking people how much trust they have in the federal government, public opinion polls sometimes ask people how they feel about state and local governments. Generally speaking, Americans express high levels of

trust in these governments. A 2012 Gallup poll, for example, found that 74 percent of people expressed a great deal or fair amount of trust in local government, and 65 percent of people expressed a great deal or fair amount of trust in state government. Trust in local government has been quite stable over the past several decades in the United States. Since Gallup has been asking survey respondents about trust in local government, it has ranged from a low of 63 percent (in 1972) to a high of 77 percent (in 1998), with the average level of trust being 70 percent. When it comes to trust in state government, public opinion has ranged from a low of 51 percent (in 2009) expressing trust to a

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high of 80 percent (in 1998), with the average being 64 percent. In short, it is clear that trust in state and local government is consistently high in the United States—and is typically much higher than trust in the federal government.

One limitation of previous polling data on trust in government is that polling organizations typically measure Americans' trust in their state and local governments on a *national basis*. While it is clear that trust in state and local government is typically high, little is known about how much trust in state and local government varies across different states or localities. As Rahn and Rudolph note “with a nationally representative sample, it is not possible to study the characteristics of different communities and why people in different places might have more or less favorable views of their local or state governments. In nationally representative samples, so few respondents are interviewed from any given state or locality that comparisons across states or communities cannot be made with any statistical reliability” (2002, 283). Stated another way, national samples are critical to learning about public opinion, however, when studying public opinion across different states or localities it is important to have fairly large samples of respondents from each state or locality. While a few studies (Rahn and Rudolph 2002, 2005) have investigated trust in local governments, little research has been done on public opinion on state government.

This article presents an analysis of public trust in government but departs from most existing studies by focusing on *trust in state government* (but see Flavin 2014). It makes a number of contributions to the literature on trust in government. First, the authors develop and analyze a new state-level data set on trust in state government. As Rahn and Rudolph have noted, “Despite the importance of subnational institutions in the federal system, public opinion scholars know surprisingly little about how citizens view them. In part this failing reflects the fact that in comparison with the information available on Americans' views of the national government, data on the public's

evaluations of subnational levels of government is not as rich, nor has information been collected at regular intervals” (2002, 283). Second, this study is an important extension of Rahn and Rudolph's (2005) research to the state level. It should be noted that one important difference between this study and Rahn and Rudolph's is that this study uses state-level public opinion data, while Rahn and Rudolph used individual-level data. Consequently, two related questions about trust in state government are investigated. First, how much does trust in state government vary from state to state? Second, if trust in state government does vary across the American states, what explains differences in trust? Newly available data from Gallup's fifty-state poll are used to answer these questions. The polling data used here separate survey respondents by state (unlike previous polling data on state-level trust) and also contain fairly large random samples within each state (between 600 and 700 respondents per state).¹

The questions asked in this article are particularly timely, especially given recent concerns and challenges in many states across the country related to issues such as corruption, state budget conditions, and economic performance. Are the problems and challenges that are arising in states across the United States affecting public trust in state government? To what extent? What factors have the most pronounced effects on trust? Understanding trust in state governments is also important because “As subnational governments are increasingly entrusted with the task of providing governmental services, the public may begin to hold them to a higher standard. These heightened expectations, if not fulfilled, may erode public confidence in subnational governments” (Rahn and Rudolph 2002, 282). Scholars have long noted that institutions that have high levels of citizen support provide political leaders with more “leeway to govern effectively” (Hetherington 1998, 803). Thus, elected officials and policy makers should have a natural interest in learning about what drives public trust in government. To be clear, not all of the variables presented subsequently represent “levers” that

can be pulled by policy makers in order to influence public trust, but some of the variables do represent things that could be changed or affected by government policies (e.g., state fiscal conditions).

