

# **Part of the Solution, or Cogs in The System? The Origins and Consequences of Trust in Public Administrators**

*Public Integrity* 6(2): 93-113

Justin Marlowe  
Assistant Professor  
jmarlowe@ku.edu

<http://www.ku.edu/~kupa/faculty/vitas/marlowe.shtml>

Department of Public Administration  
University of Kansas  
1541 Lilac Ln., #318  
Lawrence, KS 66045-3177  
(785) 864-9058  
fax: (785) 864-5208

## **Abstract**

This paper examines how individual characteristics and attitudes affect public trust in public administrators. Using data from the 1996 General Social Survey (n = 401), it shows that trust is closely linked to respondents' perceptions of government performance, as well as their confidence in particular government institutions such as Congress and the executive branch. These results imply that even though public administrators' are relatively detached from the more visible aspects of electoral politics, they appear to be included in citizens' broad assessments of "the governmental system." The paper then concludes by discussing the implications of these results for public administration theory and practice.

The author extends a sincere thank you to John Anderson, Enamul Choudhury, Eben Christensen, Robert Eger, Marc Ethridge, Tom Holbrook, Mordecai Lee, Carol Lewis, Jennifer Magyar, Scott Sager and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions throughout this paper's development. The data used in this analysis are available from both the author, and from the General Social Survey.

## Introduction

The decline of trust in government has attracted considerable attention from scholars, government practitioners, the media, and the public at large over the past several decades. Naturally, the public administration community has conducted its own research into how its members affect, and are affected by, that decline. On the one hand, that research has shown that citizens who perceive government as performing well tend to trust it more (Serra 1995; Glaser and Hildreth 1999), a fact that not only places the actions of public administrators at the forefront of the trust debate, but also suggests that the decline may be at least partially attributable to poorly performing public organizations. However, Goodsell (1994) and other public administration advocates have effectively countered this claim by presenting convincing evidence that citizens are generally satisfied with the performance of their public bureaucracies. Related research within political science has found that trust in government as a whole, and public administrators in particular, may simply be a function of citizen's broader assessments of "the governmental system." As a result, the question of whether public administrators are part of the problem or part of the solution to the problem of declining trust in government remains unsettled.

This article addresses this question through an individual-level analysis of trust in public administrators. Using data from the 1996 General Social Survey (n=401), it examines the impact of three categories of factors believed to affect that trust: demographic characteristics, attitudes toward government institutions, and confidence in non-government institutions. While the model has moderate explanatory power, it finds that trust in public administrators is 1) closely linked to attitudes toward government size and power, 2) significantly impacted by trust in Congress and the executive branch, and 3) not related to personal/demographic characteristics. These results

indicate that trust in public administrators is largely inseparable from citizens' broader assessments of government as a whole. This finding, coupled with our existing knowledge of the role that government employees play in shaping citizen trust perceptions at the "street level" (1980) suggests that public administrators are both part of the problem and the solution to declining trust in government.

This discussion proceeds in six parts. The first presents the public administration perspective on trust in government, a perspective that has repeatedly identified trust as a precursor to accountable and high-performing public organizations (Ruscio 1997). That perspective is contrasted in the second section, which presents the public opinion perspective on these same issues. A perennial question posed in this literature is whether the decline in government trust reflects discontent with the incumbents currently occupying key public offices, or disenchantment with "the government system." The third section presents the analytical model, which is rooted in both these literatures. The fourth describes the data and methods used in the analysis, and the findings are presented in the fifth. The final section discusses the implications of these findings, and provides some suggestions for future research.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Public Administration Perspective – Trust, Performance, and Accountability**

The issue of trust in government administrators has implications for three of public administration's central and interrelated concerns – discretion, accountability, and oversight.

Many social scientists have argued that trust ought to be a critical concern because of its utility in helping groups of individuals overcome collective action problems (Olson 1965). In fact, one of the most widely espoused claims regarding its importance surrounds the notion that trust can help bridge the uncertainty surrounding the creation and maintenance of new social relationships (Fukuyama 1995; Uslaner 2002). In practice, this suggests that trusting individuals

and firms are more likely to take on the risk associated with forming business contracts, promulgating interorganizational relationships, outsourcing key functions, and maintaining other ongoing interactions that require some initial element of uncertainty.

The same may be true for the relationship between discretion and accountability in public organizations. Citizens, elected officials, and other external stakeholders that maintain high levels of trust in public managers will likely provide those managers with more discretionary authority and less direct oversight (Ruscio 1997). In other words, if discretion and accountability share a zero-sum relationship, then greater trust in government shifts the balance toward discretion, which ultimately improves the potential for better government performance. This relationship appears to be cyclical, as citizens who feel government is performing well have been shown to maintain higher levels of trust in it (Bouckaert et. al. 2000), and appear willing to pay higher taxes for what they perceive to be better quality public services (Glaser and Hildreth 1999). This logical flow of events – trust allows for greater discretion, which improves performance, which reinforces trust – illustrates the importance of trust creation and maintenance within modern public administration. Carnevale (1995) has spoken directly to this issue from the perspective of organization theory, design, and development by showing how public organizations can be structured and managed in a way that facilitates trust-building among public employees, which ultimately improves the prospects for greater trust in public administration as a profession.

In all, this research seems to suggest that public administrators are a part of the solution to the problem of declining trust in government because high performing government organizations can play a pivotal role in building trust and fighting cynicism toward government (see Berman 1996 and 1997; Berman and West 1997). In turn, it is necessary to consider how

patterns of individual interactions with public bureaucracies may impact citizen perceptions of performance. This analysis does so by controlling for age, gender, race, education, income and other demographic characteristics that often dictate how, when, and why those interactions occur.

However, Goodsell (1994) and others provide a very different account of the relationship between trust in public administrators and in government as a whole. He and other public administration advocates have argued forcefully and convincingly that citizens are generally satisfied with their public organizations, and as a result, public administrators are not among those aspects of the government that citizens consider untrustworthy. In his own words:

Polls abound that purportedly show that Americans are alienated from big government in general and public bureaucracies in particular. While loss of public confidence in the political system and in many private sectors of society appears to be an increasing problem in America, it is important to note that most such polls aim at an abstract level of generalization...What the abstract survey questions tap is disgust with things like recent political campaigns, the state of the economy, and disenchantment with the current occupant of the White House (Goodsell 1994, 11).

As a result, we must be concerned with the possibility that, regardless of how public administrators perform, citizen trust in them will be dictated by attitudes toward other, more visible government institutions.

