

# Youth Trust and Political Participation

By: Zach Greenky  
Professor Portney – PS 78  
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Trust is an integral part of all human exchanges. In one's personal life, if there is no trust between a parent and child, siblings, significant others, or friends, there is no basis for a relationship. In this study, I attempt to bring this same ideology to the interaction between young voters and the government. I hypothesized that higher levels of trust in young people would correlate to higher levels of political participation. I used data from the National Civic Engagement Survey I (NCES I) administered from April 4 to May 20, 2002 to conduct my research.

I separated trust into three different categories. The first is general trust of people, the second is trust of politicians, and the third is trust of politics or the government. Four questions were used from the NCES I survey; one for trust of people, one for trust of politicians, and two for trust of government. To measure levels of political participation, again four questions were used. They measured the percentages of those that were registered, voted in the 2000 presidential election, use campaign ads such as bumper stickers or lawn signs in support of a certain candidate during an election, and if they donated money to a candidate or political organization associated with candidates respectively. Although the NCES I survey questioned people of ages 15 and up, I limited my analysis to studying the group aged between 15 and 25. 1001 people in this age group were surveyed.

To measure their general trust of people, respondents were asked which of these two statements they agreed with more: people are generally helpful or people are mostly looking out for themselves. This measures whether or not youthful respondents trust the integrity of others. When responses were cross-tabulated with the measures of voter registration and voter turnout in 2000, it showed there is a small but positive correlation

between these factors in young people. 81.8% of those who said they had trust in others said they were also registered compared to 18.2% that said they weren't registered. Those who responded that they didn't trust others exhibited the same pattern; 74.5% said they were registered while 25.5% said they weren't. These percentages follow the expected pattern in that the percentage of trusting respondents that were registered was greater than the percentage of those that were not and visa versa for non-registered respondents. However, this is only slightly statistically significant. The cross-tabulations between youth voter turnout in the 2000 presidential election yielded parallel results with only slightly different values. 90.1% of those who responded that they trusted others voted in 2000 while only 9.5% said they did not vote. Respondents who answered that they didn't trust others also showed the same pattern; 82.7% did vote while 16.9% didn't. Again, this data follows the expected pattern but only with a slight statistical significance.

The results of the cross-tabulations between youth trust of others and both the use of campaign ads and monetary donations to candidates also showed the hypothesized pattern with only a slight statistical significance. However, the large percentage values appear within the negative columns of political participation as shown: 25.5% of those who trust others said they utilize campaign ads while 74.5% said that they didn't. On the other hand, 22.2% of non-trusting respondents use campaign ads while 77.8% of those do not. For those respondents that regard others as trustworthy, 16.6% said they have donated money to a candidate while 83.4% said they did not. Conversely, within respondents that view others as untrustworthy, 9.2% said they did contribute money while 90.8% said that they did not.

The low percentages in the positive use of campaign ads are to be expected. If you drive around a normal neighborhood during an election period, you are not likely to find many lawn signs or bumper stickers supporting a candidate. Additionally, young people don't usually own homes and many times not cars either. This further limits their ability to display these ads. The high percentages of young people that do not contribute money is also to be expected because most young people are still at least partially dependent on their parents for money. Therefore, if they have any money, they normally don't have enough to use it to contribute to a candidate or campaign, even if they wanted to. In sum, it is evident from the data that a general sense of trust of others in young people positively affects political participation within this group.

To measure the level of trust young people have in politicians, respondents were asked which of the following statements they agreed with more: politics is a way for the powerful to keep the power to themselves or if they politics is a way for the less powerful to compete on different footing with the powerful. This measures if respondents trust politicians to be responsive to the needs of the people or just act in a way that will ensure their reelection and, thus, their retention of power. When this was cross-tabulated with registration status, the data shows that 78.2% of those that say they trust politicians are registered while 21.8% say they are not. On the other hand, 77.3 % of those that do not trust politicians stated that they are registered while 22.7% said they weren't. These values do follow the expected pattern, but the difference is also not statistically significant so it can be assumed that there is no correlation. However, the fact that there is no correlation is surprising. One would think that the pattern from general trust of people would spill over.

