



The roots of trust in local government in western Europe

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Jennifer Fitzgerald

University of Colorado at Boulder, USA

Jennifer Wolak

University of Colorado at Boulder, USA

Abstract

When people say that they trust local authorities, is it simply because they have generalized trust in national government? Or is trust in local government rooted in distinctive considerations, connected to the character of local communities and the balance of power across levels of government? We explore how trust in local and national government differs across individuals and across countries in western Europe. We find that people trust local government for different reasons than those that drive trust in national government. Cross-national differences in levels of trust in government reflect the character of national institutions. While both proportional representation systems and federal systems are power-sharing designs, each has distinctive consequences for trust. When opportunities for voice in local government are high, as in decentralized systems, people report greater trust in local government. When opportunities for voice in national government are limited, as in majoritarian systems, people report lower trust for national government and higher trust in local government.

Keywords

Political trust, trust in local government, proportional representation, federalism, government performance, western Europe

Introduction

Why do people place trust in local authorities? There are good reasons to believe that people see local governments through a different lens than they see their national government. For citizens, it is in local politics that they feel most politically effective and that they have the greatest understanding of political issues (Almond and Verba, 1965; Dahl and Tufte, 1973; John, 2001). Local governments afford accessible opportunities to participate in politics, from neighborhood councils

Corresponding author:

Jennifer Wolak, Department of Political Science, University of Colorado at Boulder, 333 UCB, Boulder, Colorado, USA.
Email: wolakj@colorado.edu

to school board meetings. In the case of national politics, much of the action takes place beyond people's experiences, where citizens learn about the distant decisions of parliaments or presidents from the news media rather than from first-hand interactions. People are more likely to interact with local government given its proximity – they might know a member of the council, attend a community meeting, or rely on local government services related to education or law enforcement. Local issues like housing, health care and public safety directly affect people in a way that strictly national issues like defense and trade do not. Local governments also have the potential to be particularly responsive to their constituents. With relatively small constituencies and often greater policy latitude, local governments have the potential to be flexible in public service delivery and responsive to policy demands in a way that national governments cannot.

Despite these differences, it is not clear that people evaluate local governments differently than national government. Even as local governments in Europe establish distinctive roles from central governments and gain new influence through policy devolution (John, 2001), it is possible that citizens still see their local governments in terms of the party politics and policy debates that define national politics. Those who mistrust national government may simply extend their skepticism to government at all levels. If so, it suggests that the legitimacy of local government rests not in the services it provides, but in choices made elsewhere by national authorities.

Very few studies have been done of the reasons why people trust local government, and prior work focused on the roots of political trust in local government within particular countries (i.e. Dahl and Tufte, 1973; Denters, 2002; Miller, 1988). We build on this work by considering the roots of public confidence in local government in western Europe. Using a 2006 Eurobarometer survey, we investigate why people trust their local government and the degree to which people evaluate local government differently from national government. We investigate the political and social roots of trust in each level, exploring how organizational participation, community life, political performance, and the design of government connect to levels of trust. We argue that levels of political trust depend on the character of a country's political institutions and the representational opportunities these institutions afford. We find that in the most federal states and most majoritarian systems, people are particularly trusting of local governments. But when government power is centralized, people report high trust in national government. We also find that trust in local authorities reflects local political performance as well as community life. Poor performance by local government affects trust in local authorities, just as trust in national government is responsive to national conditions.

The roots of political trust

For some, political trust is seen as a deeply embedded disposition, where people are predisposed to be trusting or not as a function of their traits, socialization experiences, or the political culture of a society (Almond and Verba, 1963; Glanville and Paxton, 2007; Inglehart, 1997; Putnam, 1993; Uslaner, 2002).¹ If political trust is understood as a trait, the roots of people's trust in local and national government should stem from the same basic orientation, with the greatest differences in trust across individual survey respondents, rather than the objects of trust themselves.

According to other research, political trust is less about who you are, and more about the community you inhabit. When people are engaged in their communities and feel trusting of others around them, the resulting social capital promotes trust in government (Putnam, 1993). While evidence of the interconnections of generalized social trust, civic engagement, and political trust at the individual level are sometimes mixed (Brehm and Rahn, 1997; Kaase, 1999; Newton, 2006; Zmerli and Newton, 2008), in the aggregate, generalized trust and political trust often travel together (Freitag and Bühlmann, 2009; Newton, 2001; Newton and Norris, 2000; Rothstein and

Stolle, 2008). If political trust is rooted in social connections, then people's willingness to place trust in political authorities should depend on their local experiences and engagement in community life.