This same has also been said of trust in the governmental process. According to Mitchell and Scott (1987), Americans may be growing complacent with the wealth and power inequalities inherent to their governmental system because that same system provides most individuals with what they perceive to be sufficient public goods and services. According to these authors, this pragmatic view has created a situation in which citizens "...may cynically withhold trust but support the current structure of the administrative state" (451). By examining these interrelationships among trust in administrators and trust in other aspects of the government

system, we may find that public administrators are both part of the problem and the solution to declining trust. That is, they may simply be cogs within a governmental system that citizens view as functionally sound, but untrustworthy nonetheless.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, public administrationists seem divided on the role that their profession plays in the widely noted decline of trust in government as a whole. For further insight into this issue, the model employed here draws upon public opinion research into these same issues. This discussion now turns to that literature and its findings.

### **The Public Opinion Perspective – Incumbents vs. “The System”**

To date, political scientists have produced an extensive literature on the question of trust in government as a whole, including its causes (Erber and Lau 1990; Williams 1985), dynamics (Miller and Borrelli 1991; Lipset and Schneider 1983; Citrin 1974; Miller, 1974), and consequences (Chandley, Rudolph, and Rahn 2000; Putnam 2000; Brooks and Lewis 2000). Although a full discussion of that literature is outside the scope of this paper, many of its findings inform our theoretical expectations regarding trust in public administrators.<sup>3</sup>

Although declining trust in government first documented in the mid-1960's (Lipset and Schneider 1983), Miller and Citrin's often-cited exchange (Miller 1974; Citrin 1974) in the *American Political Science Review* set the stage for an ongoing debate about its sources and implications. According to Miller, the sentiment against government could be attributed to discontent with the political “regime,” which includes not only public officials, but government institutions, procedures, and customs as well. Instead of lacking faith in individual public servants, he showed that declining trust reflected the attitudes of a strong contingent of citizens who had grown disenchanted with “the governmental system.”

Citrin (1974), on the other hand, made an equally compelling argument that declining trust simply reflects displeasure with the performance of incumbents, particularly in the province of policy. He showed that as the incumbent regime's policy preferences grow further from the preferences of the electorate, overall trust levels will decline until the incumbent regime is replaced. His argument is often supported by evidence from short-term public opinion dynamics, which show that shifts in trust tend to follow changes in electoral cycles and attitudes toward contemporary economic and social issues (Citrin and Luks 2001). The difference between these perspectives is clear – where Citrin considered declining trust to be natural, cyclical, and the mark of a healthy democracy, Miller spoke of a broader, structural problem with “the governmental system.”

Although the Citrin-Miller debate is far from settled, these two perspectives appear to have been at least partially reconciled on two accounts. First, most trust scholars seem to agree that current and short run evaluations of government performance are directed more toward current office holders than the governmental “regime” or “system” (Norris 1998). While regime evaluations likely do occur, it is unlikely that they are captured by standard public opinion evaluation methods, most of which are designed only to capture respondents' most salient and current attitudes. Another reconciliation that has led to a great deal of additional research rests upon an amendment to Citrin's basic logic. That is, because he spoke almost exclusively of incumbents in terms of Congress and the President, there is much to be learned about system wide trust by observing the less visible government institutions. That assertion provides a partial impetus for the current examination of particularized trust in government administrators.

Therefore, definitive research on trust in public administration must deal with the question of how public managers fit into citizens' evaluations of trust in government broadly construed. This study provides some empirical insight into this question.

### **A Micro-Level Model of Trust**

This analysis models trust in public administrators as a function of three distinct categories of explanatory variables: personal/demographic characteristics, attitudes and efficacy, and institutional confidence. The variables included in this model and their hypothesized impacts are outlined here. Descriptive statistics and detailed definitions for all the variables are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Variable Definitions and Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Definition	Lowest	Highest	Mean	Std. Dev.
Trust in Public Administrators ("PA Trust")	Response to the question: "Most government administrators can be trusted to do what is right for the country." 1 = "strongly agree," 2 = "agree," 3 = "neutral," 4 = "disagree," 5 = "strongly disagree"	1	5	3.58	0.98
<i>Personal/Demographic Variables</i>					
Age	Age in years	18	89	43.04	15.6
Race	1 = whites, 0 = non-whites	0	1	0.09	-
Gender	1 for males, 0 for females	0	1	0.50	-
Income	1 = less than \$1000, 2 = \$1000-\$2999, 3 = \$3000-\$3999, 4 = \$4000-\$4999, 5 = \$5000-\$5999, 6 = \$6000-\$6999, 7 = \$7000-\$7999, 8 = \$8000-\$9999, 9 = \$10,000-\$14999, 10 = \$15000-\$19999, 11 = \$20000-\$24999, 12 = \$25000 or more	0	12	10.02	1.14
Highest Degree Earned	0 = less than high school, 1 = completed high school, 2 = junior college, 3 = baccalaureate degree, 4 = graduate degree	0	4	1.56	1.14
South	1 if the interview took place in AL, AR, FL, GA, KY, MS, NC, SC, TN, VA, or WV; 0 if not	0	1	0.33	-
<i>General Attitudes/Efficacy</i>					
General Happiness	Response to: "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days?" 1 = "very happy," 2 = "pretty happy," 3 = "not too happy"	1	3	1.81	0.62
Financial Satisfaction	1 = "satisfied" or "more or less," 0 = "not at all"	1	3	2.03	1.13
Trust in Others	Response to: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" 1 = "most people can be trusted," 0 = "can't be too careful" ("depends" responses were excluded)	1	3	2.31	0.93
<i>Government Attitudes/Efficacy</i>					
Liberal or Conservative Policy Views	1 = "extremely liberal," 2 = "liberal," 3 = "slightly liberal," 4 = "moderate, middle of the road," 5 = "slightly conservative," 6 = "conservative," 7 = "extremely conservative"	1	7	4.24	1.28
Interest in Politics	Response to: "How interested are you in politics?" 1 = "very interested," 2 = "fairly interested," 3 = "somewhat interested," 4 = "not very interested," 5 = "not at all interested"	1	5	2.72	1.13
Cut Government Spending	Response to: "Here are some things the government might do for the economy. Are you in favor or against cuts in government spending?" 1 = "strongly agree," 2 = "agree," 3 = "neutral," 4 = "disagree," 5 = "strongly disagree"	1	5	1.77	0.85
Government Power	Response to: "Does the Federal Government have too much power?" Coded 1 = "far too much power," 2 = "too much power," 3 = "right amount of power," 4 = "too little power," 5 = "far too little power"	1	4	2.06	0.81
Democracy Works	Response to: "All in all, how well or badly do you think the system of democracy works in America these days?" 1 = "it works well and needs no changes," 2 = "it works well but needs some changes," 3 = "it does not work well and needs a lot of changes," 4 = "it does not work well and needs to be completely changed"	1	4	2.29	0.62
<i>Institutional Confidence</i>					
Confidence in Executive Branch	1 = "a great deal," 2 = "only some," 3 = "hardly any"	1	3	2.37	0.64
Confidence in Congress	1 = "a great deal," 2 = "only some," 3 = "hardly any"	1	3	2.41	0.60
Confidence in the Military	1 = "a great deal," 2 = "only some," 3 = "hardly any"	1	3	1.74	0.67
Confidence in Business	1 = "a great deal," 2 = "only some," 3 = "hardly any"	1	3	1.85	0.59
Confidence in Medicine	1 = "a great deal," 2 = "only some," 3 = "hardly any"	1	3	1.59	0.62
Confidence in Television	1 = "a great deal," 2 = "only some," 3 = "hardly any"	1	3	2.37	0.61

## Personal Characteristics

This model considers the potential impact of five key personal characteristics: race, income, gender, education, and region.