The data on voter participation in the 2000 presidential election shows similar results. 84.5% of respondents who trust politicians said they voted while 15.2% said they did not. Conversely, 88.4% of those who don't trust politicians said that they voted while 10.9% said that they did not. These values represent the expected pattern; trusting voters voted in a higher percentage than non-trusting respondents. However, the statistical significance is so slight (chi squared value of .038) that it can be reasonably assumed that this is a small statistical anomaly and that there is truly no correlation.

The cross-tabulation data for campaign ads and monetary donations also follow the hypothesized pattern, but the data within these two variables is statistically significant. 26.8% respondents that said they trust politicians also said they do display campaign ads while 73.2% say that they don't. Oppositely, 21.7% of non-trusting respondents said they display campaign ads while 78.3% say they do not. In respect to monetary donations, 15.4% of those who trust politicians said they make campaign contributions while 84.6% do not. Conversely, 10.3% of non-trusting youth make contributions while 89.7% don't.

This phenomenon is difficult to explain. It is possible that, because displaying campaign ads and donating money is so uncommon among youth (only 19.8% and 14.5% respectively of those aged 15-25 responded that they participate in these ways), that those that participate in these types of activities are hyper-politically active. It is very likely that extremely active youth have high degrees of trust in politicians, thus causing this phenomenon. However, this doesn't explain why non-trusting respondents also exhibit the statistically significant hypothesized pattern. A more probable explanation is that because registering to vote and actually voting represent much more mainstream forms of

political participation, a young person is much more easily persuaded to register or to vote by peers, teachers, parents, etc than to participate in the more active forms of politics like displaying campaign ads or donating money to candidates. Therefore, there is no correlation between trust of politicians and registration or voting because many youth are coerced in some manner to participate in this way. Additionally, it is intuitive that someone who actively supports a candidate would trust that politician and thus politicians as a group.

To determine their level of trust in government, respondents were asked to choose which of these two statements they agreed with more: the political system works to ensure equality for all or the political system gives favors to some at others' expense. This measures whether youth trust the government or political system to represent the interests of the average citizen or whether it only caters to those who are most influential in getting a candidate reelected, such as interest groups and large corporations. When responses to this were cross-tabulated with voter registration, the data showed that 76.3% of respondents who trust the government said that they are registered to vote and 23.7% said that they weren't. On the other hand, 79.0% of those that don't trust the government are registered while 21.0% are not. This data is opposite of the expected pattern in that the percentage of those registered rises as trust in government decreases. However, this data is not statistically significant so there is no correlation.

Within respondents that regard the government as trustworthy, 85.1% said that they voted in 2000 while 14.4% said that they did not. Oppositely, respondents that regard the government as untrustworthy, 86.6% said they voted and 13.0% said that they did not. Again, this pattern of data is opposite of that which was expected, however, this

data is even less statistically significant than the voter registration data. Therefore, there is also no correlation between voting and trust of the government within young people.

The same pattern exists in the cases of campaign ads and monetary donations. 25.5% of respondents that trust the government stated that they use campaign ads while 74.5% stated that they do not. Conversely, 22.8% of those that do not trust the government said that they use campaign ads while 77.2% stated that they don't. This does not follow the hypothesized pattern but is not statistically significant. Within those that trust the government, 11.7% have contributed money to a candidate while 88.3% have not. Conversely, within those that distrust the government, 12.4% have contributed money and 87.6% have not. This data, unlike the campaign ad data, represents the expected pattern, but is not statistically significant and thus there is no correlation. Hence, I contend that there is no correlation between trust of the government to represent the interests of the average citizen and political participation within American youth.

I was not confident that the previous question was an accurate measure of the entire variable of youth trust in government. Therefore, to further determine their trust in government, respondents were again asked to choose which of the following two statements they agreed with more: Government is wasteful and inefficient or government often does a better job than people give it credit for. This question measures a different aspect of governmental trust. It measures the level that American youth trust the government to use resources, such as taxes, in an efficient manner. However, the cross-tabulation data within this question again defied the hypothesis. As shown, there is no correlation between this type of government trust and youth political participation. 77.2% of trusting respondents were registered while 22.8% were not. Additionally, 79.3% of

non-trusting respondents were registered while 20.7% were not. Although this data reflects the opposite of the hypothesized pattern, it is not statistically significant.

When responses were cross-tabulated with voter turnout in the 2000 presidential election, it was found that 86.3% of trusting youth voted in 2000 while 13.1% did not vote. Conversely, 86.4% of non-trusting youth voted and 13.3% didn't. The similarities between these values clearly indicate that there is no statistical significance and therefore no correlation.