By other accounts, the primary roots of political trust are within the design and performance of government, rather than the personal characteristics of respondents. When citizens are well represented by government and receiving desirable policy outcomes, they trust government. When officials are corrupt (Anderson and Tverdova, 2003), performance is poor (Espinal et al., 2006; McLaren, 2012; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Wong et al., 2011), and institutions are unrepresentative (Miller and Listhaug, 1990; Norris, 1999), people are mistrustful of national government. If this account holds, then the most relevant considerations for explaining political trust will not be found within individuals, but in country-to-country differences in political institutions and performance.

How people evaluate local government

Which account best explains levels of trust in local government? It could be that reactions to local government are not distinctive, but instead reflections of what people think about the national government. Despite the importance of local governments, it is not clear that citizens necessarily care about the business of municipal authorities. Turnout in local elections is typically very low and many would have difficulty naming their mayor or a councilor (Lijphart, 1997; Morlan, 1984). Lacking information about the business of local governments, evaluations may simply reflect esteem for the more conspicuous national government. Nationalization of politics in western Europe may obscure national and subnational differences, where national concerns drive local agendas and elections (Caramani, 2004; Jérôme and Lewis-Beck, 1999; Miller, 1988; Rodden and Wibbels, 2011).

However, there are reasons to expect that people evaluate local and national government on different grounds. Local considerations can leave their imprint on vote choice in local elections, independent of national considerations (Heath et al., 1999; Rallings and Thrasher, 2003). When asked what they like about each level of government, people comment on the leadership, power, and policy reach of national government, while local governments tend to be seen as more representative and responsive (Jennings, 1998). We expect that people in western Europe place different trust in local authorities than national government, responsive to the characteristics of their community as well as the opportunities for voice in government. We argue that people's evaluations of local government are substantive rather than symbolic, reflecting the considerations beyond simply a predisposition to be trusting or mistrustful. Instead of using their judgment of national government as a proxy for their reported trust in local government, we expect that trust in local government is rooted in substantive factors related to the character of local life and the balance of power between local and national authorities.

Explanations for political trust

We first consider the reasons why trust in local government differs across countries. We expect that people's trust in local authorities will be responsive to the degree to which subnational governments provide opportunities for citizen input. Across western Europe, countries differ in how they distribute government power. Some countries have institutional designs that concentrate power in the hands of a few, while in other places, power is broadly distributed across groups or levels of government. We expect these institutional designs to shape people's views about government, given that they affect which voices are heard in government. The public's trust and belief in the legitimacy of government rests in part on feelings that government is responsive to them and that

they have the ability to affect government outcomes (Weatherford, 1992). When people feel they have a say in the process, they are more satisfied with government.

We consider the effects of two power-sharing institutions: federalism, which is associated with greater opportunities for voice in local government, and majoritarian electoral systems, which provide less voice for citizens in national politics. In western Europe, there has been a push toward decentralization (Proeller, 2006), with an expectation that such power shifts will enhance the quality of democratic governance. We expect that decentralization will be associated with higher levels of trust in local government and lower levels of trust in national government. In federal systems, central governments share power with subnational authorities. When government influence is not concentrated with the national authorities but distributed to lower levels, citizens have greater opportunities to influence government. Given that people value voice in political processes (Thibaut and Walker, 1975), decentralization should be associated with higher trust in local authorities. Decentralization also could improve local responsiveness to citizen interests. Because they deal with smaller constituencies and often have more flexibility in designing policy, local authorities may be able to respond better to interests than the national government.² This should be especially true in a decentralized federation, where local governments have greater autonomy and authority to act on local interests. We consider the differences in trust in government in federal versus unitary systems using the scale described by Lijphart (2012).³

The design of electoral institutions also influences citizen voice in politics. Proportional representation (PR) is often lauded for creating distributions of legislative power that are more representative of public preferences than plurality rule. Rather than having one side win and the other side lose, PR systems grant access to minor parties and increase the likelihood that those outside the political mainstream can secure elected representation. If a sense of political voice is important for the trust people place in government, then we should expect those in countries with PR systems to be more trusting of national government than those in majoritarian systems.⁴ However, we expect the highest level of trust in local government to occur in majoritarian systems rather than PR systems. When people live in countries where the opportunities to elect representatives from their favored party into office are limited, we believe they will particularly value the possibilities for political influence and voice offered by local authorities. To explore the consequences of majoritarian versus proportional representation systems, we rely on a continuous measure of the disproportionality of the electoral system, based on the disparities between the share of votes that political parties won in the most recent election and the percentage of seats obtained in the national legislature (Gallagher and Mitchell, 2008). Higher values on this measure indicate greater disproportionality of outcomes.

