Inter- and Intra-Racial Differences in Political Trust

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Abstract

Despite the large volume of research exploring racial differences in political attitudes, on the one hand, and political trust, on the other hand, very few studies have explored the intersection of these two topics by seeking to understand racial differences in political trust. To be sure, most studies of political trust note a consistent difference in the degree to which the races trust government, with blacks consistently registering more negative evaluations than whites. However, the implication of the vast majority of studies in this area is that “one size fits all” – i.e., all groups form judgments of trust in the same way and separate analyses of different groups is unnecessary. Given what we know about political trust and the typically large differences across some groups--especially racial groups--found to exist in other opinion domains, such an assumption seems untenable.

By contrast, the current research examines intra- and inter-racial differences in the antecedents of trust in government, with an eye toward answering the following questions. First, how does the collective experience of blacks in the United States translate into more negative views of government? Second, how do blacks differ from whites in their evaluation of political trust? And third, what are the implications of these racial differences for our understanding of political trust more generally?

To examine these questions, I draw on survey data from the 1996 National Black Election Study and the 1996 American National Election Study. The analysis suggests that African Americans and whites come to judgments of the trustworthiness of government by very different paths, with important implications for understanding political trust more generally.
Political scientists have been investigating political trust (defined as a basic evaluative orientation toward the government) among the American public since the 1950s. Most research has examined the antecedents of political trust in an attempt to understand the massive decline in trust starting in the late 1960s (for a review see Craig 1993, Ch. 2). This research has identified a range of important determinants of public trust in government including incumbent evaluations, satisfaction with policy outcomes and political processes, and economic evaluations.

Despite the large volume of work devoted to political trust, studies of group differences in the sources of trust are almost nonexistent. The implication of this research is that “one size fits all” – i.e., all groups form their judgments of trust in the same way. Given what we know about political trust and the typically large differences across groups found to exist in other opinion domains, however, such an assumption seems untenable. Most problematic, for the purposes of this paper, is the absence of research exploring the causes of racial differences in political trust. Over the last thirty years, in nine of the last sixteen national election studies that have recorded levels of trust of the American electorate, African Americans exhibited substantially lower levels of trust than whites. But, while studies have documented these racial differences, scholars have not focused their attention on understanding the causes of this “race gap” in trust.

This paper, recognizing the problematic “one size fits all” assumption implicit in prior work, offers one of the first in-depth investigation of race and political trust by examining antecedents of political trust among African Americans and white Americans. I begin with a discussion of why we should expect racial differences in the sources of political trust, which leads to several specific hypotheses about how blacks and whites are likely to differ in their antecedents of trust. I test these hypotheses using data from the 1996 American National Election Studies (ANES) and the 1996 National Black Election Studies (NBES), and conclude with a discussion of the broader implications of the findings.

The Case for Racial Differences in Political Trust
The “racial divide” in the political attitudes of blacks and whites has been studied extensively. Across a large number of racial and non-racial issues and more general political orientations, the “race gap” is often quite large and some argue that they are more prominent now than they were a generation ago (Kinder and Sanders 1996). Such large differences have prompted some analysts to suggest a need for separate models of political behavior and public opinion for blacks and whites. According to Dawson (1994, 207), for example, “the historical legacy of black politics has led to the development of different heuristics, institutional frameworks, leadership styles, and behavioral patterns [across races].” One finds rather large inter-racial differences in political trust as well.

Despite the amount of work devoted to understanding inter-racial differences in political attitudes as well as the equally large volume of work examining political trust, however, racial differences in political trust have been neglected, for the most part. One possible reason that researchers – especially those who study trends in political trust – have been discouraged from investigating group differences is the belief that the United States is made up of “parallel publics.” Specifically, Page and Shapiro (1992) have argued that, while we see group differences in opinions, different groups do not tend to change their preferences in very different ways; “Among most groupings of Americans, opinions tend to change (or not change) in about the same manner: in the same direction and by about the same amount at about the same time” (318).

Looking specifically at political trust across race, however, one does not see parallel publics. While both African Americans and whites experienced large declines in political trust starting in the second half of the 1960s, aggregate group differences since that time have not changed in tandem. In the period from 1980 through 2000 aggregate trends in political trust among African Americans and whites do not seem to be responding to the same environmental forces (e.g., see Tate 2003, Figure 8.2).

