

# Rethinking the Meaning and Measurement of Political Trust

*Suzanne L. Parker, Glenn R. Parker and Terri L. Towner<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

Few areas in the study of political attitudes are as rife with controversy as the analysis of political trust. The issues touch upon measurement, conceptualization, and theory, and empirical analyses have resulted in contradictory findings. Despite a growing literature, there are lingering, fundamental questions about political trust that remain unanswered. Even basic questions such as what is being measured by the most popular indicators of political trust in the U.S., the American National Election Studies (ANES) questions, are under contention.<sup>2</sup> In this analysis, questions that remain about political trust are examined using new measures of trust in political incumbents.

Specifically, a number of research questions are addressed: First, do citizens distinguish between trust in the government, and trust in individual politicians? Second, to what extent is trust in government an all-embracing concept—that is, do the trust-in-government questions represent system support (or regime support), or trust in only the national (federal) government? Third, since presidents, due to their recognizable influence over public policy, represent government in the minds of many citizens, do citizens differentiate between their trust in government and their evaluations of incumbent presidents? Fourth, are there theoretical and causal linkages

<sup>1</sup> Eder, Christina, Ingvill C. Mochmann, and Markus Quandt (eds). 2015. *Political Trust and Disenchantment with Politics: International Perspectives*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.

<sup>2</sup> The ANES trust questions are: (1) How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time? (2) Would you say the government 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? (3) Do you think that people in government waste a lot of money we pay in taxes, waste some of it, or don't waste very much of it? (4) Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are a little crooked, not very many are, or do you think hardly any of them are crooked at all? (5) Do you feel that almost all of the people running the government are smart people who usually know what they are doing, or do you think that quite a few of them don't seem to know what they are doing?

between the concepts trust in government, trust in incumbent presidents, and presidential job evaluations? These issues revolve around two lingering questions regarding trusting attitudes: Are the conceptual distinctions between incumbent trust, presidential evaluation, and trust in government meaningful empirically, and if they are distinctive concepts, how are they interrelated?

To answer these issues, we use survey data appropriate for disentangling the various interpretations of trust; these data include conventional trust-in-government items, measures of trust in several incumbent political leaders and trust in different levels of government, as well as multiple-indicators of presidential performance evaluations. The availability of multiple indicators of different concepts, and a variety of survey items explicitly designed to address these questions, places this analysis in the rare position to investigate these issues and the contrasting hypotheses surrounding them.

### *Measurement of Trust*

Numerous scholars have examined political trust; however, a debate remains on what is actually being measured. Among the many controversies surrounding this literature, the most prominent is: Do the trust-in-government indicators measure diffuse support for the political system (Miller 1974a, 1974b), specific support for elected officials (Citrin 1974), or satisfaction with the performance of incumbent presidents (Citrin and Green 1986)? David Easton (1965, 1975) was one of the earliest scholars to distinguish between the two types of trust by defining the referents of each: Trust in authorities (specific support) is directed at elected officials, such as the U.S. Congress, whereas trust in the regime (diffuse support) is directed toward the form and structure of government. Following Easton's argument that trust reflects support for the political regime, a battery of questions regarding trust in the regime were developed and included in ANES studies. The results from the ANES's trust-in-government index, however, have generated numerous debates regarding what the conventional political trust indicators actually measure. Citrin (1974) initially raised this issue in his critique of Miller's (1974a) analysis; he contended that the "trust-in-government" questions measured support for the political incumbents and not the political system. In contrast with Miller's prediction of persisting public cynicism, Citrin contended that trust could be restored by simply voting the rascals out of office. That is, if trust in government reflected trust in incumbents, the implications were not as dire as Miller contended; from Citrin's (1974) perspective, lower trust in incumbents did not pose an immediate threat to the political system.

Since the initial exchange about the meaning of the ANES trust measures between Miller (1974a) and Citrin (1974), there have been subsequent attempts to clarify the relationship between support for the political system, trust in incumbent public officials, and presidential evaluations by including measures specifically designed to reflect specific support in the ANES surveys (see for example Abramson and Finifter 1981; Craig, Niemi and Silver 1990; Erber and Lau 1990; Muller and Jukam 1977; Muller, Jukam and Seligson 1982; Seligson 1982; for a review see Citrin and Muste 1999; Levi and Stoker 2000). These attempts did little to resolve the question about the meaning of the ANES indicators, in part because it proved difficult to disentangle specific and diffuse support with the questions that were designed for those surveys. Despite the extensive study of political trust, there remains no consensus on how to measure the underlying concept.

■ The citation "Citrin and Muste 1999" (original) has been changed to "Citrin and Muste, 1999". Please check if appropriate.



### *Explaining Political Trust*

Subsequent research has shown that many factors cause changes in political trust but here too there is no dominant consensus as to what are the most important forces. For instance, political trust can depend on citizens' satisfaction with policy (King 1997; Miller 1974a), national economic evaluations (Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn 2000; Citrin and Green 1986; Citrin and Luks 2001; Feldman 1983; Hetherington 1998; Keele 2007; Lawrence 1997; Miller and Borrelli 1991; Weatherford 1984), evaluations of incumbents and institutions (Citrin and Green 1986; Citrin and Luks 2001; Craig 1993, 1996; Erber and Lau 1990; Feldman 1983; Hetherington 1998; Lipset and Schneider 1983, 1987; Miller and Borrelli 1991; Williams 1985), political scandals and corruption (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Orren 1997; Weatherford 1984), crime, poverty, and family decline (Chanley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Craig 1993; Hetherington 1998; Mansbridge 1997; Pew Research Center 1998), war and foreign policy concerns (Chanley 2002; Damico, Conway and Damico 2000; Nye 1997; Parker 1995), macro- and micropartisanship (Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn 2000; Keele 2005), and social capital (Keele 2007). All in all, the underlying assumption is that the public is more trusting when they are satisfied with policy outcomes, the economy is booming, citizens are pleased with incumbents and institutions, political scandals are nonexistent, crime is low, a war is popular, the country is threatened, and social capital is high.

Given the extensiveness of literature, it is not easy to summarize the determinants of trust. In addition, many analyses raise questions about what the conventional political trust indicators measure (e.g., Citrin 1974; Miller 1974a). Feldman (1983) suggested that trust-in-government measured evaluations of

Congress more than any other institution. Feldman's findings also are criticized for being derived from a misspecified model, which when corrected, supplied evidence that trust in government actually reflected institutional more than congressional evaluations (Williams 1985). Furthermore, in a study of racial policy preferences, Hetherington and Globetti (2002) hinted that trust in government is particular to the federal government, but few studies have empirically tested what trust is really measuring.

This analysis attempts to clarify the meaning of "trust in government" by empirically disentangling it from the many competing interpretations—that is, we distinguish trust in government from system-wide trust, trust in politicians, and evaluations of job performance. We expect these concepts to form separate, identifiable dimensions. Specifically, we contend that trust in government reflects trust in the federal or national government, which can be distinguished from trust in incumbent political leaders, trust in state government, and presidential job evaluations. Once these distinguishable dimensions of trust are established, we then model the causal relationships between trust and political attitudes and behaviors.

### *The Consequences of Trust*

A second leading area of political-trust research has been the question of the consequences of political trust on other attitudes and behaviors. The relationship of presidential evaluations to trust remains perhaps the most controversial of all the issues, with many models characterizing evaluations of presidents as causing trust. For example, several studies have found that evaluations of the president's performance had a direct effect on trust, so that higher dissatisfaction with presidential performance is associated with higher levels of public distrust (Erber and Lau, 1990; Citrin 1974; Damico, Conway and Damico 2000; Miller 1974b; Feldman 1983). Conversely, Hetherington (1999) found that respondents with low levels of trust were more likely to vote for the non-incumbent or third party candidate (see also Peterson and Wrighton 1998), and that trust influences evaluations of the president and the U.S. Congress (Hetherington 1998, 2005). He also uncovered a reciprocal relationship between presidential performance and trust, although the causal path from trust to presidential evaluation was the stronger of the two paths. Thus, another unresolved question in the trust literature is the direction of influence between presidential evaluations and trust, if one indeed exists. We anticipate that trust in the federal government influences trust in incumbent politicians, and that a reciprocal relationship between the two does not exist.