To investigate the individual level social roots of trust in government, we consider several dimensions of people's engagement in political and social life of their communities. First, we expect that the more people engage in community life, the more trusting they will be of local authorities. Given the interconnections between generalized trust, political trust, and organizational involvement (Paxton, 2007; Stolle, 1998), we cannot say this relationship is causal. But we expect that those who participate in community organizations will be more trusting of local government than those who are not engaged in any groups, measured as a count of reported memberships in up to 14 different kinds of organizations from sports clubs to charity groups.⁵ We also consider community-mindedness as a predictor of trust in local authorities, using a question about whether people say that it is important to them to help others and engage in volunteer work.

Apart from engagement in civic life, we are also interested in the psychological attachments people hold to their community. We predict that those who feel excluded from society will be mistrustful of local authorities. We also expect that those who reside in small towns will be more trusting of local authorities than those who live in larger cities, following from prior studies showing

that trust is related to community size (Baldassare, 1985; Denters, 2002). Here, we rely on a self-reported measure of size of one's city of residence.

Finally, we assess whether political trust in each level is rooted in the outcomes people get from government. When the economy is strong or desirable policies are produced, citizens of a wide variety of countries report greater trust in government (Espinal et al., 2006; Miller and Listhaug, 1998; Morris and Klesner, 2010). When people dislike the economic and policy outputs of government, mistrust climbs. To assess the effects of local government performance, we include a measure of people's judgments of the local experience, based on self-reported satisfaction with various local services and the quality of local life. We expect that when people are more satisfied with the services and quality of life in their area, they will be more trusting of local authorities. As a measure of people's evaluations of national government performance, we include a measure of economic expectations, based on two items about prospective impressions of the economic and employment situation in the country. We expect that when people are optimistic about the national economy, they will be more trusting of national government. In addition to this sociotropic economic consideration, we include a measure of employment status. We expect that those who are unemployed will be less trusting of national government as well. Finally, we control for the effects of age, gender, and education. Greater education and increasing age are generally associated with greater political support, while women tend to be less trusting of national government than men (e.g. Criado and Herreros, 2007; Listhaug and Wiberg, 1995; Norris, 1999).

Levels of trust in local and national government in western Europe

Though we are interested in understanding the phenomena of trust in local and national democratic government generally, we focus on western European countries. Characteristics of these countries enable us to gain leverage over key aspects of government trust. Western Europe offers an environment in which countries share certain baseline characteristics often associated with trust such as democratic history and supranational commitments through the European Union (Rohrschneider, 2002). Yet western Europe also hosts variation on levels of confidence in the public sector (Van de Walle et al., 2008) and diversity in institutional design at the national level – such as authority structures and voting principles (Dalton, 2008; Hooghe et al., 2010; John, 2001) – that may be associated with mass assessments of their governments. We take advantage of these commonalities and dimensions of variance to test our hypotheses. Unpacking support for local government in western Europe is also an important endeavor given that many of these countries are in the process of decentralizing authority to lower level units.

We investigate the sources of trust in local government versus trust in national government across western European countries using the 2006 Eurobarometer 66.3 survey.⁶ We choose this survey because it is one of the only cross-national surveys in Europe that includes a question on trust in local government. In it, respondents were asked, "I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it." We compare people's average trust in their country's government compared to their trust in the council of their city or village in each country in Figure 1.^{7,8} On average, across the sampled respondents in western Europe, 54% say that they trust local government and 46% tend not to trust local authorities. Levels of trust vary substantially across countries. The lowest levels of trust in local government are found in Italy, Spain, and Greece, where just over 40% report trusting local councils. The highest levels of trust in local government are in France, Belgium, and Luxembourg, where two thirds or more of the respondents report trust in local government.

