



We trust in government, just not in yours: Race, partisanship, and political trust, 1958–2012



Rima Wilkes¹

Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia, 6303 NW Marine Drive, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z1, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Although it is generally accepted that political trust is reflective of satisfaction with the performance of the incumbent administration, this is only considered true for White Americans. Because their trust reflects a larger discontent with the political system, Black Americans, it is held, do not respond in the same way in the short term. This argument has yet to be tested with over-time data. Time matters. Not only does the race gap in trust change over time but the impact of partisanship and political winning is, by definition, time-dependent. The results of an analysis of the 1958–2012 American National Election Studies data show that Black Americans and White Americans are equally likely to tie short-term performance to trust in government. However, the relationship between partisanship and political trust and, therefore, system discontent, clearly differs for the two groups. Aggregate models that do not take race-partisan sub-group differences into account will therefore be misleading.

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1. Introduction

It is widely held that democracies work better if citizens trust their government (Arneil, 2006; Dahl, 1956; Hetherington, 2005; Uslaner, 2002). Societies with greater political trust tend to have citizens who talk to each other, who work together, and who generally get along (Dahl, 1956; Mara, 2001; Newton, 2008; Putnam, 1995). As Hetherington (2005) so succinctly put it, trust matters.

Of key concern for scholars in the U.S. is the relationship between race and trust. Because there is nothing about skin color and physical appearance per se that should affect trust, the presence of such a relationship indicates that the political system is less responsive and less accessible to the members of particular groups, or at the very least, that particular groups perceive the political system as less responsive and accessible. For this reason, there has been a concerted effort to identify which causes of trust have race-varying effects in order to further understand the mechanisms through which this form of political inequality operates (Abramson, 1983; Avery, 2006; Citrin et al., 1975; Hetherington, 1998; Howell and Fagan, 1988; Mangum, 2011; Marshall and Shah, 2007; Miller, 1974; Putnam, 2001).

Among the correlates of trust identified as most important are assessments of political incumbents, of the electoral system, of public policy, and of the economy (Citrin and Luks, 2001; Hetherington, 2005; Keele, 2007). These, it is held, have differential effects on the trust of Black and White Americans because political trust reflects different considerations for each group. For Black Americans, trust is reflective of a deep malaise with the political system reflecting decades of political exclusion and violence (Abramson, 1983; Jung and Kwon, 2013; Nunnally, 2012). In contrast, for White Americans, trust represents short-term satisfaction with the current administration (Avery, 2006, 2007, 2008).

E-mail address: wilkesr@mail.ubc.ca

¹ The UBC is located on traditional Musqueam territory.

This research on whether there is racial variability in the causes and meaning of political trust has identified how the causes of trust matter within particular years, but it has yet to consider racial differences in political trust over time. There are reasons to suspect that conclusions concerning the impact of short-term satisfaction measures on trust may be time-dependent. Unlike the race gap in social trust (Wilkes, 2011; Smith, 2010), the race gap in political trust is extremely inconsistent. Not only is there a trust difference in some years and not in others, but the relative ranking of which group is more trusting shifts. As a result, inference as to the impact of short-term satisfaction or system discontent based on single-year samples may not be reflective of the general pattern.

Time matters because of partisanship. Not only do Black Americans have a high rate of affiliation with the Democratic Party, but partisans' trust rises sharply when their party is in office (Keele, 2005). The lower trust of Black Americans, if observed, could be a result of being sampled in a year in which there is a Republican President.² Single-year analysis cannot address this issue, even with controls for partisanship, because it stems from an exogenous variable that is constant for everyone within a given year. To consider a change in partisan control, and how this might be related to racial differences in trust, requires over-time data. The work presented in this paper is the first to fully address these issues related to time and trust via an analysis of 1958–2012 American National Election Studies.³