American public administration and racial minorities share a somewhat checkered, albeit generally amicable relationship. Throughout history, public administrators have played out the clash of interests between the state and federal governments. During the past several decades in particular, federal civil servants have engaged in ongoing efforts at school integration, voter enfranchisement, affirmative action, infrastructure development, assistance to the poor and elderly, and many other key administrative tasks designed to benefit all Americans, and racial minorities in particular. In fact, subscribers to the New Public Administration (Marini 1971; Waldo 1971; Frederickson 1980) that emerged from the turmoil of the 1960's shared a common commitment to use the tools available to civil servants to build social equity. As a result, the hypothesized relationship between minorities and public administrators is positive and is supported by additional empirical work on black political efficacy (Emig, Hesse, and Fisher III 1996). Therefore, although state and local administrators have often been called upon to counteract the efforts of their federal colleagues, we are led to believe that non-whites are generally trusting of public administrators.

Income is one of many variables included in this model that may exert a contradictory effect on trust. Clearly, many low-income individuals benefit from the efforts of public administrators who deliver the services and manage the private sector relationships associated with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, Medicare, and other social welfare programs. At the same time, more affluent individuals who do not require government assistance may not support these efforts. As a result, it is hypothesized that income will exert a

negative impact on trust in public administrators. Alternatively, as income increases, trust in public administration will decrease. Although counterintuitive, this relationship would be expressed by a positive statistical relationship in this model.<sup>4</sup>

Women are believed to exhibit higher levels of trust in public administrators for primarily three reasons. First, like racial and ethnic minorities, they have also benefited from administrators' efforts to advance affirmative action. Second, many find themselves working in public sector agencies as a result of their disproportionate membership in public-oriented professions such as teaching, nursing, and social work. As a result, women are believed to generally trust appointed government administrators. And finally, recent work has shown that one of the defining features of women voters is their general inclination toward strong, activist government and sociotropic views of government's role in society (Seltzer, Newman, and Leighton 1997).<sup>5</sup> For each of these reasons, the statistical relationship between women and trust in public administration is hypothesized to be positive.

To date, the relationship between education and trust in public administration has not been directly examined. However, it seems plausible that the sort of contact individuals have with the bureaucracy will mediate any relationship between these two variables. Without a doubt, all citizens have contact with public bureaucracies as a result of renewing a vehicle registration, paying a parking ticket, collecting social security benefits, or any of the myriad tasks that administrators perform. However, college educated individuals are perhaps more likely to be members of a profession that will require some contact with a licensing commission or other regulatory body. Although attitudes toward regulatory bodies are likely to be mixed, the fact that most professions have them implies that most professionals trust the ability of public

administrators to regulate their professional activities. As such, it is expected that education and trust will be positively related, as expressed by a negative coefficient in these results.

In many ways, Southerners' collective trust in public administration may reflect the impact of each of these personal/demographic characteristics. Since Reconstruction, administrators have had a significant impact on many aspects of Southern life, particularly because their efforts to build public infrastructure through initiatives such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, integrate public schools, enforce federal civil rights mandates, etc. Clearly, those efforts have been met with both tremendous support and stiff resistance from individuals of all socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds. Therefore, this model includes a dummy variable for Southern respondents.<sup>6</sup> Although it is not believed to exert any independent influence, a significant statistical relationship between trust and this variable may indicate unique regional effects or other interactions among these demographic variables that will require further investigation.<sup>7</sup>

### **Attitudes and Efficacy**

Empirical evaluations of Citrin's (1974) incumbency or performance evaluation model have typically coalesced around the hypothesis that short run evaluations of the President, Congress, and current economic and social conditions will fluctuate much more than assessments of faith in the governmental system. As a result, it is critical that this model include variables that capture both short and long run attitudes toward a number of governmental and non-governmental concerns.

First and foremost, it is possible that individuals who are inherently unhappy and/or financially unsatisfied will lack trust in many or all civic institutions, including public administrators. In order to control for respondents' attitudes toward their general life

circumstance, this model includes measures of both general happiness and financial satisfaction. Given that government makes an easy scapegoat for citizen discontent, it is hypothesized that decreasing happiness and/or financial satisfaction will be associated with decreasing trust in public administrators. Statistically, this relationship would be expressed as a positive parameter estimate.

Trust in others is also believed to impact institutional trust. Although some have claimed that political trust ought to be distinguished from personal trust (Ruscio 1999), or from “moral” and “strategic” trust (Uslaner 2002), those claims have not been tested specifically within the context of trust in public administrators. Moreover, it seems unlikely that individuals who lack trust in others will trust the individuals that comprise bureaucratic agencies, and vice versa. As a result, this model assumes that individual trust and trust in public administration will be positively related, as represented by a negative parameter estimate.

Political efficacy, expressed here as interest in politics, is also critical to the system vs. performance evaluations mentioned earlier. Previous work by Citrin and Luks (2001) using the American National Election Studies (ANES) has shown that those who are uninterested in politics and lack political information are not likely to gather the types of information necessary to arrive at an evaluation of government performance. As such, these individuals probably include government performance in their evaluation of global current events, rather than conducting any particular evaluation of government incumbents. Consequently, a lack of political knowledge is believed to contribute to system-wide government evaluations, which inherently includes public administrators. Therefore, the hypothesized relationship between political knowledge and trust in public administration is positive, as expressed by a negative parameter estimate.

This model also includes several items designed to elicit respondents' direct evaluations of the government system. They include measures of willingness to cut government spending in order to balance the budget, an evaluation of the appropriateness of government's overall power, and an item that simply asks respondents whether "democracy works." Each of these items provides a direct examination of some element of satisfaction or discontent with the governmental system. For the moment, assume that administrators are included in system wide, rather than performance evaluations. As a result, trust in public administration will be negatively related to willingness to cut government spending (as expressed by a positive statistical relationship), negatively related to support for the claim that government has too much power (positive statistical relationship), and positively related to a feeling that democracy works (negative statistical relationship).