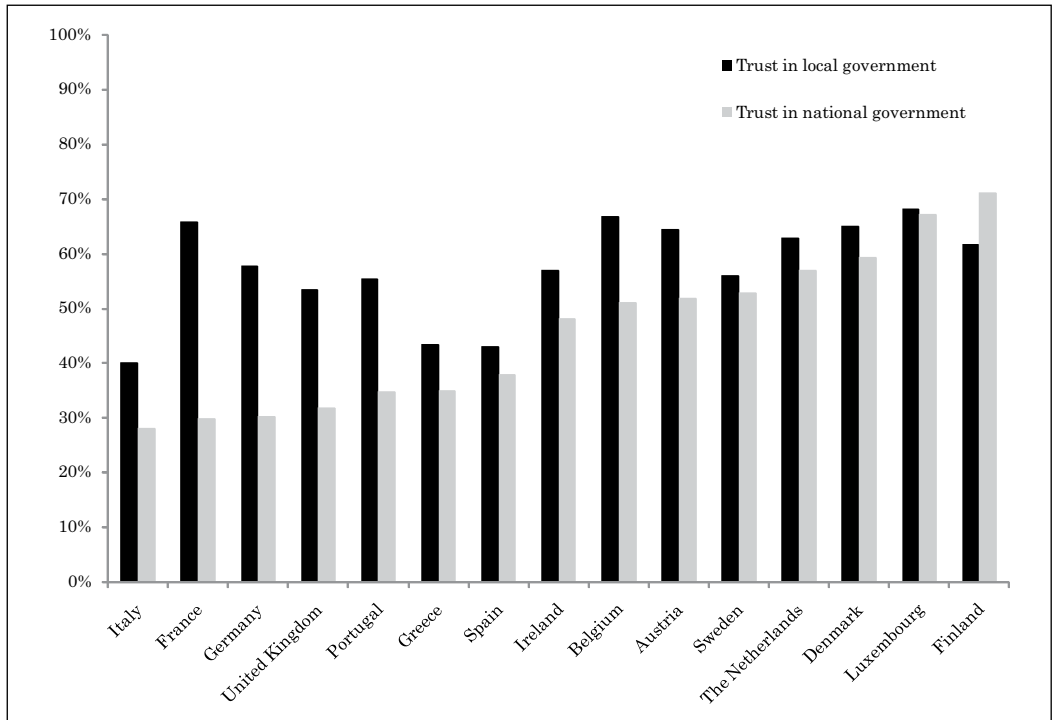


Figure 1. Trust in local and national government, 2006 Eurobarometer. The difference between levels of trust in local government and trust in national government is statistically significant in all countries excluding Sweden and Luxembourg.

In western Europe, more people trust local government than the national government. On average, across all countries, only 35% say that they tend to trust the national government. In the case of trusting national government, the lowest levels are in Italy, France, and Germany and the highest levels are in Finland. Finland is the only country in the sample where national government is more trusted than local government.⁹ In all of the other countries in this western European sample, local authorities are more trusted than national authorities. This confirms patterns observed in prior studies of the US, Japan, Norway, and the UK (Denters, 2002; Jennings, 1998; Pharr, 1997) that people tend to hold greater confidence in local governments than national governments. The size of the gap between trust in local authorities and national government also varies across countries, suggesting that there are important country-to-country differences in how people evaluate different levels of government.

Explaining trust in local and national government

We are interested in the reasons why people trust local authorities as well as the degree to which the roots of trust in local government are distinctive from the sources of trust in national government. As such, we rely on two modeling strategies. First, to test whether the effects of our explanations differ across the models of trust in local versus national government, we rely on a seemingly unrelated bivariate probit (with standard errors clustered by country). By modeling each in parallel specifications and allowing the error terms of each equation to correlate, we statistically address

concerns of correlated errors. We are also able to compare the coefficients across equations – to see if the coefficients for each explanation are statistically different across dependent variables. In this way, we can evaluate the degree to which the reasons why people trust local authorities diverge from the reasons why they trust national government.

We are also interested in explaining baseline differences in trust across countries, as illustrated in Figure 1. To do so, we add country-level explanations about power-sharing institutions to our slate of individual level explanations for trust. There is some concern with the inclusion of country-level explanations that we might have too small standard errors associated with these explanations (and call them statistically significant when they are not) because of clustering within countries (Steenbergen and Jones, 2002). We deal with this concern in the bivariate probit by reporting country-clustered standard errors, but also report the results of multilevel logit models. Since we cannot specify correlated errors across equations with this approach, we instead control for trust in the other level of government in each model. Our results associated with key variables are robust across both choices of models.¹⁰

Results are shown in Table 1. We interpret the effects of our explanations in terms of predicted probabilities in Table 2, using the coefficients from the bivariate probit model. The results show that the coefficients associated with most of the explanations are significantly different across the models, suggesting that people trust national government and local government for distinctive reasons. In other words, trust in government is not simply a trait of individuals – people appear to distinguish how they think about local government from the trust they place in national authorities.

Starting with the political roots of trust, we consider the effects of power-sharing institutions on trust in each level of government. We find differences in trust across federal versus unitary regimes, as shown in Figure 2. Local governments in federal systems tend to secure greater public trust than local authorities within unitary systems. In the most federal system, the predicted likelihood of trusting local government is 60%, compared to 49% in the most unitary state. The more powers that are held by subnational governments, the more confidence local government enjoys and the less trust that is placed in national government. In the most unitary systems, people are nearly twice as likely to trust national government as those who live in the most federal systems. National governments that reserve more powers enjoy more public trust than those that share power with subnational governments. These results could shed light on why Norris (1999) finds greater mistrust of national government in federal systems. Just as Jennings (1998) finds that trust in national government rests in part on the power it holds, we find that national authorities are trusted most when power is consolidated in the hands of national government. When local governments hold political decision-making power, then people are more likely to trust the governments closest to them and less likely to trust distant national authorities. By sharing power with subnational units, it appears that national governments end up enjoying less public confidence.

