

Elements of Trust in Municipal Government

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ABSTRACT

Local government is often characterized as the least important level of government; however governments at the local level provide many of the vital services that people rely on for daily life. In delivering these services to citizens, it is the municipal level of government that most people come into contact with in a direct way. This direct contact can have a bearing on the image of government that citizens develop and can consequently affect the behavior of those citizens toward government.

In this chapter we explore one of the primary elements of cognitive social capital, trust. First we compare the trust levels that citizens have in their local govern-

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ment in Mexico, South Africa, and the United States. Next, using a survey of chief officials in U.S. municipalities, we examine variables that contribute to the level of trust citizen's place in their local municipalities. We find several factors including the quality of services delivered, the level of income inequality, and the degree of social heterogeneity have a significant effect on trust levels in these U.S. communities. We offer these findings as suggestions for possible ways that municipal leaders in the U.S. and elsewhere may look to increase trust levels within their communities and thereby increase their levels of social capital. We conclude with a few suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Trust; Local Government; Quality of Services; Social Heterogeneity

INTRODUCTION

The local level of government, specifically the municipality, is often portrayed—or at least suggested—within the public administration literature as being of less interest than governments at the federal or state/provincial levels. This occurs in spite of the fact that it is at the local level that many of the vital services that people regularly use and rely upon are performed. Municipalities providing these vital functions are located in countries operating under a federal system, such as the 2,000 plus *municipio* governments in Mexico or the almost 36,000 towns and municipalities located within the United States, as well as in countries operating under unitary governmental systems such as that found in South Africa where 278 local municipalities operate. These local governments provide a direct link between citizens and government by providing public services such as water and sewerage, public safety, maintenance of recreational facilities, emergency medical and fire protection services, as well as a variety of planning, inspection, and many other direct services provided to the public. In fact, most contact that the average citizen has with his or her government occurs at the local level. Such regular contact has a direct effect on the image of government formed by that citizen.

The image that the citizen forms as a result of this regular contact with local government can also have a direct effect on how that citizen behaves toward government. For example, research in South Africa found that one of the major reasons why many South African residents failed to pay the charges for the direct services they received revolved around their perception of local government (Fjeldstad, 2004). Specifically, Fjeldstad found a positive correlation between how much a resident perceived their local government acted in that resident's interest and how willing that resident was to comply in paying for their service charges. In other words, citizen compliance with the payment of service charges is positively correlated with the level of «trust» in the local government.

General consensus has formed in the social capital literature around the idea of dividing social capital between two separate dimensions: structural and cognitive (Grootaert & Van Bastelaer, 2001, 2002; Uphoff, 2000). The structural dimension of social capital consists of the more objective elements such as the organization itself and various participatory elements. On the other hand, the cognitive dimension of social capital can be thought of as consisting of those more subjective elements such as trust, shared values, and norms. Among these elements, trust is the primary focus of the cognitive dimension (Parás, Coleman, & Seligson, 2006). Humphrey (1998) defines trust as consisting of an individual's acceptance of the risk and vulnerability that is derived from the action of others. Using this definition, trust develops from the expectation that these «others» will not exploit that vulnerability. Research has found that the trust citizens develop for their government has consequences and these consequences can have attitudinal, behavioral, as well as representational affects (Fjeldstad, 2004; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005). How much trust an individual places in their government can increase a citizen's compliance with demands placed upon them by that government as well as helping to promote collective restraint when it is required because of a crisis situation.

DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES BETWEEN COUNTRIES

Surveys have been conducted in several countries to assess the trust levels citizens have in their governments at the various governmental levels. These studies have provided some interesting findings, especially when similarities and differences are compared both between different countries and among the various levels of government within those countries. There are of course differences in the institutional structures and variety of services offered in local municipalities in each of these three countries as well as in their reliance on revenues transferred from higher levels of government to fund operations, but there are also many similarities. For example, each has a local mayor as well as a locally elected governing board and each has been given authority to raise local revenues and function with some level of independence.

