

# **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement\***

Eric M. Uslaner and Mitchell Brown

University of Maryland College Park

# **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

## *Abstract*

This paper examines why people ‘violate’ rationality and take part in their communities, differentiating by types of participation, particularly political versus other, more communal, types of participation. We argue that trust plays an important role in participation levels, but contrary to more traditional models, the causal relationship runs from trust to participation. In addition, we posit that trust is strongly affected by economic inequality. Using aggregated American state level data for the 1970s, 80s and 90s, we present a series of two-stage least-squares models on the effects of inequality and trust on participation, controlling for other related factors. Findings indicate that inequality is the strongest determinant of trust, and that trust has a greater effect on communal participation than on political participation.

Americans, Tocqueville (1945, 109, 117) argued in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, are a participatory people:

As soon as several of the inhabitants of the United States have taken up an opinion or a feeling which they wish to promote in the world, they look out for mutual assistance; and as soon as they have found one another out, they combine. From that moment they are no longer isolated men, but a power seen from afar, whose actions are seen from afar and whose language is listened to....When the members of a community are allowed and accustomed to combine for all purposes, they will combine for all purposes, they will combine as readily for the lesser as for the more important ones...

Americans do *not* have high rates of participation—and increasingly they are not looking out for their fellow citizens. Participation in civic life is highly skewed in American society and some forms of civic involvement are more skewed than others (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995).

Our concern in this paper is to test the claims of Tocqueville and his followers that: (1) citizens who look out for the welfare of others take a more active role in civic life than people who are more “self-interested” and (2) engagement in civic life in turn promotes “habits of the heart” that bond us to others in our communities. We offer a more nuanced view of participation that begins with two alternative premises: (1) participation takes many forms, only a few of which depend upon—or can produce—a sense of bonding across groups in the community; and (2) unequally distributed resources

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

lead to a lessened sense of community and, perhaps as well, less engagement in civic life.

The social ties that Tocqueville (and others) stress reflect the belief that most people can be trusted. Trusting people, on his account (see also Putnam, 2000, 137; Stolle, 1998) are more likely to join with others in their communities for common purposes. And working together with others creates trust in turn. For Putnam (2000, 137), the relationship clearly works both ways: “The causal arrows among civic involvement, reciprocity, honesty, and social trust are as tangled as well-tossed spaghetti.”

More familiar to many students of civic engagement (and more widely accepted) is the argument that participation is largely driven by resources rather than a sense of commitment to your community. From the earliest studies of participation onward, we know that wealthy, more highly educated people take a greater role in civic life. They have greater stakes in what government does. They understand political and social life better. They are more likely to be interested in politics, to know whom to contact, and perhaps most critically, to know *how to make their voices known* (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). And some forms of civic engagement are more demanding than others: Voting requires far less effort and knowledge than contacting public officials, running for office, or even working with others on a community project. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995, 286) argue that resources are the key to understanding variations in participation, while factors such as trust and other values are largely beside the point.

We argue that trust and resources may be alternative explanations for some kinds of participation. But they are complementary for others. Of course, we accept the argument that a person’s resources are important for understanding most forms of civic

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

engagement. Just as critical as how well any individual fares is how resources are distributed in a society. Following Burnham (1965), we would expect lower levels of participation where resources (incomes) are distributed unequally. Where some people have far more than others, they are less likely to feel common bonds of social responsibility. In a world of haves and have-nots, those at either end of the economic spectrum have little reason to believe that “most people can be trusted.” We thus argue that social trust rests on a foundation of economic equality (Uslaner, 2002). There is both a direct and indirect (through trust) impact of resources on civic engagement.

The story is not quite so simple as positing a causal chain with direct and indirect effects. Economic inequality (or, more generally, resources) does not depress all forms of engagement in the same way (Verba and Nie, 1972). The rich may donate more money, but not more time, than the poor (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995, 192). It takes less effort to vote than to contact public officials. As we shall argue below, trust may have little effect on many forms of civic engagement, so the indirect effects of inequality will be muted as well.

Our focus is on the linkage among inequality, trust, and civic engagement. Our unit of analysis is the American states. Inequality is an aggregate concept, not readily captured at the individual level. So we develop aggregate models of civic engagement.

The connections of trust, civic engagement, and inequality are not merely an intellectual puzzle. Trust and most forms of civic engagement have declined, in some cases dramatically, since the 1960s. Putnam (2000, chs. 3, 6; p. 141) argues that these trends are strongly interrelated. He claims that a revival in public participation can lead to more social trust and a more cooperative society and government.

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

Wuthnow (1998) and Uslaner (2002, ch. 5) dispute the roots of the decline of civic engagement. Individual-level *and* aggregate multivariate analyses suggest that there is *not* a single syndrome of civic withdrawal. In some arenas, participation in civic life has *increased*. Most forms of civic engagement have little to do with trust. Instead, the roots of the decline in trust stem from increasing economic inequality. As inequality rises, people feel that they have less in common with other members of society. As we trust each other less, we are less likely to engage in the sorts of civic activities (giving to charity and volunteering time) that help those most in need (and who are most likely to be different from ourselves).

We shall investigate the relationships between trust, inequality, and different forms of civic engagement at the state level. We posit a model in which inequality has largely indirect effects on civic engagement through the depressing impact of unequal incomes on trust in others. However, we do not expect powerful (even significant) effects of trust on all forms of civic engagement. We must also consider the direct effects of inequality on participation and the possibility that civic engagement will increase trust in fellow citizens.

So we estimate models for different types of civic engagement--voting turnout, signing petitions, attending political meetings, volunteering time, and giving to charity--that allow us to examine both direct and indirect effects of inequality on civic engagement. These two-stage least squares models also allow us to consider whether higher levels of trust lead to more civic engagement (Stolle, 1998), whether civic engagement promotes social trust (Brehm and Rahn, 1997), whether the relationship is reciprocal (Putnam, 2000, 137), or perhaps even spurious in many instances (Uslaner,

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

2002, ch. 5). We estimate models at the state level because inequality is a collective concept, not easily captured in individual-level models.

### **Trust and Participation**

Trust and equality are *not* alternative explanations for why people get involved in their communities. The roots of each explanation are complementary. Both trust and equality may lead people to become more involved in their communities, but trust can only flourish where there is considerable equality.

Tocqueville (1945, 169, 175) offered the most famous formulation of the linkage between trust and civic engagement. But he also argued that Americans came together for collective action because they saw each other as equals. Unlike most European countries, the United States had no history of feudalism, with its powerful class structure (Tocqueville, 1945, 169; Sombart, 1976).