### **Institutional Confidence**

In order to discern whether public administrators are included in system-wide evaluations, it is also necessary to evaluate respondent perceptions of trust in individual government and non-government institutions. Previous work has demonstrated a "spill-over" effect in which confidence in either the President (Feldman 1983) or Congress (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001; Chanley, Rudolph, Rahn 2000) accounts for most of the variance and covariance in evaluations of other institutions. In essence, the performance of the most visible institutions sets the tone for the rest of the incumbent regime. But simply examining elected institutions does not speak to the place, if any that non-elected bodies such as public administrators occupy in system-wide trust evaluations. Fortunately, the data utilized here include an item asking respondents to evaluate confidence in the military, which provides some insight into perceptions of a non-elected governmental body. Therefore, if the tenets of the system evaluation model hold, then a positive

statistical relationship will exist between trust in public administration and confidence in the Executive branch, Congress, and the Military.

This model also controls for the possibility that distrust in public administrators is the result of a general attitude of “anti-institutionalism.” This potential is addressed by including the same confidence measures for prominent non-governmental institutions such as major companies (business), medicine, and television. A positive relationship between public administrator trust and confidence in these institutions lends further support to Citrin and Luks’ (2001) claim that institutional confidence does not vary between government and non-government institutions.

### **Data and Analysis**

The 1996 General Social Survey (GSS) provides a unique opportunity to directly examine public trust in public administration. In that year, as part of its battery of “political efficacy” questions, the GSS asked respondents to identify their levels of trust in “the administrators running the government to do what is right for the country.”<sup>8</sup> That item serves as the dependent variable for this analysis.

Any analysis of this item must take into account several methodological concerns and limitations. First and foremost, the number of respondents providing a discernible answer to each of the items included in the model (N = 401) is less than 14% of the total 1996 GSS sample (N=2903).<sup>9</sup> This comparatively low turnout is due to the fact that both the trust in public administrator item and the confidence in government items were “half sampled” across different portions of the total GSS sample. Despite the limited response rate, this dependent variable and the other explanatory variables are reasonably well distributed across their respective categories, as indicated by Tables 2 and 3.<sup>10</sup>

<b>Table 2: Responses to Item: “Most Government Administrators Can be Trusted to Do What is Right for the Country”</b>	
Strongly Agree	2%
Agree	13.97%
Neutral	23.94%
Disagree	44.14%
Strongly Disagree	15.96 %
N =401	

<b>Table 3: Responses to Item: “How Much Confidence Do You Have In...”</b>						
	The Executive Branch	Congress	The Military	Business	Medicine	Television
A Great Deal	8.98%	5.74%	38.90%	26.18%	48.63%	6.73%
Only Some	44.64%	46.88%	48.13%	62.84%	44.14%	49.88%
Hardly Any	46.38%	47.38%	12.97%	10.97%	7.23%	43.39%
N = 401						

The broad-brush nature of these data is also a concern. Given that this dependent variable does not reference any particular level of government, type of government agency, appointed vs. civil service administrators, or other differentiating characteristic, we cannot be certain which administrators are included within it. Previous analyses of attitudes toward public bureaucracies, such as the Pew Foundation’s study of attitudes toward several Federal agencies (1998), have shown that confidence in public administrators varies significantly depending on their mission and task. These same results also show that citizens trust their local administrators more than state or federal government agents. Consequently, the results of any analysis that aggregates the efforts of millions of civil servants into a generic assessment of “public administrators” may hinge on overgeneralization.

In spite of those drawbacks, these data carry two main advantages that render them sufficient and appropriate for the question at hand. First, the dependent variable used here is the only item in a large-scale, national public opinion poll that asks respondents to assess trust in public administrators directly. Other surveys have certainly advanced our understanding of many of the issues related to the question of trust in public administrators. For example, the Pew

Foundation's (1998) previously mentioned *Deconstructing Distrust* study asked respondents to compare their trust in federal civil servants to their trust in politicians within the federal government. Where 16% considered politicians to be trustworthier, 67% of those same respondents favored public administrators. Other work, such as the Pew Foundation's Philadelphia study (1997) has provided numerous insights into trust issues using a geographically limited sample. But the GSS item used here contains the only known item in a national, systematic public opinion survey that asks respondents to directly assess trust in public administrators.

The second unique feature of these data that is essential to the question at hand is the fact that they allow for a multivariate analysis that includes the previously mentioned demographic variables. Many of the existing trust studies tap attitudes about government performance as a whole, but do not control for key demographics such as race, income, education, and others. In light of the previous discussion of the links between trust and performance, such a control is necessary, and is incorporated here through these demographic characteristics. If performance is part and parcel to trust, and performance is linked to citizen interactions with the bureaucracy, then the inclusion of demographic and other factors that determine how citizens interact with the bureaucracy is essential to this analysis. Unlike the existing studies, the GSS data allow for these sorts of controls.

With these advantages and disadvantages in mind, we now turn to the empirical analysis.

## **Results**

Ordered probit regression was used to estimate the impact of these variables on trust in public administrators.<sup>11</sup> The parameter estimates for the model are presented in Table 4.

<b>Table 4: Ordered Probit Estimates of “PA Trust”</b>				
Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-score	p > z
<i>Personal/Demographic Characteristics</i>				
Age	-.0045	.0037	-.125	.211
Gender	.0007	.1894	0	.997
Race	.046	.0279	1.64	.101
Income	-.043	.1146	-.38	.707
Highest Degree Earned	-.036	.054	-.67	.503
South dummy	-.032	.119	-.28	.782
<i>General Attitudes/Efficacy</i>				
General Happiness	.1067	.095	1.12	.263
Financial Satisfaction	.0638	.081	.79	.432
Trust in Others	.0574	.059	.97	.333
<i>Government Attitudes/Efficacy</i>				
Ideology	.0822	.046	1.78	.075
Interest in Politics	.0386	.052	.74	.457
Cut Government Spending	-.090	.068	-1.31	.189
Government Power	-.292	.076	-3.84	.000
Democracy Works	.397	.099	4.02	.000
<i>Institutional Confidence</i>				
Confidence in the Executive Branch	.168	.099	1.7	.089
Confidence in Congress	.304	.105	2.89	.004
Confidence in the Military	.142	.091	1.56	.120
Confidence in Business	.105	.101	1.04	.300
Confidence in Medicine	-.104	.096	-1.08	.281
Confidence in Television	-.033	.099	-.330	.789
N	401			
Log likelihood	-483.851			
Chi-Square	114.29			
P > Chi-Square (df = 20)	.000			
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup> (McKelvey & Zavonia's)	27.9%			

