

# TRUST

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In today's complex, highly technical world, every decision we make is accompanied by a host of alternatives that we could have pursued instead. Were we to contemplate every available course of action before acting, we would quickly become immobilized (Luhmann, 1979). As humans, we have developed strategies to reduce the cognitive complexity that would otherwise cripple us. One important strategy is to place our trust in other people and institutions. We trust our elected representatives to write and pass laws that will benefit our communities. We trust our doctors to stay abreast of the latest medical advances and monitor our health. We trust our financial advisors to manage our money wisely and steer us toward sound investments. By delegating some of our decision making to others in this way, we are better able to cope with the complexity that surrounds us. When such trust fails—as it sometimes does—the negative consequences can be severe.

Political and civic leaders emerge as important targets of our trust. Lacking their expertise, we rely on public leaders to act on our behalf so that we can focus on the tasks within our ken. At the same time, the choice of whom to trust can be a vexing one, particularly since so many current and former leaders have proven themselves untrustworthy. Successful leaders, such as Margaret Thatcher, Harry Truman, and Jean Monnet, earn the public's trust by presenting a compelling story and embodying the story in their own lives (Gardner, 1996). Thatcher's story was "Britain has lost its way, and I know a new and better way." She called on English men and women to pull together and work hard to advance their own interests and

those of their nation. As a grocer's daughter who had risen through her own efforts to the status of leader of the United Kingdom, Thatcher clearly embodied this story. Less successful leaders, by contrast, fail to present a compelling story, or they fail to embody the story they present. Consider Thatcher's successor, John Major, who failed to embody in a clear way the story he inherited from his predecessor or to create a convincing narrative of his own. In this chapter, we explore the centrality of trust in today's society, with a particular focus on trust in political and civic leaders. We begin with a review of the theoretical work on trust in order to identify its key dimensions. Following this review, we discuss the role that trust plays in a democratic society, including economic, civic, and political life. In this discussion, we consider the relationship between trust and two related concepts, trustworthiness and distrust. In the following section, we explore the roots of trust by examining how young people conceive of and use trust in their daily lives, particularly when they judge the trustworthiness of public leaders. We consider the implications of this exploration with respect to the role of trust in democratic society.

## Overview

### Theoretical Accounts of Trust

For such a small, seemingly self-evident word, *trust* proves to be quite a complex concept. The word *trust* can be used as a noun—"The trust between the two friends is

people reach beyond rational thought and prompt an affective response (Earle & Cvetkovich, 1995).

Thus far, we have considered trust from the perspective of one person judging the trustworthiness of another. However, we could take as the object of our trust a larger, more loosely defined group of people, such as our fellow citizens. Here, the distinction between "thick" and "thin" trust proves useful (Earle & Cvetkovich, 1995; Flanagan, 2003; Fukuyama, 1995). Whereas thick trust is rooted in dense networks of known people, thin trust, or social trust, arises between people who are not closely connected but who recognize that they share common values. The large scale of modern societies precludes most of us from establishing thick trust in our public leaders. For this reason, social trust forms the basis of our trust in these distant individuals. Social trust proves to be relatively stable over time, because it is based on an optimistic worldview rooted in one's upbringing and familial relationships (Flanagan, 2003; Uslaner, 2000). However, situations may arise that prompt individuals to reevaluate their worldview. For instance, an elected official may enjoy high levels of trust among his or her constituents in times of peace and prosperity. In the event of a diplomatic or economic crisis, however, that leader might reveal an incompetence that was previously masked by more benign circumstances.

Despite the multiple ways we might conceive of trust, there proves to be one key ingredient we cannot do without: risk. When we extend our trust, we do so without complete knowledge of or control over the future actions of others. Our lack of full knowledge and control is particularly apparent with respect to public leaders with whom we have little to no direct contact. We are fortunate today that we can take advantage of technological innovations such as the Internet to acquire information about our leaders. Government Web sites, online newspapers, and civic-minded bloggers, or "citizen journalists," provide us with extensive information about our leaders' professional qualifications, voting record, and ideological positions. Even so, this evidence can only predict future behavior; it cannot guarantee the desired outcome. Moreover, the information one encounters on the Internet is by no means all reliable, and it is a trust challenge in itself to discern what is really going on. Trust allows us to act in the face of this uncertainty.

