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Author(s): Paul R. Abramson and Ada W. Finifter

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On the Meaning of Political Trust: New Evidence from Items Introduced in 1978*

Paul R. Abramson, Ada W. Finifter, *Michigan State University*

In 1978, the University of Michigan Center for Political Studies introduced four new political trust questions that, more than the standard trust items used over the course of two decades, have specific referents—President Carter, the Carter administration, and the U.S. Congress. These four new questions, apart from their changed objects of reference, use the same wording as two of the older trust items. Thus, observed correlations between the new items and old items may reflect both *substantive conceptual associations* among the various political referents and associations resulting from *overlapping methods variance*, i.e., from the mere similarity of question wording. We find that there are problems caused by similar question wording and demonstrate that analyses of the new items will not offer any easy solution to the problem of interpreting the standard political trust index.

The decline of political trust is among the most clearly documented trends in American public opinion. In 1964, 72 percent of the American electorate scored “medium” or “high” on an index of political trust that employed the five basic SRC–CPS political trust questions.¹ The analogous figure for 1968 was 64 percent; for 1970, 53 percent; for 1972, 50 percent; and the figure fell to 36 percent in 1974, reflecting the impact of the Watergate affair. Since Watergate, the number of Americans manifesting political trust has remained low. In a preelection survey conducted in 1976, only 34 percent scored medium or high on the political trust index, and the change of administration that followed the 1976 election failed to restore feelings of political trust. In the 1978 postelection survey, only 33 percent of the American electorate scored medium or high on the political trust index.

Despite the well-documented decline of political trust, its meaning and significance remain a subject of controversy. Does this decline reflect a basic withdrawal of support for the political system as a whole, or does it

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¹See Appendix for a full description of our procedures for constructing the political trust index. Index scores for 1964 through 1972 are from work by Jukam (1977). Our construction of scores for 1974, 1976, and 1978 utilized the same procedures.

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merely reflect disaffection with the particular political leaders who currently hold power? David Easton's analysis of the components of the political system has provided a framework for this controversy. According to Easton (1965, pp. 171–219), support may be focused on one or more of three general political objects: the "political community," i.e., the broad group of persons who share a political division of labor; the "regime," the basic rules of the game through which political power is shared; and finally the "authorities," the elected and appointed officials responsible for making and implementing political decisions.

The decline in political trust may have far greater implications if it reflects a withdrawal of support for the political community or the regime, and is not merely a rejection of the incumbents. Disaffection with incumbents can, in principle at least, be remedied through the electoral process. The behavioral implications of more widespread discontent could be far greater (see Muller and Jukam, 1977; Jukam and Muller, 1979; Finifter, 1976). Arthur H. Miller (1974a) felt that the decline in political trust did have such far-reaching behavioral implications. He argued that "a situation of widespread, basic discontent and political alienation exists in the U.S. today." "Such feelings of powerlessness and normlessness," he maintained, "are very likely to be accompanied by hostility toward political and social leaders, the institutions of government, and the regime as a whole" (p. 951). The low level of trust among Americans, Miller suggested, may contribute to extralegal political behavior, party realignment, and radical political change (p. 971).

In his critique of Miller's thesis, Jack Citrin (1974) argued that the decline in trust probably reflected a withdrawal of support from the political authorities, rather than from the regime or the political community. "The meaning of recent increases in the level of political cynicism," Citrin concluded, "remains ambiguous, and to decisively conclude that there exists widespread support for radical political change or pervasive alienation from the political *system* is premature, if not misleading" (p. 978). Miller (1974b) remained unpersuaded by Citrin's critique and provided some evidence to suggest that low political trust did reflect declining support for American political institutions. In a more recent analysis, Miller, Goldenberg, and Erbring (1979, p. 79) concluded, "Cynicism evidently reflects general disaffection with government performance and not simply a lack of support for specific incumbents and is at the same time a direct cause of disillusionment with broader regime norms regarding institutional evaluations. It may therefore be considered a 'leading' indicator of diffuse support."

