The Moral Foundations of Trust

The Moral Foundations of Trust seeks to explain why people place their faith in strangers and why doing so matters. Trust is a moral value that does not depend on personal experience or on interactions with people in civic groups or informal socializing. Instead, we learn to trust from our parents, and trust is stable over long periods of time. Trust depends on an optimistic worldview: the world is a good place and we can make it better. Trusting people are more likely to give through charity and volunteering and are more supportive of rights for groups that have faced discrimination. Trusting societies are more likely to redistribute resources from the rich to the poor and to have more effective governments. Trust has been on the wane in the United States for more than thirty years, the roots of which are traceable to declining optimism and increasing economic inequality, trends Uslaner documents with aggregate time series in the United States and cross-sectional data across market economies.

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"I've never trusted cows."

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CAMBRIDGE
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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521812139

First published 2002

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Uslaner, Eric M.
The moral foundations of trust / Eric M. Uslaner.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0-521-81213-5 – ISBN 0-521-01103-5 (pb.)
1. Trust – Social aspects. 2. Trust – Moral and ethical aspects. 3. Social participation. 4. Trust – United States. 5. Social participation – United States. 6. Social values – United States. I. Title.

HM1071 .U75 2002
302.5–dc21 2001052721

ISBN 978-0-521-81213-9 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-01103-7 Paperback

With love to my favorite optimists and trusters,
Debbie, Avery, and Amber

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Preface

This book was a long time coming and represents both a detour in my conventional research agenda and an evolution in my own thinking. Most of my writing has been on the United States Congress. In 1993 I published a book, *The Decline of Comity in Congress*, that linked the increasing incivility in Congress to a decline of trust among the American public. For that study, trust was a surrogate for a cooperative spirit and I gave little thought to any deeper meaning – even though it played a key role in my analysis.

The next year Bob Putnam invited me to a conference on social capital in the very pleasant surroundings of Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Those invited could bring their spouses – and since this was our first trip away from home since we became parents, my wife and I were anxious to go. But I wasn't doing any work on social capital and so I had to come up with a topic rather quickly. Following the old maxim "write about what you know about," I looked to the faithful trust question in the General Social Survey and wrote a paper linking faith in others to a whole range of desirable attitudes and behavior. And this set me on a detour from my traditional research agenda of focusing on the Congress.

I still had little idea of any deeper language. I got some good reactions to this paper, so I decided to pursue the linkages further. I wrote a paper, "Faith, Hope, and Charity," that has become my most widely cited unpublished paper. It remained unpublished in part because I took a heretical position – that trust was the cause, rather than the effect, of civic engagement – and because I still did not have a clear idea as to what trust was. I believed that trust was the cure-all for our problems of civic engagement, which were indeed severe and threatening to our

democratic order. For someone who had just written a book on incivility and gridlock in Congress, warning signals about our society seemed like an appealing argument.

I was making progress. Trust was important, I determined, because it was a moral value. Armed with some quotations from Glenn Loury's work, I argued that *trust* was the most important part of social capital and that civic participation was an important consequence, but participation in civic life wasn't *part* of social capital. Trust was *not* the major part of social capital, journal reviewers told me, and it was much more likely to be the effect rather than the cause of civic engagement. This manuscript kept bouncing back to me, and I soon realized that in one fundamental way I was wrong and in another I was correct. I was right to assume that trust is a value, not simply shaped by experience, and that its consequences are more profound than those of civic engagement. I was wrong to get involved in the debate over what constitutes social capital. My experience with "Faith, Hope, and Charity" convinced me that it was silly to play definitional games. Then I attended conferences on social capital in settings as diverse as the World Bank in Washington, D.C., Milan, and Cluj-Napoca, Romania, where we spent at least one full day debating what constitutes social capital.

Even the casual reader will notice that I barely mention "social capital" in the text. That was not an oversight; it reflects lessons learned the hard way. After being pummeled for redefining terms and spending too much time hearing others try to do the same thing, I decided to concentrate on what interested me: trust. Then my thinking began to get more focused and I started categorizing what it would take to argue that trust is indeed a moral value and what sorts of consequences would flow from this position. As my work developed, I realized that there were many different facets of trust and that I needed to acknowledge this. And I also began to question the linkage between trust and most forms of civic engagement. I had moved away from my initial acceptance of Putnam's argument that trust and participation formed a "virtuous circle."

I initially embraced the argument, now most strongly advocated by Dietlind Stolle, that trust came first and that civic engagement followed. Yet, the more I read and thought about different forms of participation, the more skeptical I became of the link. Then when I saw Putnam's new work extending his argument to informal socializing, my doubts multiplied. Few of us spend a lot of time in civic groups or even in socializing. But when we do, we mostly hang out with people like ourselves.

Going back to my earlier work on *The Decline of Comity in Congress*, I realized that trust helped us resolve conflicts with people with whom we disagree, and with whom we might even have little in common. The rise in incivility in both Congress and the nation stemmed from our willingness to demonize our opponents.

The sort of trust of which Russell Hardin writes – trust in people we know – seems remote from these concerns. Many of Hardin's wonderful examples are about trust in people we know well. The more I thought of his examples, the more convinced I became that there really is nothing remarkable about trusting my wife. Then I thought of some people I don't consider trustworthy and wondered whether my disdain for them would make me think twice about people in general. I asked people whether they would change their worldview if I came up to them and punched them in the face. Most looked at me rather strangely, but acknowledged that such incidents would *not* make them misanthropes.