How do we explain this racial gap in political trust? Perhaps the principal reason we should expect to see a racial gap in this domain is that African Americans have a clear political
and social history in the United States, distinct from that of other groups. This history is well documented (for a brief review, see Barker, Jones, and Tate 1999, 13-20). From slavery and their denial of citizenship characterized by the Supreme Court’s Dred Scott decision, through the lynchings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, African Americans’ social and political history has been markedly different from that of most other groups in the United States. And while the political, social and economic standing of blacks as a group has improved over the years, their current political and social circumstances, while certainly not as disparate as years prior, remains quite different from that of whites in a way that is unlikely to inspire a great deal of trust in the political system.¹

In sum, the historical and contemporary experiences of African Americans in the United States doubtless help to explain the racial gap in trust. This is the point at which most research ends. Several studies find significant inter-racial differences in trust and conclude they are likely due to experiences of races in the United States. Such a post hoc explanation is unsatisfactory. What is needed is a thorough investigation of how African Americans and whites differ in their antecedents of political trust.²

By studying group differences in political trust, we not only learn more about these groups, but also learn more about political trust generally. Much of the debate over the decline in

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¹ In the area of economic wellbeing, substantial racial disparities remain. The racial gap in household income has been growing since the 1970s, with the median black household making only 65% that of whites’, while blacks are more than twice as likely to be living below the poverty threshold as whites (24% compared to 10%). And, while unemployment among African Americans has decreased since the 1970s, the racial gap in unemployment has not narrowed, with African Americans’ unemployment rate nearly double that of whites. Only around 16 percent of blacks complete college, compared to approximately 26 percent of whites. And on the political front, while African Americans have made significant gains in positions of political power, they continue to be underrepresented in American politics and, many critics claim, have been taken for granted by the two major political parties (Lewis and Schneider 1985; but see Tate 2001).

² Despite early research suggesting the importance of groups in understanding political discontent (Gamson 1968), examinations of racial differences in political trust are quite limited. While some touch on inter-racial differences in political trust in studies focused on other topics (Bobo and Gilliam 1990), only one study to my knowledge makes racial differences in the antecedents of political trust its focus and that study is limited to a sample of Detroit, Michigan residents in the 1960s (Aberbach and Walker 1970). Most other studies of race and political trust focus only on the effect of political empowerment at the local level on
trust starting in the 1960s revolved around whether the drop in trust signified a more general loss of faith in the political system or simply greater dissatisfaction with incumbent authorities and policy outcomes (Citrin 1974; Miller 1974a, 1974b). While this argument may have missed the point by concentrating on the polar ends of a political trust continuum that ranges from diffuse to specific support (Weatherford 1987), it does highlight the potentially different sources and implications of evaluation of political trust. Rather than assuming that all citizens’ evaluations of political trust fit one model at one point on the (diffuse-to-specific support) continuum, it is likely that groups will differ in where they fall along this continuum. African Americans’ distrust in government is likely to follow from attitudes and knowledge about the historical and current economic and political inequalities in the United States, while whites are more likely to use evaluations of incumbent authorities and policy outcomes. Consequently, African Americans are more likely to fall at the diffuse support end of the continuum where the consequences of declining trust are more severe. Thus, by understanding racial differences in the determinants of political trust, we can shed more light on debates that have surrounded the political trust literature over the last several decades.

**Racial Difference in the Antecedents of Political Trust**

While differences in antecedents of political trust are likely to be present across a number of different social groups, examining racial group differences is most attractive. Recent advances in our understanding of black political behavior, made possible by the availability of survey data, make possible a more detailed investigation into the sources of trust among African Americans. Likewise, volumes of research demonstrate important inter-racial differences in other opinion domains. In examining political trust among African Americans I draw on three general theories used to explain intra-racial differences in black political behavior and opinion: group

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identification theories, socio-economic status theories, and a representation and political reality theory.

Group identification theories, as used here and in the context of racial differences, seek to explain variation in the political behavior and attitudes of African Americans by examining differences in the degree to which blacks identify with their group and the degree to which they differ from whites in group identification. Socio-economic status theories seek to explain intra-racial differences as the product of a growing class polarization among blacks, which leads to a growing political schism. Finally, political reality theories look to differences in the political empowerment of blacks (i.e., black office-holding) to explicate intra-racial differences.

**Racial Identification**

Work in political science has found group identification to be important in political perception and evaluation in a number of different opinion domains (Conover 1984). Recently there has been a good deal of research examining group identity among African Americans. Drawing on Social Identity Theory (see , Tajfel 1978, 1982; Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986), Herring et al. (1999) provide an in-depth analysis of the structure of African Americans’ racial identity and reach several important conclusions. Foremost among these conclusions is that ingroup favoritism among African Americans is not strongly related to outgroup dislike. Instead, black identity is most strongly defined by individuals’ sense of common fate. While African Americans’ group identity consists of both affective and cognitive dimensions, the cognitive factors (a sense of common fate and how often they think about being black) are more important to individuals’ identity than the affective component. They conclude that “the cultural milieu in which individuals learn the meaning and value of the group may be more causative in identity formation than are negative experiences with the outgroup” (379). In sum, while attitudes toward whites may play some role in racial identity, African Americans’ group identity follows more from how closely they perceive their fate to be connected to the fate of other African Americans.
Considerable evidence already exists demonstrating that African Americans’ political interests are grounded in racial group interests (Dawson 1994; Tate 1994). But how will racial identity help explain intra- and inter-racial differences in political trust, specifically? In the first place, blacks with stronger racial identity should have lower trust in government for several reasons. African Americans, as a group, have a distinct history within the United States that is clearly linked to their race, characterized by racial inequalities and exclusion from government. This racial history, along with continuing racial inequalities in social and economic status, as well as continued underrepresentation in government, should lead blacks who identify more strongly with their racial group to be less trusting of government.