More recently, the debate has achieved new public significance via President Carter's "crisis of confidence" speech of July 15, 1979. Carter's conclusion that there was a crisis of confidence rested, at least in part, upon public opinion data, including the CPS political trust questions, marshalled by pollster Patrick Caddell. Caddell (1979) and Warren E. Miller (1979) recently published statements on their conflicting interpretation of such data. In his statement, Miller argues against the "crisis of confidence" position on the basis of his finding that changes in "political trust" and other such measures are strongly influenced by partisan considerations.

The controversy over the meaning of the political trust index is largely a problem of its validity, but two main factors have contributed to the continuing lack of resolution of the controversy: (1) the ambiguity of the referents of the standard questions ("the people in the government"; "the government in Washington"; "the government"; and "the people running the government"), which have been variously interpreted by different scholars to refer to all three of Easton's political objects, and (2) the continuing absence of measures with established validity as indicators of trust in different objects that could be used as criterion variables against which the political trust index could be evaluated.

New Political Trust Items

In the 1978 postelection survey conducted by the Center for Political Studies of the University of Michigan, four new political trust items were introduced that enable us to gain additional insights into the meaning of the standard political trust index (which was continued in its usual form). These four new items use the same basic wording as two of the standard items, but the referents of the questions are changed from the "government in Washington" or "the government" to "President Carter" or "the Carter administration," and the "U.S. Congress." The original wording of the standard items is presented in the Appendix. The four new questions read as follows:

"How much of the time do you think you can trust President Carter to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?"

"Would you say that the Carter administration is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?"

"How much of the time do you think you can trust the U.S. Congress to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?"

"Would you say that the U.S. Congress is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?"

Since these new items have the virtue of apparently greater specificity in the political objects to which they refer, scholars will use them in at-

tempts to clarify the meaning of the standard index (e.g., A. Miller, 1979). By ascertaining the correlations between the standard trust index and the new items, one might be able to infer something about the meaning of the standard index, subject, of course, to agreement on the meaning of the new items. We shall return to this problem below. A prior question is raised, however, by the fact that the new items are not independent indicators of political trust that happen to have different referents, but rather use the identical wording as two of the standard items with the exception of the words designating the referent itself. Since we know that specific wording plays an important role in responses to survey questions, it is likely that this similarity of contextual wording (i.e., the fact that the items "match") will itself cause a certain amount of correlation among the affected items, over and above whatever correlation exists between attitudes toward the referents of these questions. Since such "methods covariance" will elevate the correlations between matching items, any analysis of the affected correlations that fails to consider this problem is likely to conclude that there is greater substantive association among attitudes toward the different political referents than really exists. Depending on one's interpretation of the new items, this could lead to inaccurate conclusions about the standard political trust index. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the extent to which such methodological artifacts do exist.

Relationship of the New Items to the Standard Political Trust Items

An examination of the marginals alone might lead one to conclude that the standard political trust items were unrelated to the new items. Clearly, the distribution of responses is substantially different for the specific-focus items as compared to the more general questions about "the government in Washington." Fifty-seven percent of the respondents trusted "President Carter" to do what is right "nearly always" or "most of the time," 44 percent trusted "the U.S. Congress," but only 29 percent trusted "the government in Washington." Forty-seven percent thought "the Carter administration" was "run for the benefit of all," 36 percent thought "the U.S. Congress" was, but only 24 percent thought "the government" was run for the benefit of all. There is obviously a substantially higher level of trust in Carter than in Congress, and more trust in Congress than in the government as a whole. Therefore the evaluations might seem to have an independent basis.

But while there are differential levels of trust in Carter, Congress, and the government in Washington, the responses to these items are substantially correlated. For the do-what-is-right items, the tau-b correlation between Carter and "the government" was .33; between Congress and "the

government,” .45; and between Carter and Congress, .34. For the few-big-interests items, the correlations are even higher: between Carter and “the government,” .45; between Congress and “the government,” .57; and between Carter and Congress, .49.

As might be expected on the basis of these correlations, the new items are strongly related to the standard political trust index. These basic relationships are presented in the lower section of the first column of Table 1. There are substantial relationships between the new do-what-is-right questions and the standard five-item index, and even stronger relationships between the new few-big-interests questions and the five-item index.