This sense of equality helped Americans overcome the great temptation of democratic governments, the tendency toward selfishness and withdrawal from engagement with others (Tocqueville, 1945, 121-124). Americans abjure self-interest in favor of “self-interest rightly understood.” Contemporary observers call this regard for others “generalized trust” (Putnam, 1993, 89; Uslaner, 2002, ch. 2). This concern for the well-being of others leads people to become engaged in their communities, and through civic participation (especially in voluntary associations), “the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal influence of men upon one another” (Tocqueville, 1945, 122, 104).

Another foreign visitor to the United States, the Englishman Lord Bryce who came later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, saw social equality as the key to understanding why

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

Americans were more trusting and generous than Europeans. Bryce (1916, 873-874) observed:

People meet on a simple and natural footing, with more frankness and ease than is possible in countries where every one is either looking up or looking down... This naturalness...enlarges the circle of possible friendships...It expands the range of a man's sympathies, and makes it easier for him to enter into the sentiments of other classes than his own. It gives a sense of solidarity to the whole nation, cutting away the ground for the jealousies and grudges which distract people...

Tocqueville's work has set the agenda for a consideration of why people take part in civic life, as part of a burgeoning research agenda called "social capital." A key argument in this literature is that civic engagement is higher in places (and times) when interpersonal trust is higher.

### *Social Capital Thesis*

The social capital thesis holds that people who have faith in their fellow citizens will be likely to take a more active role in public life. Lane (1959, 163-164) argues:

...those who are inclined to participate have...a faith in their fellow men.

Those who believe that others can be trusted, are cooperative, will help a person when he needs help, and care about each other are more likely to believe in the democratic process... ..[T]hose with a relatively greater faith in people are psychologically prepared to accept the democratic process and to believe that they, and others like them, may be effective in elections.



## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

Almond and Verba (1963, 285) add: “In the United States and Britain, the belief that people are generally cooperative, trustworthy, and helpful is frequent, and it has political consequences. Belief in the benignity of one's fellow citizen is directly related to one's propensity to join with others in political activity.”

Putnam (1993, 170-171) argues that “trust lubricates cooperation,” and shows that trusting people are far more likely to join civic organizations than people who do not have faith in their fellow citizens (Putnam, 1995b). Stolle (1998) writes of “self-selection effects”: Trusting people opt in to civic life, mistrusters opt out.

### *Causality*

Even among people who see a clear relationship between trust and civic engagement, there are disputes about the direction of the causal arrow. For many, the causal arrow runs from *civic engagement to trust, not the other way around*. Tocqueville (1945, 108-109) offers the most famous statement on how social ties build trust:<sup>1</sup>

Feelings and opinions are recruited, the heart is enlarged, and the human mind is developed only by the reciprocal influence of men upon one another....these influences are almost null in democratic countries; they must therefore be artificially created, and this can only be accomplished by associations.

Putnam (1993, 90) writes: “Participation in civic organizations inculcates skills of cooperation as well as a sense of shared responsibility for collective endeavors.” And Stolle (1998, 500) elaborates: “...membership in voluntary associations should increase face-to-face interactions between people and create a setting for the development of trust....[T]he development of interpersonal trust and cooperative experiences between

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

members tends to be generalized to the society as a whole” (cf. Levi, 1998). Brehm and Rahn (1997) report a much stronger link from group membership to trust (as Tocqueville argued) than from trust to civic engagement in their analysis of General Social Survey data from the 1970s to the 1990s. But others, such as Putnam, see the relationship between both formal and informal social ties, on the one hand, and trust, on the other hand, as “mutually reinforcing”: “The more we connect with other people, the more we trust them, and vice versa” (1993, 180; 1995b, 665).

van Deth (1996, 7) expressed the benefits of joining organizations:

The remedy against atomization and social disintegration characteristic of mass society is...the active membership of individuals in all kinds of voluntary associations. Irrespective of the goals of these organizations or the motives and motivations of the participants, these groups provide the opportunity to meet other people and to cooperate in one way or another. Almost by definition, these activities will counteract the negative impacts of mass society on the position of the individual.

Yet, the logic behind the linkage between trust and civic engagement is contestable. It is not so clear that civic engagement depends upon trust and it is even more doubtful that it can create trust. And there is little reason to believe that if trust and civic engagement *are* related, the connection will hold for all forms of participation.

Putnam (2000) argues that *any* form of civic engagement can help to build bonds across people. These disparate forms of civic engagement form a common dimension of “social capital.” People who engage in one form of civic engagement are likely to be involved in other activities. He presents state-level data, aggregated from surveys, that

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

show a single dimension of “social capital” encompassing both formal group membership and informal socializing, together with equality and a surrogate measure of trust.

Yet the individual-level evidence for the claim that trust and the various forms of civic engagement form a single syndrome is weak. At the aggregate level, we do not have models of the causal order of trust and civic engagement. The logic of the argument at either level is not compelling.

The presumption of a linkage between trust and civic engagement stems from a view of trust that sees faith in others as based upon experience. The “standard” account of trust, what Yamigishi and Yamigishi (1994) call “knowledge-based trust,” presumes that trust depends on information and experience. Offe (1999) states: “Trust in persons results from past experience with concrete persons.” Hardin (2002) is even more emphatic: “...my trust of you must be grounded in expectations that are particular to you, not merely in generalized expectations.” We shall argue for a different view of trust, of a kind of trust that is *not* grounded in experience and links us to people *we may not know*. This trust in strangers is very different from confidence in people we know well, or who may simply be like ourselves. Indeed, this is what the generalized trust question used in survey research *means*.

Experience-based trust is important in daily life, but it is not the form of trust essential to resolving collective action problems. The standard trust question asked in surveys, “Generally speaking do you believe that most people can be trusted, or cannot you be too careful in dealing with people?,” is widely presumed to reflect your experiences with others. A more detailed examination of what people mean when they answer the question suggests that this *generalized trust* question really means faith in

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

people we do not know and who may be very different from ourselves (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 3). Trust in people we do not know *cannot be based upon experience* and generalized trust tends to be *resistant to most forms of experience*, including membership in voluntary organizations.

The argument that civic engagement leads to trust may be based more on hope than evidence. As Rosenblum (1998, 48) argues:

...there is the tendency to adopt a simplistic “transmission belt” model of civil society, which says that the beneficial formative effects of association spill over from one sphere to another....The “transmission belt” model is simplistic as a general dynamic. It is one thing to say that within face-to-face rotating credit associations “social networks allow trust to become transitive and spread: trust you, because I trust her and she assures me that she trusts you,” and quite another thing to show that habits of trust cultivated in one social sphere are exhibited in incongruent groups in separate spheres.

Stolle (2000, 233) argues that civic groups amount to “private social capital,” providing benefits only to members that “are not universal and cannot be generalized to other settings.” Most people spend minuscule amounts of time in voluntary organizations and even the most committed activists rarely devote more than a few hours a week to group life—hardly enough time to shape, or reshape, an adult’s values (Newton, 1997, 579). People join groups too late in life to shape their fundamental disposition. Even joiners are not more likely to discuss civic affairs (Mondak and Mutz, 1997), so they may not forge enough common ground with others to generate trust at all. And when people

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

do discuss civic affairs, they talk to people who already agree with them, mostly family members (Bennet, Flickinger, and Rhine, 2000).