## Data and Measures

The data were collected by means of random sampling and telephone interviewing with adult (18 years and older), Florida residents<sup>3</sup> as part of an annual policy survey conducted by the Survey Research Laboratory at Florida State University in the U.S. Even though these data were collected from Florida residents, it would be unwise to interpret the findings as limited to a single state. Florida has a heterogeneous population reflecting the cultures of several regions in the U.S. in addition to the South, in particular the Midwest and Northeast—only about one-fifth of the population is native to the state. Further, the candidate-centered politics that have come to characterize national politics in the last two decades (see, for instance, Wattenberg 1990, 1991) have been widespread in Florida since the 1940s (Key 1949). Arguably, then, our findings could be generalized to other U.S. states as well as states in federated systems; as this analysis unfolds it will be evident why state surveys may actually be most useful in exploring questions involving trust in political leaders. That is, in order to query people about their trust in politicians, respondents need to recognize and evaluate a common group of incumbent officials. State surveys provide that opportunity because all respondents are asked to evaluate the same state officials, as well as their state government.

### *Trust in Government*

Three of the five original indicators of trust in government typically included in the ANES surveys are used here: trust in the government in Washington to do what is right; is government run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or for the benefit of all people; and perceived degree of waste of tax money in government. (See Appendix A for the wording for all questions used in this analysis; the frequencies for the questions are available in Supplemental Material A.<sup>4</sup>) In measuring trust in government, the original ANES questions that asked whether most people in government were (1) “honest” and (2) “knew what they were doing” were omitted, because these questions appear to be directed at incumbent political leaders; hence, including them would surely bias the analysis toward finding that trust reflects support for incumbent. At the very least, it might confound the effects of trust in incumbent politicians with trust in government.

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3 The data were collected using a list-assisted random sample, and with a sample size of 1083, the sampling error is +/- 5%. The response rate for this survey was 60%. The interviewing was conducted from January-April, 1997.

4 Please refer to <http://www.brill.com/products/book/political-trust-disenchantment-politics>.

To ensure this key latent concept continues to retain a high degree of reliability, a question about the quality of representation provided by the federal government was substituted. A preliminary factor analysis showed that this variable occupied the same dimension as the three ANES indicators of trust in government, thereby enhancing the reliability of the trust-in-government measure. At a later point, we demonstrate that this indicator behaves properly in terms of the measurement of trust in government.

### *Trust in State Government*

In addition to trust in the federal government, respondents were queried about trust in Florida's state government. Four questionnaire items served this objective. Two questions duplicate the format and wording of the questions about the federal government: trust in state government to do what is right and the extent of tax waste in state government. Similar to the national-level questions, the third question asks if respondents are well represented by state government. The final indicator of trust in state government is the degree of attention given to Florida public opinion.

The trust in state government measure does more than simply permit an examination of whether people distinguish between levels of government in making their trust-in-government evaluations. More importantly, it allows us to test whether the trust-in-government measure is capturing general system support, or only orientations directed at the national/federal government. That is, do the trust-in-government items record levels of trust in the entire political system, or basically just the federal government, as the wording of some of the items contained in the measure imply?

### *Trust in Political Leaders*

Central to an understanding of the meaning of political trust, as well as addressing the long-standing Miller-Citrin debate, is whether voters are thinking about *individual* incumbents when responding to the trust-in-government questions; hence, it is imperative to in some way differentiate between attitudes toward government, and those directed at incumbent officeholders, in measuring trust. Previous efforts to develop measures of incumbent trust in order to empirically test for differences between the two concepts have encountered difficulties. For instance, a noteworthy effort in the 1978 ANES study used questions measuring trust in then U.S. President Jimmy Carter to this end, but analysis of these measures with the trust-in-government questions found them closely aligned <sup>▲</sup> the trust-in-government questions. Consequently, the authors concluded that the new measures did a poor job measuring trust in the incumbent president (Abramson and Finifter 1981). On the other hand, questions

included in the 1987 ANES pilot survey were able to distinguish between regime-based and incumbent-based trust (Craig, Niemi, and Silver 1990), but regrettably, these items were not repeated in subsequent surveys, so the conceptualization is of limited value. Nor have a sufficient number of questionnaire items been included in past studies to allow for the development of measurement models that could disentangle the relationships among the latent concepts underlying trust in the regime and trust in the political authorities.

We address this issue by measuring both types of trust: trust in political leaders captures the attitudes of voters toward incumbent politicians, whereas trust-in-government captures constituents' attitudes toward the broader political system, or merely the national government. In this analysis, trust in political leaders is linked to constituents' perceptions that the official is taking advantage of his or her position as a public servant, and exploiting the office for personal benefit. It incorporates four survey items eliciting respondents' views of the extent to which political leaders: (1) kept their campaign promises, (2) used their position for personal gain, (3) appeared to be honest, and (4) generally could be trusted to do the right thing. To ensure that respondents' attention was clearly directed at incumbent politicians, and to enhance the generalizability of our findings, well-known incumbent political leaders, at both the national and local levels (elected state-wide), were used as the reference points for these trust items—specifically, then U.S. President Bill Clinton (D), and Florida's two U.S. Senators at the time, Bob Graham (D) and Connie Mack III (R).<sup>5</sup> We believe that this helps to clarify the referent of the trust measures and as noted earlier renders national surveys typically lacking such reference points less useful.

### *U.S. Presidential Performance*

Individual and aggregate-level analyses of trust have done little to alleviate the uncertainty about whether evaluations of presidential job performance are structured by trust in government, or vice versa. Performance evaluations frequently serve as snapshots of how presidents are “doing,” and these ratings have been shown to be responsive to short-term conditions and events, like rallying events and economic “slump” (Mueller 1973; Parker 1995); nonetheless,

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5 Clinton had just been elected to his second presidential term, while Graham had served as Senator for 10 years, and Mack had served for 8 years. Prior to serving as Senator, Graham was a two-term governor and Mack was a two-term U.S. representative. The three incumbents investigated here, then, had ample time in office and sufficient prominence for citizens to have formed some estimation of their trustworthiness. It is important to note that the 1997 Florida survey did not elicit respondents' views on trust in the incumbent Florida governor, Lawton Chiles. Thus, we are limited to comparing the two Florida Senators and the U.S. President.

there may be a more enduring component to U.S. presidential popularity that resides in peoples' trust in government and, perhaps, assessments of individual presidents. Alternatively, poor presidential performance can sour individuals on the national government, or even the entire political system.<sup>6</sup>

Three indicators of job performance are used to measure evaluations of President Clinton. Job evaluation questions asked respondents to evaluate Clinton's performance over "the last four years" in the following areas: the economy, foreign policy, and overall performance. His performance was ranked on a four-point scale that ranged from excellent to poor.<sup>7</sup>

### Dimensionality of Trust Measures

The first question examined is whether "trust in government," "trust in political leaders," and "evaluations of presidential performance" can be distinguished from one another. Simply put, can one differentiate trust in government from support for authorities and the political system, and do citizens do the same? Thus, we clarify the meaning of political trust by empirically testing a series of alternative conceptual specifications. Next, the causal relationships between trust and job evaluations of incumbent officials are modeled.

Tests for the distinctiveness of the concepts were conducted by examining the dimensionality of these measures when subjected to a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (COFAMM); this statistical technique allows one to specify and test the fit of a theoretically-specified dimensional measurement model. The goodness-of-fit of the models is determined by the significance of a Chi-squared statistic, which measures the difference between the correlation matrix produced by the specified (hypothesized) measurement model, and the actual (observed) correlation matrix among the indicators. If the hypothesized measurement model provides a good fit to these data (the dimensional nature underlying the correlation matrix is correctly specified) a nonsignificant Chi-squared statistic results, thereby indicating no significant difference between the observed and hypothesized correlation matrices.

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6 Both possibilities are tested (see footnote 9).

7 The initial step in modeling the causal relationship between trust in government, trust in authorities, and evaluations of incumbent performance is to build a measurement model for the three latent concepts and their indicators. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (COFAMM) is used to test if these measures form three distinct dimensions, and therefore if citizens distinguish between their trust in a leader and their evaluations of his or her performance.