In 2011 a survey of approximately 3,500 South African citizens conducted by the *Institute for Justice and Reconciliation*, participants were asked to rate the level of confidence that they had in various institutions of South African government. Included in these institutions were ratings in the level of confidence that citizens placed in the South African national and local levels of government (Lefko-Everett *et al.*, 2011). Results of this survey exposed significant differences between the level of confidence that South African citizens displayed for these two levels of government. When asked to rate confidence in the *national* level of gov-

ernment, 65 % of respondents indicated they had either «a great deal» or «quite a lot» of confidence in the national government. However, when asked to rate their confidence in their *local* level of government only 43 % of the respondents indicated «a great deal» or «quite a lot» of confidence in their local government. This 22 % spread in level of confidence between the local and national level of government is striking.

In a similar survey conducted in Mexico in 2006 by the *United States Agency for International Development*, as part of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), Parás and Coleman (2006) oversaw a survey that captured the trust levels Mexican citizens placed in a number of institutions. Within this survey respondents were asked to rate on a 7 point scale the level of trust they had in various institutions within the country, including federal and local governments (Parás *et al.*, 2006). Similar to the South African results, respondents in Mexico reported higher trust in the federal government than the local government. Unlike the large spread in trust levels that was observed in South Africa, the difference in trust between the two levels of government in Mexico was much smaller.

In the United States, Gallup has conducted annual surveys asking about the trust levels of American citizens for many years. In their 2010 survey (Gallup, 2010) U.S. citizens were again asked to rate the level of trust or confidence that they placed in several government institutions. Respondents were asked to give their ratings of trust and confidence in the federal and local governments' handling of domestic and local problems respectively. Unlike what was seen in both the South African and Mexican surveys, respondents in the United States indicated by a wide margin much higher trust and confidence level for local government in the United States than they did for the federal government in Washington D.C. A full 71 % of respondents indicated that they have a «great deal» or a «fair amount» of trust or confidence in the local level of government to handle local government problems. Contrast that with only 42 % of respondents that said that they have a «great deal» or a «fair amount» of confidence in the federal government to handle domestic problems in the country and a large gap in confidence between the two levels of government is exposed. Public opinion of the government in Washington D.C. appears to be even more negative when survey respondents were asked how much of the time they thought they could trust government in Washington to do what is right; only 19 % responded either «just about always» or «most of the time», the remaining 81 % said «only some of the time» or «Never».

To summarize, results of the surveys for these three countries reveal that the confidence or trust levels that these citizens exhibit toward their governments indicates both differences and similarities between these countries. In Mexico and South Africa we find similarities in how citizens rate their level of trust. Citizens in both of these countries appear to place more confidence in their national or feder-

al level of government than they do in their local level of government, although the difference between the two levels of government is much higher in South Africa than it is in Mexico. When survey results within the United States are compared to the results found in South Africa and Mexico, a sharp difference is apparent. Americans seem to put much a great deal more trust and confidence in their local level of government than they do in the federal level. This is the polar opposite of what we find of both Mexican and South African respondents.

That citizens in the United States trust their local governments more than the government in Washington D.C. is not a new phenomenon. The same Gallup poll taken in 1974 showed similar results as the 2010 survey. In 1974, 51 % of respondents indicated that they had a «great deal» or a «fair amount» of trust or confidence in the federal government to solve domestic problems while 71 % said they had the same for their local level of government. The question arises; what is it about local government in the United States that accounts for these higher levels of trust?

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

To help answer this question, we first look at the structure of local government in the United States. The structure of municipal local government in the United States needs to be viewed in the context of reform (Adrian, 1988; Svava, 2001; Frederickson, Logan, & Wood, 2001). Since the early days of the country, municipal government in the United States has gone through several periods of structural change. Most of these changes were made in response to the perceived needs as well as political and economic conditions at the time. The United States has evolved from a rural society with 5 % of its citizens living in its cities in 1790 to an urban society today, with over 85 % of all citizens living in cities (Donovan, Moonney, & Simth, 2013). At the same time society in the U.S. has evolved from one that did not demand nor expect much from local government into a contemporary urban life that would be unthinkable without the services provided by municipalities. While the percentage of population living in urban areas has also increased in Mexico (77.8 % in 2010) and South Africa (61.7 % in 2010) they have not yet reached the levels found in the U.S. (United Nations, World Urbanization Prospects, 2014).