The theoretical difficulty is that experience can only build confidence in people we know—and this type of trust does *not* translate into faith in strangers. There is no straightforward linkage, either theoretical or empirical, between trust in people we know and faith in people we do not know (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 5).

The link from trust to civic engagement is more plausible, but even here it is problematic. Civic engagement is hardly a unified concept. You can join a bowling league, a choral society, an environmental movement, a political party organization, a religious group, or a protest movement. Groups based upon common interests, such as bowling leagues, choral societies, and the like are composed of people who are very much like each other. You do not need trust to get people involved in such groups—even misanthropes find outlets for their interests. Religious fundamentalists tend to trust only people of their own background. They do take an active role in civic life, but only in religiously-based groups (Uslaner, 1999; Wuthnow, 1999).

It is hard to see how participation in groups of mistrusters can do anything other than foster mistrust—and it is also hard to see why generalized trusters would be attracted to, much less welcome at, groups that do not promote diversity. Political activity is often confrontational. Parties can only win office by defeating their rivals. And protest politics is necessarily adversarial. Political participation thus thrives on distrust, rather than trust (Barber, 1983; Warren, 1996). Yes, the truly misanthropic may withdraw from any form of civic engagement (Stolle, 1998). But there are plenty of opportunities for civic engagement by people who do not trust strangers.

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

### *Volunteering and Charitable Giving*

There are two key types of civic engagement that are linked to trust: volunteering and giving to charity. These actions depend more upon moral than financial resources (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 5). Faith in others is essentially an acceptance of the belief that people who may be different from you are nevertheless part of your moral community. It is the moral glue that holds a society together, so these acts of beneficence both stem from trust in strangers and increase faith in others in turn--what economists have called the “warm glow” (Andreoni, 1989).

We thus expect that the effects of trust will be strongest for these beneficences and weaker for other forms of civic engagement such as voting and other political activities as well as for group membership. All sorts of people join voluntary associations. You do not need to trust people who are different from yourself to bond with people like yourself. People who belong to civic groups for a long time trust *other group members* more than those who have joined recently. But they *do not trust strangers any more* (Stolle, 1998). Congregating with people like yourself who distrust others may well lead to an *decrease* in generalized trust (Levi, 1996). So we do not expect to find most forms of civic engagement affecting trust. Charitable giving and volunteering often connect us to people who are different from ourselves, so there should be a stronger connection to trust. Uslaner (2002, chs. 5 and 6) has provided strong support for these arguments at the individual level.

### **Socioeconomic Status, Inequality, and Participation**

Most explanations of why some people participate more than others focus on people's resources. This resources explanation seems simple: People with more

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

resources feel more of a direct stake in politics and therefore are more likely to take part. But it is much more nuanced than that. People with more resources also are more likely to get the sort of political information that lets them see differences between candidates for office, and people who see differences are more likely to vote (Downs, 1957). Better off people also have more free time, so that they will have greater opportunities to take part in civic organizations. And people with more resources will also have more skills that help them take an active part in organizational life (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995, 352).

Early accounts of the relationship between inequality and participation equated economic resources with power. The conventional wisdom held that those with fewer resources participated in civic society and associations (broadly understood) more than the wealthy; whereas the wealthy held power over societal institutions and organizational structures that did not require active participation (Alford and Friedland 1975). Research conducted since that time has challenged these notions, and findings indicate that for almost every form of participation this is inaccurate.

So what effect does inequality have on participation? The overarching answer is that those who have more participate more, and those who have less participate less, and the very rich are over-represented in all types of participation. But of course this phenomenon is more nuanced than that, and the impact of inequality on participation is different by types of participation, particularly in the differences between political participation and participation in church and other religious activities.

Participation exercised in elections through voting has been extensively studied. Generally, there is greater voter turnout for the rich than for the poor, but the difference

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

between participation by the rich and the poor is less for voting than for all other forms of political participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995).

The poorest people have the lowest rate of participation in campaign work and political financial contributions than all other groups. “The poor are one-quarter as likely as the affluent to do campaign work and about one-tenth as likely to give a campaign contribution” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995, 189). This relationship holds for organizational affiliations and contacting elected and appointed government representatives. This relationship also holds for participation in demonstrations and protests, but in this type of activity there is less of a gap than for the other types of political participation (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, 194-195). Breaking this down for different types of the poor, of those receiving government assistance, recipients of means-tested benefits participate at lower rates than do recipients of non-means-tested benefits (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, ch. 7).

These relationships hold for other types of secular and non-secular volunteering and charitable giving as well, but with some differences. The poor contribute more hours of volunteer work to church activities than do the rich, though the overwhelming majority of this type of work is done by middle-income groups (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, ch. 7). The greatest parity between the rich and the poor is in financial contributions in the church, though when the percentage of total income is taken into account the poor give more than do the rich, and the rich contribute the least to religious activities and institutions (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, ch. 7).

Declines in trust stem from economic inequality. As economic inequality increases, people feel that they have less in common with others, and therefore trust less.



## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

The effect of inequality on participation may largely occur through trust. We expect that the main effect of inequality on participation may be indirect.

However, there are good reasons to expect a direct effect as well: In an unequal world, people with fewer resources may feel that their voices are less likely to be heard or taken seriously. More hierarchical societies leave less room for participation. People may be less anxious to get involved in their communities if they believe that others' actions have substantially more weight than their own. Equality, Tocqueville and Bryce argued, fueled widespread participation in voluntary associations in 19<sup>th</sup> century America. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, American society had arguably become *more* equal. The United States continued to be a leader (if not *the* leader) in membership in voluntary associations. Yet, electoral turnout in the United States lags behind that of virtually every other democracy in the world (Powell, 1986). And turnout is highly stratified by income. So the relationship between inequality and participation is complex.

Inequality in resources breeds mistrust and indeed is the principal determinant of trust in others (see below). So a general framework emerges in which inequality leads to mistrust, which in turn produces less civic engagement. And inequality also independently leads people away from participation in civic life. Figure 1 displays the basic relationship.

The connection among civic engagement, trust, and economic equality is important because all three have been declining in the United States. Figures 2 and 3 show the sharp declines in interpersonal trust and economic equality in the United States over time. Trust has fallen 47 percent from 1960 (when it 58 percent of Americans believed that most people can be trusted) to 41 percent in 1999, which actually

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

represented somewhat of a rebound from the mid-30s of the mid-1990s. The path has been almost straight downward over 40 years ( $r^2 = .726$ ). The increase in the Gini index of economic inequality from 1960 to 1998 has been somewhat smaller than the decline in trust. But the drop is 25 percent and the path seems strongly linear ( $r^2 = .827$ ). The yearly increments (.005 for trust, .002 for inequality) may seem small, but they have been remarkably consistent—and unrelenting—over the past four decades. We shall examine many trends in civic engagement below<sup>2</sup>; for a detailed account, see Putnam (2000).