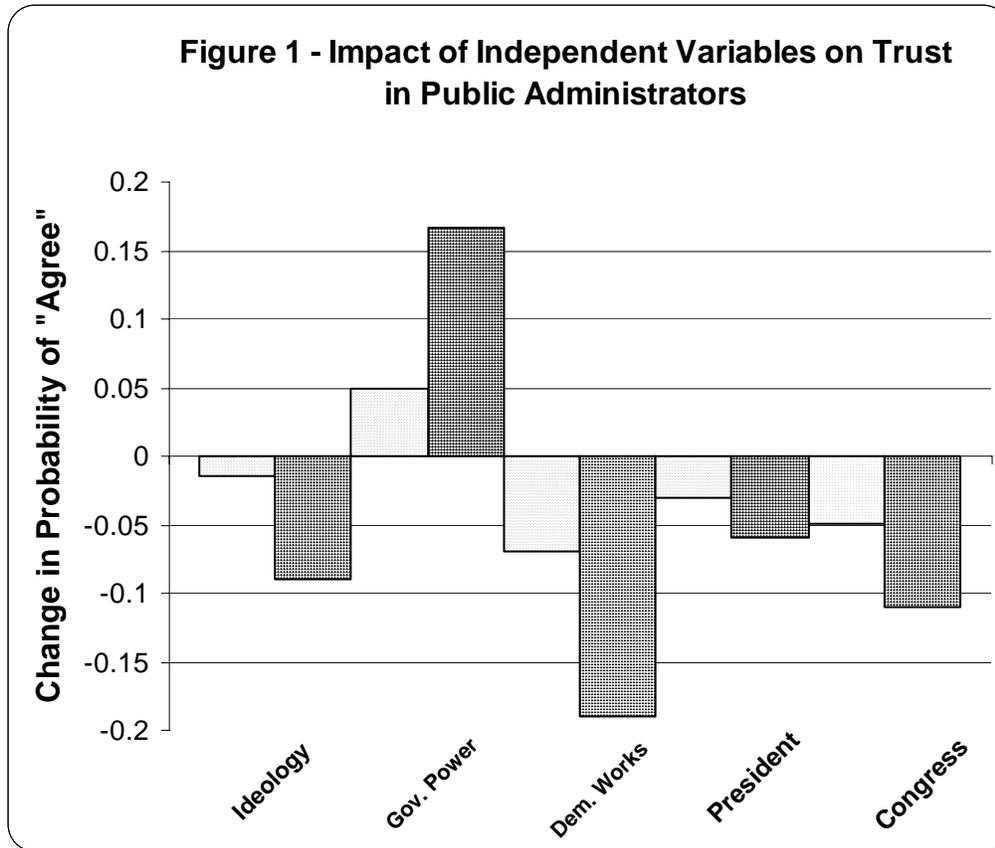
In general, the model provides a statistically significant and modestly robust (it explains 27.9% of the variance in the dependent variable) estimation that highlights a number of interesting expected and unexpected themes. In general, these results indicate that 1) demographics, life circumstance, and confidence in non-governmental institutions do not independently affect trust in public administrators, 2) attitudes toward government institutions and the governmental system are the most influential factors, and 3) trust appears to be a function of attitudes toward

the health and performance of the governmental system, rather than assessments of its overall efficiency.

First, it is important to note the insignificance of the personal/demographic variables, satisfaction measures, and confidence in non-government institutions. Although race, for example, has been shown to impact a number of different aspects of political behavior, the personal characteristics examined here do not seem to play any role in the assessment of trust in public administrators. The insignificance of the happiness and financial satisfaction measures also rules out the possibility that generally cynical individuals will distrust the bureaucracy. The same is true of political ideology and political knowledge, which are both statistically insignificant. Taken as a whole, the non-significance of these variables implies that trust is not a function of demographics, interest in political matters, or policy preferences. These results also fail to support the claim that trust in public administrators is a function of anti-institutionalism. Unlike Citrin and Luks (2001), who found that citizens do not distinguish government performance from assessments of non-governmental institutions, these results show that attitudes toward business, television, and medicine are unrelated to trust.

However, confidence in government institutions, as well as respondents' assessments of the governmental system clearly do matter. This trend is indicated by the significant relationship between trust and respondents' views on both the pervasiveness of government power, the health of the democratic system, and confidence in both Congress and the executive branch. Given the categorical nature of the dependent variable, coupled with the use of ordered probit regression, these results are best interpreted in terms of how the independent variables affect the probability of an individual respondent providing a particular response to the trust in public administration item. Figure 1 presents the comparative impact of each of these variables by showing how

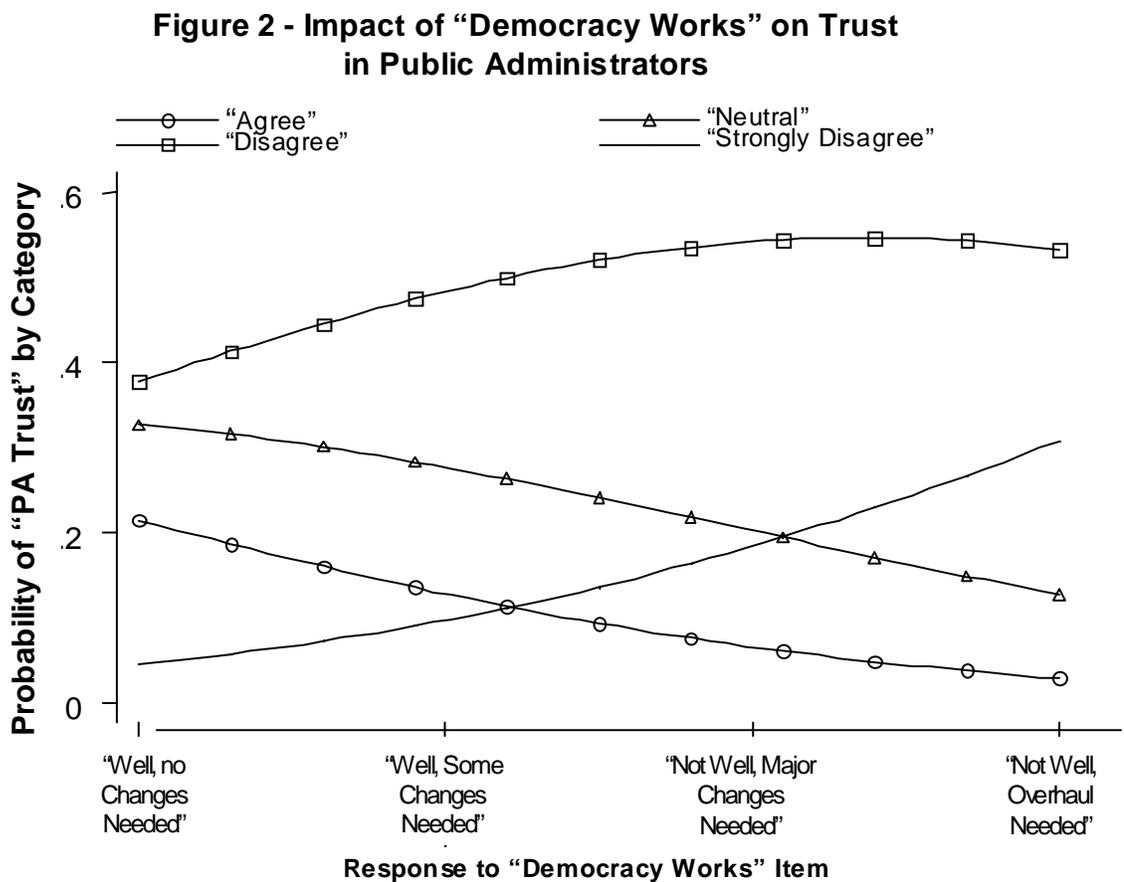
movement from lower to higher values on each of these explanatory variables impacts the probability of a respondent providing an answer of “agree” for the dependent variable.