Although one might attempt to interpret these strong relationships between the new items and the standard political trust index on substantive grounds, we hypothesized that they might result from overlapping methods variance, i.e., from the mere similarity of item wording. Perhaps a substantial number of respondents were reacting primarily to the phrases “do what is right” or “few big interests,” in association with a political object, without really differentiating among the various referents—Carter, Congress, or “the government.” To test for this possibility, we decided on an analysis strategy that would correlate each new specific-focus item with an abridged or reduced government-in-Washington index that would omit the government-in-Washington item that had the same contextual wording (i.e., the matching item). This would allow us to correlate each new item with an index of more general political trust that was not contaminated by similar contextual wording. We therefore constructed two four-item indexes of trust in “the government,” one of which deleted the government-in-Washington do-what-is-right item, and the other of which deleted the government few-big-interests item.

However, a new problem then arose: since these four-item indexes will have lower reliabilities than the full five-item index by virtue of the smaller number of items they contain, we would expect the correlations between each specific-focus item and the two attenuated indexes to be reduced merely as a result of this reduced reliability.² We controlled for this by predicting the level to which we would expect each correlation to fall as a result of the lowered reliability of the attenuated trust indexes. Columns 2 and 4 of our table show the “predicted” correlations for each of the new specific-focus items with both of the attenuated indexes. The predictions are based on the fact that the square root of the reliability coefficient is interpretable as the maximum predictive validity, or correlation, which it is possible to achieve between the scale and any variable to which it is related (Cronbach,

²Reliabilities are alpha, calculated by SPSS subprogram Reliability.

TABLE 1
Relationship of Trust-in-Carter and Trust-in-Congress Items
to Three Political Trust Indexes^a

Political Trust Index ^b	Five-item Political Trust Index	Four-item Political Trust Index (do-what-is-right item deleted)	Four-item Political Trust Index (few-big-interests item deleted)
Reliability of Index	.570	.472	.451
Maximum Predictive Validity (highest possible correlation be- tween this index and any external variable to which it is related = $\sqrt{\text{reliability}}$)	.755	.687	.672
Trust-in-Carter and Trust-in- Congress Items ^c	Observed Relationship	Predicted Relationship Given Reduced Reliability ^d	Predicted Relationship Given Reduced Reliability ^d
Trust Carter to Do What Is Right	.32	.29	.28
Trust Congress to Do What Is Right	.46	.42	.41
Carter Administration Is Run by a Few Big Interests	.44	.40	.39
Congress Run by a Few Big Interests	.53	.48	.47
			.30
			.41
			.34
			.41

^aCorrelations are Pearson's *r*.

^bSee Appendix A for the procedures used to construct these indexes.

^cSee p. 299 for the wording of these items.

^dBased on the assumption that for each item, the ratio of observed to maximum possible correlation with the reduced four-item indexes will remain the same as the ratio of the observed to maximum possible correlation with the full five-item index.

1970). The predictions then assume that, for each item, the *ratio* of the observed to maximum possible correlation with each of the *four*-item indexes will remain the same as the ratio of the observed to maximum possible correlation with the full five-item index. This expectation in essence posits that the similarity of question wording did not inflate the original correlations. Thus, when one of the pair of matching questions is removed, the “null hypothesis” prediction is that the new correlations will decline only to the extent predictable by lowered reliability.

An example should clarify our procedures. Given its reliability of .570, the maximum possible correlation between the standard five-item political trust index and any external variable to which it is related is .755 ($\sqrt{.570}$). The correlation between “trust Carter to do what is right” and the five-item index is .32, 42 percent of the theoretical maximum. Since the reliability of the four-item index drops to .472, the theoretical maximum correlation for this index drops to .687. The null hypothesis is essentially that the “trust Carter” item will retain the same relative degree of correlation with the attenuated index as it had with the original five-item index (i.e., omitting the matching item has no effect on the correlation). In this case, the predicted correlation between “trust Carter to do what is right” and the abridged index would be .29 ($.42 \times .687$).