The decline in trust and the increase in economic inequality are, not surprisingly, strongly related (see Figure 4). As inequality increases, trust falls ( $r^2 = .527$ ). This could, of course, reflect simple covariation with time: Both trust and equality have fallen over time. However, there are four reasons not to accept this argument. First, extensive modeling with time series operators fails to obliterate the relationship between trust and inequality (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 6). Second, inequality is not only the strongest determinant of trust over time in the United States, but it is also the best predictor of trust in cross-sectional analyses across a wide range of countries. Third, some have suggested that the direction of causality goes the other way (Knack and Keefer, 1997; Putnam, 2000). But simultaneous equation estimation strongly supports the link from inequality to trust rather than the other way around—both over time in the United States and across countries (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 6 and 8). Finally, we shall offer a framework below that explains the linkage between equality and trust.

The key question, which is the focus of our investigation, is whether the link between trust and economic inequality shapes patterns of civic engagement, particularly differences between political participation and participation through volunteering and

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

charitable giving. Does the drop in the various forms of civic engagement track the rise in economic inequality, the decline of trust, or some interaction between the two? Or might some forms of civic engagement bear no relationship to either trust or inequality—and have gone into decline simply because people are doing other things with their time (Wuthnow, 1998)?

The simple diagram in Figure 1 raises more questions than it answers. There are conceptual and measurement issues that call each part of the argument into question. We discuss them in greater detail below. Inequality can be measured at different levels, with different consequences. Inequality is a *relative* concept—some people have more than others. It is based upon income, but is not the same as income. To argue that some people have higher incomes than others says little about the *level* of income inequality. Knowing that a particular person's income is \$50,000 tells us little about income *inequality* as well. The claim that rich people participate more in civic life than poor people is not the same thing as saying that participation will be higher when there is more equality. Of course, the two claims are *similar*, but one does not imply the other. Since income is a property of *individuals* and inequality is a *collective* property, one cannot move from one level of measurement to the other without qualification. Consider a wealthy or middle-income person in a state (Mississippi) or country (Brazil) with a great deal of economic inequality. What matters more for her levels of trust and civic engagement—personal economic circumstances or the level of economic inequality? For trust, we argue that the level of equality is important, while personal economic circumstances are not. For various forms of civic engagement, the impact may be more variable.

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

Voting is a much less demanding form of civic engagement than contacting public officials, working for a political party or attending a rally (Verba and Nie, 1972). Even acts such as volunteering time and giving to charity, which seem quite similar and stem from moral commitments, consume different resources: Charity requires money and volunteering demands time. Some people have more money than others, but everyone is constrained by the 24 hours in a day (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). It may well be that states where people socialize in bars are the same ones where people volunteer their time, but the underlying motivations of each seem quite different—and one might suppose that people seeking to increase the number of volunteers would not find bars to be particularly good recruiting grounds.

The varieties of forms of civic engagement suggest that there are many different patterns with trust and inequality. If generalized trust is *trust in strangers* and trust in people who may be different from ourselves, and if generalized trust is *distinct from trust in people we know*, then there is little reason to believe that trust is important for socializing with neighbors (people we know) or even for joining organizations made up of people very much like ourselves. On the other hand, it should be much more important when we reach out to people who are different from ourselves, such as volunteering or giving to charity (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 5). Similarly, economic inequality should matter more for forms of civic engagement that require financial resources (giving money) or skills that only a minority of citizens have developed (working for a political party and even writing to public officials). It should not be so consequential for less demanding activities such as voting.

### **The Effects of Trust and Inequality on Participation**

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

We move now to a consideration of the effects of trust and inequality on political and other types of participation. We examine the relationships between civic engagement and trust and inequality, and develop a series of endogenous models to examine not only the causal relationships between trust, inequality and participation, but other exogenous variables, as well.

Our data combine surveys and aggregate data.<sup>3</sup> We analyze the survey data at the individual level; we also aggregate survey results to the state level. We employ a wide variety of surveys to estimate state-level measures of trust and other social psychological variables. These surveys were not designed to produce state level measurements. The primary sampling units are not states. Nevertheless, aggregating surveys generally does produce reliable results. Putnam (2000) aggregates General Social Survey (GSS) data to the state level to produce estimates of social capital measures; Brace *et al.* (2002) provide validation of this method of aggregation, comparing estimated state opinions with public policies and other aggregate indicators using GSS data. We use a much broader range of surveys than the GSS in an attempt to get the most reasonable estimates for each state. Since the state measures of income inequality are computed only once each decade, we aggregate the survey data to the state level *by decade*.<sup>4</sup> To maximize the number of cases, our models include observations for the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s where data are available (so our maximum number of cases is  $50 * 3$  or 150). The charitable giving and volunteering estimates are only available for the 1990s.

We faced a trade-off in obtaining *any* data points for some smaller states and unreliable estimates. We chose an arbitrary minimum sample size of 50 respondents (though the vast majority of cases had far more observations than that). If we found

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

observations that were outliers or that had values that seemed unusual, we checked one decade's estimates against those for other decades—and, when necessary, deleted aberrant cases.<sup>5</sup> Overall, we believe that we have minimized errors in the aggregated survey data and have confidence in our estimates. For some other surveys we employ, such as the Roper Social and Political Trends Archive, aggregation is less problematic because of the large number of observations in each annual survey.

### **Assessing the Models**

Our models are all estimated by two-stage least squares, to account for the possibility of reciprocal causation between trust and various forms of civic engagement. Our major premise is that the level of inequality in a state will be a key determinant of trust and that the principal impact of inequality on civic engagement will come through trust, rather than through inequality itself. However, this presumption depends upon a hypothesized relationship between trust and civic engagement. We do expect a strong relationship between trust and communal forms of civic engagement such as volunteering and giving to charity (our measure here is whether people give time or money at all, not how much they give). We do not expect significant relationships for most forms of political participation. For political engagement, if inequality is a key determinant of participation, we should expect a direct relationship. So we include state level measures of family income inequality in both the trust and civic engagement models. Our civic engagement models include three political measures (turnout, attending political meetings, and signing petitions) and two communal measures (volunteering and giving to charity).<sup>6</sup> Our volunteering measure gives us an opportunity to assess the reliability of our aggregation of surveys: Our survey-based measure is correlated at .780 with a Census

Bureau survey of volunteering reported in Jennings and Patrick (2002).<sup>7</sup>

Our models for trust include aggregated indicators of optimism and control, which Uslaner (2002, ch. 4) found to be the most important determinants of trust at the individual level: (1) whether the lot of the average person is getting better or worse (from the General Social Survey ANOMIA5 measure); (2) whether people get ahead in life by hard work or luck (also from the GSS); and (3) an overall measure of financial satisfaction (GSS). Expectations for the longer-term future, as measured by the lot of the average person, is one of the best overall measures of optimism, while how people get ahead gives us a handle on whether people believe that they are the masters of their own fate. Optimists who believe that they are in control do not view trusting strangers as risky.