For each pair of bars in this figure, the left bar indicates the impact of a one unit increase in that explanatory variable, and the right bar illustrates the impact of that variable moving from its lowest to its highest value. For example, as a respondent’s confidence in Congress changes from “a great deal” to “only some,” the probability that a respondent will agree that public administrators can be trusted most of the time will decrease by .05, or roughly 5%. As that same respondent’s confidence in Congress moves from “a great deal” to “hardly any,” the probability of that same response will decrease by roughly 11%. The opposite effect is noted for “government power.” In this case, as a respondent’s feelings that government has “far too much

power” moves to government having “far too little power,” the probability of agreeing that public administrators can be trusted increases by just over 15%.

These results suggest that the single most influential variable is perceptions of the health of the democratic system. In this case, respondents who felt our system of democracy works “most of the time and needs no changes” were nearly 20% more likely to agree that public administrators can be trusted most of the time than those who felt that the democratic system “does not work well and needs major changes.” In light of these findings, Figure 2 presents an additional interpretation of the relationship between “democracy works” and trust in public administrators.



In this graph, each line represents the predicted probability of a respondent providing one of four unique responses to the trust in public administration item – agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly

disagree.<sup>12</sup> Those probabilities are plotted against the values of the “democracy works” item, which ranges from “works well and needs no changes” to “does not work well and needs to be completely changed,” with each of the other explanatory variables held at their mean values. In other words, it examines how changes in the democracy works variable impact trust in public administration when all of the other variables in the model are held constant.

Two main trends emerge from this comparison. First, it indicates that changes in respondents’ perceptions of the democratic system exert a fairly uniform negative impact on all categories of trust in public administration. For example, as an individual’s perception of the democratic system moves from most positive to least positive, the probability they will agree that public administrators are trustworthy decreases by nearly 20% (a change of 0.2). Conversely, the probability that same individual will disagree that public administrators can be trusted will increase from less than .4 to over .55, a change of roughly 15%. This negative trend is made even more clear by the relationship between “democracy works” evaluations and the probability of an individual falling in the “strongly disagree” category. Where the change in probability for the other responses ranges from approximately 15-25%, that same change for the strongly disagree category is well over 30%. Although not illustrated here, a similar pattern is noted for the relationship between the dependent variable and confidence in Congress.

Another notable finding highlighted by Figure 2 is the relationship between perceptions of the democratic system and “neutral” assessments of trust in public administrators. This model predicts that as individual assessments of the system move from most positive to least positive, the probability of an individual having a “neutral” assessment of trust in public administration decreases by approximately 20%. Given that this statistical model incorporates more than 20 explanatory variables, the fact that the democracy works variable alone can bring about such

noticeable changes in the dependent variable is evidence of a strong empirical link between trust in public administration and system-wide evaluations of government.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, these results suggest that trust is first and foremost the result of broad, system-wide evaluations of the government system, with confidence in the most visible federal government institutions also having a notable impact.

## **Discussion and Implications**

The original question posed in this paper was whether public administrators are part of the problem or the solution to the issue of declining trust in government. The empirical analysis presented here suggests that they may be both. In particular, these results indicate that trust in public administration is not necessarily a function of innate demographic characteristics, pedestrian attitudes toward one's life circumstance, or a general sense of anti-institutionalism. Rather, it is closely related to confidence in both the governmental system, and in the specific institutions that comprise it. The corresponding implication is clear: despite their relative distance from electoral, legislative, and judicial politics, trust in government administrators is closely linked to the performance of the governmental system as a whole. It seems, therefore, that public administrators are simply viewed as cogs within that system.

These general conclusions raise a number of theoretical and empirical questions that warrant further consideration. First, they suggest a departure from the work of Goodsell (1994), Mitchell and Scott (1987), and other analyses that hinge upon the assumption that feelings about the administrative apparatus diverge from perceptions of the governmental system. According to this analysis, citizens either trust both the system and public administrators, or they trust neither. What remains to be told, however, is whether this lockstep relationship is the result of a clear expectation among the citizenry. That is, it may be the case that citizens are fully aware of the

complexity of modern governance, and expect public administrators to maintain close relationships with other institutional actors as a precursor to trust. In turn, future analyses should further explore the extent to which trust is a function of how citizens view the interrelationships among government institutions, rather than assuming that they maintain independent evaluations of each.

Because perceptions of whether the democratic system is “working” appear to be such a prominent part of trust assessments, these results also redirect our attention toward the issue of performance. In particular, what criteria are people using to evaluate whether “the democratic system” is working? It may be the case that citizens have good interactions with public administrators, but have negative views toward some other aspect of government that skews their overall assessment toward distrust. In that regard, the seemingly perpetual presence of government scandal may present an ongoing challenge for trust building. Other research in this area suggests that declining trust may be related to the public’s lack of satisfaction with system’s efficiency. According to the previously mentioned Pew Foundation Study (1998), 92% of survey respondents felt government could become more efficient, despite the fact that those same respondents felt government administrators are more trustworthy than politicians by a 3 to 1 margin. What precisely is meant by efficiency is unknown, but it seems to have some bearing on trust. As a result, future work on trust in public administration should incorporate what we have learned thus far about when and why citizens consider “the system” to be “working,” and how they evaluate public administrators against that standard.<sup>14</sup>

The link between trust and confidence in the two most visible government institutions also deserves further consideration. There may be numerous explanations for the link between confidence in Congress and trust in public administrators, but what remains untold is whether

declining confidence in Congress causes its members to seek confidence within the electorate at the expense of public administrators. In fact, some have argued that members of Congress design public agencies to be inherently unresponsive, which in turn creates opportunities to gain favor with voters by helping them navigate the bureaucracy (Fiorina 1989), or with interest groups by providing opportunities to influence rulemaking processes that have been designed to be hypo or hyper responsive (Moe 1989; Balla 1998). If performance is the single most important factor influencing trust in public administrators, then members of Congress may benefit from a perceived lack of it. This tit-for-tat relationship may help to explain the congruence in attitudes toward these two institutions. The same can be said for the executive branch, which has numerous methods of funding, oversight, and agency design available to affect the actions of front line public administrators. Therefore, future research ought to further explore whether citizens are in fact aware of the constraints that shape public administrators' work environments, and whether knowledge of those constraints affects public trust in those same administrators.<sup>15</sup>

Without a doubt, this analysis has certain drawbacks, and its estimates ought to be interpreted with caution. In particular, the GSS trust in public administrators item does not ask citizens to evaluate their feelings towards administrators any particular level of government, or whether those administrators are elected, politically appointed, or merit system employees. Undoubtedly, the correlates of trust may differ tremendously if we are to differentiate the performance of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs from an orthopedics resident at a VA hospital from a veterans' benefits administrator at a local community college. Despite the incomparable differences in their stature and duties, this analysis asks respondents to evaluate all of the above as generic public administrators.