### *Levels of Government*

If trust in government primarily captures attitudes toward the entire political system, then citizens will not distinguish between their trust in the federal and state governments. Still, there is reason to imagine that citizens differentiate between their trust in federal and state governments. For instance, Jennings and Zeigler (1970) find that American citizens readily distinguish between different levels of government affairs. In fact, Jennings (1998, 241) finds that Americans expressed greater confidence in local than national-level government (see also, Conlan 1993). In addition, in the U.S., the system of government is a federal one, where policy responsibilities lie with the state rather than the national government. Citizens are aware that these levels of government have different functions and responsibilities. While citizens differentiate between their trust in various levels of government, one might also imagine a positive relationship between the two. Simply put, either citizens trust the government, both at the national and state levels, or they do not trust government. They do not form distinct trust levels of each level of government. Indeed, trust in state government is usually higher than federal government, but states are not the reservoir of trust and confidence among citizens. Hetherington and Nugent (2001) find that trust at the state level of government is generally dependent on trust in other levels of government. Other scholars also show that state trust is simply influenced by the same variables, such as the status of the economy, that influence trust in federal government (Uslaner 2001; Wolak and Palus 2010). In sum, our arguments lead to the expectation that trust in the state and federal government will form separate dimensions, with a positive relationship between the two.

As expected, we find two latent dimensions: the Chi-squared (20.6,  $df = 15$ ) for the two-dimensional solution is insignificant (see Figure 1). The largest correlated errors between the indicators of the two underlying concepts are for the correlation between how well represented people feel in both levels ( $r = 0.41$ ) and between indicators of the degree of waste at each level ( $r = 0.30$ ).<sup>8</sup> Two points are worth noting about this model. First, the signs of the indicators of each unmeasured concept are in the same direction. Second, the correlation between trust in the federal government and trust in the state government is positive. Both of these findings support the contention that people differentiate in terms of their trust between these two levels of government, with the relationship between them is highly positive ( $r = 0.75$ ). People who are trusting of the federal government tend to also trust state government. Thus, trust in

<sup>8</sup> This may result from the similarity in the format and wording of these two questions. Abramson and Finifter (1981) and Feldman (1983), for example, find wording effects for the trust-in-government questions, but they find them for different questions than we do.

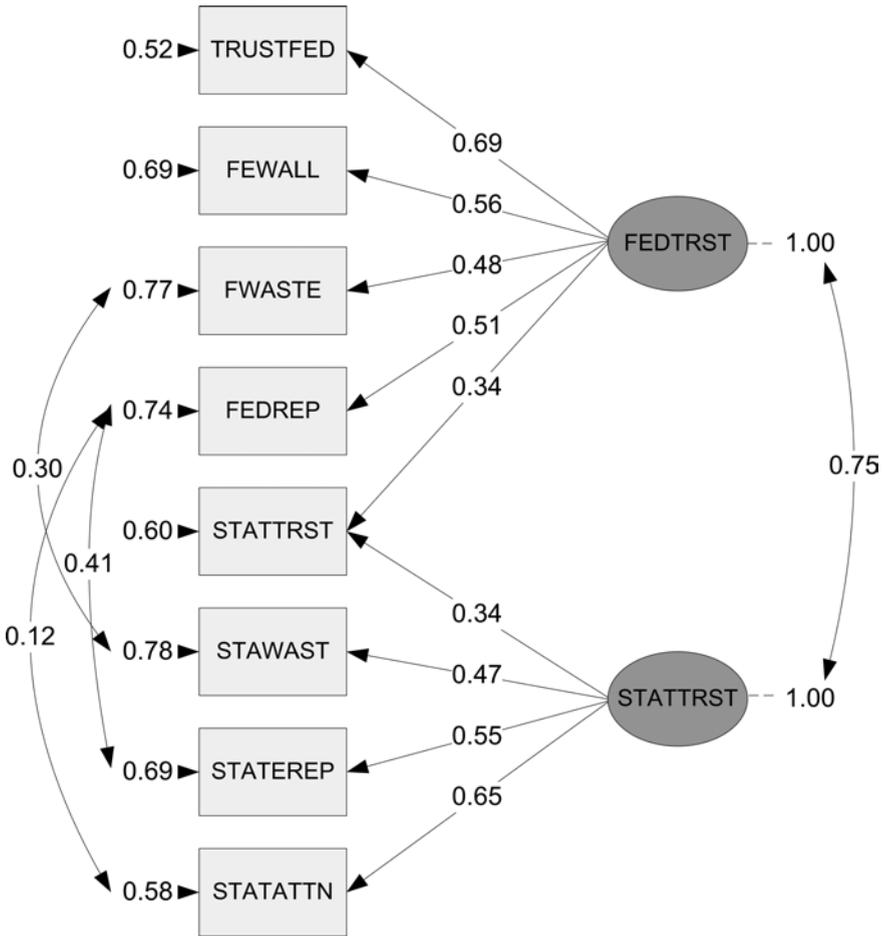


FIGURE 1 *Trust in the government in Washington, D.C. and trust in state government in Florida: a measurement model. Chi-Square = 20.6, df = 15, P = 0.15, RMSEA = 0.02, Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index = 0.99, N = 832*

government is directed at trust in the federal or national government, rather than trust in the political system or in all levels of government, as demonstrated by peoples' distinctions between state and federal governments. Although we are reluctant to generalize this finding to all federated systems, the relationship is certainly worthy of investigation in such settings.

***Political Leaders and Government***

Having established that trust in government reflects feelings toward the national government, the next step is to examine whether citizens distinguish between their trust in the national government and in incumbent politicians.

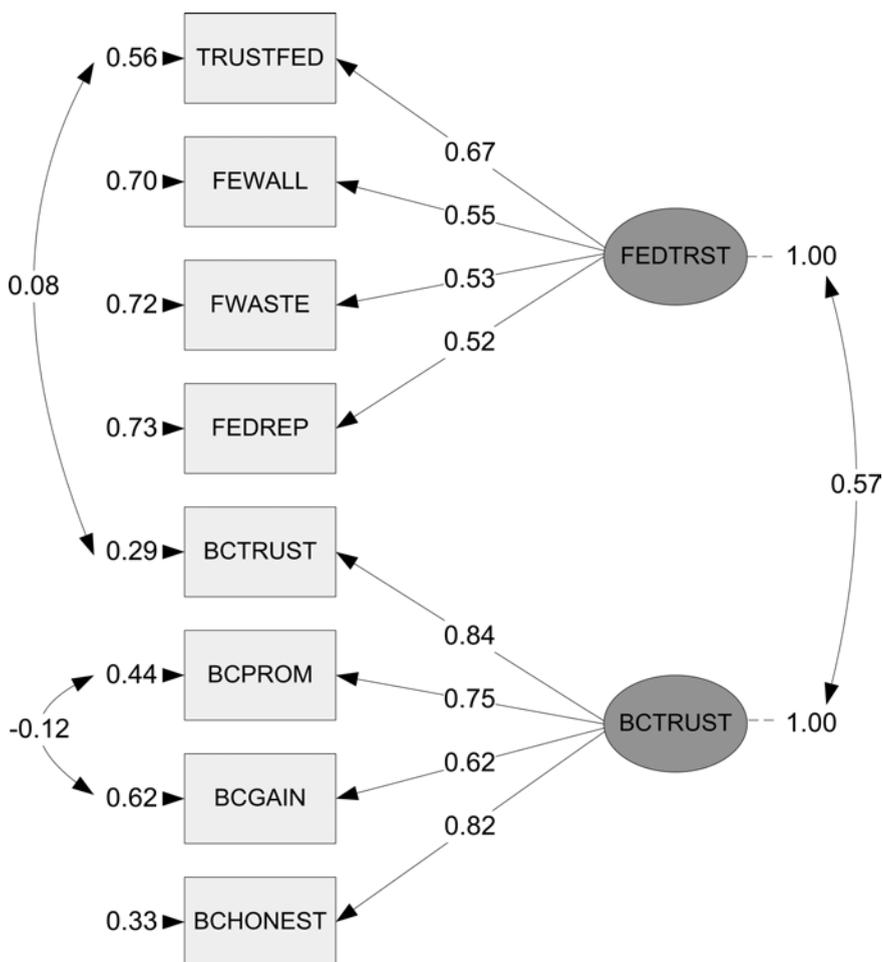


FIGURE 2 *Trust in government and trust in incumbent political leaders: measurement models. (a) Trust in Bill Clinton: Chi-square = 22.97, df = 17, P = 0.19, RMSEA = 0.02, Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index = 0.99, N = 856, (b) Trust in Bob Graham: Chi-Square = 26, df = 19, P = 0.12, RMSEA = 0.03, Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index = 0.98, N = 563, (c) Trust in Connie Mack: Chi-Square = 26, df = 19, P = 0.73, RMSEA = 0.00, Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index = 0.99, N = 495*

Once again, the fit of these data to COFAMM models stipulating a two-dimensional solution between trust in the federal government, and trust in each of the (three) specific politicians, is used to test these relationships.

