1975

Political Competence, Political Trust, and Action Orientations of University Students

M D. Abravanel

Ronald J. Busch
Cleveland State University, r.busch@csuohio.edu

Original Citation

Abravanel, M.D., and Ronald J. Busch. 1975. "Political Competence, Political Trust, and Action Orientations of University Students."
Journal of Politics 37:57-82.

Repository Citation

Abravanel, M D. and Busch, Ronald J., "Political Competence, Political Trust, and Action Orientations of University Students" (1975). *Political Science Faculty Publications*. 14.
https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clpolsci_facpub/14

Political Competence,
Political Trust,
and the
Action Orientations of
University Students

MARTIN D. ABRAVANEL

RONALD J. BUSCH

COMPARED TO MASS PUBLICS IN OTHER NATIONS, a relatively large number of Americans believe that they are politically competent—that they are able to influence political affairs. And yet, over the past several years we have witnessed the estrangement of substantial portions of the American citizenry from the political system—an estrangement accompanied by an increase in popular distrust of government.[1]

As concepts, political competence and political trust have occu-

[1] Arthur H. Miller, Thad A. Brown and Alden F. Raine, "Social Conflict and Political Estrangement, 1958-1972" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Ill., May 3-5, 1973); and Hazel Erskine, "The Polls: Government Information Policy," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 35 (Winter/Spring 1971-72), 636-651.

pied significant positions in our models of mass political behavior and in our theories about the political system, and more recently the combination of these variables has attracted the attention of a number of scholars. Much of the research has shown that Americans who exhibit a sense of political competence tend also to trust the national government, a situation that contributes to the stability of the political system.[2] When highly competent people lose confidence in their government, there is good reason to expect an increase in social disruption and political violence. Among some subcultures—for example, black residents of ghetto communities—certain evidence indicates that politically competent low trusters were more likely to riot than others.[3] In such subcultural groups, however, it is unlikely that this combination of competence and distrust occurs very frequently. Although the level of political trust among blacks may be low, the belief that one can influence political outcomes is less widespread than in the general public.[4] On the other hand, within some groups we are likely to find a rather large proportion of highly competent people who distrust the government. An obvious example is the university community. The social characteristics of college students are conducive to feelings of personal and political competence, but at the same time many students have demonstrated a lack of faith and confidence in government. To explore the consequences of this mixture of high competence and low trust, the present study examines these variables as they are related to the action orientations of university students.

[2] Richard L. Cole, "On the Causes and Consequences of Political Trust: A Causal Analysis" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Ill., April 28, 1972). See also Cole's "Toward a Model of Political Trust: A Causal Analysis," American Journal of Political Science, 17 (November 1973), 809-817.

[3] William Gamson, "Political Trust and Its Ramifications," in Social Psychology and Political Behavior: Problems and Prospects, ed. Gilbert Abcarian and John W. Soule (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1971), 40-55.

[4] Paul R. Abramson, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust Among Black Schoolchildren: Two Explanations," Journal of Politics, 34 (November 1972), 1,243-1,275. Also see Donald R. Matthews and James W. Prothro, Negroes and the New Southern Politics (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), 275-280.

POLITICAL TRUST AND POLITICAL COMPETENCE

Preliminary to our empirical analysis, we here introduce the two concepts that serve as a foundation for that which follows.

Trust in Government

Although one finds serious discrepancies if not contradictions in the literature on the origins of people's trust in government, the process whereby it is diffused, and its consequences for political behavior, general agreement on the importance of trust for the political system seems to exist. It promotes legitimacy; it is conducive to system stability; and it provides discretionary power for political elites.[5] As many have observed, all regimes strive to es-

[5] Most empirical research devoted to the concept of political trust can be divided into studies that examine the correlates of trust as a dependent variable and those that characterize trust in government as an independent variable influencing citizen attitudes and behavior. Depending on the characteristics of the setting and population under study, political trust has been found to covary with social trust, age, education, income, sense of political efficacy, political alienation, a general feeling of deprivation, citizen expectations about treatment from government officials, level of alertness to external danger, strength of drive to self-assertion, and race. Does it make any difference, however, if the citizenry or significant portions thereof, is trusting of the institutions and actors of the political system? Those interested in this question have found political trust to be related to voting turnout, the direction of the vote, voting for extremist candidates, dissatisfaction with policy outcomes, a willingness to violence or coercive and demonstrative behavior, and an attachment to salient political structures in the society. Among the more relevant publications, see Joel D. Aberbach, "Alienation and Political Behavior," *American Political Science Review,* 63 (March 1969), 86-99; Aberbach and Jack L. Walker, "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," *American Political Science Review,* 64 (December 1970), 1,199-1,219; Abramson, "Political Efficacy," 1,243-1,275; Robert E. Agger, Marshall N. Goldstein, and Stanley Pearl, "Political Cynicism: Measurement and Meaning," *Journal of Politics,* 23 (August 1961), 477-506; George I. Balch, "Political Trust and Styles of Political Involvement Among American College Students" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Ill., April 29-May 1, 1971); Cole, "Causes and Consequences"; John Fraser, "The Mistrustful-Efficacious Hypothesis and Political Participation," *Journal of Politics,* 32 (May 1970), 444-449; Gamson, "Political Trust and Its Ramifications," 40-45; Martin Kraus, Kevin Houlihan, Mark I. Oberlander, and Lawrence Carson, "Some Motivational Correlates of Attitudes Toward Political Participation," *Midwest Journal of Political Science,* 14 (August 1970), 383-391; Edgar Litt, "Political Cyni-

tablish a basis of authority independent of coercive force, and to instill in the populace an abiding sense of trust and allegiance. Since a marked decline in trust may encourage instability or "immobilism," mechanisms exist in all political systems to engender trust in political actors, processes, and institutions.

