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Political trust, civic duty and voter turnout: The Mediation argument

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether civic duty mediates the effect of political trust on voter turnout. Specifically, this study outlines the relationship between political trust, civic duty and voter turnout by incorporating political trust into the rational choice model of turnout. Empirical evidence from Taiwan, the United States and the United Kingdom supports the mediation argument. This study consistently finds that political trust exerts a significant mediation effect on voter turnout through civic duty. Besides, this study also confirms a weak or no direct relationship between political trust and voter turnout. The findings imply that past studies have misestimated the impact of political trust on voter turnout and it is wrong if we simply assume a direct relationship between political trust and voter turnout, and do not think about other mechanisms between them. Therefore, we should treat the relationship between political trust and voter turnout more seriously and cautiously.

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1. Introduction

Political trust refers to the confidence people have in their government and institutions and denotes an evaluative orientation of citizens toward their political systems based on their normative expectations (Hetherington, 1998; Miller, 1974). Political trust is critical for democratic governance. For example, Easton (1965) argues that the democratic legitimacy of political systems depends on how much citizens trust their government to do what is right most of the time; Gamson (1968) contends that political trust is necessary to build support for democratic government; moreover, Dahl (1971) thinks that democratic society is unlikely to emerge without political trust. Therefore, low levels of political trust are viewed with

alarm and are a major concern for the functioning of democracy. In view of importance of political trust in the operation of democracy, scholars have made a considerable effort to identify the consequences of political trust (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; Wong, Wan, & Hsiao, 2011).

This study pays special attention to the relationship between political trust and political participation, especially focusing on the mechanism how political trust affects voter turnout that is still the “most common and important act of political participation in any democracy” (Aldrich, 1993: 246). Past studies have simply examined the direct effect of political trust on voter turnout and hardly addressed whether political trust could affect voter turnout through another variable. Given the close linkage between political trust and civic duty (Mishler & Rose, 2005; Pammett & LeDuc, 2003), this study argues that civic duty plays a mediating role in the relationship between political trust and voter turnout, and provides empirical evidence to support this theoretical relationship using

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survey data from Taiwan, the United States and the United Kingdom. This study expects to provide new insight into how political trust influences voter turnout and points out the mediating mechanism in the relationship between political trust and voter participation.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The second section provides a theoretical discussion on the relationship between political trust, civic duty and voter turnout, and outlines a set of testable hypotheses. The third section describes the data, measurement of variables and model specification. The fourth section reports the results of empirical tests. The final section concludes with a summary of empirical findings and discusses their implications.

2. Relationship between political trust, civic duty and voter turnout

Previous studies have offered some theoretical frameworks to account for the relationship between political trust and political participation. Generally speaking, there are two different and incompatible arguments about the impact of political trust on individual political behavior. The first argument is that the trusting should be expected to participate to a greater extent than the distrusting, at least in conventional activities such as voting and campaign involvement. This argument is based on the idea that distrust will discourage political engagement because of disaffection and alienation (Almond & Verba, 1963; Stokes, 1962). Empirical evidence from the United States shows that the over-time decline in voter turnout coincides with the over-time decline in political trust. By contrast, the second argument contends that it is distrust, rather than trust, to stimulate political engagement, or at least, distrust stimulates political participation among those who feel politically efficacious. Gamson (1968: 48) is the first scholar to develop a specific hypothesis about the roles of both political trust and efficacy in predicting political participation, suggesting that a high level of political efficacy and a low degree of political trust is the optimum combination for mobilization. However, this general argument has not received any empirical support (Fraser, 1970; Hawkins, Marando, & Taylor, 1971).

With regard to the relationship between political trust and voter participation, scholars have arrived at a conclusion that higher levels of political trust are associated with higher levels of voter turnout. Political trust can be viewed as an indicator of citizens' normative expectations toward government and politics, and a higher level of political trust implies that citizens underpin government legitimacy and the policy-making process. Consequently, greater political trust will increase citizens' likelihood to vote. Nevertheless, the empirical findings have been mixed with some studies supporting the positive effect of political trust on voter turnout (Citrin, 1974; Grönlund & Setälä, 2007; Martin, 2010) and other studies indicating no relationship between political trust and voter turnout (Hetherington, 1998; Miller, 1974; Muller, Jukam, & Seligson, 1982; Rosenstone & Hanson, 1993). Despite the mixed results, past studies, in general, have always assumed that political trust is directly connected to voter turnout.

On the other hand, civic duty has been viewed as the most important factor to overcome the paradoxical nature of voting (Downs, 1957; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). Civic duty means that citizens feel obligated to participate in the public affairs so as to contribute to the overall health of the society and polity. Moreover, civic duty comprises of actions and attitudes associated with democratic governance and political participation, and thus civic duty is paramount to the success of democracy. Since citizens with a strong sense of civic duty tend to possess and uphold certain democratic values, they have a moral obligation to participate in politics and are especially likely to vote in elections in order to ensure a well-functioning democracy. As mentioned by Loewen and Dawes (2012), "In the context of voting, a sense of a duty to vote will then be based on a belief that one has an obligation to others to vote, even though voting is costly." Accordingly, there is no doubt that civic duty can engender a strong motivation to turn out and several studies have provided evidence that the sense of civic duty is a powerful predictor of voter turnout (Blais, 2000; Blais & Achen, 2010; Campbell, 2006; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960).

While the above discussion indicates that both political trust and civic duty exert direct influence on voter turnout, this study argues that that political trust can influence individual turnout decisions through the sense of civic duty. That is, civic duty plays a mediating role in the relationship between political trust and voter turnout. Blais (2000) argues that the sense of civic duty captures the motivation of citizens who "are concerned with the well-being of their community as much as with their own self-interest." People feel obligated to undertake actions because they think their actions can benefit others even when the actions are costly to themselves. Therefore, for people to fulfill civic duty, they must believe that the government is willing and able to take care of the public's interest and needs and this belief is built on their trust in government. It is difficult to image that people who distrust their government will feel obligated to participate in civic and political affairs that are not mandatory. As mentioned by Miller and Listhaug (1990: 358), political trust is the "judgment of the citizenry that the system and the political incumbents are responsive, and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny." Therefore, it clearly makes sense that people who lose trust in government should be less likely to possess a sense of civic responsibility. Some studies have provided empirical evidence on the relationship between political trust and civic duty. For example, Butt and Curtice (2010) investigate the possible causes for the decline of civic duty in Britain and find that there is a clear link between political trust and civic duty, although the decline in political trust is not a major cause of the decline in civic duty. Mishler and Rose (2005) examine the consequences of political trust in Russia and show that citizens with higher levels of political trust are more likely to feel a sense of civic duty. Similarly, Pammett and LeDuc (2003) identify the determinants of civic duty in Canada and indicate that political trust is one of significant predictors of civic duty. Overall, it is reasonable to argue that political trust has a mediating effect on voter turnout through the sense of civic duty.

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