Measuring Trust in State Government

The concept of political trust is one that has received a great deal of attention from political scientists over time. Hetherington defines trust as “the degree to which people perceive that government is producing outcomes that are consistent with their expectations” (2006, 9). Many studies have focused on trust in the federal government and have used questions like “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?” to measure public trust in government. Of course, it is also possible to measure trust in other levels of government. Rahn and Rudolph (2002) used individual-level data from the 2000 Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey and asked “How much of the time do you think you can trust the local government to do what is right?” In order to assess public trust in state government, this analysis makes use of newly released data from Gallup’s fifty-state poll, which asked a random sample of residents in each state the following question: “How much trust and confidence do you have in the government of the state where you live when it comes to handling state problems—a great deal, a fair amount, not very much, or none at all?” The polls were conducted between June 27, 2013, and December 4, 2013. Although this measure of trust certainly differs from the trust questions used by Hetherington (2006) and Rahn and Rudolph (2002), it is an equally important measure of trust. In addition, this measure is consistent with Hetherington’s definition of political trust, which focuses on expectations. Thus, using this question to capture public opinion on trust in state government seems quite reasonable. To measure trust in state government, the percentage of people in each state who said that they trusted their state government “a great deal”

or “a fair amount” was summed. It is important to note that Gallup has currently only made the aggregate-level data available, so it is not possible to develop an individual-level model of trust in state government using these data. Despite the lack of access to the individual-level data sets, aggregate-level data can still provide interesting insights into the dynamics of political trust in state governments.

In order to answer the first question, a map was created to help visualize the extent to which trust in state government varies across the United States (shown in Supplementary Figure 1). As the figure illustrates, trust in state government differs considerably from place to place. The mean level of trust is 58.28 percent (SD = 9.76), with the median level of trust being 57 percent. Trust ranges from a low of 28 percent (Illinois) to a high of 77 percent (North Dakota). In short, there is a considerable amount of variation around the mean. Although it is certainly interesting to speculate about what might be behind the differences shown in the map, it is possible to systematically assess hypotheses about the correlates of trust by merging the state public opinion data with additional data on state attributes.

What Explains Differences in Trust across States?

Existing studies provide solid guidance on the factors that have played a role in shaping trust in the federal government and in local governments. Previous studies are used to help develop hypotheses about what might influence trust in state government. Although many of the hypotheses investigated subsequently have been proposed in other studies on trust in the federal government or local governments, it is important to see how findings compare across different layers of government. Do findings about the correlates of trust in local government hold up in the context of state government? While this article relies heavily on existing studies, it also investigates a number of variables that have not received much attention in previous research on trust. The theoretical insights from other studies suggest that

variables from the following three areas may be important in understanding trust: economics, politics, and demographics.

Economics

Many previous studies on political trust have stressed the importance of economic variables (Hetherington 1998; Keele 2007; Stimson 2004). It seems quite reasonable to think that when economic conditions are good, citizens will express more trust and confidence in their government. A number of variables are used to measure economic conditions at the state level:

- state unemployment rate,
- state fiscal conditions,
- state wealth,
- income inequality, and
- state tax rates.

First, a measure of the state unemployment rate (from the year 2012, so that it predates the trust data) is used, which was gathered from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. As unemployment increases, trust in state government should decrease.

Second, a state fiscal condition index is used, which is based on data from the 2012 fiscal year. State fiscal conditions have received a great deal of attention in the media over the past several years, as some states have dealt with challenging budgets and financial issues. The fiscal condition index was developed by the Mercatus Center at George Mason University and integrates data on cash solvency, budget solvency, long-run solvency, and service-level solvency (Arnett 2014). The index provides an overall assessment of the fiscal performance of each state. Higher values indicate better fiscal conditions. The expectation is that this variable will be positively related to trust in state government. States with better financial pictures should see high levels of trust from citizens.

Third, a measure of state wealth—median household income—that was collected from the U.S. Census Bureau (2010 data) is employed. The expectations regarding the potential impact

of this variable are mixed (and thus we use a two-tailed hypothesis test in the regression model). In their study of trust in local government, Rahn and Rudolph note that “in wealthier communities, people may be less favorable toward government because fewer citizens in these places actually benefit from local government spending” (2002, 293). On the other hand, one might argue that wealthy places should have higher levels of satisfaction, which might translate into more trust in the government.

Fourth, a measure of income inequality (Gini Index), collected from the U.S. Census Bureau (2010 data), is used. Higher values on this measure indicate greater income inequality. The expectation is that this variable will be negatively related to trust in state government. As Rahn and Rudolph note, “To the extent that uneven distributions of wealth make people believe that government decisions concerning that distribution were unfair . . . income inequality will decrease political trust.” (2005, 536). Rahn and Rudolph find support for this idea in the context of local government trust.