The element of risk plays a central role in experimental studies of trust. These experiments typically involve a variation of the classic prisoner's dilemma game. In this game, each of two players is presented with a choice: cooperate or defect (do not cooperate). The payoff associated with either choice depends on the other player's decision. However, each player must choose whether or not to cooperate without knowing what the other player has decided. Let us imagine a prisoner's dilemma game in which the payoff in question is a monetary reward. Table 67.1 depicts the four possible outcomes. In this matrix, the payoff to the Row player is listed first. If both players decide to cooperate, each one receives the second-best outcome: \$5. On the

strong"—or as a verb—"I trust that he will pay back the money I lent him." Depending on how one uses it, trust may be viewed as a belief one holds about a person or institution or, alternatively, as an action one takes. Russell Hardin (1996, 2002, 2006), a political scientist who has written extensively about the role of trust in civic and political life, provides a definition of trust that aligns with the former, "noun" view of trust. He describes trust as a belief about another person that is based on accumulated evidence of that person's trustworthiness. According to Hardin, trust is established in the context of ongoing, interpersonal relationships. Through such relationships, we gradually accumulate sufficient evidence to form beliefs about others' trustworthiness.

When we use the word *trust* in more agential terms, the focus shifts from our beliefs in others to the actions we take based on those beliefs. This "verb" view of trust could be described as a bet we make about a person's future actions (Sztopmka, 1999). To improve the odds that our bet will turn out well, we draw on our knowledge of the person's past trustworthy (or untrustworthy) behavior. In this way, the "verb" view of trust requires us to make an active commitment. Of course, some situations call on us to place a bet even when we lack knowledge of another person's past actions. In such situations, we might set our doubts aside and act *as if* we trusted (Gambetta, 1988). By acting *as if* we trusted, we can deliberately choose to enter into a cooperative relationship with a person who is not well known to us. Our cooperation may take the form of lending our mower to a new neighbor, or it may involve electing a little-known but appealing politician to office. The subsequent behavior of the people we approach with *as if* trust will eventually provide us with sufficient evidence to form a true belief about their trustworthiness.

The decision to act *as if* we trust someone raises the question of whether we trust with our head or our heart (Chua, Ingram, & Morris, 2008). In some cases, trust may resemble a strictly rational process of carefully observing a person's actions and using those observations to form a belief about his or her trustworthiness. We might employ such a process to evaluate the trustworthiness of colleagues with whom we work on a long-term project. Our observations of their work habits and interactions with others serve as evidence that we use to inform our assessments. Of course, there may be one particularly dramatic colleague who elicits from us a positive emotional response. If such were the case, our trust judgments would take on a more affective quality as we focus on evidence that reinforces our positive feelings and overlook evidence that does not. In this circumstance, noncognitive processes of the mind may play a greater role in our trust judgments than cognitive processes. Jones (1996) describes this noncognitive dimension of trust as an attitude of optimism regarding another person's goodwill and competence. Leaders draw on the noncognitive dimension of trust when they tell their stories. Stories that resonate with and inspire

later stages of development. In a similar manner, Flanagan (2003) claims that children's early trust experiences create a sense of security and self-confidence that allows them to approach new experiences with openness and optimism. Lacking such early experiences of trust, children are likely to assume a more guarded stance as they encounter new people and situations.

In nondemocratic societies, such as Hitler's Nazi Germany or Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, trust is irrelevant or dangerous. In such autocratic societies, leaders use fear in the place of trust to maintain their power over citizens. Trust becomes important in societies that allow for individual choice, such as democracies. Sztoplka (1999) identifies several features of a democracy that are fostered by trust, such as communication, cooperation, tolerance, and participation. According to Putnam (1995, 2000), trust leads people to participate in voluntary associations, such as bowling leagues, labor unions, and church organizations. Putnam argues that these associations form the foundation of democratic society because they require people to work together for a common cause. Participation in voluntary associations, in turn, enhances levels of trust between members as they come to know each other through ongoing interaction. Termining this pattern of behavior a "virtuous circle," Putnam claims that the virtuous circle sustains democratic life (Putnam, Leonardi, & Nantti, 1993).