In the case of proportional representation, we find the highest levels of trust in local government in countries with the lowest level of proportionality in representation. We illustrate the effect size in Figure 3, showing the predicted probabilities of trusting government for most majoritarian versus most proportional systems, holding other variables at their means. Proportional representation systems have often been argued to better represent diverse interests and promote compromise outcomes. We find here that they are correlated with higher trust in national government. But in the case of trust in local government, we find the reverse. Those living in states with majoritarian systems are more likely to trust local government than those in proportional representation systems. Moving from the most proportional system to the least, predicted trust in local government climbs from 48% to 64%. Local government is often seen as more representative than national government, and for those who may not be getting representative policies at the national level due to the

Table 1. Trust in local and national government in western Europe, 2006.

	Trust in local gov't	Trust in national gov't	χ^2 (equal of coef.)	Trust in local government	Trust in national government
Country factors					
Index of disproportionality	0.020* (0.005)	-0.016* (0.006)	76.44*	0.041* (0.010)	-0.062* (0.016)
Federal systems	0.085* (0.023)	-0.131* (0.036)	74.39*	0.186* (0.065)	-0.386* (0.103)
Social capital and social connectedness					
Organizational memberships	0.044* (0.022)	0.040* (0.012)	0.04	0.072* (0.020)	0.011 (0.020)
Importance of helping others	0.287* (0.085)	-0.005 (0.038)	18.94*	0.232* (0.081)	-0.071 (0.085)
Feels excluded	-0.371* (0.057)	-0.260* (0.050)	2.49	-0.379* (0.085)	-0.257* (0.091)
Lives in a village	0.308* (0.047)	0.117+ (0.068)	5.12*	0.262* (0.054)	0.044 (0.056)
Performance					
Evaluations of local life	1.459* (0.095)	1.115* (0.078)	14.82*	1.852* (0.129)	0.889* (0.137)
Economic expectations	0.192* (0.033)	0.457* (0.042)	41.64*	0.108* (0.033)	0.732* (0.035)
Unemployed	-0.016 (0.058)	-0.099* (0.026)	1.47	-0.054 (0.091)	-0.230* (0.101)
Demographic factors					
Age	-0.001 (0.001)	0.003+ (0.002)	33.47*	-0.001 (0.001)	0.008* (0.001)
Female	0.044 (0.030)	-0.119* (0.028)	19.48*	0.130* (0.041)	-0.229* (0.042)
Education	0.097* (0.030)	0.225* (0.053)	6.21*	-0.052 (0.061)	0.344* (0.063)
Trust in other level of government					
Trust in local government	-	-		-	1.898* (0.045)
Trust in national government	-	-		1.894* (0.045)	-
Constant	-1.358* (0.148)	-1.120* (0.147)		-2.214* (0.157)	-1.887* (0.192)
Rho	0.707* (0.054)			-	-
Level 2 variance	-			0.041* (0.018)	0.113* (0.045)
Deviance				14571	13731
N (Level 2 n)	12918			12918 (15)	12918 (15)

First columns, seemingly unrelated bivariate probit estimates, country-clustered standard errors in parentheses. Last two columns, multilevel logit estimates. * $p < 0.05$ + $p < 0.10$.

Table 2. Predicted probabilities of trust in local and national government.

	Local government	National government
Social capital and social connectedness		
Member of no organizations	53%	32%
Member of 14 organizations	75%	49%
Helping others is not personally important	46%	31%
Helping others is very important	57%	28%
Does not feel excluded from society	57%	37%
Feels excluded from society	42%	20%
Lives in a large town	47%	30%
Lives in a rural area of village	59%	30%
Performance		
Unsatisfactory local services	19%	12%
Very satisfactory local services	72%	44%
Economic situation will worsen	47%	28%
Economic situation will improve	62%	44%
Not unemployed	54%	34%
Unemployed	53%	31%
Demographic factors		
Age 15	55%	31%
Age 98	52%	40%
Male	53%	36%
Female	54%	32%
Age left school, 15 or under	52%	30%
Age left school, 20 or over	56%	38%

Predicted probabilities were calculated using the bivariate probit coefficients from Table 1. The change in probabilities reflects a movement from the minimum value of the independent variable to the maximum, holding other variables at their means.

design of institutions, they are more likely to report trust in the level of government closest to them.¹¹ When people live in countries where the electoral system accommodates more diverse views, people are more trusting of national government. When including country-level explanations in a survey model, the within-country clustering can lead to underestimation of the standard errors. However, the results associated with both country-level explanations are robust to the multilevel model specifications in the last columns of Table 1.