By contrast, racial identification among whites, is not expected to influence their level of political trust. For one, it is unlikely that many whites have a strong sense of racial identity. In the United States, often characterized as being a “melting pot,” whites are more likely to have multiple social identities. Further, whites who do identify with their racial group are not likely to have less trust in government because they are not likely to associate their social and economic conditions with their political realities (i.e., level of representation and treatment by the government), as blacks are. As Lewis (1991) notes, the political, social, and economic environments of African Americans have become amalgamated, while the same cannot be said for other Americans. Similarly, Dawson (1994) points out that “the experience of slavery, reinforced by the post-Civil War destruction of Reconstruction, ensured that both the general social component and the economic component of African-American group interests would be tied to black politics” (48). In sum, African Americans’ experiences, leading to the merging of social, economic and political interests, should lead them to use their racial identification in evaluating government’s trust. White Americans, on the other hand, are not likely to use racial identification in evaluating political trust because they are not likely to perceive racial group membership as linked to their relationship with government.
Drawing on the foregoing research examining racial identity and political attitudes, I propose two hypotheses regarding racial identification and political trust: (1) African Americans who have stronger racial identities will have lower levels of trust than those with weaker racial identities, and (2) racial identification will not have a measurable influence on political trust among whites.

**Socio-economic Status**

The substantial gap separating black and whites in their socio-economic status may also help to explain inter-racial differences in trust. At the same time, as more African Americans have moved into the middle and upper-middle classes, class status, is also a prime suspect in explaining differences in levels of trust among blacks. In his early work, William Julius Wilson (1980) argued, among other things, that the civil rights movement provided economic benefits for middle-class African Americans at the exclusion of poor and working class blacks, and that social class, rather than racial discrimination, will be the most important determinant of life chances among most African Americans. As African Americans become more heterogeneous in terms of class, we would expect increasing diversity in their political behavior (Dawson and Wilson 1991).

Economic polarization among African Americans has indeed been increasing in the last several decades. From 1960 to 1991, the black middle class more than doubled in size. Forty percent of respondents in the 1996 National Black Election Study (Tate 1998) reported identifying with the poor and working classes, while fully 53% reported identifying with the middle (45%), upper-middle (6%), or upper-classes (2%). What is more, some evidence exists supporting the claim that this has lead to a corresponding political polarization among African Americans. Katherine Tate (1994, Ch. 2), for example, finds that while the proportion of African Americans identifying themselves as conservative is still lower than whites (about one third), the number has been increasing from 12% in 1974 to 30% in 1980 (though only 22% of those sampled in the 1996 NBES identified as conservative). Further, she finds that socioeconomic status, measured by family income and education, strongly influences blacks’ policy attitudes in
some areas, with more affluent blacks tending to be less supportive of the idea that jobs and a decent standard of living should be guaranteed for all Americans and less supportive of increased federal aid for crime prevention and public schools.\(^3\)

How should we expect social class to influence levels of political trust among African Americans, and how might this relationship among blacks differ from that of whites? Considering the first question, we might not expect income, an objective measure of class, to play such a large role in understanding trust among African Americans. Rather, subjective identification with a social class is more likely to exert influence. Many African Americans who would fall within the middle class given their income levels continue to identify with the poor and working class blacks (Tate 1994, Ch. 2), suggesting that subjective identification may trump objective measures in general. Specifically, African Americans who identify with the poor and working classes are those who should be more suspect of government because they may attribute their class status in part to decisions made by the government.

But how should we expect education to influence trust among blacks? While blacks who identify with the upper-middle and upper classes should have greater trust in government, those with higher levels of education (usually associated with higher status) are more likely to be distrustful of government than those with less education. Through education, blacks are more likely to perceive discrimination and identify with their race. Michael Dawson (1994) finds that “the more education one had, the more likely one was to believe that blacks were economically subordinate to whites, and consequently, the more likely one was to believe that one’s fate was linked to that of the race” (81-82, italics in original). These findings suggest that higher levels of education among blacks should lead to less trust in government. Indeed, in a limited examination employing the 1996 National Black Election Study, Katherine Tate (2003, 148) finds that college

\(^3\) Michael Dawson (1994), using an objective measure of social class – family income, also finds some influence of social class on policy preferences, though class is not found to be as important a determinant as racial identification in shaping policy attitudes. For example, Dawson (1994) discovers that
educated blacks are less trusting of government than African Americans with only a high school education.