All three models (incumbent politicians and trust in government) matched these data quite well, with insignificant Chi-squares associated with each (Figure 2). Few of the error terms for the indicators are correlated, and the two

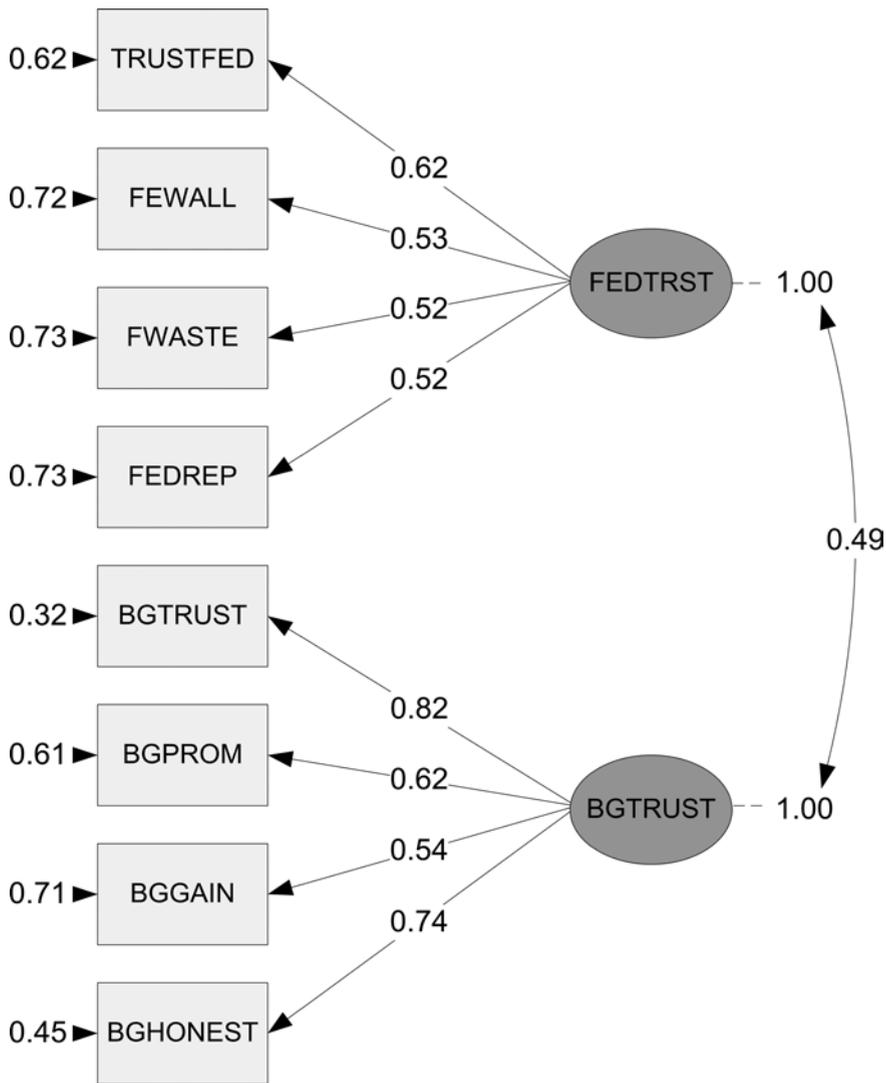


FIGURE 2 (cont.)

that are correlated in the model (for Clinton) are small. Clearly, trust in government and individual politicians are distinctive concepts; they are, as expected, also positively correlated—that is, higher trust in government is associated with higher trust in incumbent political leaders. The correlations are moderate in size, with trust in government more strongly associated with trust in national leaders—i.e., Clinton ( $r = 0.57$ )—than more local ones—Graham ( $r = 0.49$ ) and Mack ( $r = 0.37$ ). In short, people distinguish between “government” and

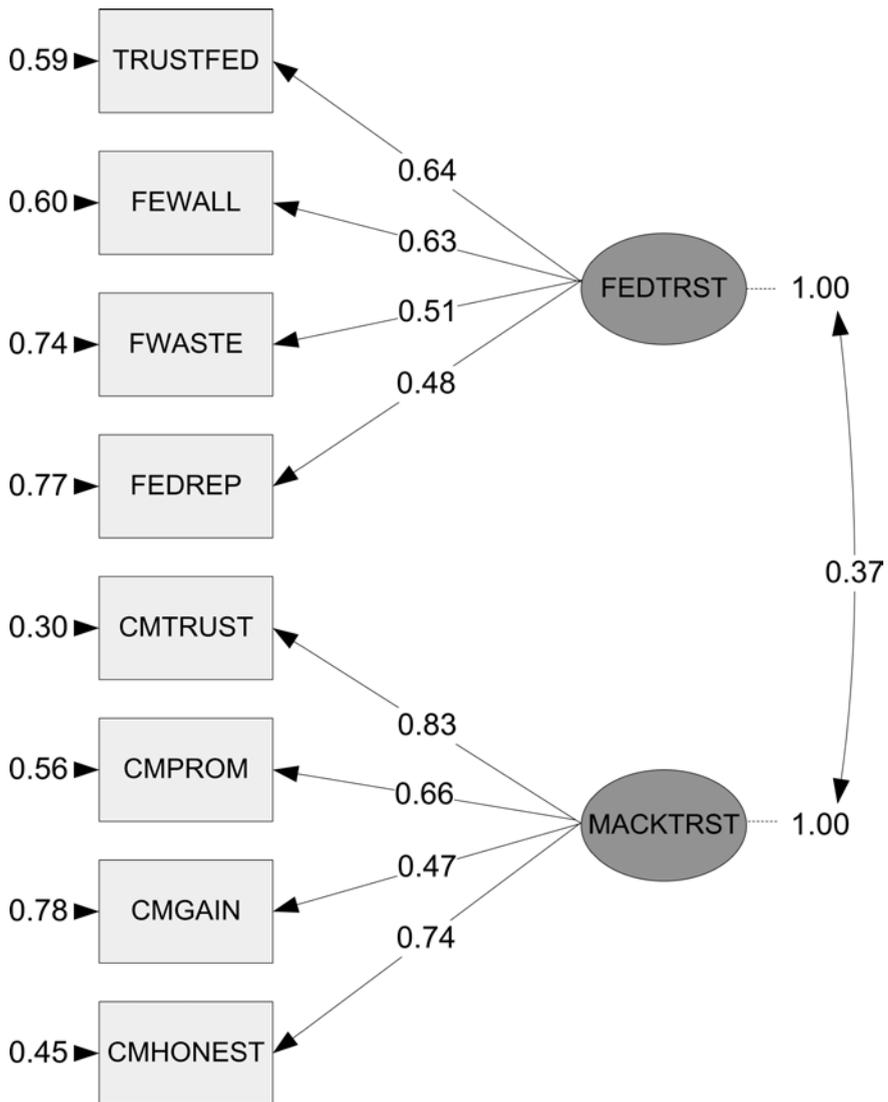


FIGURE 2 (cont.)

incumbent political leaders; still, those who are more trusting of government are also more trusting of incumbent political leaders. Yet, the concepts are clearly distinctive.

*Trust and Evaluations of Job Performance*

Now that a difference between trust in government and trust in politicians has been established, the next task is to demonstrate that these trust measures can

be differentiated from citizen assessments of incumbent job performance. Some scholars have suggested that the trust-in-government questions reflect little more than satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the job performance of the current administration (Citrin 1974; Citrin and Green 1986)—simply put, trust in government and incumbent evaluations are interchangeable; we believe otherwise. By following the same testing procedures—namely, formulating a COFAMM model and testing for a three-dimensional fit to the data—we find that Clinton's performance ratings can be differentiated from both trust in government and trust in Clinton. As the model in Figure 3 indicates, Clinton job evaluations (i.e., evaluation of his last four years in office, evaluation of his job performance on the economy, and evaluation of his job performance on foreign policy) form a dimension separate from both trust in Clinton and trust in the federal government (Figure 3). In short, there are three identifiable dimensions underlying these trust and evaluation variables—i.e., trust in the federal government, trust in Clinton, and performance ratings of Clinton.