2. Race and political trust

The electoral experience of many Black Americans is characterized by multiple forms of discrimination including overt and covert disenfranchisement, contextual political irregularities, and political minority status (Omi and Winant, 1994; Walters, 2003; Wilson, 2012). Despite claims that with the election of Barack Obama, the U.S. is on its way to becoming a “post-racial” society, empirical evidence demonstrating an ongoing link between race and politics suggests otherwise (Bobo, 1997; Tesler, 2012). Race affects beliefs about out-group members. White Americans, for example, are more likely to believe that Black Americans are undeserving recipients of social assistance (Gilens, 1999; see also Gay (2006) on Black out-group attitudes). Race also correlates with policy preferences: Black Americans are more likely to favor redistributive welfare policies than White Americans (Hasenfeld and Rafferty, 1989; Hetherington and Globetti, 2002; King and Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2011). Furthermore, race is connected to political participation, affecting voting, political campaign involvement, and protesting (Philpot, 2009; Verba et al., 1993).

Most fundamentally, race has been linked to general faith in the political system writ large as operationalized by trust in government (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Mangum, 2011; Nunnally, 2012). Briefly, generalized political trust represents an assessment individuals make as to the recent performance of government incumbents, typically the President and Congress (see e.g. Citrin, 1974; Hetherington and Husser, 2011). Individuals who rate these representatives more favorably are thus more likely to trust the government. Other factors linked to political trust in the research literature include policy preferences (Miller, 1974; Hibbing and Smith, 2004), economic assessments (Citrin and Green, 1986); issue salience (Hetherington, 1998; Hetherington and Husser, 2011) and social capital (Keele, 2007). These studies have, however, been conducted for the population as a whole. When race is considered, it is typically as a demographic control variable.

Studies of political trust that do have a specific focus on race consider trust among Black Americans or compare Black with White Americans. Using the 1992 National Election Studies Survey, Hetherington and Globetti (2002) demonstrate that feelings about the President have a strong effect on trust for White Americans but have no effect for Black Americans. Analysis of the 1984 and 1996 National Black Election Study show little effect of evaluations of the President, of Congress, or of defense policy on the trust of Black Americans (Avery, 2006). In a related study, the effect of Presidential evaluations not only differed between Black and White Americans, but Black Americans of all political persuasions were likely to feel dissatisfied after the Bush vs. Gore Supreme Court decision (Avery, 2007). Ultimately, many of the factors that affect White Americans' political trust have little or at least a much weaker effect on Black Americans' level of trust. Results such as these have led scholars to conclude that political trust represents short-term assessments of current government performance for White Americans, but for Black Americans, it represents a larger and more long-term political discontent.

The problem is that the evidence upon which this and other work has been based is largely derived from cross-sectional analysis of race and trust within a single or at most two years.⁴ In this paper I build on this work by using over-time data to assess the short-term vs. system discontent argument. There are two important reasons for doing so.

First, the race difference in political trust is not constant over time.⁵ Miller (1974) first pointed this out in his bivariate analysis of race and trust from 1964 to 1970. Whereas Black Americans were more trusting than White Americans in 1964

² An alternative is that time could matter because, in addition to representing parties, Presidents also represent race. According to the descriptive representation theory, minority groups who fail to see themselves reflected in their political leaders become politically alienated (Abney and Hutcheson, 1981; Howell and Fagan, 1988; Nordin, 2012; Pantoja and Segura, 2003). While the data used in this paper provide much-needed new evidence about trust under the first Black President, because there is only one year with a Black President and 23 years with White Presidents, the data do not allow for a formal test of the descriptive representation argument.

³ Throughout this paper, race refers to identification as Black or White only and the theoretical focus is limited to these two groups. Although the ANES does contain some measures of an ‘Other’ racial group, the sample sizes in the first few decades of data collection are too small to produce results about this group that can be interpreted with any confidence.

⁴ Avery (2007) uses the 2000 Social Capital Benchmark survey and a sample collected in 2007 that contains data on 497 students, 51 of whom are Black. Nunnally (2012) also uses the former dataset and Mangum (2011) also uses the 1996 NBES.

⁵ In comparison, the racial gap in social trust is far more constant over time (Wilkes, 2011).

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