While the institutional structure of local government in both Mexico and South Africa are very uniform across the country, municipal government structure in the U.S. is nothing if not diverse, with institutional structures varying from one state to another and from one city to the next. The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) recognizes five separate forms of local government representing municipalities in the United States. These five forms (and their percentage of all

cities over 2,500 in population) include the mayor-council (44 %), council-manager (49 %), commission (2 %), and town-meeting or representative-town-meeting (5 %). The relatively rare commission and town-meeting/representative-town-meeting forms are restricted primarily to particular regions of the country. For example, town-meeting form cities are generally found in the New England. As a result, most research on local government in the U.S. has focused on the two structural forms that dominate the American municipal landscape, namely the mayor-council and council-manager that represent 93 % of all municipalities over 2,500 (DeSantis and Renner, 2002; MacManus and Bullock 2003; Moulder, 2008) The mayor-council form's primary feature is the presence of a separately elected mayor that serves independently of the city council and acts in the capacity of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the municipality. By contrast, South African local government's structure is constrained to very few options by national legislation such as the *Municipal Systems Act* and the *Municipal Structures Act*. All Mexican municipal governments are headed by a mayor or municipal president (*regent*) and governed by a municipal council (*ayuntamiento*).

The primary feature of a council-manager form of government in the United States is the presence of an appointed professional city manager that acts as the CEO of the municipality. In traditional council-manager cities the city organization may or may not include a mayor, but the manager is hired by and accountable to the city council. If a mayor is present, she is usually selected from among one of the council's own members to serve a specific period of time, on a part time basis, and given little or no executive authority. Scholars have typically used this dichotomous classification system (mayor-council versus council-manager) to analyze the effects that form of government exhibit on a number of variables including characteristic differences between mayors and city managers (Nolting, 1969; Stillman, 1974; Wikstrom, 1979; DeSantis and Newell, 1996) and the influence that demographic and socio-demographic variables have on form of government (Sherbenou, 1961; Kessel, 1962; Dye and MacManus, 1976; Sanders, 1979; Giles, Gabris, and Krane, 1980; and Farnham, 1986).

WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE SAY?

In this chapter we examine municipalities in the United States to identify elements that increase trust in these local governments. If these elements can be manipulated, this may suggest ways of increasing the trust levels found in other municipalities. A review of the relevant literature suggests a number of elements that might affect the trust that citizens have in their local government.

Most western governments, including local municipalities in the United States, have worked under the presumption that the best strategy to build more trust in

government is to provide better services to the public. A government's action is often based upon, «the implicit hypothesis on which this strategy is built...that *better performing public services will lead to increased satisfaction among their users, and this, in turn, will lead to more trust in government*» (Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003, 892, emphasis original). Although scholars have argued that citizen trust is not limited to perceptions of government's performance, there is agreement that government's performance can have a significant effect on the amount of trust citizen's place in that government (DeHoog, Lowery, & Lyons, 1990). While many local government services work quite well, «problems such as traffic congestion, over-crowded public schools, and a lack of public safety are frequently cited as evidence of government failure and incompetence» (Berman, 1997: 106).

The demographic makeup of the population has also been found to have an effect on the level of trust citizen's place in their government. In a study that surveyed a random sample of households in Orange County, California, Bealdasare (1985) found that while many structural characteristics of a community did not significantly affect trust, social heterogeneity (measured as a non-white and Hispanic population above 22 %) was positively correlated with lower levels of trust in government. Looking at both individual-level factors and city-level factors that affect trust in local government, Rahn and Rudolph (2005) found that African Americans and Native Americans are less trustful of local government than are whites. Their findings also suggested that population size had an inverse relationship with trust. In addition, they found strong support for a relationship between several indicators of community heterogeneity and citizen trust, with the relationship between income inequality within a community and trust being the most significant. «While a city's overall wealth has little impact on trust in local government, the distribution of that wealth in the city has a substantial effect» (Rahn & Rudolph, 2005, p. 549). Their conclusions are very clear, «all else equal, levels of trust are considerably lower in cities that are racially diverse, ideologically polarized, and have wider gaps between the rich and the poor» (p. 551).