Brehm and Rahm's (1997) analysis of the General Social Survey (GSS) data provides empirical support for Putnam's virtuous circle. Since 1972, the GSS has been measuring Americans' attitudes about a broad range of topics, including their levels of trust in fellow citizens, government representatives, and public institutions. Using longitudinal data from this survey, Brehm and Rahm identified a reciprocal relationship between levels of trust and civic engagement. They found the relationship was stronger when civic engagement was used to predict levels of trust, suggesting that it is more likely that a civically engaged person will develop trust in others and somewhat less likely that a trusting person will become civically engaged. Usaner (2000) argues the reverse. Using data from the same survey, he claims that people who trust are more likely to be civically engaged, but that civic engagement rarely leads to trust. This contradictory evidence complicates the relationship between trust and civic engagement. Nevertheless, it appears to be the case that trust and civic engagement are integrally connected.

Given the connection between trust and civic life, it is perhaps unsurprising that levels of trust tend to be higher in countries with a tradition of democracy. Paxton (2005) looked at 46 countries over a 10-year period and found that more democratic countries tended to have higher levels of trust. Similarly, a 1999 survey of students in 28 different countries found variations in trust levels according to factors such as economic inequality and democratic stability.

Table 67.1 Prisoner's Dilemma Game

Row Player (A)	Cooperates	Cooperates	A Gains \$5 B Gains \$5
		Defects	A Loses \$5 B Gains \$10
Column Player (B)	Cooperates	A Gains \$10 B Loses \$5	A Gains \$0 B Gains \$0
	Defects	A Gains \$5 B Loses \$5	A Gains \$5 B Loses \$5

other hand, if the Row player cooperates and the Column player does not, the Row player loses \$5 while the Column player gains \$10. The payoffs are reversed if the Row player defects while the Column player cooperates. If both players defect, the status quo is preserved: No one receives a payoff. Thus, the safest choice for both players is to defect.

Since players have no further interactions with each other, the traditional prisoner's dilemma fails to capture the ongoing nature of most human interactions. The need to consider possible future dealings would alter a player's cost-benefit calculation. For this reason, many researchers use the iterated prisoner's dilemma in their studies of trust. In this version, the game is played repeatedly. If both players decide to defect each time, the status quo is preserved: No one loses or gains anything. However, they both stand to gain \$5 after every game if each one decides to cooperate. This version of the game more closely approximates real-life trust decisions because players must consider the long-term consequences of defection and cooperation. For instance, when we weigh the costs and benefits associated with placing our trust in a public leader, we consider their likely actions in both the near and distant future. Even so, by virtue of its experimental design, even this form of the prisoner's dilemma is largely stripped of the rich context that informs real-life trust situations.

### Trust, Trustworthiness, and Distrust in a Democratic Society

According to Erikson (1968), the struggle between trust and distrust constitutes the first psychological "crisis" of human development. The ratio of trust to distrust that emerges from the infant-caregiver relationship forms the basis for all subsequent experiences of trust. Erikson explains that a trusting relationship between infant and caregiver instills in the former a sense of stability and continuity that serves as a solid foundation for psychological growth. In contrast, infants who experience greater amounts of distrust in their early relationships are placed at a psychological disadvantage as they progress through

and either competence or motivation proves lacking, we may be reluctant to extend our trust in future situations. Thus, trust is beneficial only when it is accompanied by trustworthy behavior.

Because untrustworthy behavior exists in our society, there are times when distrust is warranted. Distrust can be conceived as the negative mirror image of trust (Barber, 1983; Sztopka, 1999). While evidence of competence and motivation leads to trust, evidence of incompetence and disinclination leads to distrust. To be sure, distrust is the prudent course of action when confronted with untrustworthy behavior. It serves as protection against individuals who would take advantage of us. And yet, Luhmann (1979) argues that distrust ultimately hurts society by closing people off from one another and limiting social behavior. Economic life slows due to the transacting costs associated with increased reliance on bureaucratic arrangements (Fukuyama, 1995). Civic life suffers as a result of individuals' reluctance to cooperate with each other. According to Uslaner (2000), distrustful people stop volunteering, reduce their charitable contributions, and retreat into their own walled communities. In the realm of political life, he explains, Congress accomplishes less due to party polarization, and campaigns become increasingly negative. It should be noted, however, that a certain amount of distrust is necessary to ensure that elected officials do not reach beyond the limits of their power. Such institutionalized distrust, in the form of separation of powers and watchdogs like the media and interest groups, supports democratic life by holding government officials accountable to their constituents. Indeed, *Federalist Paper No. 51*, Madison's famous essay about the importance of instituting checks and balances in government, can be read as an argument for institutionalized distrust.