We also include in our trust model an indicator of *particularized* as opposed to generalized trust: the share of religious fundamentalists in a state (from the GSS, aggregated by state). Fundamentalists are likely only to trust their own kind and not to trust people who are different from themselves (Uslaner, 2002, chs. 2 and 4). Finally, education is consistently among the strongest predictors of trust, so we include this in the model.

Since we have five forms of civic engagement, we have five sets of parameter estimates for trust.<sup>8</sup> Overall, each of the predictors of trust (excluding measures of civic engagement) is significant in all five estimates, with the sole exception of how people get ahead in the petitions equation. So optimism, control, and high levels of education make people more trusting and fundamentalism makes people less confident in strangers. *In each equation except for charitable giving (see below) the level of economic inequality*

*in a state emerges as the strongest or next strongest determinant of trust.* There is strong support for the first link in our causal chain.

There is also strong evidence that civic engagement does *not* lead to trust (cf. Uslaner, 2002, ch. 5; Stolle, 1998; and Oliver, 2001, Appendix C). There is one exception—a weak connection between signing petitions and trust, but this seems rather curious. Putnam’s argument about developing trust from civic engagement presumes a sustained interaction with group members, which then translates into a more generalized trust. However, signing a petition does *not* involve much interaction at all much of the time—a brief meeting on the street, at a fair, or somewhere else.

Where signing a petition does involve greater interactions—say, signing at a club meeting—the organizational milieu rather than the act of signing should be the source of generating trust. Yet, we fail to see any relationship between attending meetings and trust. It is somewhat surprising to find *no* reciprocal relationship between volunteering or charitable giving and trust. Uslaner (2002, ch. 5) provides evidence for such a reciprocal relationship at the individual level. However, we find powerful effects of trust on both volunteering and charitable giving, and a lesser effect for signing petitions. There is no connection between trust and the other forms of political engagement, turnout and attending political meetings.

Table 1 lays out the relationships between trust, inequality and political participation, represented here by voter turnout, attending political meetings, and signing petitions. We estimate identical models for the three political factors. Trust is not significantly related to election turnout but is for signing petitions, albeit very weakly. Trust has a *negative effect* on attending political meetings (but the coefficient is not



significant).

Trust is a significant predictor of volunteering and charitable giving, but its effects on political participation are weaker. We did not expect to find significant effects for political activities. Political participation thrives on distrust, whereas volunteering and charitable giving requires faith in others. Verba and Nie (1972, 52-53, 62) argue that campaign activity is a different form of civic engagement than cooperative efforts at improving your community. While there is a moderate ( $r = .52$ ) correlation between campaigning and communal activity, substantial numbers of Americans participate in only one or the other type of activity. It is thus not surprising to find different determinants of the two forms of engagement.

We find a modest *positive* effect of trust on signing petitions (significant at  $p < .10$ ). Signing petitions may indicate a positive disposition toward strangers. Where do most of us sign petitions? Not at club meetings or bowling alleys (though this is of course possible), but through interactions with strangers while we walk down the street, leave the grocery store, or wait at the bus stop after work. This political transaction requires that we interact with strangers and trust them with personal information about ourselves. Petitions do indicate a faith in the system (and thus a positive view of others). Petitions are not necessarily confrontational either in spirit or in substance: Petitions, unlike campaigns, may not be *against* something or someone.<sup>9</sup> We find no connection between trust and turnout (but see Knack, 1992).

Economic inequality has no direct impact on these relationships. Political participation is not equal among classes, but the activities we focus on here are not especially skewed by class at the state level (Uslaner with Brown, 2002).

## **Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement**

States where there is a higher feeling political efficacy have greater participation in politics. Where people believe that government is paying attention to public concerns, there is higher turnout and greater participation in political meetings. Ironically, signing petitions is not related to perceptions that the government is listening. However, believing that the government is run by a few big interests shapes all forms of participation: The more people believe that government is close to the people, the more likely they are to participate. Education is perhaps the strongest determinant of political participation (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1992). But its effects in these aggregate models is slight, only being significant for attending political meetings. Union membership also mobilizes people—but primarily to vote, with a lesser effect on signing petitions and no effect at all on attending political meetings.

### **Trust, Inequality, and Communal Activities**

Table 2 lays out the relationships between trust, inequality and volunteering and charitable giving. Volunteering and the giving to charity are more prevalent in states with higher levels of trust. But we see no direct effects for economic inequality for either charitable donations or volunteering. Inequality matters for volunteering, but through its indirect effect on trust. There is no indirect effect at all in this estimation for charitable giving.

More inequality leads to less trust—and less caring for people who are different from yourself. Where there is less trust, there are fewer acts of kindness toward others. We don't see the same impact on political engagement because the impacts of trust on political participation are far smaller than those of faith in others on political participation.

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

Volunteering is higher in states where people feel empowered: The higher the number of people who see themselves as community leaders and who see themselves as influential in their communities, the more likely people are to volunteer<sup>10</sup>. Giving time does not depend upon available spare time and is not reduced by heavy watching of television (Uslaner, 2002, 133). Adding education, income, or religious values to this model does not yield significant coefficients.

Across the five models, we find little support for the claim that civic engagement can lead to a more trusting citizenry. Only for signing petitions is there a significant coefficient and there it is marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ). Trust depends less upon civic participation than on a sense of optimism (whether the lot of the average person is getting better or worse and personal financial satisfaction) and control (whether people get ahead by their own hard work or good luck). States with more highly educated populations also have higher levels of trust, while states with higher numbers of religious fundamentalists who attend church regularly have fewer trusters (since religious fundamentalists reserve their trust for people who share their faith). These findings, based upon aggregated measures from the General Social Survey, parallel individual-level results in Uslaner (2002, ch. 4). Across each of the models, the strongest determinant of trust is the level of economic inequality in a state: *The more equal the distribution of incomes, the greater the level of trust.*

### Reprise

We have set forth four main hypotheses. First, inequality will lead to less trust. Second, inequality's effects on participation come largely through trust rather than directly to participation. Third, trust will have greater effects on communal types of civic

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

engagement than on political engagement. Fourth, there is less likely to be an effect from civic engagement to trust than from trust to civic engagement. Each of these hypotheses fare well, though two require some qualifications.