There is also an urban/rural divide in trust perceptions. Haeberle (1983) found a difference in how «core cities», «suburban towns», and «small cities» (more isolated from surrounding communities) formed their opinions and responded to local governments. Residents of smaller cities located outside of a metropolitan area were more likely to form favorable opinions about their local government than those residents located within metropolitan areas.

Other studies have also indicated that there is a connection between the policy preference of the citizenry, the policies pursued by elected officials, and trust in government (Citrin, 1974; Easton, 1975; Miller, 1974; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005). The higher the policy congruence is between the citizen and the elected officials, the higher the trust in government. Similarly, policy divergence decreases trust.

DATA AND METHOD

This analysis utilizes data collected from a random national survey conducted in 2011 of municipalities in the United States drawn from a list of all 2996 mayor-council (38.3 %) and council-manager (61.7 %) municipalities with populations between 10,000 and 250,000. These municipalities were identified using the International City Management Association *Municipal Year Book* (2010). The survey was delivered in hard and electronic copy to the chief administrative officer from a random sample of 800 municipalities drawn from this list. The sample included 502 council-manager and 298 mayor-council municipalities representing 49 states. Participants returned 270 surveys (a response rate of 34 %).³ Of the 241 usable surveys, 86 came from in mayor-council communities and the remaining 155 were completed by respondents in council-manager cities (see Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics- Population and Sample

Municipal Type	Population (1)		Sample		Survey Respondents	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Mayor-Council	1,146	38	398	37	86	36
Council-Manager	1,850	62	502	63	155	64
All Cities	2,996	100	800	100	241	100

To measure trust we utilized a measure similar to that used in a 1997 study by Berman. In his study on public cynicism Berman (1997) surveyed Chief Executive Officers (City Managers and Mayors) to measure perception of citizen attitudes within their communities. He found that these CEO's used a variety of sources to form their opinions about citizen trust their local governments. These sources included citizen complaints, conversations, local newspapers reports, local election returns, and citizen surveys. Respondents in our survey were very knowledgeable about their communities, having worked an average of 8.09 years in their current positions and many having held other positions in their present or other municipalities prior to their current position. Following Berman's example, we based our trust measurement on the opinions of these chief administrative officers. We asked these participants to rate citizen's trust levels on a five point Likert scale from 1

³ Four surveys were deemed unusable; three because of insufficient data completion in the survey and one municipality's population was deemed outside of the study parameters. Twenty-five surveys were subject to listwise deletion due to missing values for the variables of interest.

(very low) to 5 (very high). For analysis this variable was then collapsed into a three point scale of low, average, and high.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Quality Score	241	2.25	0.34	1.4	3
Percent Minority	241	21.18	16.13	0	86.3
Policy Congruence	241	86.09	10.80	45.23	99.30
Poverty Rate	241	9.06	6.51	0.60	33.2
Population	241	37.6	36.5	10.3	223
Rural	41				
Trust Score	241	3.67	.773	1	5

To measure the quality of municipal services we again looked at the ratings given by the survey respondents. Dye and MacManus (1976) identified twelve municipal functions that are common in many municipalities (education, welfare, housing, libraries, health, police, fire, streets, sewerage, sanitation, and parks). In our survey we asked participants to rate the quality of these twelve services offered by their municipality using a three point scale.⁴ A composite interval level variable was then created by taking the overall mean rating for all of the individual services that the respondent indicated were provided by that municipality. The composite rating thus represents the mean quality rating for all services offered within that municipality. It is expected that trust will be higher in municipalities with higher quality scores.