To the extent that political trust is associated with interpersonal (social) trust, there are additional ramifications for political life. Group political behavior presupposes a willingness to co-operate. Broadly based coalitions in the political system, dependent as they are on agreement that cuts across extant cleavages and opinions, often require of their adherents a belief in the integrity, ability, or correctness of one set of political objects as opposed to others. When intracoalitional trust deteriorates, existing intercoalitional arrangements may become fragile if not altered. Though interpersonal trust may be neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for social co-operation—indeed, under certain conditions distrust may stimulate co-operation among those with similar feelings—it seems clear that social trust facilitates collective action and probably also increases the likelihood of that action becoming routine over time.[6]

Political Competence

While some minimal level of citizen trust in government is essen-

cism and Political Futility," *Journal of Politics,* 25 (May 1963), 312-323; Edward L. McDill and Jean Clare Ridley, "Status, Anomia, Political Alienation and Political Participation," *American Journal of Sociology,* 68 (September 1968), 205-213; Edward N. Muller, "The Representation of Citizens by Political Authorities: Consequences for Regime Support," *American Political Science Review,* 64 (December 1970), 1,149-1,166; Harrell R. Rodgers, Jr., and George Taylor, "Pre-Adult Attitudes Toward Legal Compliance: Notes Toward A Theory," in *Political Attitudes and Public Opinion,* ed. Dan Nimmo and Charles Bonjean (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1972), 215-227; Donald E. Stokes, "Popular Evaluations of Government: An Empirical Assessment," in *Ethics and Bigness: Scientific, Academic, Religious, Political and Military,* ed. Harland Cleveland and Harold D. Lasswell (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 61-73; Meredith W. Watts, "Efficacy, Trust, and Orientation Toward Socio-Political Authority: Students' Support for the University," *American Journal of Political Science,* 17 (May 1973), 282-301.

[6] For a more detailed statement of how hostility and distrust functions for group life, see Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1956), pts. 2 and 5.

tial to long-term regime success, the significance of political competence varies with the value placed on the role of "citizen" in public affairs. In a society committed to popular rule, a widely shared sense of political competence encourages an aware and active citizenry and thus allows some influence over the general direction of public policy. A self-confident and politically involved populace also serves to protect the public interest, providing a check against governmental power.[7]

A strong sense of political competence also appears to have personal dividends. A persistent tradition in American political thought posits an active and informed citizen role as a vehicle through which an individual achieves self-fulfillment. The subjectively competent and politically active citizen presumably derives certain psychological gratifications from having involved himself in political life: he acquires a heightened sense of importance and well-being especially if successful in his endeavors.[8] It is obvious that not all citizens, nor even all competent citizens, engage in political action, and it may well be that the person who believes that he is able to influence government, but never tries, also derives certain benefits.[9] While confidence in one's political acumen and abilities may provide a set of highly positive and functional beliefs,

[7] In political communities that are not committed to free and meaningful citizen participation, a politically competent citizenry may be eufunctional, if not dysfunctional, to the political order. See, however, Frederick C. Barghoorn, *Politics in the USSR* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1966); and James H. Oliver, "Citizen Demands and the Soviet Political System," *American Political Science Review*, 63 (June 1969), 465-475, for alternative interpretations.

[8] This is but one aspect of the humanistic and naturalistic philosophy raised most forcefully by John Dewey and continued in the action-oriented psychology dedicated to the idea that a man is what he does and becomes by doing. Its political component has a heritage reaching back to the ideals of an active citizenry characterized in the Greek city state. See H. Mark Roelofs, *The Tension of Citizenship: Private Man and Public Duty* (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1958).

[9] If they are unsuccessful in political life, there are those who would minimize the significance of the outcome in order to avoid the feeling of failure. Apparently there exists a cost-benefit ratio by which the citizen attains sufficient value satisfactions *from having participated,* albeit in a losing effort, to offset the attendant cost of having engaged in the first place. For example, investigators in the Elmira study found that losing partisans tended to play down the impact of the election, thus reducing personal costs in their unsuccessful venture. Bernard Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

inactivity avoids a variety of "costs," including the possibility of frustration due to failure.[10]

The Competence-Trust Relationship

The political trust and political competence literature is extensive, yet social scientists have only begun to examine the interrelationship between these two variables. With Gamson's illuminating theoretical discussion of the subject as a basis, one can postulate a series of behavioral consequences that result from the fusion of trust and political competence.[11] The first combination, a low level of political trust and a limited sense of political competence, characterizes the apathetic, indifferent spectator who is minimally involved in political life. Those who possess this same low level of

[10] Scores of studies suggest a relationship between one's sense of effectiveness in political life and a wide array of politically-relevant attitudinal and behavioral variables. These are far too numerous and too well known to require review here. These studies have been accompanied by equally ambitious efforts to develop valid and reliable measures of political efficacy. Much of our scholarship has been based on either the Survey Research Center's four-item efficacy scale, whose referents are the citizen's belief in the receptivity of government to citizen influence and his sense of political self-confidence, or the somewhat broader view of this motivating force as conceived by Almond and Verba. Their study included in its five-item scale of political competence not only the dimension of governmental responsiveness but also the informational base that is considered to be prerequisite to effective political action and the confidence in oneself that is required as a stimulus to action. Hence, the belief that government is responsive to personal influence further implies (1) that the individual possesses the amount and kind of knowledge that is adequate for directing his political claims and grievances to the proper authorities; and (2) that he feels sufficiently confident in his ability to succeed when circumstances make it necessary or desirable for him to become involved. See Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton, N.J.; Princeton University Press, 1963); Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin, and Warren Miller, *The Voter Decides* (Evanston: Row, Peterson and Co., 1954); Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960); Ada Finifter, "Dimensions of Alienation," *American Political Science Review*, 64 (June 1970), 389-410; Edward Muller, "Cross National Dimensions of Political Competence," *American Political Science Review*, 64 (September 1970), 792-809.