### Exploration: Trust Among Youth

Yearly public opinion surveys show that levels of trust in public figures, institutions, and one's fellow citizens have declined steadily in the United States since the middle of the 20th century; in contrast, with the exception of some European countries, levels of trust in other countries have remained relatively stable (Keefe, 2007; Nannestad, 2008; Uslaner, 2000). While these surveys measure trust among adults, a similar downward trend has been found among American youth (Rahn & Transue, 1998). According to Greenstein (1960, 1969, 1975), a pioneer in the study of political psychology and the political socialization of children, the conceptions of public figures and institutions formed during childhood serve as the basis for political attitudes and behaviors in adulthood. Thus, it is instructive to look at youths' conceptions of trust to illuminate the foundation of adults' low levels of trust in the United States.

(Torney-Purta, Richardson, & Barber, 2004). For instance, the highest levels of trust in government institutions were found in Denmark and Norway. These countries have long-standing democracies, high adult satisfaction in democracy, and low proportions of youth from low socioeconomic families. In contrast, Colombia and Bulgaria, countries with less stable democracies and higher levels of violence and corruption, had the lowest levels of trust in government institutions.

Fukuyama (1995) considers the role of trust in economic life. In contrast to earlier agrarian societies, modern life requires people to enter into economic relations with unfamiliar parties. Although laws and contracts are commonly used to back these exchanges, Fukuyama points out that they introduce considerable transaction costs that slow the pace of economic life. Trust, on the other hand, encourages people to cooperate with each other in the absence of formal laws and contracts. In this way, trust enables economic partners to avoid the constraints of bureaucratic arrangements.

According to Fukuyama (1995), innovative and flexible corporations tend to be found in countries that boast high levels of trust. He attributes variations in countries' trust levels to differences in their ways of organizing social behavior. He notes that relatively high-trust societies like Japan, Germany, and the United States have more voluntary organizations than low-trust societies like France, southern Italy, and many Latin American countries. Due to the focus on family in the latter group, individuals outside one's family are generally approached with skepticism and a guarded attitude; consequently, the state must intervene with bureaucratic regulations to facilitate economic activity. In contrast, social life in high-trust societies tends to be organized around voluntary organizations, such as church groups and labor unions. According to Fukuyama, these social organizations pave the way to economic cooperation between diverse groups. In short, by relying on trust instead of state intervention, high-trust societies support innovation and flexibility more successfully than low-trust societies.

The benefits of trust—for individuals, democracy, and economic life—occur only when trust is warranted (Bater, 1986; Hardin, 2002). Thus, it becomes necessary to evaluate a person's trustworthiness before extending one's trust. Hardin (2002) explains that trustworthy people follow through on their commitments to others. With respect to public leaders, it is not enough to tell compelling stories. They must support their stories with appropriate actions. Govier (1998) identifies two dimensions of trustworthiness: competence and motivation. When there is reason to believe that a person is both able and willing to follow through on a commitment, we are likely to extend our trust. If either competence or motivation is called into question, we may withhold trust. While such a stance may be protective, it precludes the possibility of realizing the benefits of trust. On the other hand, if trust is extended

Greenstein's 1958 survey of American youths' political attitudes revealed an overwhelmingly positive regard for political leaders, particularly the president. In contrast, Carter and Tetens' (2002) replication study found that youths' judgments of political leaders had become decidedly more negative by 2000. In 2001, a series of 11 focus groups conducted with young people across the United States revealed a similarly critical stance toward politicians and the political process (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002). Participants said the political process cannot be relied upon to solve critical issues affecting the United States. During the 2004 presidential campaign, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) conducted a survey of middle and high school students that uncovered consistently low levels of trust in government and elected representatives (Flanagan & Gallay, 2008). The same survey also found low levels of trust in the news media, although these levels were slightly higher than government and elected representatives.

The distrust of public leaders and institutions expressed by youth today, while a matter of concern, has an important role to play in democratic life. Hardin (2002) points out that a certain amount of distrust in public figures and institutions is necessary for the smooth functioning of a democratic society. In fact, the authors of the U.S. Constitution institutionalized distrust by calling for three independent branches of government that would each serve to rein in the power of the other two branches. Sztopka (1999) describes such institutionalized distrust as a paradox of democracy because it leads to greater trust among citizens. With a system of checks and balances to limit the government's reach, individuals feel a sense of security in society's basic functioning. This security instills in people a sense of optimism and a willingness to engage in cooperative relations with their fellow citizens. In this way, distrust can actually engender trust.