Within trusting respondents, 23.9% of respondents stated that they use campaign ads while 76.1% said that they do not. Oppositely, 23.6% of non-trusting respondents stated that they use campaign ads while 76.4% said that they do not. Again, the similitude of these data shows that there is no statistical significance.

Finally, 12.3% of respondents that stated they trust the government to be efficient stated that they have contributed money to a candidate while 87.7% said that they haven't. Conversely, 13.3% of non-trusting respondents stated that they have given money and 86.7% said that they have not. These data again have no statistical significance and thus have no correlation. Given that all the cross-tabulations of two separate questions measuring two different types of youth trust of government with the four types of political participation yield no correlation, it is safe to assume that there is truly no relationship within American youth between trust of government or the political system with participation.

Existing research on the relationship between trust and political participation is slim, especially within young people. The only research somewhat similar is Working Paper 17 written by Judith Tourney-Purta et al and published by the Center for

Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) in August 2004. Tourney-Purta used data from the Civic Education Survey conducted on 14 year-olds in 60 different countries administered by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in 1999. They also divided trust into three categories. The first was generalized trust; the second was trust in people contacted on a daily basis such as a banker; the third was trust in distal social objects such as governmental institutions. Although the majority of their research focused on how their respondents developed these types of trust and which types of students were more likely to be trusting, a third section of their research focused on the relationship between the respondents' trust of governmental institutions and two types of expected future participation including voting and conventional participation other than voting such as joining a political party or writing a letter on a political issue. In this research, they predicted that greater trust in governmental institutions was a significant but small positive influence on future voting and other conventional types of political participation.

Although Working Paper 17 tested trust of government in different nations, including the US, and its relation to political participation, this data is not parallel to my research on the same relationship. They found a slight correlation between youth trust in the government and voting as well as between this type of trust and conventional political participation other than voting where I found no correlation. The difference in our conclusions can be explained in a variety of ways. First, the difference may be due to the fact that in their research was conducted on 14 year olds who could not vote at the time of the survey. My research is based upon youth that were of voting age and were registered. Therefore, my research is more conclusive because it is not measuring expectations of

voting behavior but actual voting patterns. Second, Tourney-Purta specifically tested trust in government institutions such as the courts and legislatures while I tested trust in the government or political system in general. Third, Working Paper 17 used the activities of writing a letter on a political issue and joining a political party as the examples of conventional political participation. The examples I used were displaying campaign ads or donating money to a candidate/candidate-affiliated organization. My examples of active political participation, however, are much more mainstream than those used by Working Paper 17 and are thus more representative of this category of activities. One could argue that Tourney-Purta's example of joining a political party is parallel to my use of registration status. However, because I also found no correlation between registration status and governmental trust, this argument is flawed. Finally, question wording in either the IEA or NCES I surveys could have produced biased results. However, this argument is doubtful considering the acceptance of the factual legitimacy of both surveys within the political science community. In sum, my research represents more conclusive findings because of the flaws in Working Paper 17.

My research, however, is also not without its flaws. To begin, it is perplexing that 71.7% of the youth surveyed that could vote in 2000 did. This seems improbable given the fact, according to Census Bureau, which tested close to the entire population of the US, only 36.1% of those aged 18-24 voted in this presidential election. The NCES I data also found that 63.7% of youth said that they were registered while the Census Bureau said that only 50.7% were. However, these values are close enough that the difference can probably be explained by the fact that the two surveys had different respondent pools. Conversely, the differences in voter turnout in 2000 cannot be explained simply by this

difference. Second, only 363 of the 1001 respondents (36.8%) were able to answer if they voted or not in the 2000 election. The low percentage of respondents is because those aged 15 to 19 at the time of the survey (conducted in April and May of 2002) were unable to vote in 2000. Therefore, confidence in the values is further depleted because of the small size of the sample pool. Although the patterns represented by any cross-tabulation involving the voting question (VP<sub>2</sub>) in the NCES I survey may be representative of the actual patterns, the data is, at minimum, questionable given the large difference between these percentages.