The three dimensions also are related to one another: The strongest correlation is between Clinton trust and Clinton evaluations ( $r = 0.86$ )—higher levels of Clinton trust are associated with higher evaluations of Clinton's performance. The next strongest relationship is between trust in government and trust in Clinton ( $r = 0.57$ ), and the weakest of the three is between trust in government and Clinton's job evaluation ( $r = 0.46$ ). Once again, higher levels of trust are associated with higher job evaluations. In sum, the results of the confirmatory factor analyses indicate that trust in government reflects attitudes about the federal government, which can be distinguished from trust in incumbent political leaders, trust in state government, and presidential job evaluations.

### Structural-Equation Models

We have now demonstrated that these concepts—trust in incumbents, trust in the political system, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction with presidential performance—are not interchangeable with trust in government, but this should not be construed to mean that these distinctive latent concepts are unrelated. It is expected that theoretically-based causal connections underlie these concepts. Blindness to the causal dynamics among these concepts may be one reason why studies have largely ignored the face validity of the trust-in-government questions with their reference to the federal government firmly embedded within the survey items. Hence, the next question is whether these distinctive concepts relate to each other, and if so, how they are related. For this purpose,

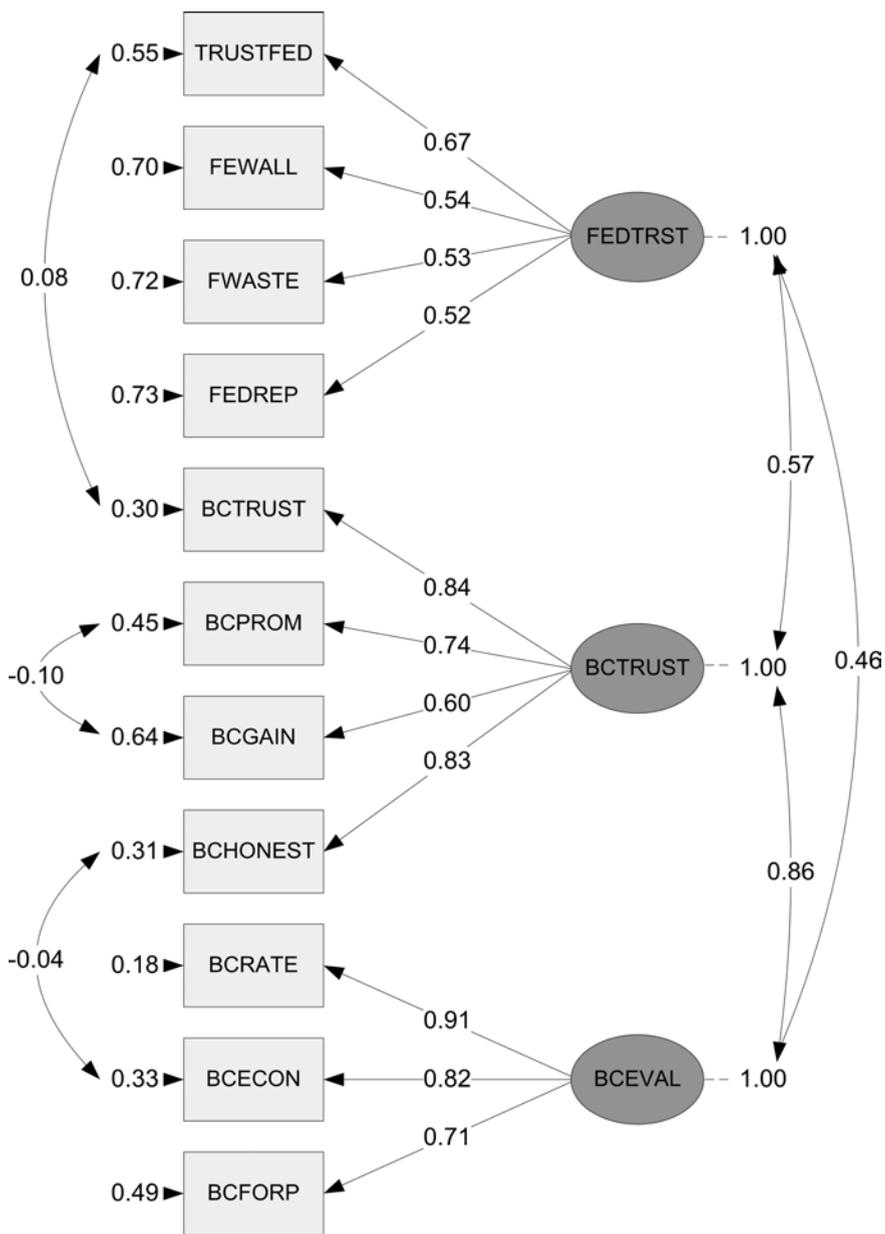


FIGURE 3 *Trust in Government, trust in Clinton, and Clinton job evaluations: a measurement model. Chi-Square = 49, df = 38, P = 0.12, RMSEA = 0.02, Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index = 0.98, N = 818*

structural-equation models of the relationships among these variables are developed and tested. This section of the analysis tests the aforementioned causal relationships using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) and maximum likelihood estimates in LISREL.<sup>9</sup>

This statistical technique is particularly well suited for situations in which modeling the measurement error is important and multiple measures of the latent concepts are available. A modeling process is followed where COFAMM measurement models are initially built, and then path analyses using maximum likelihood estimation are performed. Although the possibility exists that important variables are omitted from the models, this is not a critical problem for the following reasons: the chi-squared statistics were reduced to insignificance in every instance, which indicates that the model is a good representation of the observed correlations among indicators of the latent concepts; the goodness-of-fit statistics (AGFI, goodness-of-fit index adjusted for degrees of freedom) are large, and well beyond the acceptable range; and there are not even modest correlations between the error terms for the indicators of the dependent and independent variables (concepts), the existence of which might suggest some third variable, excluded from the analysis, but nonetheless related to both the independent and dependent variables.

Consistent with other studies, in particular Williams (1985) and Hetherington (1999), we hypothesize that trust in the federal government *causes* trust in incumbent politicians. Since the analysis reveals that trust in government taps attitudes toward the federal government, it is reasonable to expect that trust in national leaders would be affected by trust in the national government. However, we do *not* hypothesize that the influence between these two latent concepts also flows in the opposite direction—i.e., trust in government is affected by trust in political elites—because untrustworthy or unresponsive political leaders can be removed from office before their actions critically damage levels of governmental trust (Citrin 1974; Easton 1965). Indeed, a study of the relationship between system trust and trust in U.S. Representatives found no evidence of a causal linkage extending from trust in the U.S. Representative to system trust, although a causal linkage in the opposite direction was clearly evident (Parker and Parker 1993).

Further, we expect that *trust in the president is a far better predictor of evaluations of job performance than trust in government*. Presidential evaluations tend to focus on individuals, which makes it far easier for citizens to link that performance to how much they trust the incumbent Chief Executive, than to their more amorphous views of government. In their haste to uncover the

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9 Readers seeking a more in-depth discussion of LISREL modeling are directed to Joreskog and Sorbom (1993).

roots and effects of trust in government, scholars may have, regrettably, ignored the relevance of citizen trust in incumbent office holders. Simply put, trust in presidents, rather than the larger national government, structures citizen evaluations of presidential job performance. In fact, a spurious relationship between trust in government and evaluations of presidential performance is suspected, contrary to Citrin's (1974) contention.

The first model includes both direct and indirect relationships between trust in government and Clinton evaluations, with the indirect path operating through trust in Clinton (Figure 4, Model 1). While the direct relationship between trust in government and Clinton's evaluations is not significant (Beta =  $-0.04$ ), the direct relationship between trust in Clinton and Clinton evaluations is strong and positive (Beta =  $0.88$ ); thus, trust in Clinton leads to higher evaluations of his job performance. The important conclusion that can be drawn from this model is that trust in government has only an indirect effect on Clinton evaluations with trust in Clinton mediating the relationship.

In Model 2 (Figure 4) the direct path between trust in government and Clinton evaluations has been eliminated and the model is reestimated. Once again, the model provides a good fit to these data with an insignificant Chi-square value. The relationship between trust in Clinton and job evaluations remains significant (Beta =  $0.86$ ), as does the path between trust in the federal government and trust in Clinton (Beta =  $0.57$ ). The modification index, which specifies whether further adjustments to the model are warranted, indicated that there were no significant paths left out of the model and, more importantly, that a reciprocal relationship between trust in government and trust in incumbents was needless.<sup>10</sup> Thus, all the evidence points to a causal link from trust in government to trust in incumbent political leaders, and from trust in leaders to job evaluations. Although these findings are limited to the U.S., there is no reason to believe that the job performance of chief executives in general is immune to such effects.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> A model was tested that included a reciprocal relationship between trust in the political system and trust in Bill Clinton. The path from Bill Clinton trust to system trust was not statistically significant. A model was also tested with a reciprocal relationship between Clinton trust and Clinton evaluations, but the path from Clinton evaluations to Clinton trust was not statistically significant.