Columns 3 and 5 of our table show the actual correlations between each of the new specific-focus items and the attenuated indexes, and these results may be compared with the “predicted” results. The correlations between the Carter and Congress do-what-is-right items and the reduced index that deletes the matching government do-what-is-right item fall to about the levels expected, given the reduced reliability of this attenuated index (columns 2 and 3). When the two do-what-is-right items are correlated with the four-item index that retains the matching do-what-is-right item but deletes the few-big-interests item, the correlations fall to the predicted level (or just above it) (columns 4 and 5). The correlations between the Carter and Congress few-big-interests questions and the index that deletes the do-what-is-right question fall slightly *less* than we would expect, given the reduced reliability of the attenuated index (columns 2 and 3). However, the correlations between the Carter and Congress few-big-interests items and the index that deletes the matching government few-big-interests question *fall about twice as far as we would predict*, given the reduced reliability of this attenuated index (columns 4 and 5).

These findings suggest that, to some extent, people *are* responding to the wording of the few-big-interests questions—that is, when the matching item is deleted from the index, correlations between the specific-focus measures and the index fall considerably more than can be accounted for by

reduced reliability alone. Thus, there seems to be a carryover response set in the few-big-interests questions that does not appear as strongly for the do-what-is-right items. It should also be noted, however, that even when the matching items are removed from the basic political trust index, the correlations between the new items and the attenuated standard trust indexes remain substantial.

We also conducted a series of factor analyses to clarify the structure of the entire set of items.³ When all nine items are analyzed, a single trust factor emerges.⁴ The few-big-interests items are clearly the defining items of the factor: the government and Congress few-big-interests items have the highest loadings, and the Carter few-big-interests question also loads quite strongly. The questions evaluating Congress load more highly on the factor than three of the standard items used to measure political trust and play a dominant role in defining the factor. All four of the new specific-focus items are more strongly related to the underlying trust factor than either the question about the government in Washington wasting tax money or being run by "smart people." That these latter two items have basically different wording compared to most of the other "trust" items again suggests the importance of contextual wording.

To control for the effects of wording similarities, a factor analysis was conducted in which the government do-what-is-right item was excluded and another in which the government few-big-interests item was deleted. However, in both cases, the four specific-focus items continued to load highly on a single trust dimension even when their matching items were not present. This supports our earlier conclusion that there are substantive associations among these items apart from the additional covariance introduced by similarities of wording.

Conclusions

Our analyses cannot lead to definitive conclusions about the relationship of the CPS trust index to "system trust" or "support for the incumbents." First, as we have shown, the use of similarly worded items to measure the meaning of these concepts poses a basic methodological problem of overlapping methods variance. Second, the referents in the new ques-

³SPSS factor analysis was used. We employed listwise deletion procedures, in which any case with missing data was deleted from the analysis. This reduced the total *N* from 2,304 to 1,500.

⁴The loading of each item on the factor was as follows: government "few big interests," .70; Congress "few big interests," .69; trust government, .65; trust Congress, .62; Carter "few big interests," .62; government crooked, .53; trust Carter, .50; waste tax money, .44; smart people, .23.

tions are not as unambiguous as they should be for analysis of any discriminations that may be made by the general public along the lines of Easton's "authorities" versus "regime" distinction. On their face, the new items appear to focus on attitudes toward the political authorities. Clearly, questions about "President Carter" and "the Carter administration" refer to specific incumbents. Questions about "the U.S. Congress" are more problematic. They may appear to focus on incumbents, although the absence of a specific time reference (e.g., the *present* Congress) may lead respondents to interpret the questions as referring to the Congress as an institution, rather than to the current 535 incumbents. While the present U.S. Congress is indeed a set of several hundred incumbents, the U.S. Congress is a continuing institution (part of the American political "regime") functioning over time, and can and has been evaluated by the public as such. Which aspect of the U.S. Congress the new questions refer to is ambiguous, and it is not unlikely that different respondents interpreted the questions differently.¹ Moreover, our analyses provide no evidence that these questions elicit any systematic distinction relating to Easton's typology. For example, no factors emerge that in any way relate to the political objects or referents of the questions. Thus, if respondents *do* discriminate between the regime and the incumbents, these questions do not provide sufficiently clear referents to elicit such distinctions. If these *questions* do distinguish between regime and incumbents, then respondents apparently do not.