Despite its minimal flaws, this research is unprecedented and draws some interesting conclusions. To begin, youth that are trusting of others have higher political participation in all four categories: voter registration, voter turnout, the use of campaign ads, and monetary donations towards candidates. High trust of politicians within young people is only statistically significant in providing higher engagement within active political activities such as the use of campaign ads and monetary donations. Additionally, youth trust of the government has no correlation with any of the four types of political participation. As discussed earlier, trust of politicians was only statistically significant in providing higher involvement in active forms of participation because someone that actively supports a candidate with campaign ads or monetary donations, intuitively, should trust that candidate. It is perplexing why youth that had general trust in others drew significantly higher participation in all forms while governmental trust had no correlation whatsoever. This question, however, cannot be answered intuitively with the present research on the subject. In sum, these conclusions are significant and represent the beginning of research on the relationship between trust among youth and political

participation, but before anything can be concluded definitively, more research must be conducted.

# Appendix

Table 1: Trust in others (ATA1) versus registration (VP1)

		ATA1		
		Trust	Don't	Depends
VP1	Registered	81.8%	74.5%	79.7%
	Not registered	18.2	25.5	20.3

ATA1 wording: Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements to see how you feel about some matters. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

Most of the time people try to be helpful OR Most of the time people are just looking out for themselves.

VP1 wording: In talking to people, we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around too often. Would official state records show that you are now registered to vote in your election district, or not?

Table 2: Trust in others (ATA1) versus voter turnout in the 2000 election (VP2)

		ATA1		
		Trust	Don't	Depends
VP2	Voted	90.1%	82.7%	84.2%
	Didn't Vote	9.5	16.9	15.8

ATA1 wording: Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements to see how you feel about some matters. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

Most of the time people try to be helpful OR Most of the time people are just looking out for themselves.

VP2 wording: Can you recall if you voted in the 2000 election between Al Gore and George W. Bush, or did something prevent you from voting?

Table 3: Trust in others (ATA1) versus campaign ads (PP2)

		ATA1		
		Trust	Don't	Depends
PP2	Registered	25.5%	22.2%	22.4%
	Not registered	74.5	77.8	77.6

ATA1 wording: Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements to see how you feel about some matters. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

PP2 wording: Do you wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in front of your house, or aren't these things you do?

Table 4: Trust in others (ATA1) versus monetary donations (PP6)

ATA1

	Trust	Don't	Depends
PP6 Registered	16.6%	9.2%	12.0%
Not registered	83.4	90.8	88.0

ATA1 wording: Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements to see how you feel about some matters. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

PP6 wording: In the past 12 months, did you contribute money to a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supported candidates?

Table 5: Trust in politicians (ATA7) versus registration (VP1)

ATA7

	Trust	Don't	Depends
VP1 Registered	77.3%	78.2%	85.4%
Not registered	22.7	21.8	14.6

ATA7 wording: Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements to see how you feel about some matters. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

Politics is a way for the powerful to keep power to themselves OR Politics is a way for the less powerful to compete on equal footing with the powerful.

VP1 wording: In talking to people, we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around too often. Would official state records show that you are now registered to vote in your election district, or not?

Table 6: Trust in politicians (ATA7) versus voter turnout in the 2000 election (VP2)

ATA7

	Trust	Don't	Depends
VP2 Voted	84.5%	88.4%	87.9%
Didn't Vote	15.2	10.9	12.1

ATA7 wording: Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements to see how you feel about some matters. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

Politics is a way for the powerful to keep power to themselves OR Politics is a way for the less powerful to compete on equal footing with the powerful.

VP2 wording: Can you recall if you voted in the 2000 election between Al Gore and George W. Bush, or did something prevent you from voting?

Table 7: Trust in politicians (ATA7) versus campaign ads (PP2)

ATA7

	Trust	Don't	Depends
PP2 Registered	21.7%	26.8%	28.9%
Not registered	78.3	73.2	71.1

ATA7 wording: Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements to see how you feel about some matters. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.  
 Politics is a way for the powerful to keep power to themselves OR Politics is a way for the less powerful to compete on equal footing with the powerful.

PP2 wording: Do you wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in front of your house, or aren't these things you do?

Table 8: Trust in politicians (ATA7) versus monetary donations (PP6)

ATA7

	Trust	Don't	Depends
PP6 Registered	10.3%	15.4%	20.3%
Not registered	89.7	84.4	79.7

ATA7 wording: Now I'm going to read you some pairs of statements to see how you feel about some matters. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

PP6 wording: In the past 12 months, did you contribute money to a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supported candidates?