<sup>11</sup> Models were tested to examine if personal characteristics, particularly partisanship, drive trust in government. To test the latter, we estimated the causal model in Figure 4, Model 2, separately for Republicans and Democrats. The models show that the patterns for Republicans and Democrats are the same. The latter is not surprising, as previous scholars show that trust in government is weakly explained by personal differences (Stokes 1962; Uslaner 2001). See Supplemental Material B for the partisan models (Please refer to <http://www.brill.com/products/book/political-trust-disenchantment-politics>).

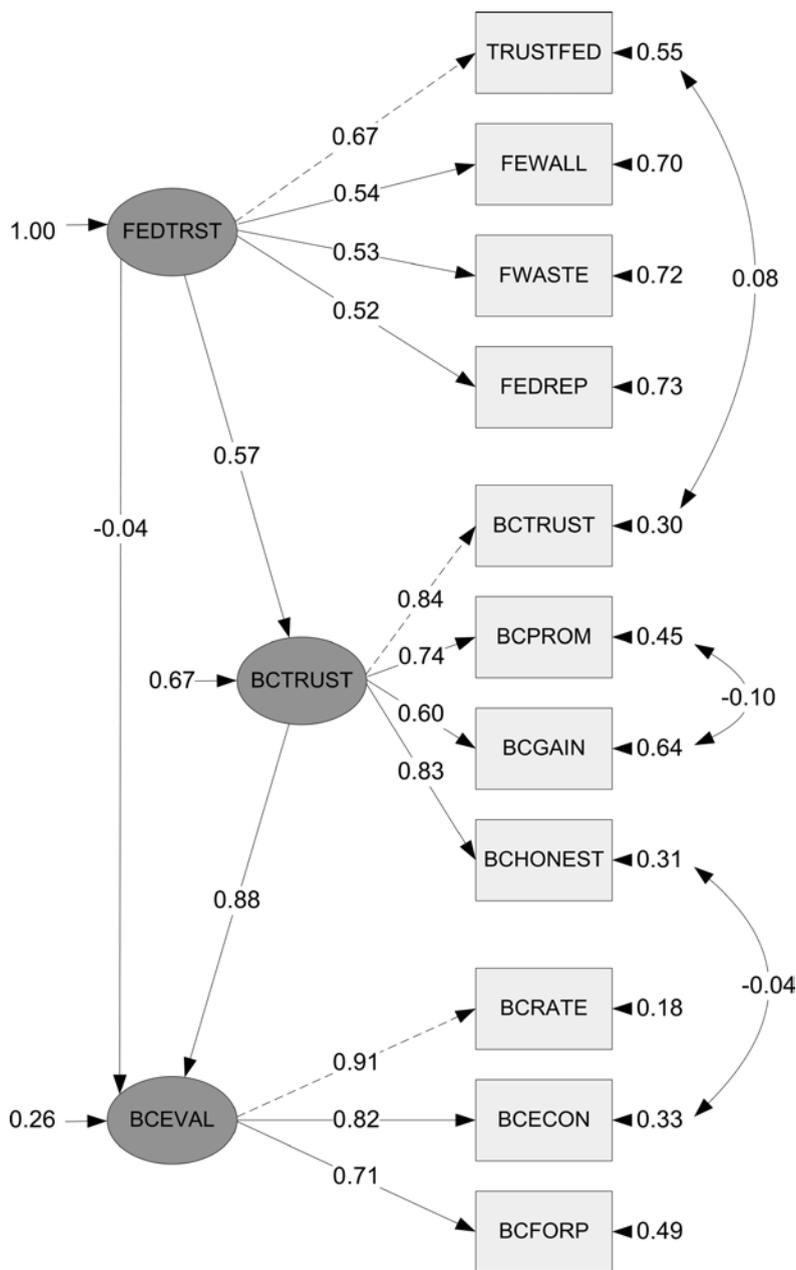


FIGURE 4 *Trust in Government, trust in Clinton, and Clinton job evaluation: a causal model (standardized solution). (a) Model 1: Chi-Square = 49, df = 38, P = 0.12, RMSEA = 0.02, Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index = 0.98, N = 818, (b) Model 2: Chi-Square = 50, df = 39, P = 0.12, RMSEA = 0.02, Adjusted Goodness of Fit Index = 0.98, N = 818*

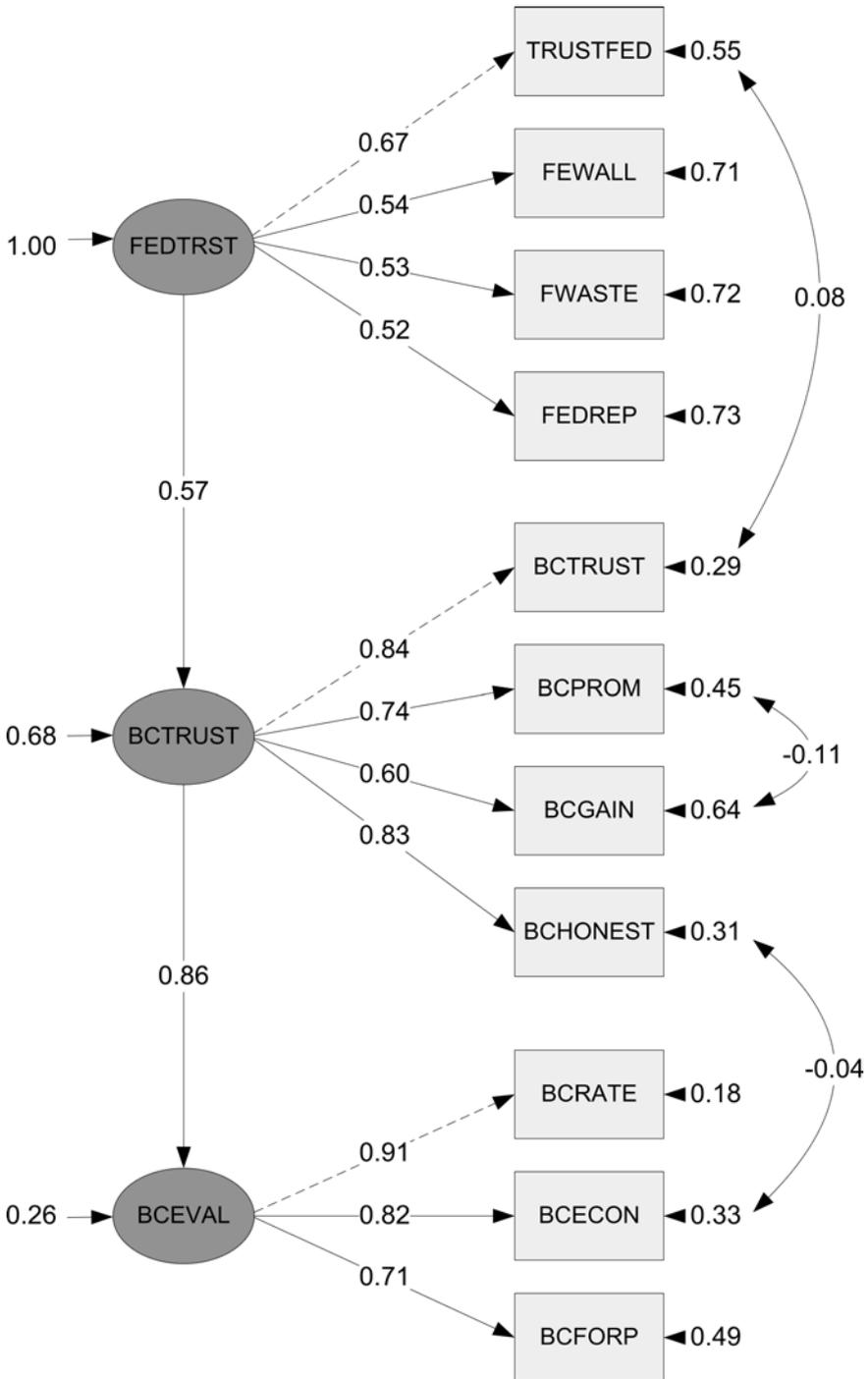


FIGURE 4 (cont.)

