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Measuring social trust and trusting the measure

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ABSTRACT

Decades of rigorous quantitative scholarship have generated a wealth of knowledge regarding the causes and consequences of crossnational variations in social trust. However, while some social science disciplines have made significant contributions to this conversation, others have largely failed to do so. The field of international relations, for example, has lagged behind in producing aggregate-level scholarship on social trust. This is surprising given that (1) trust influences public opinion and thereby the incentive structure for political leaders and (2) many peacebuilding efforts directly target the levels of trust in post-conflict settings. Country-level trust scholarship in international relations and the social sciences more generally is hampered by data scarcity. The main purpose of this article is to present a new publicly available data set on aggregate levels of social trust. Relying on a set of 19 widely accepted correlates, we construct a new cross-sectional measure of the concept that covers all countries from 1946 to 2010. We then perform a series of empirical tests establishing the validity of our measure. Finally, we offer a number of bivariate analyses to demonstrate the broad utility of our new variable for scholars in the social sciences.

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of this article is to present a new publicly available data set on aggregate levels of social trust. “Social trust” refers to an individual’s beliefs about the general trustworthiness of others and it is part of a person’s worldview regarding the benevolence of other human beings. Aggregated up to the state-level, the variable constitutes an important dimension of a country’s political culture. Decades of rigorous quantitative scholarship have generated a wealth of knowledge regarding the causes and consequences of cross-national variations in social trust (Knack & Zak, 2001; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005; You, 2012). However, while some social science disciplines have made

significant contributions to this conversation, others have largely failed to do so. The field of international relations, for example, has lagged behind in producing aggregate-level scholarship on social trust. This is a shortcoming for two reasons.

First, trust influences individual-level foreign policy preferences. Citizens who tend to put faith in strangers have a different outlook on global politics than individuals who harbor a very negative outlook on human nature (Fair, Kaltenthaler, & Miller, 2013; Rathbun, 2011a). Since public opinion affects the incentive structure for political leaders (Bueno de Mesquita, 2003; Putnam, 1988), systematic cross-national variations in trust are therefore likely to have major effects on country-level behavior.

Second, at the conceptual level, trust has been identified as an important *dependent* variable for international relations scholars. At the end of civil conflict, restoring trust in a given society is imperative in order to prevent renewed outbreak of fighting and in order to rebuild

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political and economic institutions (Zak & Knack, 2001). Doyle and Sambanis (2006, p. 47) thus “see the problem of rebuilding a war-torn state as one of rebuilding social trust” and many peacebuilding efforts (such as dialogue programs and truth commissions) directly target the levels of trust in post-conflict settings (Rettig, 2008; Schaap, 2005; Svensson & Brouneus, 2013). Nevertheless, even though social trust is an important variable in the theories of many international relations scholars, empirical work in this area has not adequately assessed its causes and consequences. The quantitative literature on post-conflict reconciliation, for instance, has largely focused on other outcomes such as conflict relapse, democratization, or changes in human rights practices (DeRouen et al., 2010; Meernik, Nichols, & King, 2010).

Aggregate-level trust scholarship in international relations (and in the social sciences more generally) is hampered by data scarcity. Existing country-level measures of the concept are based on aggregated survey responses and they only generate a very limited number of observations. This prevents scholars from conducting large-*n* statistical tests. In this article, we provide a remedy to this problem. We first assert that existing measures of trust are best understood as observable but “noisy” manifestations of a latent concept. We then adopt a latent variable approach which has the advantage of reducing the potential for measurement error. More specifically, we deploy a Bayesian measurement model to construct a new social trust variable that offers significantly greater coverage (more countries and years) than existing measures of trust. This new measure will allow scholars (in international relations and all other social science subfields) to answer a wide range of novel research questions such as: (1) do trusting societies pursue different kinds of foreign policies than untrusting societies or (2) what types of peacebuilding initiatives create social trust in war-torn societies?

This article has six sections. First, we provide a short overview of existing individual-level research on social trust and we use this scholarship to motivate the construction of a new country-level measure. In the second section, we present existing measures of social trust and discuss some important weaknesses. In section three, we describe our Bayesian measurement model and the latent variable resulting from this procedure. In the fourth section, we conduct a series of validity checks for our latent measure. Fifth, we discuss a number of applications of our new latent trust measure. The sixth section concludes this article.

2. Theoretical motivation: the importance of trust in the social sciences

Social trust is an individual-level trait that shapes a person's worldview about the benevolence of other human beings. Trusting individuals have been found to be more optimistic about the prospects of cooperation and less concerned about exploitation than their untrusting counterparts (Rathbun, 2011a). In addition, high-trust survey respondents are consistently more likely to empathize with people from a different background (Uslaner, 2002). This, in turn, allows social trusters to build more expan-

sive moral communities and to create cooperative bonds across racial and ethnic boundaries (Rathbun, 2011a). Given these characteristics, it is not surprising that social trusters are more integrated and active in their communities, more likely to engage in pro-social behavior (i.e. in costly actions that benefit the society as a whole), and more likely to have good/very good levels of self-reported health and life-satisfaction (Bjørnskov, 2003; Poortinga, 2006; Sønderskov, 2011).

More relevant for our present purposes, social trust has also been demonstrated to influence a wide range of political attitudes. Domestically, people who score high on this trait are more likely to approve of re-distributive policies that benefit cultural minorities, and they harbor more positive feelings towards immigrants (Crepaz, 2008). In the words of Herreros and Criado (2009, p. 339) “social trust implies an expectation that strangers are trustworthy and [...] that this expectation should be extended to all people, including immigrants [...]”. Furthermore, trust is an important predictor for micro-level preferences about government intervention. As Aghion, Algan, Cahuc, & Shleifer (2010) show, cynics have a bigger base propensity to favor a strongly regulated economy than social trusters. Similarly, they are more likely to agree that “competition is harmful [and] brings out the worst in people” (p. 1030).

More recently, scholars have started to investigate the effect of social trust on foreign policy preferences. At the most general level, the variable makes people more supportive of internationalist foreign policies and less likely to endorse the principle of isolationism (Brewer & Steenbergen, 2002). Similarly, trusting survey respondents have been found to endorse broadly cooperative foreign policies and they are less prone to seeing the realm of global politics as a competition of “all against all” (Binning, 2007). Moving on to more specific policy issues, recent research suggests that social trust increases individual-level support for foreign aid, free trade, and participation in international institutions (Bayram, 2016; Fair, et al., 2013; Kaltenthaler & Miller, 2013; Rathbun, 2011a). Since “trusters have a dispositional tendency to believe that the risks of opportunism are [low]” (Rathbun, 2011b, p. 8), bilateral assistance programs, close economic ties, and participation in intergovernmental organizations appear more attractive (Fair, et al., 2013). Finally, available evidence suggests that trust affects attitudes in the context of border disputes. Justwan (2017) finds that citizen in claimant states are more likely to favor adjudication by an international court if they are high in social trust. Cynics, by contrast, are less willing to let a third party determine the terms of a settlement. Subsequent survey research by Justwan and Fisher (2017) has expanded on these findings by showing that trust also increases support for territorial concessions.

A summary of these research findings is presented in Table 1. The individual-level dynamics summarized here have important theoretical implications. It is well established that mass attitudes change the incentive structure for political leaders (Bueno de Mesquita, 2003; Putnam, 1988). Since trust influences public policy preferences (about world politics and other issues), there are strong theoretical reasons to believe that high-trust countries

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