Considering the social roots of trust, we find that those engaged in community life are more trusting of government at both levels. All else equal, someone who is not a member of any community organization has a 32% likelihood of trusting their national government and 53% probability of trusting their local government. For someone at the highest level of organizational involvement, their likelihood of trusting national government climbs to 49% and the probability of trusting local government is 75%. People's sense of social connectedness, as assessed by the importance they personally place on helping others, is associated with trust in local government, but not trust in national government. Someone who says that helping others is very important has a 57% probability of trusting local government, all else equal. This falls to 46% for one who does not place personal importance on helping other people. Those who feel it is important to help others in their community are more trusting of the level of government closest to them. A sense of social exclusion predicts trust in government at both levels. Those who feel isolated and excluded

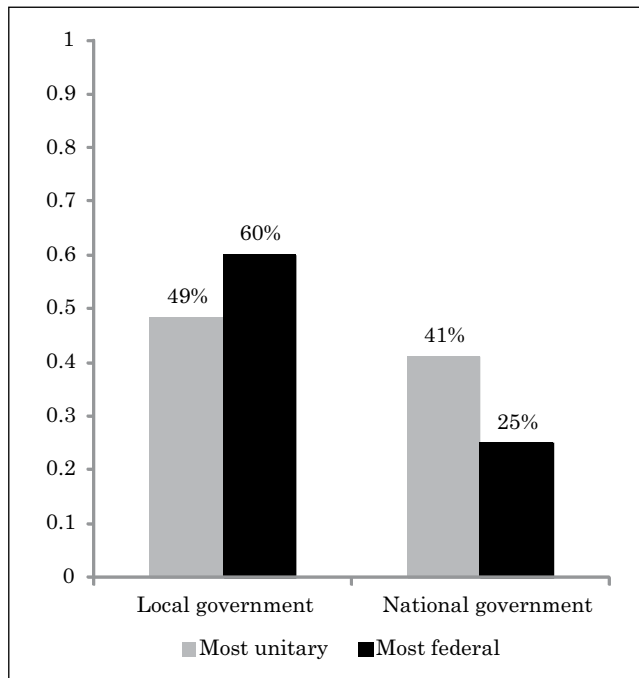


Figure 2. Trust in government in federal versus unitary systems.

Values are predicted probabilities of trusting that level of government based on the estimates in the first two columns in Table 1, moving from the minimum to the maximum of that variable and holding other variables at their means.

from society report low levels of trust in their local council and the national government, while those who feel connected to society trust government across federal levels.

Levels of trust reflect not only one's engagement in the community, but also the characteristics of the locality. Those living in rural areas or small villages are more trusting of local authorities than those who report living in larger towns, where the likelihood of trusting local government is thirteen points higher for those in rural areas over those in large towns or cities. The size of one's city is associated with trust in national government as well, but the magnitude of the effect is much smaller (less than 20% the size) and the significant χ^2 associated with the test of equality of coefficients indicates that it has a much greater effect on trust in local government than trust in national authorities. On the whole, social considerations like engagement in society and participation in community groups tend to be slightly better explanations of trust in local government than trust in national government. Even though these factors have been critiqued for their sometimes weak effects in explaining confidence in political authorities, we find connections between community life and trust at the local level.

Next, we consider how people's appraisals of political performance affect their levels of political trust. First, we find that trust in local government is strongly correlated with the quality of life in communities. People's evaluations of the quality of local life and community services are connected to trust in both local and national government, with the greatest effects for people's trust in local government. For someone with the most unsatisfactory rating of local life, their predicted likelihood of trusting local government is 19% and the predicted likelihood of trusting national government is 12%. Moving to the highest level of satisfaction with the quality of local life, the

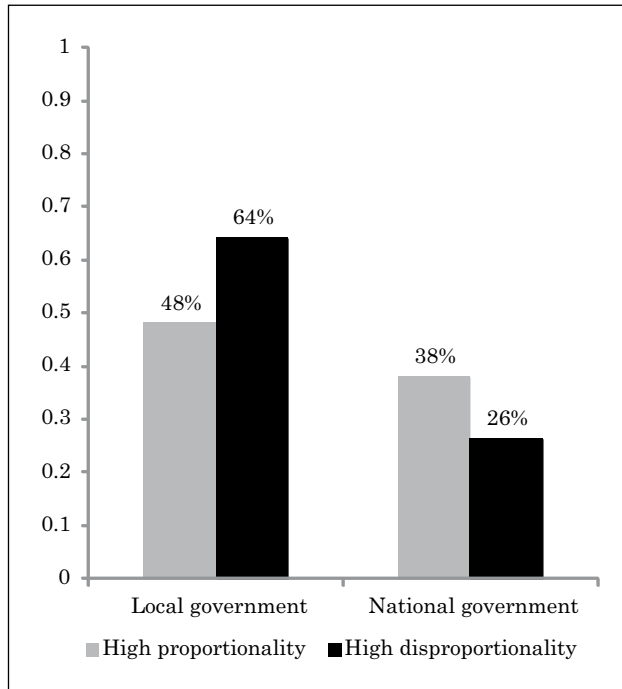


Figure 3. Proportional representation and trust in government.