## Summary and Implications

To summarize, the measurement and causal models presented here support the contention that the trust-in-government measures refer to attitudes directed at the federal government. Although there is a strong relationship between trust in government and trust in incumbent authorities, it is not so strong as to suggest that they are measuring the same thing. In short, we have been able to distinguish between incumbent and federal government support.

Then, how do the above findings fit with previous research about trust in government? As to the disagreement between Citrin and Miller, we would suggest that Citrin (1974) was right to point to the distinction between trust in government and trust in incumbent politicians; Miller (1974a, 1974b) was correct in contending that the measures reflected more than trust in incumbent officials. Our research shows that citizens differentiate between trust in government and their trust and evaluation of public officials (at least the U.S. president and senators). Our findings show three distinct dimensions of trust—trust in the federal government, trust in the state government, and trust in incumbent officials. Finally, Citrin (1974) was also correct in suggesting that declining trust in government did not necessarily mean that people were dissatisfied with the political regime, principles, norms or institutions. It is not the case, however, that voting the incumbents out would restore trust in government. Given that trust in the federal government is distinct from trust in officials, throwing the rascals out does not necessarily increase trust in the government.

The missing variable in the Citrin (1974) and Miller (1974a, 1974b) analyses that permits us to disentangle the meaning of trust is “trust in the state government.” This variable allows us to uncover the true focus of the trust-in-government variables—the *federal* government. Using state trust, we show that those who trust the federal government tend to also trust the state government. While Americans distinguish between the two levels of government, the way they feel about one level of government depends on the other level. In other words, the degree to which trust varies at the state level is ~~simply~~ a reflection of sentiments about the national government. This means that state and local governments have limited ability to promote public trust. The implications of this finding are: declining trust in government may denote declining distrust of democracy or support for radical changes in the constitutional system.

Citrin and Green (1986) suggest that the rise in trust in government during the Reagan presidency (1981–89) reflects the effects of presidential performance on people’s trust in government. In contrast, we find that trust

in government indirectly affects presidential evaluations, and presidential evaluations do not cause trust in government. Yet, it is possible levels of trust in the federal government increased because Republicans believed that President Reagan was successfully restraining the power and size of the federal government. That is, Republicans began to trust the federal government because Reagan was finally able to rein it in after Democratic control. He restrained busing; he reduced social spending and increased military spending; and he was outwardly sympathetic toward citizens' distrust of the federal government. On the other hand, it can be argued that Democrats naturally have a higher regard for the federal government because of their strong belief in using the federal government to solve national problems. In general, Republicans' belief that the federal government was reduced in size and power relative to the state government restored trust in the 1980s in the U.S. This is a reoccurring theme in American politics, and may be endemic to its federal structure.

It is also not surprising to see trust in the federal government responsive to performance of the national economy (Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn 2000), to international events, and to military actions (Parker 1995), as these are legitimate areas within the federal government's purview. Further, given that trust in government reflects the belief by many that the federal government had overstepped constitutional bounds and grown too powerful, finding that those who displayed reduced trust were less supportive of expanded social programs and spending (see Hetherington 2005) is not surprising.

Our research suggests that it might be fruitful to investigate government trust in other countries, particularly within other federated systems. This is particularly important as trust in government has declined in numerous industrial democracies across the globe (Dalton 2004). For example, in Europe, trust in the European Union is very important, as the EU is currently increasing its political authority over the member states. One might expect that citizens in these federations might not like to see the role of the federal government expanded relative to the role of state governments. As a result, antipathy for the European government may increase among citizens in member states. Drawing on our research, we would argue that growing distrust at the state level is linked to the increasing distrust toward the EU. To re-establish trust, the EU must rebuild confidence at the national level rather than member states seeking to restore trust at home. Turning to trust in political actors, Dalton (2004) reports that distrust in politicians is evident in the U.S. as well as Sweden and Canada. Our study suggests that even if Swedes and Canadians removed those incumbents—trust would not be restored—as trust in the federal government is distinct from trust in politicians.

## Appendix: Literal Question Texts for New Measures of Trust in Political Leaders

### *Trust in State and Federal Political Leaders*

There also has been a lot of talk recently about the trustworthiness of elected officials. I'll be asking you how trustworthy you think a couple of elected officials are. If you do NOT know who the person is, let me know and I'll go on to the next person. If you do not have enough information to answer a particular question, let me know and I can go on to the next question.

The first official is Bob Graham. [The next official is *Connie Mack/Bill Clinton*].

Q. Of the promises (*Graham/Mack/Clinton*) made when he was running for office, how many do you think he has kept? Would you say: All of them, most of them, only some of them, or none of them?

Q49	BGPROM	Bob Graham Promises
Q53	CM PROM	Connie Mack Promises
Q57	BCPROM	Bill Clinton Promises

Q. How often do you think (*Graham/Mack/Clinton*) has used his position to benefit himself personally? Would you say: Most of the time, some of the time, or rarely?

Q50	BGGAIN	Bob Graham uses position for personal gain
Q54	CMGAIN	Connie Mack uses position for personal gain
Q58	BCGAIN	Bill Clinton uses position for personal gain

Q. How would you rate (*Graham/Mack/Clinton*) honesty? Would you say: Very honest, fairly honest, somewhat dishonest, very dishonest?

Q51	BGHONEST	Bob Graham honesty
Q55	CMHONEST	Connie Mack honesty
Q59	BCHONEST	Bill Clinton honesty

Q. How often do you feel you can trust (*Graham/Mack/Clinton*) to do what is right? Would you say: Almost always, most of the time, only some of the time, or never?

Q52	BGTRUST	Trust in Bob Graham
Q56	CMTRUST	Trust in Connie Mack
Q60	BCTRUST	Trust in Bill Clinton

### *Trust in State and Federal Government*

Q41. Thinking now of state government in Tallahassee. How much of the time do you think you can trust Florida state government to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

STATRST Trust in state government

Q42. How much of each tax dollar you pay to STATE government would you say is wasted? Would you say: All of it, most of it, some of it, or hardly any of it?

STAWAST Waste in state government

Q43. How well represented in the STATE government are you and people like you? Are you well represented or poorly represented?

IF POORLY: Are you somewhat or very poorly represented?

IF WELL: Are you somewhat or very well represented?

STATEREP Representation in state government

Q44. Over the years how much attention do you feel state government pays to what the people think—a good deal, some, or not much?

STATATTN State attention to public opinion

Q45. Thinking now about the FEDERAL government in Washington, D.C. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington D.C. to do what is right: Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

TRUSTFED Trust in the federal government

Q46. Would you say the country 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?

Do you feel strongly or not so strongly about that?

FEWALL Country run by the few or the many

Q47. How much of each tax dollar you pay to the FEDERAL government in Washington D.C. would you say is wasted—all of it, most of it, only some of it, or hardly any of it?

FWASTE Waste in the federal government

Q48. How well represented in FEDERAL government are you and people like you? Are you well represented or poorly represented?

IF POORLY: Are you somewhat or very poorly represented?

IF WELL: Are you somewhat or very well represented?

REPFED Representation in the federal government

### *Bill Clinton Job Evaluations*

Q38. How would you rate the job that Bill Clinton has done as president over the last four years? Would you say excellent, good, fair or poor?

BCRATE Bill Clinton 4 year evaluation

Q39. How would you rate the job Bill Clinton has done handling the ECONOMY in the last four years?

BCECON Bill Clinton evaluation on handling the economy

Q40. How would you rate the job that Bill Clinton has done handling FOREIGN POLICY in the last four years?

BCFORP Bill Clinton evaluation on handling foreign policy

**Supplemental Material A: Frequencies for Variables Used in the Analysis**

*New Measures of Trust in Political Leaders*

There also has been a lot of talk recently about the trustworthiness of elected officials. I'll be asking you how trustworthy you think a couple of elected officials are. If you do NOT know who the person is, let me know and I'll go on to the next person. If you do not have enough information to answer a particular question, let me know and I can go on to the next question.

The first official is Bob Graham. [The next official is *Connie Mack/Bill Clinton*].