Should we expect to see inter-racial differences in the effect of social class on political trust? Several studies have found that higher status individuals (controlling for race) have higher levels of trust (Heatherington 1998; Miller and Borelli 1991). For example, while education level should be inversely related to political trust among African Americans, some research finds education to be positively related to trust among whites (Heatherington 1998; Miller and Borelli 1991). There is also limited evidence that higher income whites are more trusting (see Miller and Borrelli 1991). The explanation for this positive relationship between social status and trust among whites, however, is unclear. In the case of education, it may be that individuals have greater trust in the known than in the unknown. Thus, with greater education whites learn more about the government and how it operates, leading to higher levels of trust in government. In the case of income, higher income individuals may partially attribute their economic success to the policies of government, leading to greater trust. Because the 1996 ANES does not include a measure of subjective social class for whites, no inter-racial comparison of its effect will be possible.

The discussion above suggests the following hypotheses regarding the intra- and inter-racial effects of social class on political trust: (1) African Americans with higher levels of education will be less trusting of government, while (2) whites with higher levels of education should be more trusting; (3) although family income is not expected to have a measurable impact on political trust among African Americans, income should be positively related to trust among whites; and (4) African Americans who identify with the poor and the working class will have lower levels of political trust.

**Representation and Political Reality Theory**

“a large majority of African Americans support extensive economic redistribution, but a significant drop-off in support occurs at the upper end of the income distribution” (199).
A third research tradition has sought to explain the political behavior of African Americans by examining intra-racial differences in political empowerment, or the extent to which the black community is represented by black office holders. Political empowerment theories seek to explain political attitudes and behavior of African Americans as resulting from their underrepresentation in the political arena. African Americans who live in areas where blacks have been empowered are likely to have higher levels of trust because they will feel that they have greater say in the political processes. Similarly, because African Americans are underrepresented in the national government they are likely to feel left out of the policy debate; hence they are more likely to distrust a political process they feel is unfair.

Indeed, the majority of studies investigating political trust among African Americans focus on the impact of political empowerment and most of these studies have examined the relationship at the local level (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Abney and Hutcheson 1981; Emig, Hesse, and Fisher 1996; Howell and Fagan 1988). Lawrence Bobo and Franklin Gilliam (1990), for example, looking at bivariate differences in mean scores, found that blacks in high empowerment areas (i.e., living in cities with black mayors) are more trusting of the local government than blacks in low empowerment areas. However, as one would expect, no evidence is found for a relationship between local empowerment and trust in the national government. Abney and Hutcheson (1981) and Howell and Fagan (1988), in studies at the city level, also find support for a link between political empowerment and trust in city government. However, the findings of these studies can be questioned because they too examine only bivariate relationships.

Despite the amount of work in this area, surprisingly little has examined the relationship between national empowerment and trust in the national government. Perhaps the best study is done by Katherine Tate (2003, Ch. 8). Controlling for number of demographic (gender, education, income), political (party identification and ideology), and other variables (political knowledge, efficacy, and media use), Tate finds no significant relationship between having a black representative and having (1) stronger approval of Congress, (2) higher levels of trust in
government, or (3) higher levels of political efficacy. However, she does find is that blacks who have higher estimations of the percent of Congress that is black are both less critical of Congress and more trusting of government. Tate’s findings suggest that, while black political empowerment at the national level may not influence black’s trust in government, perceptions of empowerment in Congress as a whole, that is, perceptions of greater descriptive representation, do lead to higher levels of political trust. Similarly, I expect that no relationship will be found between actual empowerment (i.e., having a black Congressperson) and trust, but perceptions of empowerment will be positively related to trust in government.

Although my primary interest is in the impact of political empowerment on political trust among African Americans, I will also examine the effect of black empowerment on trust among whites, though I don’t expect to find any relationship. Whites are not likely to make judgments of the trustworthiness of the whole national government based on the race of their Congressional representative, especially when most white are likely to know (or guess) that whites are not underrepresented in the national government. Some limited evidence exists in support for this null expectation. Looking at this relationship at the local level, Bobo and Gilliam (1990) conclude that “…whites tend to pay less attention to local politics when blacks control local offices but do not become less trusting or efficacious as a result” (383).

The above discussion leads to the following hypotheses with respect to the impact of political empowerment on trust. (1) Consistent with Tate’s (2003) study, no relationship will be found between political empowerment at the Congressional level and trust in national government for either African Americans or white Americans; and (2) African Americans who estimate the percent of Congress that is black to be higher will be more trusting of government.