Values are predicted probabilities of trusting that level of government based on the estimates in Table I, moving from the minimum to the maximum of that variable and holding other variables at their means.

predicted probability of trusting local government more than quadruples, climbing to 72%. The predicted probability of trusting national government is 44% for one most satisfied with local life. People's feelings about local government are not simply a reflection of their views of national government. Instead, people incorporate their views about the quality of local services and community life in deciding to place their trust in local government. Notably, satisfaction with local services has the greatest ability of all of the individual level factors to discriminate between those who trust and mistrust local authorities. While we cannot fully distinguish the causal flows and the degree to which satisfaction with community life follows from a trustworthy local government, our results are suggestive that people hold local governments accountable for their performance.

We find a similar pattern in the case of economic expectations in explaining trust in national authorities. Views about the economic health of the country do the most among all the explanations in the model to distinguish those who trust national authorities from those who do not. Optimistic economic expectations are connected to higher trust in both local and national government, though the effects are significantly more sizable in explaining trust in national government. Those who are unemployed are less likely to trust national government than those who are not searching for work, but there is no significant effect for being unemployed on people's reported trust in local government. Overall, people hold their government accountable for economic performance in deciding whether to trust or mistrust authorities. Among the demographic controls, only education is related to trust in local government, where increasing education is associated with a higher probability of trusting local government. Gender, higher education, and older age are associated with greater likelihood of trusting national government as well.

We find that trust in national government is a function of both processes and policy outcomes, where people trust their government more when national institutions offer more opportunities for voice as well as when favorable outcomes are achieved. Trust in local government is more responsive to local performance than national performance but, like trust in national government, depends on the design of political institutions and the ways in which power is shared across parties and across levels of government. We should also note several caveats about our conclusions. First, we cannot specifically model the important variations across municipalities with this particular dataset, as we do not know the cities where our respondents reside. We can model people's perceptions about the places they live, but future work is needed to consider the wider range of important variations in the structure and performance of local government across regions. Second, we cannot establish causal relationships with a single cross-sectional dataset. We demonstrate that trust in local government is correlated with the quality of local life and the structure of political institutions, but more work is needed to know precisely how these relationships form and evolve. It is possible that people's engagement in community life and satisfaction with local conditions are either a cause or consequence of people's trust in local authorities.

Conclusions

On many fronts, the importance of local government in Europe is increasing. In democratic societies, there is a push to shift various dimensions of governmental authority away from central institutions through devolution of powers to subnational units (Proeller, 2006). Numerous western European states have taken demands for decentralization to subnational units seriously (Hooghe et al., 2010; Wollmann, 2004). Local governments are also becoming increasingly distinctive from central governments (John, 2001). With the rising importance of the European Union, local governments are finding new opportunities for influence and voice. As the political landscape for local governments evolves, so do citizen demands. Denters and Rose (2005) suggest that citizens are now expecting more from their local governments and are more and more concerned about the performance and efficiency of local government.

As the role of local governments in western Europe evolves, it is increasingly important to understand why and when citizens place trust in local authorities. After all, public trust in local government is an essential resource. When people trust their government, authorities are empowered to take policy risks and innovate (Bianco, 1994; John, 2001). When people lose trust, they vote incumbents out of office, favor minor party candidates, and call for government reforms (Betz, 1994; Dalton, 2004; Hetherington, 1999; Orren, 1997). But if trust in local government cannot be differentiated from trust in national authorities, trust may not serve as a meaningful resource to local politicians or as a check on the composition of local government.

We find that people in western Europe think about local government and central government in distinctive ways. Trust in local government is not simply a reflection of national assessments, where people who trust government automatically exhibit confidence in all manifestations of it. Instead, people tend to judge local government according to distinct criteria, some of which differ greatly from their expectations of national authorities. Differences in trust across countries reflect the character of power-sharing institutions. In the case of federalism, decentralization is associated with higher trust in local authorities, and lower trust in central government. In countries where local governments hold more influence and authority, people also tend to be more trusting of local authorities. In proportional representation systems, where power is dispersed and people have voice in national politics, citizens tend to be trusting of national government. In majoritarian systems where power is concentrated among the few and opportunities for voice are constrained, people are more likely to trust local authorities.