[11] In his discussion of the consequences of the trust-efficacy combination, Gamson draws on his previous work in this area and on the dissertation of Jeffrey Paige. Although Gamson deals with political efficacy, his use of the concept "efficacy" is consistent with the term political competence as employed in this research. See Gamson, "Political Trust and Its Ramifications," 40-55; and also his *Power and Discontent*, 42-52.

competence but who feel a strong allegiance to the political system, constitute a second type which is similar to the subject orientation portrayed by Almond and Verba. Bound by an attachment to symbols of nation and community, the extent of this group's engagement in political life is often constrained by an excessive respect for the law and a restricted sense of personal rights and privileges. The third combination, a mixture of political competence and confidence in government, meets the civic ideal, supporting active political involvement, yet at the same time staying within the bounds of social convention.

And finally, a sense of political competence coupled with low trust provides the potential for political action, but of a highly volatile sort. A feeling of competence merged with distrust affects not only the likelihood of political participation but also the means, for should one's beliefs in the possibility for mass political influence be juxtaposed with a belief that government is unresponsive to certain interests, the very legitimacy of the regime may eventually be called into question. Depending in part, then, on the extent of political competence and on the intensity of the conviction that the system is not responding as it should, one can suggest those resulting conditions that nurture within-system tensions and encourage system instability. They include withdrawal of support by a significant segment of the population; discontinuity in support; fragmentation in existing political coalitions; and polarization.[12] Alternatively, when government is viewed as responsive to citizen inputs and willing to channel public resources in directions indicated by those inputs, allegiant orientations that broaden the extent of diffuse support are encouraged.

Empirical research has shown that trust and competence are linked to one another, but the character of the association between these two variables and their relationship to various forms of political behavior need to be further explored.[13]

---

[12] Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 448.

[13] Gamson reports data collected by Paige as corroborative evidence for his typology. Studying black residents of Newark in the aftermath of the 1967 disturbances in that city, Paige found that low trusters were no more likely than others to have engaged in riot-related behavior. However, when political efficacy (measured by a political information item) and trust are examined together, the findings are compelling: persons with high efficacy and low political trust constitute the group most likely to have engaged in riot behavior; persons with a medium level of trust and high efficacy constitute

HYPOTHESES

The literature on trust and competence treats a number of theoretically important problems, among them, the relationship between interpersonal and political trust;[14] the extent of trust and competence within select publics;[15] the relationship between political trust and political competence;[16] and the impact of trust and competence on behavior and behavioral predispositions.[17]   This

---

the group most likely to have engaged in conventional civil rights activities; and those with both a high level of trust and a high sense of efficacy constitute the group most likely to have limited their political activity to the ballot box. "Political Trust and Its Ramifications," 40-55. In an ambitious and thorough empirical treatment of the trust phenomenon, Aberbach and Walker report moderately strong correlation coefficients between trust and three indices of political expectations, among them, political competence (Gamma = .40 for blacks; Gamma = .32 for whites). Trust is also found to constrain the respondent's "potential political behavior" in race-related matters, but Aberbach and Walker make no effort to link directly the three variables of competence, trust, and behavior. "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," 1,205-1,207. Cole, conducting a secondary analysis of the 1970 SRC national sample, did test for causal linkages in a political trust model incorporating nontraditional modes of political behavior. Again, a very strong relationship is obtained between political efficacy and political trust (Gamma = .55), but when the combined impact of efficacy, trust, and other variables is considered, the "model fails to account for as handsome a percentage of the 'non-conventional' tactic sympathy as one would expect." "Causes and Consequences," 19.

[14] Robert E. Lane, *Political Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 163-166; Agger, Goldstein and Pearl, "Political Cynicism," 477-506; Almond and Verba, *Civic Culture*, 248-288; Morris Rosenberg, "Misanthropy and Political Ideology," *American Sociological Review*, 21 (December 1956), 690-695; Aberbach and Walker, "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," 1,204-1,205; Litt, "Political Cynicism," 315; Cole, "Causes and Consequences," 9-11; Aberbach, "Alienation," 92.

[15] Abramson, "Political Efficacy and Political Trust," 1,244; Aberbach and Walker, "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," 1,203-1,204; Watts, "Efficacy, Trust," *passim*; Miller, Brown and Raine, "Social Conflict," *passim*; Litt, "Political Cynicism," 312-323; McDill and Ridley, "Status, Anomia," 206-210.

[16] Aberbach, "Alienation," 92; Aberbach and Walker, "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," 1,205-1,207; Abramson, "Political Efficacy," 1,244; Cole, "Causes and Consequences," 11-12; Fraser, "The Mistrustful-Efficacious Hypothesis," 444-449; Gamson, "Political Trust and Its Ramifications," 46-52; Brett W. Hawkins, Vincent L. Marando and George A. Taylor, "Efficacy, Mistrust and Political Participation: Findings From Additional Data and Indicators," *Journal of Politics*, 33 (November 1971), 1,130-1,136; Stokes, "Popular Evaluations of Government," 67.

[17] Aberbach and Walker, "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," 1,213-1,219;

literature suggests the following hypotheses, as applied to a university population.

(1) College students as a group will exhibit a higher level of political competence and a lower level of political trust than is found in the general public.

(2) Students who have trust in government will tend to have faith in other people.

(3) Students who are politically competent will manifest predispositions to engage in politics.

(4) Those students who are politically competent will tend also to be trusting of government.

(5) Students who are both politically competent and distrustful of government will be more open than others to unconventional political actions.

DATA

Data for examining the interaction of trust and competence were obtained in the spring of 1972 from a sample of 661 university students in the Cleveland, Ohio, area. Respondents were selected on the basis of a serial systematic method (employing a random start) of all full-time students drawn equally from Case Western Reserve University, a private high-tuition university, Cleveland State University, a public, primarily commuter university, and John Carroll University, a private coeducational university affiliated with the Jesuit order.[18]

Cole, "Causes and Consequences," 16-19; Fraser, "The Mistrustful-Efficacious Hypothesis," 444-449; Gamson, "Political Trust and Its Ramifications," 50-52; Gamson, *Power and Discontent*, 42-52; Hawkins et al., "Efficacy, Mistrust," 1,130-1,136; Kraus et al., "Motivational Correlates," 387-388; Watts, "Efficacy, Trust," 294-299.