In addition, these findings confirm an intuitively sound conclusion that many public administration professionals have known for some time – that trust in public managers is likely to be affected by circumstances beyond their control. But that confirmation is not the purpose, nor the main contribution of this analysis. Instead, in spite of the limitations inherent to these data, this paper has demonstrated that public administrators may benefit from further exploring the link between trust in them and the various aspects of precisely what is meant by democracy “working well.” As several decades of research has shown, the concept of performance is multifaceted and complex. But these results indicate that regardless of an individual’s demographic or life circumstance, some unique aspect of performance leads some citizens to trust, and others to distrust public administrators. That factor may be related to procedural fairness, as demonstrated by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002, 2001), efficiency, entrepreneurial behavior (Osborne and Gaebler 1992), or something that varies among different types of administrative agencies, functions, and levels of government. But more precise knowledge of this link between trust and performance will undoubtedly provide many insights into what role, if any, public administrators may play in building trust in them, and in government as a whole.

## Notes

1. One of the most prolific debates within this literature surrounds the measurement of trust, particularly with regard to question wording and construct validity. Beginning with Finifter (1970), several papers have shown that measures designed to evaluate trust in institutions (such as the approval ratings included in the American National Election Studies) often capture feelings of system-wide alienation similar to that described by Easton (1965), Miller (1974), and to a certain degree, Goodsell (1994). Subsequent papers have also addressed this issue, and have shown that “confidence” questions actually reflect cognitive constructs ranging from xenophobia to political legitimacy (Weatherford 1992; Niemi, Craig, Mattei 1990; Cole 1973). Similar studies have shown that question wording can impact the substance of responses, as evidenced by work examining public opinion toward government spending (Rasinski 1989), as well as the prevalence of measurement error in survey work on trust in government issues (Williams 1985; Feldman 1983). Survey mechanics such as question order have also been shown to bias responses on trust-related questions (Smith 1997). In light of these subtleties, it is critical that we recognize the potential for error in this analysis. However, since this paper represents the first direct examination of trust in public administrators, no methodological adjustments will be made to account for that potential.

2. By the same token, one could argue that distrust and negative attitudes toward government are two pillars of American political culture. In the end, the American Revolution was an anti-government war, and distrust has long been held as a healthy and necessary component of American democracy. Unfortunately, the data used in this analysis are limited in many ways, including the fact that they do not distinguish a lack of trust from “distrust.”

3. See Levi and Stoker (2000) for a comprehensive overview of the trust in government literature from a political science perspective.

4. This is because trust in public administrators is reflected in the lowest 2 of the 5 ordinal choices presented for that item.

5. It should be noted that these, and many other authors throughout the women and politics literature caution against any characterizations of “the women’s vote” as a monolithic and unified bloc. In fact, gender is not nearly as important to the formation of women’s political attitudes as other demographic characteristics such as race and education (Seltzer, Newman, and Voorhees Leighton 1997).

6. This sort of regional control is also important in light of Putnam’s (2000) general finding that trust and civic engagement vary a great deal among different regions within the United States. His results indicate that the Southeastern states are typically among the lowest in terms of civic engagement, which further supports the inclusion of this variable.

7. Of course, these are simply hypothesized relationships set forth in order to provide some structure to the interpretation of the eventual statistical findings. Clearly, strong arguments could be made in opposition to each of these relationships.

8. Other items in this series ask respondents to agree or disagree with statements such as “The average person can get nowhere talking to public officials,” “People like me have much to say about government,” and several others.

9. Although the General Social Survey is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, these data are available from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu:8080/GSS/homepage.htm>

10. We should be cautious about comparing these items, given that one taps “trust” while the others address “confidence.” While these items are not amenable to a direct statistical comparison, examining their marginals allows for some comparison of generalized support.

11. For a detailed discussion of the ordered probit model, see Long (1997, 114-147).

12. Given the comparatively small number of respondents in the “strongly agree” category, its probabilities are not included in this figure.

13. These same probability change graphs were plotted for two additional explanatory variables – perceptions of government power and confidence in Congress. The patterns of change in the dependent variable were similar to those brought about by the democracy works variable, but not of the same magnitude. As a result, they are not presented or discussed here.

14. Recent work by Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001, 2002) indicates that the essence of performance may be procedural fairness. These authors present a wide variety of evidence to indicate that the most important factor shaping performance perceptions is whether or not citizens felt as though they were “treated fairly” and if the public administrators they encountered seemed to conduct business “by the book” during an interaction requiring individualized attention. The general conclusion of this work is clear: citizens want government  
14 (cont.). to work quickly, efficiently, and according to procedural norms. But this expectation is not general; rather, citizens only want government to perform this way when they require something from it. Aside from these direct transactions, it appears that citizens have little interest in efficiency, effectiveness, or other key considerations. Incidentally, these findings hang well with Goodsell’s (1994) overarching assertion that procedural rules are generally upheld, and that the perception of public bureaucracies as unfair, arbitrary, or capricious is largely a function of several well-documented and well-publicized mistakes. If in fact procedural considerations are a

salient source of discontent with public administrators, then the media coverage devoted to bureaucratic “foul-ups” is their response to a standing demand.

15. From a methodological perspective, these findings also indicate that research emphasizing covariance among the variables analyzed here might make a valuable contribution to our overall understanding of how trust in public administrators fits into citizens’ cognitive trust assessments. Specifically, any analysis utilizing a structural equation approach, rather than the standard linear regression method used here, might provide helpful insights into the causal directions of many of these variables. Using a path modeling, confirmatory factor analysis, simultaneous or structural equation modeling approach, future research might discern the extent to which trust in public administrators impacts the system-wide and institutional assessments that this model shows to be significant. It seems entirely plausible, for instance, that trust in public administrators covaries, or perhaps even causes much of the dynamic element of the predictor variables used here. In other words, any attempt to map out the causal elements at work in this or any other model of trust in public administration would make a valuable contribution to the literature.