Both proportional representation systems and federal systems are power-sharing designs that allocate political authority across the many rather than concentrating it in the hands of a few (Norris, 2008). But the use of one versus the other has different implications for how people assess government. If a government was interested in sharing greater power, adopting a proportional representation system would have the theoretical side effect of boosting trust in national authorities. If this country instead decided to share power not across parties in national government, but instead across federal levels, our model suggests that trust in national government would fall while trust in local authorities would climb. While both reforms distribute national power, they have very different consequences for levels of public confidence in local and national authorities. When local governments have greater authority, as they do in federal systems, public confidence is higher. This suggests that in the European context, devolving power to local authorities will be viewed positively by the public, as more federal systems are connected to greater trust in local government. At the same time, the devolution of power to local governments in Europe may not help officials build confidence in national authorities.

While some have described trust as an attribute of individuals or rooted within the character of societies, we find here that it is more than that. No doubt there is a tendency for some to be more trusting than others, but trust in government is more than just a characteristic of particular countries or individuals. Apart from an individual's propensity to trust or mistrust their government, we find that people's political trust also reflects the character of social life and the performance of that government. Trust in local government has somewhat more social roots than trust in national government. Interest in volunteering and residence in a small town matter more for explaining trust in local government than national government. Political performance also affects trust in local authorities – where the quality of local life has a stronger association with trust in local government than trust in national government. For local officials, mayors, and councilors, this suggests that the choices they make have consequences for the public. As local governments form distinctive roles and take on new responsibilities, they need to be concerned about cultivating the public's trust – as trust in local authorities depends on the quality of local life.

We worry about what low confidence means for the legitimacy of government. At the extreme, a lack of trust can delegitimize the actions of public authorities. At a minimum, levels of public trust serve as a barometer of citizen satisfaction with government. Because trust in local government and trust in national government have distinctive roots, trust in local government might not be subject to the same pressures that drive trust in national governments across Europe. This is not to say that the public does not hold local government accountable for its performance, for we find that trust is higher when people are satisfied with local services. But trust in local government also finds a basis in community life and social connections, potentially offering a reservoir of public trust that will persist even if the performance of local government stumbles. Because political trust is not merely a fixed attribute of particular countries or cultures, countries should have the ability to rebuild public trust by altering the design of political processes or by improving the performance of government.

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Notes

1. This account finds support in the correlations between the levels of trust people place in different public institutions (Listhaug and Wiberg, 1995; Rothstein, 2000).
2. Evidence that federal designs promote trust has been mixed. While Lijphart (2012) argues federal systems should promote satisfaction with democracy over unitary systems, Norris (1999) finds the reverse.

3. We choose this measure as it is arguably the most familiar and commonly used measure of federalism. The measure can be critiqued for being somewhat noisy as a measure of decentralization, as it includes Belgium's social federalism as well as more formalized federal structures. It also does not distinguish decentralized power to local versus generally subnational or regional authorities. Even if imperfect, we believe the measure broadly captures the difference between the most centralized countries and the most decentralized federalist states. We also cannot think of strong reasons why the limits of the measures would bias us in favor of finding results (rather than making it more difficult to find effects). Our results are generally robust to various dichotomous measures of federalism – the effects of federalism are consistent for trust in local government in both sign and significance, while the effects on trust in national government are consistent in direction, but sometimes only near-significant.
4. However, evidence on this point has been mixed in prior literature. While some find proportional representation promotes trust and satisfaction with democracy (Anderson and Guillory, 1997; Freitag and Bühlmann, 2009; Lijphart, 2012), other studies have not confirmed this pattern (Karp and Bowler, 2001; Listhaug et al., 2009; Norris, 1999).
5. Question wordings for the items used in our analysis can be found in the online appendix, available at <http://ips.sagepub.com/>.
6. This survey was conducted 17 November – 19 December 2006. Overall, 29,260 citizens of the EU aged 15 and over were interviewed face to face, based on multistage national probability samples. We rely on the subsample of 15,512 respondents residing in western Europe. Response rate is not reported for the survey.
7. These descriptive statistics incorporate survey weights for the EU 15.
8. The wording of the trust in local government question is more specific than would be ideal given that it asks only about councils with no mention of mayors. With its focus on councils, this item likely facilitates comparisons across countries, given the heterogeneity in how mayors are selected across regions. But this comes at the cost of imperfectly capturing people's global trust in local authorities.
9. See Newton (2001) on the unusual dynamics of political trust in Finland.
10. In the case of trust in national government, the intraclass correlation for an empty model is 0.091, indicating that 9.1% of the variation in trust is at the country level. For trust in local government, the intraclass correlation is 0.035.
11. We find a similar pattern of results when using a dichotomous indicator of PR systems.

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Author biographies

Jennifer Fitzgerald is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Colorado. She studies comparative political behavior focusing mainly on voting and attitudes in Europe.

Jennifer Wolak is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Colorado. Her research interests include public opinion, political psychology, and subnational politics.