This is a very abbreviated tale of my intellectual journey. And along the way, I have picked up many debts. Key among them are the General Research Board, University of Maryland, for a Distinguished Faculty Research Fellowship, which gave me a year off to read, write, and think about these issues in 1997–8; the Everett McKinley Dirksen Center for the Study of Congressional Leadership for a grant that helped me think about the linkages to Congress; and the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences (through Bob Putnam's generosity) for support that helped me conduct the research.

Many people and institutions provided data that made the analysis possible: the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, which provided most of the data in the book; Richard Morin, *Washington Post*; Aaron Hefron and Ari Holtz, Independent Sector; Andrew Kohut, Pew Center for The People and The Press; Robert O'Connor, United Way; Ann E. Kaplan, American Association of Fund-Raising Councils; Patrick Gilbo and Robert Thompson, American Red Cross; Michael Kagay, *New York Times*; Jingua C. Zou, CBS News; Meril James, Gallup International; Rolf Uher, International Social Survey Programme; Donald Kinder, Nancy Burns, Ashley Gross, and Pat Luevano, American National Election Studies for the 2000 Pilot Study with the "thinking aloud" questions on trust, helpfulness, and fairness; Patrick Bova, National Opinion Research Center; Rafael LaPorta; Daniel Treisman; Johannes Federke; and Robert Putnam, through the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. None of

these institutions or kind folks are responsible for any interpretations I have made.

I owe particular debts to those devoted souls who gave me their sage – and detailed – advice on the manuscript, especially Jane Mansbridge, Jeffrey Mondak, Bo Rothstein, Dietlind Stolle, and Mark Warren (listed alphabetically). A much larger group of people commented on smaller portions of the manuscript in various forms and/or gave me the benefit of their advice in conversations. Again, listed alphabetically, they are: Gar Alperowitz, Gabriel Badescu, Stephen Bennett, Valerie Braithwaite, John Brehm, Geoffrey Brennan, Mitchell Brown, Dennis Chong, Richard Conley, Eva Cox, Sue E. S. Crawford, Karen Dawisha, Paul Dekker, Keith Dougherty, John S. Dryzek, Richard Eckersley, Morris Fiorina, Francis Fukuyama, Gerald Gamm, James Gimpel, Mark Graber, Russell Hardin, Joep de Hart, Jennifer Hochschild, Virginia Hodgkinson, Mark Hooghe, Ronald Inglehart, Ted Jelen, Richard Johnston, Karen Kaufmann, Ronald King, Robert Klitgaard, Anirudh Krishna, Jan Leighley, Margaret Levi, Peter Levine, Richard Morin, John Mueller, Kenneth Newton, Jenny Onyx, Joe Oppenheimer, John Owens, Martin Paldam, Anita Plotinsky, Sanjeev Prakash, Robert Putnam, Edward Queen II, Preston Quesenberry, Wendy Rahn, Lindon Robinson, Nancy Rosenblum, Tara Santmire, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Per Selle, Marcelo Siles, Karol Soltan, Shibley Telhami, Jan van Deth, John Whaley, Paul Whiteley, Richard Wilkinson, Raymond Wolfinger, Dag Wollebaek, Robert Wuthnow, and Yael Yishai.

I have also benefited from comments made by participants at many conferences, including more meetings of the American Political Science Association and Midwest Political Science Association than I can document. Domestically, they have included audiences at the Brookings Institution; the Conference on "Civility and Deliberation in the U.S. Senate" sponsored by the Robert J. Dole Institute of the University of Kansas; the World Bank; the Conference on Democracy and Trust, Georgetown University; the Communitarian Summit organized by Amitai Etzioni in Crystal City, Virginia; the American Association of Retired Persons; the Secretary's Open Forum of the United States Department of State; the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania; the Social Capital Initiative at Michigan State University; Tulane University; the Hendricks Seminar at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln; the Workshop on Social Capital and Democracy, Cape Cod, Massachusetts; and, of course, presentations at my own institution, the University of Maryland, College Park.

Internationally, I have learned much from the audiences at the European Consortium for Political Research conference in Milan and workshops in Warwick, England, and Copenhagen, Denmark. I was privileged to be able to present my findings at a conference in Solstrand, Norway, organized by the Norwegian Centre for Research in Organisation and Management and the Norwegian Power and Democracy Project; the Social and Cultural Planning Bureau, The Hague, the Netherlands; Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania; the Romanian Cultural Foundation, Bucharest, Romania; the University of Westminster, London, England; the University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia; Australian National University, Canberra, Australia; the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia; and the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, Mexico City, Mexico.

I am also indebted to the fine folks at Cambridge University Press, especially Lewis Bateman, Michael Moscati, and Lauren Levin for shepherding the manuscript through the review process and to publication. And most critically, my ever-trusting family withstood the demands of time and distractions. Avery, age 11 when the manuscript is completed, is now old enough to figure out what I do for a living, but is hardly overwhelmed. Debbie, who is a classic truster, has put up with so many of my trials and tribulations with this manuscript that she says she will wait for the movie. And our newest addition, Amber, a golden retriever we adopted from Golden Retriever Rescue, Education, and Training (GRREAT), slept through much of the recent rewriting. On other occasions, she tried to jump on the computer, but mostly landed on me. They are all joys to warm the heart of even the most diehard misanthrope.

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