Table 9: Trust in government equality (ATB4) versus registration (VP1)

ATB4

	Trust	Don't	Depends
VP1 Registered	76.3%	79.0%	74.5%
Not registered	23.7	21.0	25.5

ATB4 wording: : I'm going to read you some more pairs of statements. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.  
 The political system works to ensure equal opportunity for everyone OR the political system works to give special favors to some at the expense of others.

VP1 wording: In talking to people, we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around too often. Would official state records show that you are now registered to vote in your election district, or not?

Table 10: Trust in government equality (ATB4) versus voter turnout in the 2000 election (VP2)

ATB4

	Trust	Don't	Depends
VP2			

Voted	85.1%	86.3%	83.1%
Didn't Vote	14.4	13.0	16.9

ATB4 wording: : I'm going to read you some more pairs of statements. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

The political system works to ensure equal opportunity for everyone OR the political system works to give special favors to some at the expense of others.

VP2 wording: Can you recall if you voted in the 2000 election between Al Gore and George W. Bush, or did something prevent you from voting?

Table 11: Trust in government equality (ATB4) versus campaign ads (PP2)

		ATB4		
		Trust	Don't	Depends
PP2	Registered	25.5%	22.8%	18.0%
	Not registered	74.5	72.2	82.0

ATB4 wording: : I'm going to read you some more pairs of statements. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

The political system works to ensure equal opportunity for everyone OR the political system works to give special favors to some at the expense of others.

PP2 wording: Do you wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in front of your house, or aren't these things you do?

Table 12: Trust in government equality (ATB4) versus monetary donations (PP6)

		ATB4		
		Trust	Don't	Depends
PP6	Registered	11.7%	12.4%	18.2%
	Not registered	88.3	87.6	81.8

ATB4 wording: : I'm going to read you some more pairs of statements. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

The political system works to ensure equal opportunity for everyone OR the political system works to give special favors to some at the expense of others.

PP6 wording: In the past 12 months, did you contribute money to a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supported candidates?

Table 13: Trust in government efficiency (ATB8) versus voter registration (VP1)

		ATB8		
		Trust	Don't	Depends
VP1	Voted	85.1%	86.3%	83.1%
	Didn't Vote	14.4	13.0	16.9

ATB8 wording: I'm going to read you some more pairs of statements. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient OR Government often does a better job than people give it credit for.

VP1 wording: In talking to people, we find that many are not registered to vote because they are too busy or move around too often. Would official state records show that you are now registered to vote in your election district, or not?

Table 14: Table 10: Trust in government efficiency (ATB8) versus voter turnout in the 2000 election (VP2)

		ATB8		
		Trust	Don't	Depends
VP2	Registered	25.5%	22.8%	18.0%
	Not registered	74.5	72.2	82.0

ATB8 wording: I'm going to read you some more pairs of statements. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient OR Government often does a better job than people give it credit for.

VP2 wording: Can you recall if you voted in the 2000 election between Al Gore and George W. Bush, or did something prevent you from voting?

Table 15: Trust in government efficiency (ATB8) versus campaign ads (PP2)

		ATB8		
		Trust	Don't	Depends
PP2	Registered	25.5%	22.8%	18.0%
	Not registered	74.5	72.2	82.0

ATB8 wording: I'm going to read you some more pairs of statements. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient OR Government often does a better job than people give it credit for.

PP2 wording: Do you wear a campaign button, put a sticker on your car, or place a sign in front of your house, or aren't these things you do?

Table 16: Trust in government efficiency (ATB4) versus monetary donations (PP6)

		ATB8		
		Trust	Don't	Depends
PP6	Registered	11.7%	12.4%	18.2%
	Not registered	88.3	87.6	81.8

ATB8 wording: I'm going to read you some more pairs of statements. Please tell me which you agree with more, even if neither is exactly how you feel.

Government is almost always wasteful and inefficient OR Government often does a better job than people give it credit for.

PP6 wording: In the past 12 months, did you contribute money to a candidate, a political party, or any organization that supported candidates?

\*NOTE: Although the “depends” column was not used in the analysis, it was included in the cross-tabulations because its absence altered the data in a way that did not reflect the true results.

## Worked Cited

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