Policy congruence is hypothesized to have a similar positive effect on trust. To obtain our measure of policy congruence, the ideology of the chief administrative officer (self-report) was regressed on the percentage of the 2008 presidential vote won by Obama in the county in which the municipality is located and the percentage of the county's population that lives within the municipality. The absolute value of the residuals from this regression were subtracted from one and then multiplied by 100 to get the percent of policy congruence. Higher values indicate higher congruence between the electorate and the respondent.

Unlike trust and policy congruence, increased social heterogeneity is expected to have a negative effect on the level of trust in government. The percentage of

⁴ The three categories were: 1.-Service available but less than desirable; 2.-Service available and meets the needs of citizens; and 3.-Service exceeds citizen's expectations.

minority residents in each city from the 2010 U.S. Census data is used to capture racial heterogeneity. A measure of income inequality, the percentage of families in the municipality living below the government established poverty line, was also gathered from the Census.

In addition to the substantive variables of interest, controls were also included for population, urban/rural, and the form of government (mayor-council/council-manager). Population estimates were gathered from the Census. Form of government and whether the municipality is in an urban or rural location were reported by survey respondents.

FINDINGS

Due to the ordinal nature of the dependent variable, the model was analyzed using ordinal logistic regression (Table 3).⁵ Several of our substantive variables were found to be statistically significant. However the effect for policy congruence, although correctly signed, is not significant. Rural and more populated communities were more trusting of government than urban or less populated areas. Council-manager municipalities were not statistically distinguishable from mayor-council governments.

Beginning with the leftmost panel in Figure 1, we can observe that the probability of being in the low or moderate trust categories increases as income inequality increases. The average poverty level of the municipalities in the study was slightly over 9 %. At this level, it is still more likely for trust to be high. In communities with extremely high poverty, the probability mass shifts to the moderate category.

A similar pattern can be seen for citizen heterogeneity. Trust declines as the citizenry becomes more heterogeneous. The average community had a 21.5 % minority population, making them more likely to be high trust. The probability of being in this category declines as the percentage of racial minorities' increases, although this rate of change is slightly slower than it is for income inequality.

In contrast to the other variables, increasing the quality of services delivered by the municipality increased the probability of citizens' having high trust in government. Although municipalities with poorer service quality were more likely to have low to moderate trust in government, by the time service quality increases to the average level of 2.2, governmental trust was more likely to be high than low to moderate. As service quality increases across the range of values, the probability of a municipality having high trust in government increases by a dramatic 0.5.

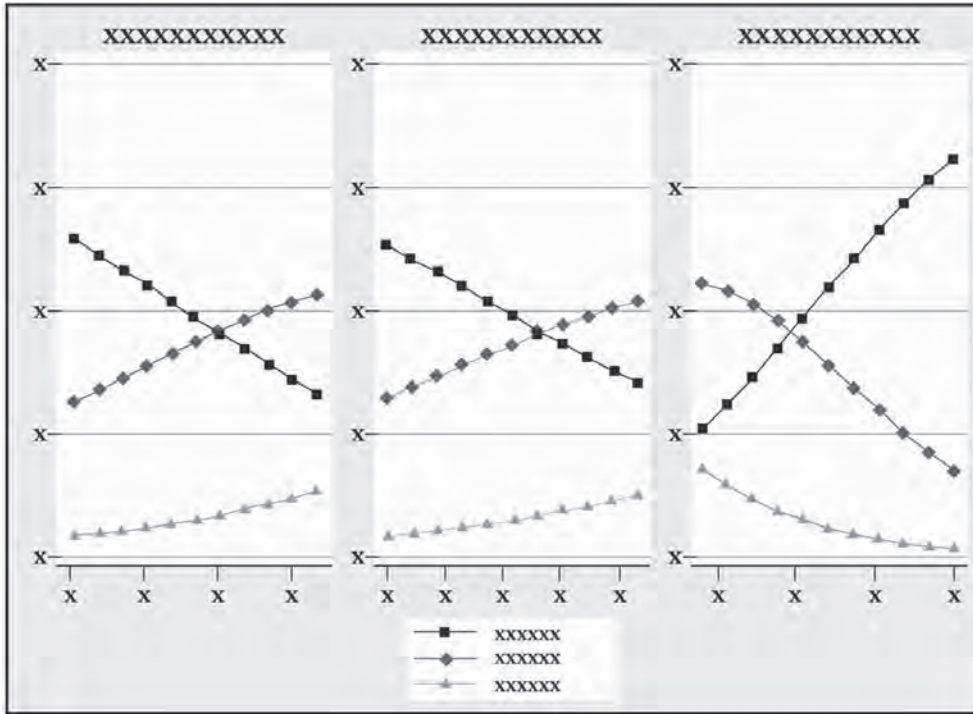
⁵ A likelihood ratio test indicates the proportional odds assumption is not violated.