Data, Measures, and Methods

Data used in the analysis comes from the 1996 National Black Election Study (NBES) and the 1996 American National Election Study (ANES). These studies are near ideal for examining racial differences in political trust, for several reasons. First, they provide access to
large samples of both African America (1,216 total in the NBES) and white respondents (1,507 total in the ANES), both taken at approximately the same time. Second, there is a great deal of overlap in questions across the two studies, making inter-racial comparisons possible. Finally, they both include questions needed to test the hypotheses described above as well as questions needed to control for other known predictors of political trust.

**Dependent Variable**

The current research defines political trust as a basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well the government is operating according to people’s normative expectations. The objects of this evaluation are confined only in that they must consist of government institutions, outcomes, processes, or officials. Other research has chosen to simplify the study of political trust by focusing on specific objects of trust, thereby avoiding potential conceptual confusion (Craig 1993). While studies focusing on specific political actors or institutions can be profitable, the current work is interested in broad evaluations of the trustworthiness of government and I measure political trust using an additive index including two items that are included in both the 1996 NBES and 1996 ANES: (1) belief that the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people, and (2) how often the government in Washington can be trusted to do what is right. These measures are scaled from 0 to 1 to provide equal weight to each and then summed creating a scale where higher values are associated with greater distrust in government.

**Independent Variables**

Three antecedents of trust are of primary interest in the analysis: racial identification, socio-economic class, and political empowerment. Racial identification of African Americans is measured using an additive index of agreement with four statements: (1) “what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life,” (2) “being black determines a lot how you are treated in this country more than how much money a person earns,” (3) “your opportunities to get ahead aren’t affected much by how other blacks are
generally treated in this country,” and (4) “in this country, people judge you more on the content of your character than on your race.” Each item is scaled from 0 to 3, so the summary index ranges from 0 to 12, with higher values indicating strong racial identification.

Because a comparable measure of racial identification among whites is not included in the 1996 ANES, white racial identification is measured with a feeling thermometer toward “whites,” which ranges from 0 to 100, where higher values indicate warmer feelings toward whites. While this measure is closer to affective attachment than the measure of black group identity, it has been used in other studies as a measure of in-group preference (Sidanius et al. 1997).

Social class for African Americans is measured using two objective indicators – education and income, and one subjective indicator that asks respondents with which social class they identify: poor, working class, middle class, upper-middle class, and upper class. The 1996 ANES does not include a measure of subjective social class, so only education and income are used in the analysis of whites.

Black political empowerment is measured using a dummy variable indicating whether one lives in a congressional district with a black (coded 1) congressperson or not (coded 0). For the black sample I also include perceptions of the percent of Congress that is black in the analysis of African Americans. The 1996 ANES does not include this question, so we are unable to examine inter-racial differences in the effect of perception of empowerment in United States Congress.

A host of other proven predictors of political trust are included as control variables. These include feelings toward the president, feelings toward Congress, political efficacy, interpersonal trust, national economic evaluations, television and newspaper consumption, gender, and generational cohort.4 All measures are described in detail in Appendix A.

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4 All of these control variables have been widely examined in the extant literature with the exception of generational cohort. I have chosen to use cohort in place of age because it is theoretically more interesting.
Methods

Recent research has demonstrated that evaluations of the president, Congress, and interpersonal trust not only influence political trust, but are also significantly influenced by political trust. Specifically, Marc Hetherington (1998) shows that evaluations of the president and Congress not only influence one’s level of trust in government, but that political trust also influences these evaluations. Similarly, other research has shown that interpersonal trust and political trust influence are endogenous (Brehm and Rahn 1997). Considering this evidence, I estimate a system of structural equations employing three-stage least-squares procedures, where the relationship between political trust and presidential evaluations, congressional evaluations, and interpersonal trust are endogenous to the system. Estimating this system of equations allows greater confidence that we are capturing the influence of these evaluations on trust rather than the effect of trust on them. The estimated equations used to produce the instruments for the endogenous variables are reported in Appendix B. Below are the equations used in predicting political trust for African Americans and whites, respectively. Estimates are produced using Stata, version 7:

Black respondents:

Trust in national government = racial identification + education + income + subjective social class + black representative + percent of Congress Black + feelings toward the president + feelings toward Congress + perception of responsiveness of representative + efficacy + interpersonal trust + national economic evaluations + T.V. consumption + newspaper consumption + age + gender

White respondents:

when examining political trust among African Americans. I identify three cohorts: those who turned eighteen years old before the Johnson administration, during the Johnson administration, and during and after the Reagan administration. I have chosen these cohorts because they roughly correspond with significant changes in the Civil Rights Movement and expect blacks who came of age before the Johnson administration and after Reagan was elected in 1980 to be less trusting of government than those who came of age during the Johnson administration, when the most significant Civil Rights policies were enacted.
Trust in national government = white feeling thermometer + education + income + black representative + feelings toward the president + feelings toward Congress + perception of responsiveness of representative + efficacy + interpersonal trust + national economic evaluations + T.V. consumption + newspaper consumption + age + gender