The final economic measure included in the model is designed to capture differences in tax rates across states. Thus, a measure of each state’s sales tax rate (2014 data) is used, which was gathered from the Tax Foundation. Sales tax levels vary considerably from state to state. Some states have no sales tax, while others have rates as high as 7.5 percent. High sales tax rates are often used in lieu of other types of revenue sources (i.e., income taxes). There are a number of ways this tax measure might influence perceptions of state government. On one hand, citizens may dislike high tax rates, which could lead to lower levels of trust. On the other hand, high tax rates may provide states with resources that can be used to provide goods and services and to make improvements in the state. If people connect taxes to high-quality goods and services provided by the government, higher taxes could lead to higher levels of trust. Because of the mixed expectations for this variable, a two-tailed hypothesis test is used in the regression models.

Political Variables

A number of political variables should also shape trust. First, there is a strong argument to be made that a state's political ideology will influence public opinion on state government. Since the "devolution revolution" in the 1980s, many conservatives have come to prefer that states, rather than the federal government, make and implement public policy. In general, "conservatives are more suspicious of government power in general than liberals, but historically they have viewed state and local governments as less of a threat to individual freedom" (Rahn and Rudolph 2002, 285). Thus, the expectation is that more conservative states will have higher levels of trust in state government. To measure the political ideology of a state, a new measure of state ideology is employed, which comes from The American Ideology Project (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013). The data set contains state-level estimates of conservatism/liberalism for all fifty states, which are based on an item response theory model and a large public opinion survey. Higher values on the ideology measure indicate higher levels of state conservatism.

Second, given current political conditions, it is also worthwhile to consider the effects of political polarization on trust in state government. Recently, the idea that political polarization is linked to the low levels of trust in federal government has captured the attention of political scientists and journalists, although research has suggested that congressional polarization is not related to trust in the federal government. Recent research from Shor and McCarty (2011) has illustrated that many state legislatures, like Congress, have become more polarized over time. Some researchers have noted that political polarization might influence trust in subnational governments. Polarization may lead to lower levels of trust by reducing a government's "ability to perform efficiently and effectively" (Rahn and Rudolph 2005, 537). In short, polarization may make it more difficult to generate policy consensus that could create a perception that governments are not responsive or are not creating policies to address important issues. Rahn and Rudolph (2005) find that their

measure of political polarization at the local level is negatively related to trust in government. To measure state polarization, data from the Shor–McCarty state legislative aggregate ideology data set are used. The data set contains ideal point estimates for political parties in the fifty state legislatures over time. To measure ideological polarization, the distance between the party medians in each state is used. For each state, the most recent year (prior to the year 2013, the year when our trust data were collected) of ideology data available is employed. In this analysis, Shor and McCarty's measure of senate party polarization is used, since it contains data on all fifty states (the measure of house polarization was missing data on Nebraska because it has a unicameral legislature and only has a senate). Higher values indicate higher levels of party polarization in the state senate (house and senate polarization correlate at $.77, p < .05$, so we feel comfortable using the senate measure). Based on Rahn and Rudolph's logic, this variable should be negatively related to trust.

Finally, a measure of the amount of corruption by public officials in each state is employed. Using the Department of Justice's 2012 Report to Congress on the Activities and Operations of the Public Integrity Section, the number of federal convictions of public officials in each state was calculated. In order to make this number comparable across states, it was divided by the total number of state and local government employees per state, which was collected from the 2012 Census of Governments State and Local Government Employment and Payroll data set. Higher values indicate higher levels of public corruption. Corruption is not something that Rahn and Rudolph (2002, 2005) were able to integrate into their model of public trust, but they noted that it should be negatively related to trust.

Demographic Variables

In addition to economic and political variables, the effect of one state-level demographic variable is investigated. A number of studies on political trust have suggested that population should be negatively related to trust in government (Rahn and Rudolph 2005). The logic here

Table 1. OLS Regression Models of Trust in State Government.