Q. Of the promises (*Graham/Mack/Clinton*) made when he was running for office, how many do you think he has kept? Would you say:

	Q57 BGPROM Clinton	Q49 BGPROM Graham	Q53 <del>Graham</del> Mack
1. All of them	3%	2%	3%
2. Most of them	26	28	22
3. Only some of them	58	36	30
4. None of them	9	2	2
Don't know the person	1	14	26
Don't know/ can't judge	3	17	19
N	1083	1083	1083



Q. How often do you think (*Graham/Mack/Clinton*) has used his position to benefit himself personally? Would you say:



		Q58 BGGAIN Clinton	Q50 BGGAIN Graham	Q54 CMGAIN Mack
1.	Most of the time	29%	8%	6%
2.	Some of the time	43	31	30
3.	Rarely	19	25	17
4.	Don't know/can't judge	7	35	45

Q. How would you rate (*Graham/Mack/Clinton*) honesty? Would you say:

		Q59 BCHONEST Clinton	Q51 CMHONEST Graham	Q55 CMHONEST Mack
1.	Very honest	10%	21%	14%
2.	Fairly honest	48	44	39
3.	Somewhat dishonest	22	7	5
4.	Very dishonest	15	1	1
5.	Don't know	5	27	40

Q. How often do you feel you can trust (*Graham/Mack/Clinton*) to do what is right? Would you say:

		Q60 BCTRUST Clinton	Q52 BCTRUST Graham	Q56 CMTRUST Mack
1.	Almost always	12%	13%	11%
2.	Most of the time	32	35	24
3.	Only some of the time	43	25	25
4.	Never	8	1	1
5.	Don't know	4	26	38

*Trust in State and Federal Government*

Q41. Thinking now of state government in Tallahassee. How much of the time do you think you can trust Florida state government to do what is right:

STATRST

1.	Just about always	5%
2.	Most of the time	32
3.	Only some of the time	57
4.	VOLUNTEERED: Never	3
8.	Don't know	3

Q42. How much of each tax dollar you pay to STATE government would you say is wasted? Would you say:

STAWAST

1.	All of it	3%
2.	Most of it	27
3.	Some of it	60
4.	Hardly any of it	5
8.	Don't know	5

Q43. How well represented in the STATE government are you and people like you? Are you well represented or poorly represented?

IF POORLY: Are you somewhat or very poorly represented?

IF WELL: Are you somewhat or very well represented?

STATEREP

1.	Very well represented	4%
2.	Well represented	38
3.	Poorly represented	36
4.	Very poorly represented	9
5.	Don't Know	12

Q44. Over the years how much attention do you feel state government pays to what the people think—a good deal, some, or not much?

STATATTN

1.	A good deal	13%
2.	Some	48
3.	Not much	35
4.	Don't know	3

Q45. Thinking now about the FEDERAL government in Washington, D.C.

How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington D.C. to do what is right:

TRUSTFED

1.	Just about always	5%
2.	Most of the time	19
3.	Only some of the time	69
4.	VOLUNTEERED: Never	6
5.	Don't know	2

Q46. Would you say the country 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?

Do you feel strongly or not so strongly about that?

FEWALL

1.	Strongly a few big interests	45%
2.	A few big interests	27
3.	Benefit of all	16
4.	Strongly the benefit of all	6
5.	Don't know	5

Q47. How much of each tax dollar you pay to the FEDERAL government in Washington D.C. would you say is wasted—all of it, most of it, only some of it, or hardly any of it?

FWASTE

1.	All of it	4%
2.	Most of it	39
3.	Some of it	51

4.	Hardly any of it	3
5.	Don't know	3

Q48. How well represented in FEDERAL government are you and people like you? Are you well represented or poorly represented?

IF POORLY: Are you somewhat or very poorly represented?

IF WELL: Are you somewhat or very well represented?

REPFED

1.	Very well represented	4%
2.	Well represented	30
3.	Poorly represented	45
4.	Very poorly represented	12
5.	Don't Know	9

*Bill Clinton Job Evaluations*

Q38. How would you rate the job that Bill Clinton has done as president over the last four years? Would you say:

BCRATE

1.	Excellent	12%
2.	Good	37
3.	Fair	28
4.	Poor	21
8.	Don't know	2

Q39. How would you rate the job Bill Clinton has done handling the ECONOMY in the last four years?

BCECON

1.	Excellent	10%
2.	Good	38
3.	Fair	34
4.	Poor	16
5.	Don't know	2

Q40. How would you rate the job that Bill Clinton has done handling FOREIGN POLICY in the last four years?

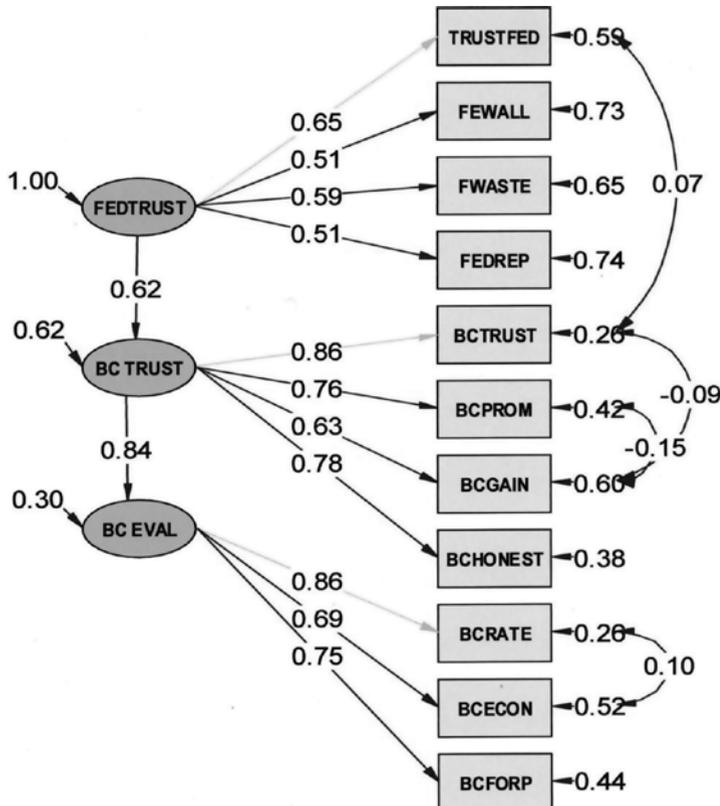
		BCFORP
1.	Excellent	6
2.	Good	32
3.	Fair	36
4.	Poor	20
5.	Don't know	6

**Supplemental Material B**

Trust in Government, Trust in Clinton, and Clinton Job Evaluation: A Causal Model for Party Identifiers (Standardized Solution)

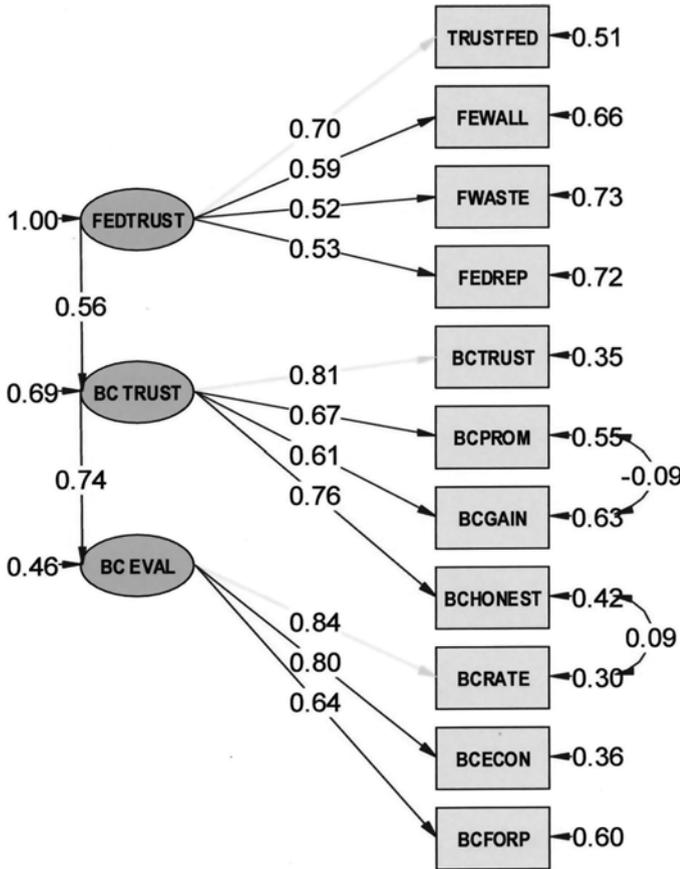
Republicans

Chi-Square = 51, df = 38, P = .08, RMSEA = .03, N = 288, AGFI = .95



Democrats

Chi-Square = 51, df = 40, P = .12, RMSEA = .03, N = 245, AGFI = .94



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