Analysis

In 1996 African Americans were less trusting of government than whites. On the political distrust scale, approximately 57% of blacks fall on the distrusting end of the scale (values of 3 or 4), while only 48% of whites do, despite the fact that the Democrats held the White House at the time of the study. Tables 1 report the coefficients and standard errors associated with the three-stage least-squares analysis predicting political trust for African Americans. The significant positive coefficient for racial identification indicates that African Americans with stronger racial identities are more distrusting of government than those with weaker racial identities. Apparently, African Americans who have strong racial identities use perceptions of their group’s status and historical experience in American politics as a cue in forming their individual judgments of political trust. This finding provides further support to the large literature demonstrating the importance of racial identification in understanding political attitudes of African Americans.

The examination of the effects of social class support my hypotheses. African Americans with higher levels of education are less trusting of government. As African Americans become more educated they become more aware of historical and current racial inequalities in the United States, leading to less trust in government. This finding is consistent with Tate’s (2003), who finds that college educated blacks have lower levels of trust. Likewise, the significant positive relationship between subjective social class and trust suggests that African American who identify with the poor and working classes are also less trusting of government. It is likely that those identifying with the lower classes attribute some of their class status to actions of the government. Income, on the other hand, has no influence on trust among blacks.
The final set of hypotheses concern the influence of political empowerment on political trust, where the analysis is consistent with findings in other studies (Tate 2003). Having a black representative does not influence trust in the national government among African Americans, while estimations of the percent of Congress that is black does. African Americans who believe that blacks make up a greater share of Congress have higher levels of political trust. One way to interpret this finding is that African Americans who realize that they are underrepresented in Congress (not equally empowered) are more likely to be distrusting, which is consistent with theories of political empowerment. Theories of how black political empowerment should influence the attitudes and behavior of blacks assume (explicitly or implicitly) that those being empowered have some knowledge of their empowerment and the greater representation associated with empowerment, leading them to have more positive evaluations of government. So while no direct effect of empowerment is present, support for the theory is found in that blacks who realize that they are underrepresented at the national level use this knowledge in evaluating the trustworthiness of the national government.\footnote{Tate (2003) points out that respondents to the 1996 NBES over estimated the percent of blacks in Congress with an average response of 13%, considerably higher than the 7% that they made up in 1996. However, blacks also over estimated their percent of the black population with an average response of 40%, much higher than the 1990 U.S. Census estimates of 12%. So while blacks overestimate their representation in Congress, they still come to the conclusion that they are underrepresented, a conclusion that is correct, but exaggerated by their inflated perception of their percent of the U.S. population that is black.}

The only other variable that reaches statistical significance in Table 1 is the feeling thermometer for Congress. Blacks who have warmer feelings toward Congress are more trusting of the federal government generally. Otherwise, few of the traditionally held antecedents of trust are important in explaining black political trust. For example, presidential evaluations and national economic evaluations, widely thought to be two of the stronger predictors of trust, do not seem to influence trust among blacks after controlling for the influence of racial identification, social class and perceptions of empowerment.
Looking now at Table 2, we see that there are clear inter-racial differences in the antecedents of political trust. First, whites do not seem to use their racial identification in evaluating the trustworthiness of government. This is expected. First, fewer whites are expected to have strong racial identities, being a majority in the United States that has does not have a clear “racial history.” However, even whites with strong racial identities do not seem to use them in evaluating political trust. The group status and historical experience of whites in the United States is not one of denied rights and political exclusion as it is for African Americans. Thus, having a strong “white identity” should not, and does not, lead to less trust in a government that has, for the most part, advantaged whites.

We also see inter-racial differences in the effect of social class and black political empowerment on political trust. Despite significant effects found in several studies, we find no relationship between either income or education and political trust among whites. Unfortunately, because there is no measure of subjective social class in the 1996 ANES, we cannot examine inter-racial differences in its effect. However, we can conclude that the effects of education on political trust are clearly different across race – negatively related to trust among blacks, but unimportant for whites.

Likewise, there is no evidence of any influence of black empowerment on trust among whites. Having a black representative in Congress does not lead whites to be less trusting. This finding is consistent with work examining this relationship at the local level (Bobo and Gilliam 1990).

What does influence trust among whites? First, the effect of political efficacy is positive and significant, suggesting that whites with higher levels of political efficacy are more trusting of government. This is consistent with what we would expect: as individuals believe that they have more influence on government and government cares about their opinions and needs, they are more likely to trust government. Evaluations of President Clinton and the national economy are also important in whites’ evaluations of political trust. Those who felt colder toward President
Clinton were less trusting of government, as were those who believe that the economy was worse than the year before. These findings are consistent with a large amount of research that shows that political trust is largely dependent on evaluations of incumbent authorities and government outputs (Citrin 1974; Citrin and Green 1986; Citrin and Luks 2001).