It is also possible that some of the distinctions made by Easton in his typology of "objects of support" are not mutually exclusive and that certain political objects do not fit neatly into one category or another. Certain political objects may simultaneously encompass both incumbents and institutions to a degree that makes it difficult for most members of the public to distinguish clearly between their regime and authority aspects. This problem may be particularly severe when measuring attitudes toward political bodies that are continuous, e.g., the Congress and the Supreme Court.

Despite these problems, our findings do lead to certain tentative conclusions. The 1978 data suggest that the basic political trust index has a very substantial component that evaluates the political authorities. This follows from the strong relationship of the standard trust items to items about the Carter administration, and the presence of both these sets of items on the

¹A. Miller (1979) argues that both the questions about Carter and the U.S. Congress focus primarily on the evaluations of institutions. However, his own analysis (p. 18) shows that both affect toward Carter and evaluations of Carter's performance were strongly related to the trust-in-Carter questions. On the other hand, he shows that affect toward the respondent's incumbent congressman and evaluations of the incumbent congressman's performance were only weakly related to the trust-in-Congress questions.

same general factor. To the extent that questions about the "U.S. Congress" tap attitudes toward the *present* Congress, this conclusion is reinforced. Even if the Congress items are interpreted as "regime level" measures, their relationships with the Carter administration questions, which are clearly incumbent-oriented items, support the same conclusion. Moreover, despite the problem of overlapping methods variance, these relationships do not appear to be solely the result of similar item wording.

The political trust index may also be tapping a more general evaluation of the political system. But our analysis strongly suggests the need to develop new measures that more clearly separate evaluations of incumbents from those of the political system more generally in order to resolve this question definitively. Progress toward this objective might be advanced by utilizing Easton's (1965) formulation or some other theoretical definitions of the various objects of the political system as a conceptual starting point, and by referring specifically to elements of these definitions in the question wordings.

At the same time, we are not suggesting that the current measures of trust should be discarded. Despite their limitations, they now provide the basis for time-series analyses going back to 1964, and four of these items were used still earlier in 1958, permitting analyses over a period of two decades. Given the current concern about the "crisis of confidence" in American social and political institutions, these time-series data may prove to be very valuable. However, we would urge that analysts (1) remain aware of the limitations of these measures, (2) recognize that the attitudes they tap may respond largely to evaluations of incumbents and government performance, and (3) continue their efforts to clarify the meaning of these measures and to develop still better measures of attitudes toward both political authorities and political institutions.

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APPENDIX

Scoring for the Political Trust Index. As indicated below, the value of each item was scored as 2, 1, or 0, ranging from highest trust to lowest trust.

"Do you think that people in the government waste *a lot* of the money we pay in taxes (0), waste *some* of it (1), or *don't waste very much of it* (2)?"

"How much of the time do you think you can *trust* the government in Washington to do what is right—*just about always* (2), *most of the time* (1), or *only some of the time* (0)?" (The volunteered response "none of the time," which made up 4.0 percent of the responses, was also scored as 0.)

"Would you say the government is pretty much run by a *few big interests* looking out for themselves (0) or that it is run for the *benefit of all* the people (2)?" ("Other, depends" was scored as 1.)

"Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are *smart people* (2), or do you think that quite a few of them *don't seem to know what they are doing* (0)?" ("Other, depends" was scored as 1.)

"Do you think that *quite a few* of the people running the government are crooked (0), *not very many* are (1), or do you think *hardly any* of them are crooked (2)?"

For all five items, "don't know" and "not ascertained" responses were scored as 1, but respondents with more than two such responses were excluded from our indexes. This decreased the sample size from 2,304 to 2,245.

The trust index scores are sums of the individual item values. Scores ranged from 0 to 10 on the standard five-item index and from 0 to 8 on the two four-item indexes. The correlations presented in Table 1 utilize the full range of scores. In describing the decline of trust between 1964 and 1978, we considered scores of 0 through 3 as low trust, 4 through 6 as medium trust, and 7 through 10 as high trust.

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