Our findings indicate that inequality has a dampening effect on generalized trust, and this relationship has been consistent over the past thirty years. Inequality in our estimations is generally *the strongest determinant of trust*. Second, we have found little evidence of a direct effect of economic inequality on civic engagement. Inequality has an indirect effect only for volunteering. There is auxiliary evidence that inequality shapes charitable giving: The insignificant coefficient in our model clearly stems from collinearity with the other predictors (especially the level of education in the trust model). Alternative models yield either a direct or indirect effect of inequality on charitable giving—but in each case, the more inequality, the *smaller the share of a state's population that gives money*. This is as we would expect if inequality were driving trust down, but *not as we would expect if people were donating to good causes on the basis of need*.

The poor do participate less in political affairs, but the skew in participation has not increased as income inequality has grown (Leighley and Nagler, 1992). Levels of inequality are unrelated to state level measures of efficacy. The poor may participate less, but this analysis does not show either a direct or indirect effect of inequality on participation.

We can see four explanations for these (perhaps surprising findings): (1) Inequality might lead to mobilization of the poor if there is strong leadership (Fong, 2001); (2) Inequality might demobilize African-Americans rather than whites (though

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

simple zero-order correlations for black and white political participation with inequality do not support this thesis); and (3) Inequality's most important consequence may be in its effects on depressing trust and political cooperation; and (4) The relationship between a participatory skew based on income and inequality is more complex than we imagined and we need a more complex specification. These accounts are *not* mutually exclusive and all may be true in varying proportions.

Third, we found support for our argument that trust has a greater effect on communal participation than on political participation. Finally, we suggested that, contrary to much of the theoretical literature on trust and participation, the causal arrows are more likely to run from trust to civic engagement than from civic engagement to trust.

Inequality matters in both political and communal participation, but in neither case is its effect direct. In both realms, the effect comes through trust. Because trust is more strongly linked to communal than to political participation, rising income inequality seems more critical to our fraying social fabric than to declining political participation. Since minority participation in politics is increasing, looking to inequality to explain levels of political participation may be less realistic now. Since our torn social fabric clearly spills over to our politics—making political parties more polarized (Uslaner, 2000) and making it more difficult to obtain compromises on legislation (Uslaner, 2002, ch. 7)—we must not dismiss the impact of inequality on our political life. It is important, however, to get the story right as to what causes what, and there is meager evidence that economic inequality *per se* is the cause of variations in political participation.

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# Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

Table 1  
Political Participation and Trust

	<b>Turnout</b>	<b>Political Meetings</b>	<b>Petitions</b>
	<i>Trust</i>	<i>Trust</i>	<i>Trust</i>
Political participation	-0.000 (0.000)	0.343 (0.505)	0.262* (0.186)
Gini	-1.729*** (0.301)	-1.977*** (0.299)	-1.089** (0.529)
Lot of average person gets worse	-0.315*** (0.098)	-0.329*** (0.299)	-0.318** (0.118)
Get ahead	-0.191** (0.069)	-0.182** (0.069)	-0.075 (0.110)
Financial satisfaction	-0.264** (0.085)	-0.258** (0.086)	-0.295** (0.114)
Fundamentalism	-0.014** (0.004)	-0.127*** (0.004)	-0.011** (0.004)
Education	0.0356*** (0.007)	0.035*** (0.007)	0.021** (0.009)
Constant	1.623*** (0.168)	1.365*** (0.387)	1.359*** (0.240)
	<i>Turnout</i>	<i>Political Meetings</i>	<i>Petitions</i>
Trust	-6.233 (35.273)	-0.132 (0.088)	0.448* (0.2778)
Gini	-5.757 (125.584)	0.243 (0.311)	-1.061 (0.928)
Government pays attention	79.311*** (17.310)	-0.112** (0.042)	0.089 (0.130)
Labor union	69.504** (27.704)	0.0503 (0.067)	0.323* (0.233)
Church	-26.199*** (2.899)	-0.009 (0.007)	0.0205 (0.022)
Education	-2.663 (2.429)	0.008* (0.006)	0.017 (0.019)
Government run by few big interests	76.687** (24.870)	-0.140** (0.061)	0.366* (0.226)
Constant	-44.359 (60.941)	1.119*** (0.149)	-0.199 (0.477)
n	102	102	93
Participation R-square	0.724	0.179	0.453
Trust R-square	0.747	0.745	0.771

\* p < 0.10

\*\* p < 0.05

\*\*\* p < 0.001

# Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

Table 2  
Other Types of Civic Engagement and Trust, 1990s

	<b>Volunteering</b>	<b>Charitable Giving</b>
	<i>Trust</i>	<i>Trust</i>
Participation	-0.124 (0.202)	0.459 (0.754)
Gini	-2.015** (0.61)	-1.264 (1.143)
Lot of ave person gets worse	-0.300** (0.124)	-0.267** (0.116)
Get ahead	-0.361** (0.005)	-0.278** (0.112)
Financial satisfaction	-0.245** (0.111)	-0.073 (0.145)
Fundamentalism	-0.027*** (0.005)	-0.020*** (0.006)
Education	0.051*** (0.011)	0.051* (0.035)
Constant	1.821*** (0.482)	0.584 (0.719)
	<i>Volunteering</i>	<i>Charity 1990s</i>
Trust	0.625*** (0.178)	0.394*** (0.107)
Gini	0.701 (0.673)	-0.492 (0.480)
Hours watching TV	-0.015 (0.036)	--
Spend time	-0.255** (0.112)	--
Influence	-0.327*** (0.079)	--
Leadership	0.201** (0.079)	--
Income	--	0.00002 (0.0002)
Church membership	--	-0.023* (0.015)
Constant	1.183** (0.619)	0.797*** (0.234)
n	41	37
Trust R-square	0.809	.8812
Participation R-square	0.639	.5548