**Implications**

There has been little prior work exploring racial differences in political trust in any real depth. Using theories of racial identity, social class, and representation and black political reality (or empowerment), I argue that black and white Americans should use very different criteria when evaluating political trust. The analysis reported here supports this claim. Whites, as documented in numerous other studies, use evaluations of incumbent authorities, government outcomes, and political efficacy when judging the trustworthiness of government, while African Americans rely more on their racial identity, social class, and perceptions of underrepresentation. These findings lend support to Dawson’s (1994) call for separate models of public opinion for white and African Americans. Clearly, most African Americans use very different considerations when evaluating the trustworthiness of government.

These findings, however, provide more than simply a documentation of inter-racial differences in the antecedents of political trust. They also have important implications for our understanding of political trust more generally. The most notorious debates in the political trust literature revolved around the question of what level of the political system (or object in the political system) was losing trust during the tumultuous 1960s. The so-called Miller-Cirtin debate dealt with whether the decline in political trust in the 1960s and 1970s was capturing a more profound discontent similar to Easton’s (1965; 1975) diffuse support, or simply capturing discontent with incumbent authorities, closer to Easton’s notion of specific support. Arthur Miller (1974a, 1974b) argued that the ANES political trust items were measuring a cynicism toward the government that signified a growing rejection of the political regime. Jack Citrin (1974; Citrin and Green 1986), however, maintained that political trust, for the most part, is a
function of public perceptions of economic outcomes, presidential performance, and presidential image and that this is true in optimistic as well as pessimistic times. Indeed, the literature in political trust centered on this debate for most of the 1970s and 1980s (see for example Citrin and Green 1986, Miller 1979).

The inter-racial differences in political trust found in this paper suggest that the political trust debate should be less about whether distrust is related to evaluations of the system vs. incumbents than it should be about for whom political trust represents evaluations of the system vs. incumbents. The analysis reported here suggests that political trust among whites is largely consistent with Citrin’s explanation: whites’ trust is largely a function of their evaluations of the president and the performance of the economy. However, blacks rely more on evaluations (racial identification and perceptions of representation) and conditions (social status) that are fundamental to enduring social and political inequalities in the United States. African Americans’ distrust in government seems to be the product of attitudes toward more systemic problems in America – knowledge of historical and current social, economic and political inequalities that are associated with greater racial identification and education, identification with the poor and working classes, and the knowledge of racial inequalities in representation. This suggests that blacks’ evaluations of trust may be tapping something closer to diffuse support.

It remains to be seen what criteria explain changes in political trust among African Americans over time. Based on the cross-sectional analysis presented here, one can only speculate in this regard. Satisfaction with incumbent authorities and political outputs seem to explain change in trust across time among whites (Citrin and Luks 2001), but can change in trust among blacks be explained by changes in racial identification, social status, and perceptions of unequal representation? It is unlikely that racial identification can explain change, because such identities are doubtless quite stable and enduring over time. Perceptions of political empowerment, however, may change a great deal as actual representation and empowerment of African Americans fluctuates. The findings suggest that if African Americans become
represented in Congress in closer proportion to their size in the population, leading to greater perceptions of equal representation, we might expect an increase in political trust among blacks. Still, it is unlikely that perceptions of representation account for the bulk short-term, year-to-year fluctuations in political trust among blacks. It may be that evaluations of Congress accounts for a good portion of this change. Analysis at other points in time is needed before any conclusions regarding the nature of change in levels of political trust among blacks can be made.

Our findings suggest that any large increase in political trust among African Americans is unlikely without a substantial reduction of the political and social inequalities found in the United States. As long as African Americans continue to be underrepresented in government and make up a disproportionate percentage of the poor and working classes we should expect blacks to continue to report lower levels of trust than whites. Similarly, as long as these inequalities persist, we can expect blacks who identify with their race will be critical of a government that has not adequately addressed these inequalities.
Appendix A: Measures

Dependent Variable

Political Trust: Political trust is measured using an additive index created by summing responses to the following two questions: (1) Would you say the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?, and (2) How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right?. The scale runs from trusting (0) to distrusting (4).

Independent Variables

1. Racial Identification of blacks: Racial identification of blacks is measured using an additive index of four items: (1) belief that “what happens generally to black people in this country will have something to do with what happens in your life,” (2) agreement with the statement that “being black determines a lot how you are treated in this country more than how much money a person earns,” (3) agreement with the statement that “your opportunities to get ahead aren’t affected much by how other blacks are generally treated in this country,” and (4) agreement with the statement that “in this country, people judge you more on the content of your character than on your race.” Each question is scaled from 0 to 3. The questions are summed, creating an index ranging from 0 to 12, where 12 indicates the strongest racial identification.