Table 3: Ordinal Logistic Regression of Trust in Government		
	Coefficient	p-value
	(Std. Error)	
Quality of Services ^a	1.55**	0.000
	(0.43)	
Heterogeneity ^a	-0.013*	0.074
	(0.01)	
Policy Congruence ^a	0.01	0.146
	(0.01)	
Income Inequality ^a	-0.04**	0.05
	(0.02)	
Rural	0.36	0.355
	(0.39)	
Population	0.008*	0.073
	(0.00)	
Form of Government	-0.39	0.202
	(0.30)	
N	241	
Log-likelihood	-186.69	
χ^2	28.08	
pseudo-R ²	0.07	
μ_1	1.113	
μ_2	3.659	
*p≤0.10; **p≤0.05		
^a One-tailed test		

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have examined some of the variables that help to explain levels of trust in U.S. municipalities. By finding variables that help explain higher levels of trust in these U.S. cities, we hoped to provide information that may be useful to other municipalities both in the U.S. and other areas of the world that might help them to improve the level of citizen trust within their own local governments and improve their social capital level.

Figure 1: Predicted Probabilities Plotted



Of the four substantive variables included in our model, three were found to be significantly related to trust in local government. As suggested in the literature, the quality of the services delivered by the municipality had a very significant, positive affect on the level of trust. The levels of heterogeneity and income inequality in a municipality had a significant and negative effect on the trust level found, as anticipated.

Findings from this study would suggest that municipalities seeking to increase their trust levels may want to concentrate their efforts on projects that will help lessen income equality within their cities. From a more practical perspective, our data mirror prior findings that indicated that the delivery of quality services to citizens appears to have considerable influence on how much trust people have in local governments. This suggests that if leaders want to develop more trust in their city they can do a lot to accomplish it by simply working to provide a better quality service to their citizens.

Future research could help to give us a better understanding of these findings. Due to a lack of systematic surveys of citizen attitudes regarding local government, we were forced to rely on municipal leaders reported perceptions of citizen trust. Although this is the conventional way to deal with the dearth of this type of data,

administrator predictions tend to be pessimistic and more negative than actual citizen ratings (Melkers 1998). Assuming this negative skew is randomly distributed among administrators and does not vary systematically according to community or administrator characteristics, the only statistical consequence is that the magnitude of our effects may be slightly exaggerated. In order to accurately examine whether this pessimism is truly randomly distributed, scholars interested in the cognitive dimension of social capital should engage in a large-scale systematic survey of citizen attitudes toward municipal governments.

Other factors may also influence trust. Municipal governments may deliver more services to increase trust in government, but the effect may be conditional on the quality of services provided. For example, is trust increased by providing fewer services at a higher level of quality or more services at moderate levels of quality? Do all economic development projects that create jobs increase trust or is it more effective to concentrate on those jobs that tend to move people out of poverty? Although we have identified several important components of trust, there is still more work to be done.

Trust is a major component of cognitive social capital. This research suggests that municipalities in the United States may have some control over at least two areas that hold the possibility of increasing local citizens' trust in their local government and as a result increasing social capital. Providing quality services and working to lessen income inequality result in higher levels of trust. Since local governments in many other countries such as South Africa and Mexico also control many of the same services and programs in their communities that U.S. cities do, this research suggests the possibility of improving social capital in these cities using the same techniques.

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