[18] A 71-item questionnaire was mailed to respondents on April 27, 1972, followed five days later with a postcard reminder. Questionnaires numbering 661 were returned, a 55 percent response rate. Of the Case Western Reserve University sample, 65 percent responded, compared with a 50 percent return from the two other universities. Three different universities were included in this study in order to obtain a less homogeneous sample, and to reduce the likelihood of bias derived from student association with a single campus. These three universities differ in terms of the social classes from which their students are drawn as well as in school milieux. A careful inspection and comparison of sample and population characteristics for sex, race, class standing, and curriculum reveals no significant biases for these variables.

The principal variables utilized in this report are: interpersonal trust; political trust; two dimensions of political competence; and two measures of orientation to political activity.

Interpersonal Trust. To determine whether students' trust in government is a reflection of a broader trust and confidence in people, we included in the questionnaire the Survey Research Center's (SRC) adaptation of the Rosenberg Faith-in-People Scale.[19] The scale consists of three items in forced-choice format, with scores combined into a simple additive index.

Political Trust. Trust in government is measured by a commonly used SRC item, worded as follows:

How much of the time do you think we can trust the government in Washington to do what is right—just about always, most of the time, some of the time, or almost never?

Because this question has been put to national samples of Americans since 1958, it allows for observation of national trends and for comparison of the Cleveland student population with the nation-at-large.[20]

Political Competence. Students' beliefs about their ability to influence the government are measured by two questions from Almond and Verba's scale of subjective competence.[21] The first item

---

[19] The questions are:

1. Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?

2. Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?

3. Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?

[20] The trust item was scored 1 through 4 with the lowest value assigned to respondents answering "just about always" (high trust), and the highest value assigned to respondents answering "almost never" (low trust). This question measuring trust in government was also part of a three-item index of political disaffection along with the following items:

1. Do you believe that there is a "credibility gap" between what the government does and what it says—yes, definitely; yes, probably; no?

2. Do you think that people like you have too little political power, or just about the right amount?

To permit a comparison of political trust with this index, coefficients for this index are also presented in Tables 2 and 3.

[21] The following were used as indices of political competence:

1. Now suppose that a law were being considered by the Congress that you considered to be very harmful or unjust. If you made an effort to block

(referred to as "governmental responsiveness") poses a hypothetical situation in which Congress is considering legislation that the respondent believes to be "harmful or unjust," and he is asked to judge the probability of success in trying to block its passage. This item is followed by a second (referred to as "political self-confidence") asking whether the respondent would himself become involved, that is, if he as an interested citizen would actively oppose this law. Both competence items serve as indicators of people's predispositions to engage in political activity. Our use of the two items separately is consistent with Converse's recent analysis of the SRC's scale of political efficacy. In what had originally been a unidimensional scale, Converse detects a bifurcation into personal capabilities and perception-of-system components.[22]

Orientations to Action. To measure students' orientations to political action, we determined each respondent's inclination and ability to specify a plan or strategy for influencing Congress ("Engagement Index") and the mode of action called for in the strategy ("Engagement Direction"). These variables are adapted from an item also appearing in *The Five Nation Study's* subjective competence scale. Almond and Verba asked their respondents what they could do about undesirable legislation, and a similar question was put to our sample. We asked, "What methods would you be most likely to use in trying to persuade Congress that the law it was considering was harmful or unjust?"

(a) *Engagement Index.* One way to analyze the responses is to dichotomize the sample into those who responded to the question and those who did not (the latter group including respondents who answered that they would do "nothing"). We hypothesized that differences between the two groups would be highly correlated with the dimensions of political competence that are outlined above,

---

passage of this law, how likely is it that you would succeed: very likely; somewhat likely; or not very likely?

2. If such a case arose, how likely is it that you would actually try to do something about it: very likely; somewhat likely; or not very likely?

[22] Philip Converse, "Change in the American Electorate," in *The Human Meaning of Social Change,* ed. Angus Campbell and Philip Converse (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1972), 325-330. On close inspection of national trend data, Converse found that the decline in efficacy varied by education: the less educated were likely to show a decline in personal effectiveness while the better educated seemed to reflect a decline in their evaluations of system responsiveness.

since providing a method of influence may itself be considered as one dimension of political competence. In short, people who feel that the system is responsive and who feel confident in their own abilities to effect change should be more likely than others to propose some method of action as opposed to thinking that nothing can be done.

It is clear, however, that most citizens, and especially most university students, have little difficulty in giving some type of answer to the question that we posed—often, we would assume, without much thought—and we expected to find the distribution of responses highly skewed. In order to probe one step further, therefore, we asked, "Let's say that the method or methods of persuasion that you use don't prove successful. Then, what would you be most likely to do?" Whereas only two percent of the students responded "nothing" to the first question and six percent did not respond at all, 26 percent of all respondents indicated that they would "give up" if their first attempt failed while nine percent gave no second answer. With the inclusion of this second item, then, we increased the size of the group giving partial or incomplete answers to 43 percent (classified as "low" on the Engagement Index), a result which gave us a much more realistic indication of the proportion of the sample that is least disposed to engage in political action.

(b) *Engagement Direction.* In addition to information about the number of alternatives that the respondent can, and is willing to, devise in order to influence Congress, the same question elicits information about the *kinds* of strategies that are being proposed. Engagement Direction, we hypothesized, would be less highly correlated with political competence than with political trust. Although the efficacious person possesses the kind of outlook that is psychologically most conducive to political activity per se, the particular method selected is much more likely to be a function of beliefs about the type of behavior that is necessary to bring about desired outcomes.[23] The latter partially reflects an over-all evaluation of the government with which one would have to contend, and the concept of political trust clearly taps such an orientation.