1a. Racial Identity of Whites: Racial Identification of whites is measure using feeling thermometers for whites, ranging from 0 (most cold) to 100 (most warm).

2. Education: Education for both blacks and white ranges from 1 (Eighth grade or less) through 7 (an advanced college degree).

3. Income: Income from both blacks and whites is ranges from 1 (less than $10,000) through 11 ($105,000 and up).
4. Subjective Social Class: Subjective social class among blacks is measured using a question asking whether respondents identify with the poor (0), working class, middle class, upper-middle class, or upper class (5).

5. Black Representative: Whether a respondent lives in a district with a black representative in Congress (1) or not (0). The 1996 NBES includes 393 of 1,216 respondents living in districts with black representatives, while the 1996 ANES includes 66 of 1,507 respondents living in districts with black representatives.

6. Presidential and Congressional Feeling Thermometers: The feeling thermometers range from 0 (most cold) to 100 (most warm).

7. Political Efficacy: Political efficacy is measured using an additive index of both internal and external efficacy including two questions: (1) agreement with the statement that “public officials care what people like me think,” and (2) agreement with the statement that “people like me have no say in government. High values are associated with greater political efficacy.

8. Interpersonal Trust: Interpersonal trust is measured using an additive index created from two questions: (1) Agreement with the statement that “most people can be trusted” and (2) agreement with the statement that “most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance.”

9. National Economic Evaluations: National economic evaluations are measured using a question asking if the national economy has gotten much worse (0) or much better (4) than a year ago. The middle value is associated with the belief that economic conditions have not changed.

10. Television and Newspaper Consumption: Television and newspaper consumption are measured using questions asking how many days a week respondents watch television and read the newspaper, respectively.
11. Gender. Gender is coded so that values of one are associated with male and values of zero are associated with female.

12. Generational Cohort: Generational cohort is measured using a series of dummy variables: “Pre-Johnson” indicates that the respondent turned 18 years old before Lynden Johnson administration. “Reagan” indicates that the respondent turned 18 years old during or after the Reagan administration. The excluded category consists of respondents turning 18 during the Johnson administration.

**Appendix B: Three-Stage Least Squares Models**

Instrumental variables for presidential and congressional evaluations are estimated using the following model:

Presidential and congressional evaluations = trust in government + party identification + ideology + personal economic evaluations + national economic evaluations + preferences for guarantied jobs for unemployed + preferences for how to reduce crime + attitudes about gay rights + preferences for spending on crime + preferences for spending on food stamps + preference for spending on defense + family income + education + gender + age

Instrumental variable for interpersonal trust is estimated using the following model:

Interpersonal trust = trust in government + number of groups one is a member of + interaction with neighbors + organization membership + employment status + church attendance + age + education + income
Works Cited


the 1979 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington.


Table 1: Three-stage Least Squares Predicting Political Distrust Among African Americans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial ID (weak to strong)</td>
<td>0.030**</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (less to more)</td>
<td>0.089***</td>
<td>0.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (low to high)</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective Social Class (poor to upper)</td>
<td>-0.050*</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Empowerment (1=black congressman)</td>
<td>0.020</td>
<td>0.041</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of Congress Black (low to high)</td>
<td>-0.006*</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings Toward the President (cold to warm)</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings Toward Congress (cold to warm)</td>
<td>-0.024***</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy (low to high)</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>0.027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Trust (low to high)</td>
<td>-0.181</td>
<td>0.151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Economic Evaluations (negative to positive)</td>
<td>-0.055</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television Consumption (low to high)</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper Consumption (low to high)</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1=male)</td>
<td>0.085</td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Johnson Era (Johnson Era excluded)</td>
<td>0.028</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan Era</td>
<td>-0.041</td>
<td>0.062</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 802
Model chi-squared = 112.55

* = p<.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001
### Table 2: Three-stage Least Squares Predicting Distrust Among White Americans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial ID (weak to strong)</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (less to more)</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td>0.016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Income (low to high)</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>0.008</td>
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<td>Black Empowerment (1=black congressman)</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>0.087</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings Toward the President (cold to warm)</td>
<td>-0.005***</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feelings Toward Congress (cold to warm)</td>
<td>-0.023</td>
<td>0.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Efficacy (low to high)</td>
<td>-0.113***</td>
<td>0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Trust (low to high)</td>
<td>0.386</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Economic Evaluations (negative to positive)</td>
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<td>0.024</td>
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<tr>
<td>Television Consumption (low to high)</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper Consumption (low to high)</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1=male)</td>
<td>-0.051</td>
<td>0.042</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-Johnson Era (Johnson Era excluded)</td>
<td>-0.025</td>
<td>0.046</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reagan Era</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>0.048</td>
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</table>

N = 1506
Model chi-squared = 271.79

* = p<.05, ** = p<.01, *** = p<.001