	Model 1	Model 2	Standardized β
	β /SE	β /SE	
Unemployment rate	-1.940** .688	-1.563 [†] .992	-.280
Fiscal condition index	2.024** .892	1.805** .969	.255
Median income	.001* .000	.001* .000	.405
State population (logged)	-.906 1.653	-.825 1.770	-.084
Income inequality	80.184 99.752	103.021 99.475	.183
Ideology	28.986** 10.208	32.649** 11.775	.616
Corruption	-33,839.160 23,678.280	-33,963.140 [†] 22,337.030	-.148
Sales tax	-7.697 41.551	-8.608 42.140	-.017
Political polarization	0.505 2.504	0.072 2.834	.004
Putnam index	— —	1.609 2.022	.128
Constant	25.841 42.020	11.304 46.537	
Number of observations	49	48	
F statistic	14.57	15.86	
Prob > F	.0000	.0000	
R ²	.62	.63	
Adjusted R ²	.53	.53	

Note: Robust standard errors reported. OLS = ordinary least squares; SE = standard error.

** $p < .05$ (one tailed).

* $p < .05$ (two tailed).

[†] $p < .10$ (one-tailed).

is that “Larger states have larger economies and more citizens needing services, and often more diverse populations, so they may be more challenging to govern than smaller states” (Jones 2014). Rahn and Rudolph (2005) found that city size was negatively related to trust in local government. A measure of state population was obtained from the 2010 U.S. Census (the log of state population is used in order to normalize the variable).

Results

In Table 1, trust in state government is used as the dependent variable (scatterplots showing

the bivariate relationships can be seen in Supplemental Figure 2). The model is estimated using ordinary least squares regression, given the continuous nature of the dependent variable. Trust in state government is modeled as a function of the nine independent variables described earlier.² For any variables where the theoretical expectations were mixed, two-tailed hypothesis tests are employed, and for variables with directional expectations, one-tailed tests are employed. It is worth noting that extensive robustness checks were conducted on the models presented subsequently, which revealed that the results hold when different measures and specifications are used (see Supplementary

Material for additional details). Model 1 in Table 1 contains forty-nine observations because it excludes an outlier that was identified after examining a scatterplot between fiscal conditions and trust. Overall, the model fits the data quite well; the adjusted R^2 is fairly high at .53. The model indicates that a number of the variables identified as being significantly related to trust in government in the bivariate analysis (shown in Supplemental Figure 2) hold up in the presence of the other independent variables. Unemployment is negatively related to trust ($p < .05$, one tailed), the fiscal condition index is positively related to trust ($p < .05$, one tailed), and political ideology is positively related to trust ($p < .05$, one tailed).³ It appears that after controlling for other factors, median income is also a statistically significant predictor of trust ($p < .05$, two tailed). The coefficient indicates that states with higher median incomes have higher levels of trust in government, all else being equal.

It is interesting to note that two of the variables that were significantly related to trust in state government in the abovementioned bivariate scatterplots—income inequality and state population—are not statistically significant in model 1. It is also worth noting that the tax measure is not related to trust in state government in the model. The other variables in the model—corruption and political polarization—do not appear to be statistically significantly related to trust in state government.

One important possibility worth considering after analyzing model 1 is that perhaps trust in government is a function of the cultural roots of a state. In short, some areas may have more social capital than others, which might lead to more trust in state government. *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam's (2000) seminal work on social capital, has indicated that people and places that have high levels of social capital are more trusting than people and places that have low levels of social capital. In order to make sure that the results presented in model 1 do not vanish after accounting for state social capital, Putnam's social capital index—which was obtained from the *Bowling Alone* website—was added to the model (results shown in model 2). Putnam's index is an aggregation of fourteen

different state-level measures. Overall, the results shown in model 2 look quite similar to the results presented in model 1 (the number of observations drops from forty-nine to forty-eight because Putnam's index is missing data on Hawaii—and Alaska was already omitted from the model). Even after accounting for differences in social capital, it appears that unemployment, fiscal conditions, median income, and ideology continue to have statistically significant effects on state political trust (although the level of significance for the unemployment variable changes slightly). In addition, the corruption variable becomes significant at the $p < .10$ level (one tailed). A look at the standardized coefficients (generated from model 2) reveals that ideology and income have the most pronounced effects on trust, followed by unemployment and the fiscal condition index, respectively. It is worth noting that the social capital measure does not exert a statistically significant effect ($p = .22$, one tailed) on trust in government (after accounting for our other independent variables), although the coefficient is positively signed, as expected. Comfortingly, the Putnam index shows a fairly strong bivariate correlation with our dependent variable (Pearson's $r = .40$, $p < .05$) and has a statistically significant effect on trust in a bivariate regression (adjusted $R^2 = .14$; t score on Putnam coefficient of 3.47, $p < .05$, one tailed). In short, it is not that social capital is irrelevant to trust in state government, but instead once other factors are included, the relationship diminishes. When it comes to the measure of trust in state government used in this analysis, it appears that economic conditions and political factors are more important predictors than levels of social capital. It would be interesting to see if social capital predicts levels of trust in other state institutions or actors (e.g., legislature, governor) or whether those assessments are also driven primarily by economic and political factors.