Accordingly, we coded the answers to our open-ended questions into "traditional" liberal democratic modes of political influence (voting, writing to one's congressmen, organizing with others into

[23] See Gamson, *Power and Discontent,* for a more elaborate argument relating political trust to political action, especially pp. 163-183.

groups, lobbying, and the like), and "nontraditional" political strate-
gies (mass activities, demonstrations, picketing, riots, violence, and
so on). Again, our two-item sequence proved especially useful in
distinguishing between these two styles of political activity. In
responding to the first question, for example, only five percent gave
nontraditional methods. When asked what they would do if their
initial strategy failed, however, 26 percent of this latter group es-
calated to a nontraditional activity. Of the students who are most
disposed to engage in political action, then, the majority fell into
two categories: those who gave a traditional response to both
questions (33 percent of the total sample; 58 percent of the stu-
dents scoring "high" on the Engagement Index); and those who
started with a traditional strategy and moved to a nontraditional
one (20 percent of the total sample; 35 percent of students scoring
"high" on the Engagement Index).[24]

FINDINGS

It is useful to report our findings in the following order: (1) the
incidence of trust and competence among students; (2) the rela-
tionship between interpersonal and political trust; (3) the concept
of political competence; (4) the trust-competence relationship; and
(5) the relationship between trust, competence, and orientations to
action.

(1) *Comparison Between Students and the General Public.* The
SRC provides us with a 15 year time frame for viewing trends in
political trust. As Table 1 makes clear, public confidence in gov-
ernment has consistently declined during the last decade and a half.
To be sure, there are always those who are skeptical about poli-
tics, but apparently the concurrence of the Vietnam conflict, the
"credibility gap," and the heightened sense of anxiety over the
direction and pace of social change, has helped to undermine
people's faith in their national government. Students, who have
shown themselves to be especially sensitive to many of these issues,
are even more distrustful of government than the general public.
This above-average level of political mistrust among students, it

---

[24] Only three percent of the total sample can be classified as having pro-
posed alternative methods both of which are unconventional, and one percent
of our students actually "de-escalated" by moving from a nontraditional to a
traditional strategy.

should be noted, fulfills the first of Gamson's two conditions for nontraditional political behavior. The second condition relates to political competence.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF STUDENT SAMPLE AND NATIONAL SAMPLES (SRC)

Year	Political Trust			Governmental Responsiveness			Political Self-confidence		
	Mean^a S.D.		N	Mean^b S.D.		N	Mean^c S.D.		N
1958 (SRC)	2.07	.668	1737						
1964 (SRC)	2.08	.636	1436						
1966 (SRC)	2.18	.771	1239	2.67	.683	1059	2.59	.843	1162
1968 (SRC)	2.30	.724	1310	2.41	.752	801			
1970 (SRC)	2.39	.743	1461						
1972 (SRC)	2.41	.601	2232						
1972 Cleveland Area Students	2.66	.768	648	2.70	.656	647	2.27	.785	654

Source: The data utilized in this table were made available, in part, by the Inter-University Consortium for Political Research. The ICPR does not, however, bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

^{a} Scores range from 1 (most trusting) to 4 (least trusting); "it depends" and "don't know" responses are excluded from the calculations in all categories.

^{b} Scores range from 1 ("high" governmental responsiveness) to 3 ("low" governmental responsiveness).

^{c} Scores range from 1 ("high" political self-confidence) to 3 ("low" political self-confidence).

On the measure of governmental responsiveness, no definite pattern appears, though students are less likely than the general public to expect success with Congress. When the "it depends" and "don't know" categories are included in the calculations, the proportion of students who view the government as unresponsive is markedly higher than that of the general public.[25] Of the students, 71 percent believed it unlikely that they could influence Congress, compared to 58 percent of the public in 1966 and 47 percent in 1968 who thought so. Comparing the respective populations on the sec-

[25] In calculating the mean scores, "it depends" and "not ascertained" categories were excluded. This procedure affects the comparison between the national and student samples on the governmental responsiveness variable because 18 percent of the national sample can be found in these categories while only two percent of the students are so situated.

ond dimension of political competence, we find that students are more politically self-confident. When asked if they would actually try to influence the Congress, college students responded in the affirmative more often than others. This higher level of political self-confidence, then, satisfies the second requirement of the Gamson equation. The implication of these findings will be examined below.

(2) *Interpersonal Trust and Political Trust.* It seems reasonable enough to expect trust in government to be a manifestation of a more generalized sense of trust in one's fellow man, the arguments being: a) that political trust represents less of a judgment based on performance criteria than it does a basic evaluative predisposition or response set, and b) that government consists of *people* who hold office, and "if one cannot trust other people generally, one can certainly not trust those under the temptations of and with the powers which come with public office."[26] Although one can find some support for this hypothesis,[27] a number of studies, including our own, report a conspicuously weak relationship (Gamma $= .15$) between interpersonal and political trust.[28]

Confidence in government bears little relationship to faith in people, we might suggest, when "government" cannot be substituted for a specific reference group—one that a respondent might envisage when given the cue "people" in questions asking whether "most people can be trusted." In part, at least, interpersonal trust would seem to reflect the kinds of experiences and learning that take place among immediate cohorts, and these may be different enough from one's own experiences with the "government in Washington" to modify the impact of what Hess and Torney call "inter-

[26] Lane, *Political Life,* 164.

[27] In their codification of SRC measures, Robinson et al., report Pearson product moment correlations of .24 between "trust in people" and "trust in government" for the 1964 study, *Measures of Political Attitudes* (Ann Arbor: SRC, Institute for Social Research, 1969). Using 1970 SRC data, a Gamma of .28 was obtained between "personal satisfaction" and political trust measures by Cole, "Causes and Consequences," 10. See also Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture,* 248-288; Rosenberg, "Misanthropy and Political Ideology," 690-695; and Agger, Goldstein, and Pearl, "Political Cynicism," 477-506.