## References

- Balla, Steven J. 1998. "Administrative Procedures and Political Control of the Bureaucracy." *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 3: 663-673.
- Berman, Evan M. 1996. "Restoring the Bridges of Trust: Attitudes of Community Leadership Toward Local Government." *Public Integrity Annual*. Washington, DC: American Society for Public Administration/Council of State Governments.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1997. "Dealing with Cynical Citizens." *Public Administration Review* 57, no. 2: 105-112.
- Berman, Evan M. and West, Jonathan P. 1997. "Managing Ethics to Improve Performance and Build Trust." *Public Integrity Annual*. Washington, DC: American Society for Public Administration/Council of State Governments.
- Bouckaert, Geert, Steven Van de Walle, Bart Maddens, and Jarl K. Kampen. 2002. *Identity vs. Performance: An Overview of Theories Explaining Trust in Government*. University of Leuven: Public Management Institute. Available at [www.kuleuven.ac.be/io/trust](http://www.kuleuven.ac.be/io/trust).
- Brewer, Paul R. and Sigelman, Lee. 2002. "Trust in Government: Personal Ties that Bind?" *Social Science Quarterly* 83, no. 2: 624-631.
- Brooks, Arthur C. and Lewis, Gregory B. 2002. "Giving, Volunteering, and Mistrusting Government." *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 21, no. 4: 765-769.
- Carnevale, David G. 1995. *Trustworthy Government: Leadership and Management Strategies for Building Trust and Higher Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chanley, Virginia A, Thomas J. Rudolph, and Wendy M. Rahn. 2000. "The Origins and Consequences of Public Trust in Government: A Time-Series Analysis." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64: 239-256.

- Citrin, Jack. 1974. "Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government." *American Political Science Review* 62, no. 3: 973-988.
- Citrin, Jack and Luks, Samantha. 2001. "Political Trust Revisited: Déjà vu All Over Again." In John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Moore, eds. *What is it About Government that Americans Dislike?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cole, Richard L. 1973. "Toward a Model of Political Trust: A Causal Analysis." *American Journal of Political Science* 17, no. 4: 809-817.
- Emig, Arthur G., Hesse, Michael B., and Fisher, Samuel H. III. 1996. "Black-White Differences in Political Efficacy, Trust, and Sociopolitical Participation: A Critique of the Empowerment Hypothesis." *Urban Affairs Review* 32, no. 2: 264-276.
- Erber, Ralph and Lau, Richard R. 1990. "Political Cynicism Revisited: An Information Processing Reconciliation of Policy-Based and Incumbency-Based Interpretations of Trust in Government." *American Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 1: 236-253.
- Feldman, Stanley. 1983. "The Measurement and Meaning of Trust in Government." *Political Methodology* 9, no. 3: 341-354.
- Finifter, Ada W. 1970. "Dimensions of Political Alienation." *American Political Science Review* 64, no. 3: 389-410.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1989. *Congress, Keystone of the Washington Establishment*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Frederickson, H. George. 1980. *New Public Administration*. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1997. *Trust: The Social Virtues and The Creation of Prosperity*. New York: The Free Press.

- Glaser, Mark A. and Hildreth, W. Bartley. 1999. "Service Delivery Satisfaction and Willingness to Pay Taxes: Citizen Recognition of Local Government Performance." *Public Productivity and Management Review* 23, no. 1: 48-67.
- Goodsell, Charles. 1994. *The Case For Bureaucracy: A Public Administration Polemic*. New York: Chatham House.
- Hibbing, John R. and Theiss-Morse. 1995. *Congress as Public Enemy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. *What is it About Government that Americans Dislike?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. "Process Preferences and American Politics: What the People Want Government To Be." *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1: 145-153.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. *Stealth Democracy: American's Beliefs about How Government Should Work* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levi, Margaret and Stoker, Laura. 2000. "Political Trust and Trustworthiness." *Annual Review of Political Science* 3:475-507.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin and Schneider, William. 1983. "The Decline of Confidence in American Institutions." *Political Science Quarterly* 98, no. 3: 379-402.
- Lipsky, Michael. 1980. *Street Level Bureaucrats: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Long, J. Scott. 1997. *Regression Models for Categorical and Limited Dependent Variables* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Marini, Frank, ed. 1971. *Toward a New Public Administration: The Minnowbrook Perspective*. Scranton, PA: Chandler Books.

- Melkers, Julia and Thomas, John Clayton. 1998. "What Do Administrators Think Citizens Think? Administrator Predictions as an Adjunct to Citizen Surveys." *Public Administration Review* 58, no. 4: 327-334.
- Miller, Arthur H. 1974. "Political Issues and Trust in Government, 1964-1970." *American Political Science Review* 68, no. 3: 951-972.
- Miller, Arthur H. and Borrelli, Stephen A. 1991. "Confidence in Government During the 1980's." *American Politics Quarterly* 19, no. 2: 147-173.
- Mitchell, Terence R. and Scott, William G. 1987. "Leadership Failures, the Distrusting Public, and Prospects of the Administrative State." *Public Administration Review* 47, no. 6: 445-452.
- Moe, Terry M. 1989. "The Politics of Bureaucratic Design." In Chubb, John E. and Peterson, Paul E., eds. *Can the Government Govern?* Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Neimi, Richard, Stephen Craig, Franco Mattei 1991. "Measuring Internal Political Efficacy in the 1988 National Election Study." *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 4: 1407-1413.
- Olson, Mancur. 1965. *The Logic of Collective Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Osborne, David and Gaebler, Ted. 1992. *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Pew Research Center for People and the Press. 1997. *Trust and Civic Engagement in Philadelphia: A Case Study*. Available at <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=110>.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. *How Americans View Government: Deconstructing Distrust*. Available at

<http://people-press.org/reports/print.php3?ReportID=95>.

Putnam, Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Rasinski, Kenneth A. 1989. "The Effect of Question Wording on Public Support for Government Spending." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 53: 388-394.

Ruscio, Kenneth P. 1997. "Trust in the Administrative State." *Public Administration Review* 57, no. 5: 454-458.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1999. "Jay's Pirouette, or Why Political Trust is not the Same as Personal Trust." *Administration & Society* 31, no. 5: 639-657.

Seltzer, Richard A., Jody Newman and Melissa Voorhees Leighton. 1997. *Sex as a Political Variable: Women as Candidates and Voters in U.S. Elections*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Serra, George. 1995. "Citizen-Initiated Contact and Satisfaction with Bureaucracy: A Multivariate Analysis." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 5, no. 2: 175-188.

Smith, Tom W. 1997. "Factors Relating to Misanthropy in Contemporary American Society." *Social Science Research* 26:170-96.

Uslaner, Eric 2002. *The Moral Foundations of Trust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Waldo, Dwight 1971. *Public Administration in a Time of Turbulence*. Scranton, PA: Chandler Books.

Weatherford, M. Stephen 1992. "Measuring Political Legitimacy." *American Political Science Review* 86, no. 1: 149-166.

Williams, John T. 1985. "Systemic Influences on Political Trust: The Importance of Perceived Institutional Performance." *Political Methodology* 11, no. 3: 125-142.