Conclusion

In general, the results presented earlier fit nicely with previous research on the correlates

of trust in government. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of economic performance (Hetherington 1998) and political factors (Keele 2005) in shaping trust. Interestingly, a number of variables identified in previous studies (Rahn and Rudolph 2005) as being important correlates of political trust in local government, such as income inequality and polarization, were not statistically significant predictors of state-level trust (though it should be noted that Rahn and Rudolph used individual-level data merged with city-level contextual variables). Future researchers should consider collecting individual-level survey data that measure attitudes toward state government, so that the influence of contextual variables on trust in state government (and other political attitudes) can be investigated.

Although the findings highlighted earlier provide some interesting insights into trust in state government, this is just one study on state-level trust, and the trust data that were used were collected at one point in time. In order to gain a better understanding of trust in government, data from additional time periods and contexts are needed. Additional efforts to replicate and expand upon this study are encouraged, as are efforts to study the dynamics of trust in state government. This will take more efforts to collect data, but it could be a fruitful endeavor. Macro-level studies (e.g., Keele 2007) that have described levels of trust in the federal government over time and explained the shifts have shed a great deal of light on the dynamics of American public opinion.

In addition to these ideas, it may be worthwhile to study the effects of citizens' perceptions of conditions on trust in government. It would be interesting to measure perceptions of corruption, polarization, inequality, and other factors, and to examine whether perceptions matter to trust in state government. It could be the case that objective measures don't show a strong relationship to trust but that subjective measures are strongly connected to trust. It could also be the case that the effects of these variables are mediated by other variables. It should also be noted that our measure of corruption does not capture the salience of

corruption in each state. Future studies should consider developing measures of corruption that integrate information on the amount of attention that each case of corruption received. In addition, the null results presented earlier for polarization and inequality should not be taken to mean that these factors are completely irrelevant to trust in government or that polarization and inequality do not have negative effects—they may impact other important attitudes (e.g., political efficacy or interest), behaviors (e.g., voter turnout or other acts of civic engagement), or outcomes (e.g., policy making). In the end, additional research is needed in order to learn about the nature of public opinion on trust in state government.

Supplementary Material

The online data supplements are available at <http://slgr.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. Mean number of respondents across the 50 polls is 608.84 people. Minimum number of respondents is 600 and maximum number of respondents is 700.
2. Multicollinearity does not appear to be a serious concern. A Variance inflation factor (VIF) test indicated that the mean VIF was 2.16, with the highest VIF being 3.30 (the ideology variable). A correlation matrix for all variables can be found in Supplemental Table 1).
3. In order to check the robustness of the ideology result, we created a variable to measure state political culture (based on Elazar's typology of moralistic, individualistic, and traditionalistic states; a table of the states in each category can be located here: <http://theamericanpartnership.com/tag/elazars-political-culture/>), which is

something that ideology could be capturing. The inclusion of political culture in the models in Table 1 did not influence the significance or direction of ideology, nor did it influence the significance or direction of the other independent variables). In addition, the political culture variables were not statistically significant (moralistic culture states, p value = .847; individualistic culture states, p value = .523; traditionalistic states were used as the baseline category). We also checked what happened when ideology was omitted from the model. All variables that were statistically significant in Table 1 remained statistically significant when ideology was omitted and the political culture measures we included in its place. The political culture measures were not statistically significant (moralistic culture states, p value = .295; individualistic culture states, p value = .295; traditionalistic states were used as the baseline category). Full model results available from authors on request, which are omitted to save space.

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