[28] Aberbach and Walker report a Gamma of .17 for blacks and .16 for whites, "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," 1,206. See also Litt, "Political Cynicism," 315.

personal transfer" as it occurs during early socialization.[29] Furthermore, there is evidence to indicate that aggregate levels of public trust in government have diminished over the past several years, especially among blacks and students, while no such evidence exists about people's trust in mankind. Since this could affect the magnitude of the relationship between the two kinds of trust for these groups, the general hypothesis that faith in people constrains confidence in government may need to be qualified accordingly.[30]

(3) *Dimensions of Competence.* There is a moderately strong association (Gamma = .35) between governmental responsiveness and political self-confidence. (See Table 2.) As we might expect, those who believe that successful influence of Congress is possible tend to express a companion belief in their own willingness to attempt such influence. That the two competence dimensions are not more highly associated, however, indicates a degree of independence between these items. Not all students who claim that they would try to alter legislative outcomes expect to be successful in their undertaking; likewise, some students who assert high expectations of success with Congress would abstain from any such effort. We can distinguish, therefore, three types of "political

---

[29] A brief description of the interpersonal transfer model of learning is provided by Robert D. Hess and Judith V. Torney in their study of American school children, *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Anchor Books, 1968), 24. And since Edward Banfield, earlier, and Dean Jaros and his colleagues have described subcultures in two nations, there is some evidence to suggest the utility of the model for understanding the personal trust-political trust phenomenon. See Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1958); and Jaros et al., "The Malevolent Leader: Political Socialization in an American Subculture," *American Political Science Review*, 62 (June 1968), 564-575. As appealing as is this thesis for understanding the relationships between one set of objects and political attitudes, the transference of learning from one area to another depends, in large part, upon the substitutability of one set of objects for another. On this point, see Theodore Newcomb, Ralph Turner, and Philip Converse, *Social Psychology: The Study of Human Interaction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), 121-149.

[30] We find that the correlation coefficient between trust in government and self-reported conservatism-liberalism stance is Gamma = .50, with those who call themselves liberals less trusting than conservatives. This result suggests that for certain groups, such as university students, political ideological variables may be much more relevant to political trust than explanations based on interpersonal trust.

competents." First is the person who is competent on both of the above dimensions (23 percent of the sample). A second type consists of people who believe that the system will respond to their attempts at persuasion but who are not very likely to make an effort (four percent). And finally, there is the person who is politically self-confident but who thinks that system responsiveness is unlikely (48 percent). The fact that more students fall into the third category than into either the first or the second indicates that among those who are disposed to participate, many are motivated by something other than their estimate of success with Congress.

TABLE 2

ASSOCIATION (GAMMA) BETWEEN POLITICAL TRUST, GOVERNMENTAL
RESPONSIVENESS, AND POLITICAL SELF-CONFIDENCE

	Governmental Responsiveness	Political Self-confidence
Governmental Responsiveness		.35
Political Trust	.24	−.22
Index of Political Disaffection[a]	.25	−.21

[a] See footnote 20.

(4) *Trust and Competence.* On the basis of previous studies, we had expected to find a clear and consistent positive relationship between political competence measures and political trust.[31] To the contrary, results are mixed. (See Table 2.) We find neither an exceptionally strong association between political trust and dimensions of competence nor a relationship that is consistently positive. As was anticipated, those who trust the national government are more likely than others to believe that successful congressional influence is possible, yet the Gamma between trust and governmental responsiveness is a moderate .24. At the same time, politically trusting students exhibit less of an inclination to take an active part in such efforts (Gamma = −.22). Those who *distrust* the government, then, are somewhat more likely than their counterparts to say that they would attempt to influence the legislature.

The most interesting finding here is the negative relationship between trust and political self-confidence. Among other things, it raises the possibility of reciprocal influence such that a strong

[31] Aberbach and Walker, "Political Trust and Racial Ideology," 1,207; Cole, "Causes and Consequences," 11; Watts, "Efficacy, Trust," 295. See, however, Gamson, "Political Trust and Its Ramifications," 50.

sense of competence results in political action, and political action results in a *lowering* of political trust. Though we are unable to explore the question of the attitudinal after-effects of political participation, we have some data that indirectly support such an interpretation. We asked the students whether they had ever worked for a political party or candidate, and the association (Gamma) between this measure of activity and political trust is –.21. Those who had participated in partisan activities were more likely to be low in trust than nonparticipants. While causal direction is uncertain, the possibility exists that political distrust is a consequence of one's participation in politics, a notion quite inimical to the belief that citizen activity promotes positive orientations to the system. It is also possible, however, for political distrust to have stimulated political activity, and in this regard the thesis advanced by William Gamson is most relevant. We address this topic below.

(5) *Strategies for Political Action.* For those who are interested in the relationship between political trust and political competence, few issues command greater attention than the ties between attitudes about the political system and orientations to action. We have conceptualized action orientations in two ways: in terms of one's willingness and ability to articulate political strategies (the Engagement Index); and in terms of the kinds of tactics that the individual would find acceptable (Engagement Direction). The latter, it will be recalled, incorporates a two-phased strategy ranging from traditional methods of influence to nontraditional political

TABLE 3

ASSOCIATION (GAMMA) BETWEEN POLITICAL COMPETENCE, POLITICAL TRUST, AND ORIENTATION TOWARD POLITICAL ACTION

Orientation to Action	Governmental Responsiveness	Political Self-confidence	Political Trust	Index of Political Disaffection
Engagement Index	.51	.35	.10	.03
Engagement Direction	.05	–.13	.50	.38

action. We have discussed the lack of a strong relationship between political trust and political competence. The relationship between political trust and the Engagement Index is also weak (Gamma = .10), evidence that trust is not a good predictor of a

person's readiness to state a plan for political action. (See Table 3.) Political competence, on the other hand, is more powerful in its association with the Engagement Index. People who believe that successful influence is possible as well as those who express a willingness to attempt such action are more likely than others to propose political strategies. The respective Gamma values are .51 and .36. Clearly, sense of political competence helps to explain some of the variation in people's predispositions to engage in political action.