\* p < 0.10

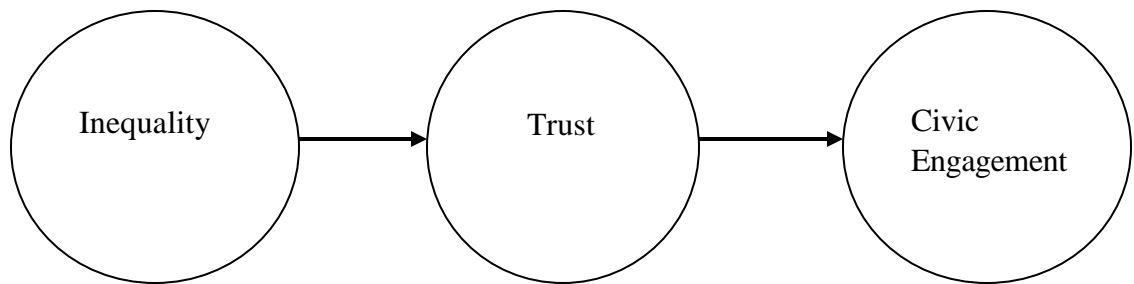
\*\* p < 0.05

\*\*\* p < 0.001

## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

Figure 1

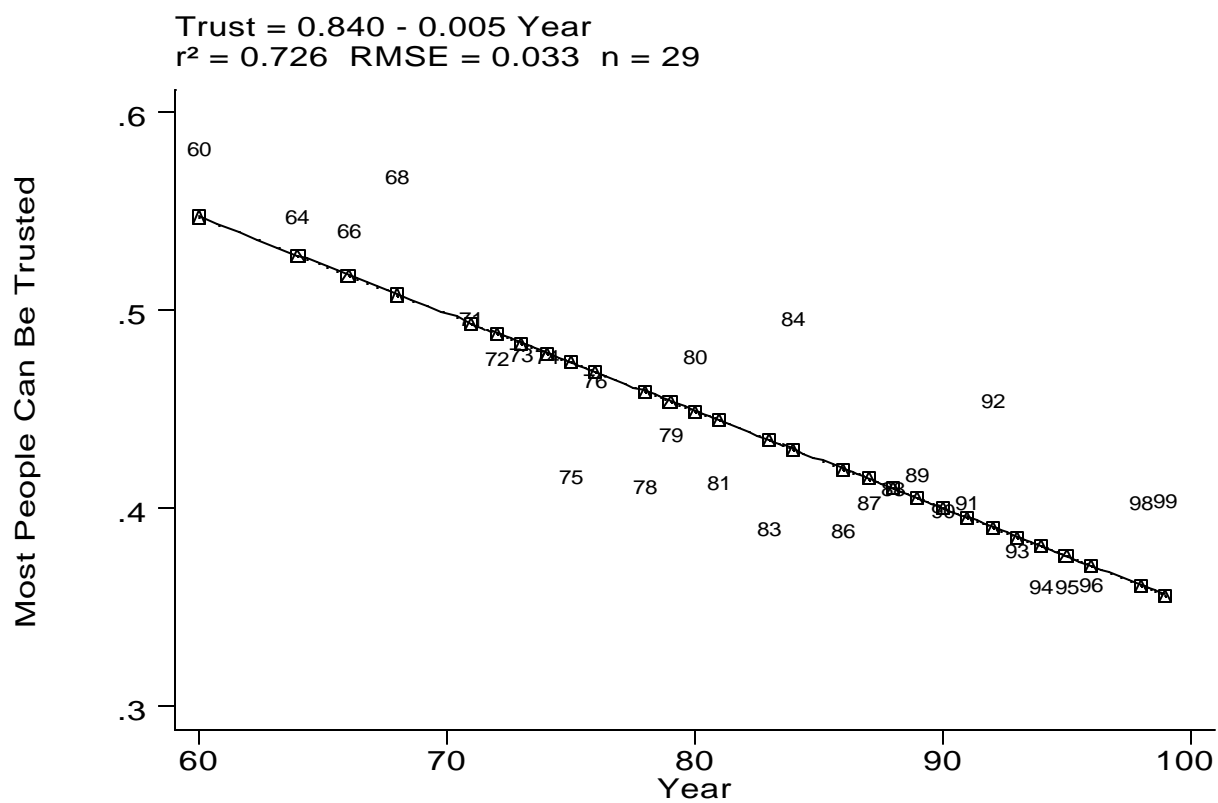
The Relationship Among Trust, Inequality, and Civic Engagement



## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

Figure 2

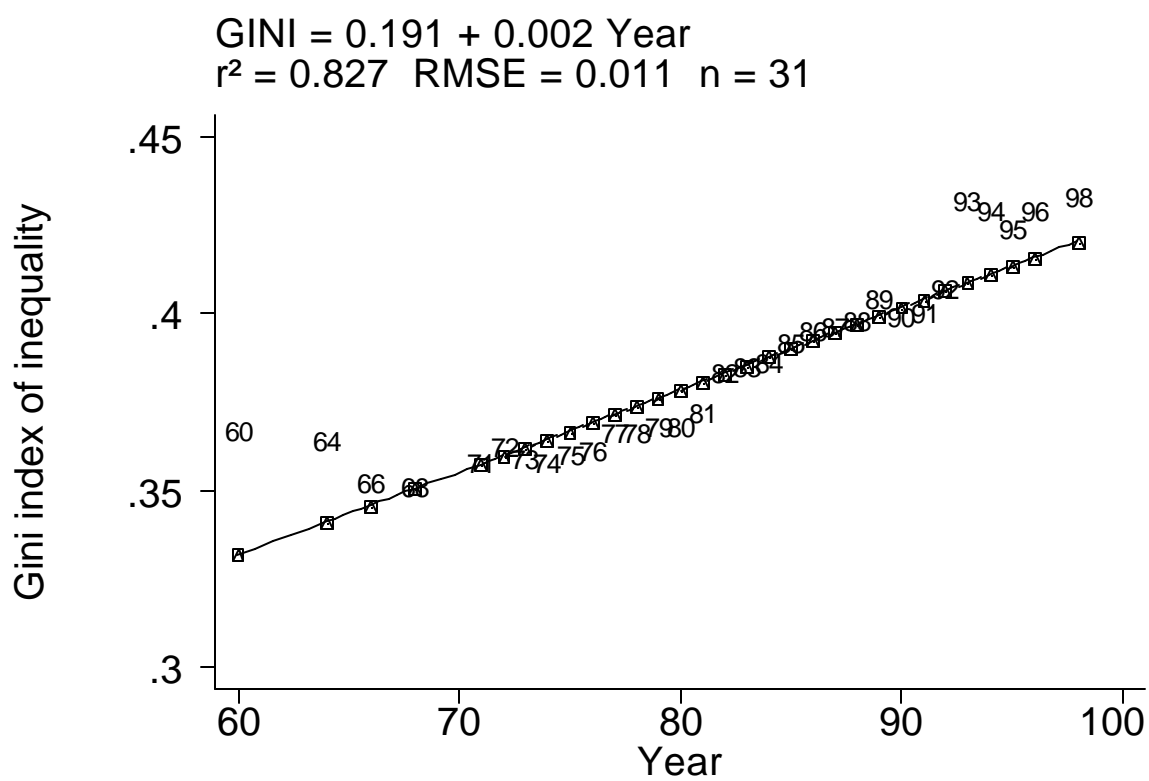
Trends in Trust Over Time, 1960-1999



## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

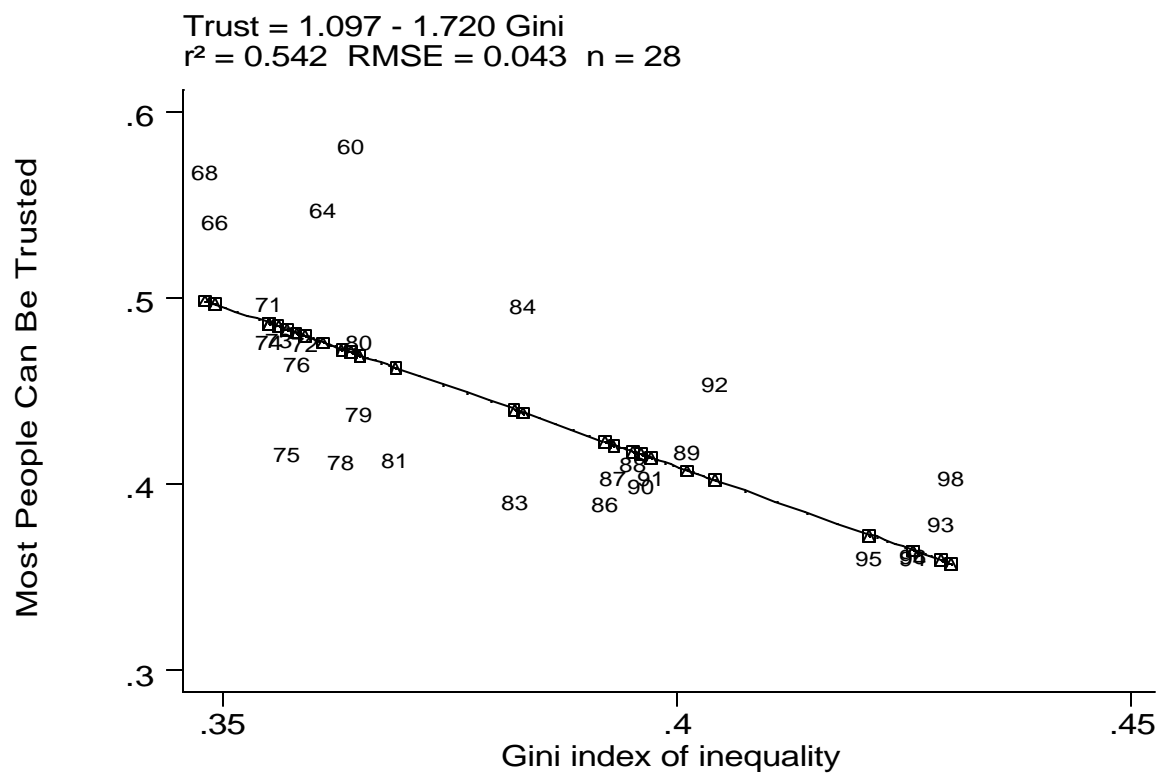
Figure 3

Trends in the Gini Index of Inequality in the United States, 1960-1998



## Inequality, Trust, and Political Engagement

Figure 4  
Trends in Interpersonal Trust and Economic Inequality, 1960-1998





**NOTES**

\*This research was supported by a grant to Uslaner from the Russell Sage Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation under the Social Dimensions of Inequality Project. Some of the data come from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, which is not responsible for any of our interpretations. We are also grateful to the General Research Board, University of Maryland—College Park, for support on related projects and to Barbara Norrander for comments on an earlier draft, presented at the 2002 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association.

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<sup>1</sup>. Tocqueville himself offers contradictory explanations. Only a few pages after arguing that reciprocity can only be developed through group membership, Tocqueville (1945, 121, italics added) reverses the causal ordering—from trust to civic engagement:

I have already shown...by what means the inhabitants of the United States almost always manage to combine their own advantage with that of their fellow citizens; my present purpose is to point out *the general rule that enables them to do so*. Tocqueville's "present purpose" was to describe "self-interest rightly understood," or the generalized trust that leads us to recognize that "man serves himself in serving his fellow creatures."

<sup>2</sup> The data come from a variety of surveys. Whenever possible we used data from the General Social Survey (GSS): 1972, 1973, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, and 1998. Other data come from the Civic Culture survey (1960); American National Election Surveys (1964, 1966, 1968, 1974, and 1992); the Washington Post trust in government survey (1995), the Quality of American Life Survey

- (1971); the World Values Survey (1981); the Temple University Institute for Survey Research (1979, reported in the Roper Poll data base on Lexis -Nexis), and the New York Times Millennium Survey (1999).
- <sup>3</sup>. We are grateful to Arthur Jones, Jr. of the United States Bureau of the Census for providing us with the state level Gini indices and to Ben Highton of the University of California–Davis for turnout data in the United States (obtained from Census data). We have also benefited greatly from the State Policy and Politics Quarterly data resource website, <http://www.unl.edu/SPPQ/datasets.html>.
- <sup>4</sup>. The time series effects of the decades in the pooled data are controlled for with comparison models utilizing generalized two-stage least squares random-effects regression. The results of these models (not shown in this paper) are very similar to those of the two-stage least square regression reported in Tables 1 and 2. The three decades were pooled not just to increase statistical power, but also because we realized that the relationships were largely similar over the three decades. As a result, the hypothesized relationships concerning changing inequality over the three decades did not hold.
- <sup>5</sup>. Fengshi Wu helped with the data aggregation at the beginning of the project. We used the following surveys for generating the trust estimates: GSS (1972, 1973, 1975, 1976, 1978, 1980, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1996, and 1998), American National Election Study (1972, 1974, 1976, 1992, 1996, and 1998), the Washington Post trust in government survey (1995), the Pew Civic Engagement survey (1997), the New York Times Millennium survey (1999), and the 1971 Quality of Life survey of the Survey Research Center, University of Michigan. We did not use the 1978 Quality of Life survey, nor the Jennings-Niemi socialization surveys since the estimates of trust were much higher than those of other surveys and we judged these estimates to be less reliable. Also the World Values Surveys did not have state codes available. We are grateful to Robert Putnam and John Robinson for making the state codes

- for the GSS available to us.
- <sup>6</sup> Our measure of political meetings is aggregated from American National Election Studies. The petitions variable is aggregated from the Roper Survey from the Social and Political Trends Archive. The volunteering and charitable contribution estimates were aggregated from ANES, GSS, Washington Post, New York Times, and INDEPENDENT SECTOR surveys.
- <sup>7</sup> We are grateful to Edward Jennings and Margaret Patrick for providing their data. The correlation increases to .851 when the outliers of Connecticut and Vermont are dropped.
- <sup>8</sup> We could estimate a six-equation model but that would be unwieldy and the parameter estimates would not be reliable.
- <sup>9</sup> We wondered whether this might simply be an artifact, stemming from ecological inference. We ran simple correlations of trust and signing petitions across all three waves of the World Value Surveys for the United States (1981, 1990, and 1995-97). In each case, we found a positive individual-level correlation, with little variation in the size of the tau-c's (ranging from .125 to .135).
- <sup>10</sup> Both of these variables were aggregated from the DDB Needham Life Style Surveys.