In terms of the direction of engagement, political trust is a much more potent variable in understanding the *kinds* of strategies a person would employ. Whereas weak relationships are obtained between Engagement Direction and governmental responsiveness (Gamma = .05) and between Engagement Direction and political self-confidence (Gamma = –.13), the association between political trust and Engagement Direction is impressive (Gamma = .50). While the politically trusting students tend to favor "traditional" methods of influence, the distrusting are substantially more apt to select mass demonstrations and protest tactics. This finding is most interesting in view of the negative relationships between political trust and political self-confidence, and between political self-confidence and Engagement Direction. Students who express some confidence in themselves as political actors, then, tend more than others to distrust the government and to select strategies that incorporate nontraditional tactics. These findings, however, are based on bivariate relationships between the respective variables, and it remains to be seen how the mixture of political trust and political competence affects the direction of political engagement.

Are the less trusting but politically self-confident students in our sample more likely than their cohorts to designate protest and sometimes violent methods of political persuasion, as Gamson predicts? The data in Table 4 shows that they are. The frequency of nontraditional strategies is greatest among those who are most self-confident *and also* most distrustful. Of additional importance is the finding that students who are least politically self-confident and who are inclined to trust the government tend to limit their options to a range of traditional political activities like writing letters, lobbying their representatives, and seeking legal remedies. Finally, when political trust is held constant, the higher the sense of political self-confidence, the greater the tendency toward non-

TABLE 4
RELATIONSHIP OF POLITICAL SELF-CONFIDENCE TO ENGAGEMENT DIRECTION CONTROLLING FOR POLITICAL TRUST
(IN PERCENTAGES)

Engagement Direction[a]		Low Political Trust			High Political Trust		
First Method to Influence Congress	Second Method to Influence Congress	High Political Self-confidence	Medium Political Self-confidence	Low Political Self-confidence	High Political Self-confidence	Medium Political Self-confidence	Low Political Self-confidence
Traditional	Traditional	43	48	55	69	76	79
Traditional	Nontraditional	52	41	40	25	23	16
Nontraditional	Traditional	1	3	—	—	1	—
Nontraditional	Nontraditional	3	8	5	6	—	5
Number		(67)	(120)	(40)	(32)	(71)	(40)

[a] This table includes only respondents who score "high" on the Engagement Index.

traditional strategies. Among students, then, the predisposition to participate is correlated with the predisposition to use methods intended to challenge system norms. In sum, trust and competence in combination provide us with a useful indicator of student orientations to political action.

DISCUSSION

Two findings in this study warrant further discussion. The first is the relationship between political competence and political trust, and the second is the relationship between these variables and orientations to political action.

Research devoted to the relationship between trust and competence has provided a mixed pattern of findings, but of late a number of investigators have reported a strong, positive relationship between the two variables.[32] In this study of Cleveland-area university students, another pattern emerges: we obtain neither a strong nor a consistently positive relationship between political trust and two dimensions of political competence. Trust is posi-

[32] A few words are in order about the inconsistencies in the trust-competence literature. Research in this area is quite varied, differing in a number of important respects. For instance, some investigators have utilized the concept "political competence" while others have used "political efficacy"; different indicators have been used to measure essentially the same phenomenon; and trust and competence have been examined in a variety of contexts. To cite just a few examples, Aberbach and Walker use a six-item index of political competence, which includes national and local competence items, to study residents of Detroit in "Political Trust and Racial Ideologies"; Watts modifies the SRC efficacy items in order to derive an efficacy/powerlessness scale in "Efficacy, Trust," 293; Cole initially uses a single item extracted from the SRC's political efficacy scale to study the national electorate in "Causes and Consequences," 11, and subsequently employs the more complete version of the SRC scale in "Toward a Model of Political Trust," 815; and Paige uses a political information item as a measure of political efficacy to study black residents of Newark, in Gamson, "Political Trust and Its Ramifications," 50. These differences may help to account for the variation in findings: Aberbach and Walker report a substantial positive relationship between trust and competence; both Cole and Watts find that efficacy is even more highly correlated with trust; and Paige observes a slightly negative association between trust and efficacy. Our own data suggest that there may be significant differences in the trust-competence relationship depending upon the particular subdimension of competence that is used. Furthermore, our findings based on a student population are more akin to Paige's data on the black population of Newark than to Cole's study of the population-at-large.

tively related to governmental responsiveness and negatively as-
sociated with political self-confidence.

In examining the implications of trust and competence for po-
litical action, we assumed that the articulation of political strate-
gies was a valid indicator of one's propensity to participate in
politics. This assumption is understandable since strategy articu-
lation implies both a political readiness and some information about
the channels available for political influence. There are two essen-
tial decisions that an individual must make: the first is whether or
not to participate; and the second is what direction that participa-
tion will take. With respect to the former, the two competence
items proved to be valuable indicators of one's disposition to plan
a strategy. Political trust, on the other hand, provided an indication
of the *kinds* of political strategies that students were apt to em-
ploy: those who trusted the government tended to prefer the more
traditional forms of political action. When trust and competence
are simultaneously examined for their impact on action orientations,
we obtain an even more powerful measure of the direction of these
activities.

Our two most important findings, then, are the negative relation-
ship between trust and political self-confidence, and the association
between distrust and the proposed use of nontraditional political
tactics. Further investigation reveals that politically self-confident
students exhibit a higher-than-average interest in politics, yet they
tend to be low in political trust and are more likely than others to
resort to unconventional political strategies. These data, however,
deal basically with behavioral predispositions. What may be even
more significant, then, is the finding that those who have actually
engaged in partisan political activities are somewhat less trusting
of government than those who have not participated, a fact that
leads us to ask whether for some people *participation* has a damp-
ening effect on levels of trust. Reciprocal influences may be at
work: high levels of trust are conducive to political activity, but
participatory experiences, in turn, feed back to reduce levels of
trust. If in fact this reduction occurs, it would be appropriate to
consider negative feedback as one of the elements in the generation
of political distrust.

In his discussion of the way in which distrust is diffused through
the political system, Gamson claims that it originates in the citizen's

negative perception of a set of official decisions. These decisions, then, cumulate so that initial suspicions come to taint the individual's view of institutions, the regime, and ultimately the political community.[33] Our data, however, are not inconsistent with the hypothesis that political distrust is a function of actual participation, as well as of evaluations of system outputs.

The extent of these negative feedback influences is of special importance to the United States because an increasing proportion of the citizenry is becoming better educated, and higher levels of education are generally associated with feelings of political competence.[34] Should participation result in a decline in trust for some segments of the population, it is quite possible that the volatile conditions described by Gamson will become more prevalent as ever larger numbers of politically competent people begin to distrust the government. If participation in political life were to affect adversely *both* the individual's political trust and his sense of political competence, however, then the likelihood of nonconventional activities might not appear so great. Among our respondents, for example, levels of political competence *as measured by governmental responsiveness* are especially low. While low levels of trust and competence discourage the use of nontraditional forms of political activity, these conditions are equally inappropriate to other forms of citizen participation. People who lack trust and competence tend to withdraw from, or engage perfunctorily in, political life.[35]

As seen in our data, the climate of the university in the early 70s is one permeated with a distrust of government and a sense of pessimism about governmental responsiveness. Yet a significant number of students still exhibit confidence in their personal political abilities. Ultimately, the importance of these attitudinal patterns depends upon their durability over time, the continuation of conditions that gave rise to them, and the kinds of opportunities that will emerge in the future to stimulate the public's participation in politics.

[33] Gamson, *Power and Discontent*, 51-52; see, also, Miller, Brown, and Raine, "Social Conflict," 61-65.

[34] Cf. Dean Jaros, "Political Response to New Skills: The Conforming and the Deviant," in *Political Attitudes*, ed. Nimmo and Bonjean, 228-236.

[35] Cf. Watts, "Efficacy, Trust," 300.

COMMENTS

Findings such as those discussed above are intriguing in their ramifications and suggest a number of important questions. How durable are attitudes of trust and distrust? What level of trust is a necessary or sufficient condition for the continued stability of democratic government? What are the conditions and circumstances that facilitate the diffusion or generalization of distrust? And what are the correlative factors that move people to accept one kind of political strategy over another?

The long-term impact of student distrust in government remains to be seen. Although a rather high proportion of students lack faith in the national government, their distrust may not be as deleterious to the system as some have prophesied. Portions of the student community harbor a generalized rebelliousness toward authority figures which sometimes includes political authorities. Such hostility, however, need not have dire consequences for the political system if it is neither central to the person's belief system nor extreme in its intensity. For some, expressions of distrust simply lack substance, while for others political distrust is without an emotional anchor. The durability of these opinions as well as their consequences for political behavior remain open questions.

Furthermore, when distrust is highly focused and personalized, the prospect that generalization will occur from one attitude object to another is diminished. The belief that "Jones is a corrupt politician" need not lead one to conclude that all politicians are corrupt or that political institutions are no longer reliable. What is the threshold that must be reached if institutions are to be tainted by individual culpability? Generalizing from distrust of authorities to distrust of institutions is equivalent to the identification of individual error with institutional failure. The constraints militating against such a diffusion of distrust are indeed considerable, compounded by the fact that the burden of guilt for organizational shortcomings and errors is often displaced onto the individual.[36]

Partial evidence in support of this distinction between distrust as a transient opinion and distrust as a more durable and generalized behavioral cue exists in the number of students who lack confidence

[36] Robert Presthus, "Toward a Theory of Organizational Behavior," in *Readings in Public Administration,* ed. Maurice E. O'Donnell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1966), 47.

in government yet remain content to opt for the more traditional forms of politics. Thus the current low level of political trust among university students may be a short-term occurrence resulting from the Vietnam War, domestic unrest, urban blight, and so forth. With the passage of time and the eventual lessening of those conditions producing the ebb tide in trust, confidence in government may re-emerge to its previous, more robust levels. If so, the finding of a high incidence of distrust within the student community assumes a lower order of importance. It is seen as a temporary manifestation of transitory and idiosyncratic occurrences in the political life of the nation.

To the contrary, however, a number of factors and conditions suggest a greater durability to, and importance of, today's standard of political trust. We have said that the salience of our findings depends upon the measure to which trust-eroding conditions continue, the degree to which extant attitudes of distrust are reinforced, and the extent to which opportunities for political engagement are ripe. These conditions, taken individually, need not have pernicious effects for the society. Their occurrence within a brief span of time, however, makes problematical the assumed resilience of political trust.

Since these data were collected in 1972, the most relevant political event has been the fuller disclosure of the details of the Watergate affair. Few events in our political history have reached the enormity of Watergate, with its evidence of political spying, surreptitious entry, politicization of governmental agencies, and campaign sabotage. One thing seems certain. The illegal activities of the Nixon administration will do much to reinforce the feelings and beliefs of those who are already distrustful of government. And for those in the electorate who have been most allegiant in their political orientations, Watergate is likely to be increasingly viewed as something more than the ill wind of administrative indiscretion. Whether the threshold point for the diffusion of distrust will have been reached in the aftermath of Watergate remains a moot issue—one dependent, as we have suggested, on the degree to which blame for these events falls on a number of individuals rather than on the institutions themselves.

Aside from these reinforcing conditions, a second factor presages a continuation of low levels of public confidence in government: developments in the media industry. Combined with an unprece-

dented availability of information from the news media is the in-
terest in investigative reporting. Developments in media tech-
nology have resulted in the widespread and almost immediate
diffusion of information to mass audiences while increased profes-
sionalization in the journalism fraternity has encouraged a more
critical scrutiny of public events and official acts.

As larger numbers of politically self-confident, yet distrusting
students involve themselves in social and political affairs, the ques-
tion of political stability becomes paramount. System stability will
turn on the capacity of government to respond quickly to salient
political issues and problems. The changing composition and
character of the electorate seem to demand a tempo of response
that is without precedent in American political history.