At the same time, the high levels of distrust among today's youth seem excessive. When levels of distrust in a society are high, cynicism increases, and people withdraw from social life, with deleterious effects on democratic processes (Luhmann, 1979; Putnam, 2000; Uslaner, 2000). In our in-depth interviews with youth ages 15–25, participants expressed a troubling degree of cynicism toward public leaders and institutions. They explained that they do not trust elected officials to follow through on promises made during their election campaigns. They believed that most politicians are primarily interested in extending their power and will say anything to get elected. As one 18-year-old participant stated, "Politicians . . . they're spin doctors. They know exactly how to manipulate bias and how to take any piece of information and change it to say anything else." Similar explanations were offered for participants' distrust in the media. They attributed the media's untrustworthiness to their desire to secure large profits and

promote their political agenda. These attitudes are matters of concern because they suggest a sense of disillusionment in the basic processes of democracy. Indeed, several participants described their distrust in public figures and institutions with resignation. For example, the same participant quoted above said, "I have an innate distrust of politicians. . . . Enough studying of history has decided for me that I'll make up my own mind." Such sentiments are consistent with the notable decline in youth political engagement during the latter part of the 20th century (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). In the early 1970s, half of 18- to 29-year-olds voted in presidential elections, whereas less than one third voted in the 1996 elections (Galston, 2001).

To understand the cynicism and disengagement of today's youth, we must consider the criteria they use to evaluate public figures and institutions. Individuals' conceptions of trust are formed during childhood in the context of close relationships with family and friends (Erikson, 1968; Flanagan, 2003). The youth in our study described their trusting relationships with family and friends in terms of care, loyalty, honesty, and mutual respect. Similarly, a survey of 864 adolescents in the United States identified two dimensions of adolescents' conceptions of trust in parents and friends: dependability beliefs and sharing confidences (Hestenes, 1996). Participants trusted parents and friends on whom they could depend and with whom they could share confidences. These findings suggest that trust helps individuals develop and maintain feelings of closeness in the context of their interpersonal relationships (Rawlins & Holl, 1987).

The affective dimension of trust provides insight into Greenstein's (1960) finding that children, lacking political knowledge, base their evaluations of political leaders on their emotional responses to these individuals. Our interviews with youth uncovered a similar proclivity to apply an interpersonal mental model of trust to judgments of public leaders and institutions. Many of our interview participants seek direct interaction with all potential targets of trust in order to judge their consistency, integrity of motivation, and ability to follow through on commitments. One 23-year-old participant explained, "I don't think I could get to like a deep level of trust with somebody I've never met and interacted with personally." In the absence of such direct contact, these youths regarded government officials, journalists, and public institutions with skepticism, or they declined to engage in any form of assessment at all. Many youths said they were unsure how to judge the trustworthiness of individuals with whom they have no personal relationship. For instance, the same participant quoted above reflected the sentiments of many when he explained:

I always feel like if you're not directly talking with someone and interacting, it's hard to know the true intentions through filters like TV and books and things. You never know what's going on behind the scenes, what they're really thinking, what

newspapers and the major broadcast networks as popular sources of information. With recent cases of deception in the traditional news media, some of these newer options may be more attractive to people. Yet, with today's copy-and-paste technology, it is often hard to determine the original source of stories that appear in a digital medium such as a blog. Information takes on a disembedded quality, making it difficult to judge its accuracy and to identify a suitable trustee. At the same time, we would argue that this complex information landscape raises the need for trustees who can provide individuals with reliable information about the trustworthiness of public figures and institutions.

A small number of participants in our study spoke about employing a strategy of triangulation in which they compare information gleaned from several respected sources. One 17-year-old youth explained how he attempts to distinguish truth from fiction: "Just dig. Dig. Get a bunch of different resources, talk to people, find out what they know, find out what you can piece together." The young people in our study who employed such a strategy were effectively "cobbling together" trust from diverse and partial trustees. They turned to parents, teachers, friends, and various media sources to piece together their trust judgments. However, most participants, like the majority of American youth today (Bennett, Rhine, & Flickinger, 2008), did not consume enough news media to be able to engage in such a process. Their thin consumption of news media and general ambivalence toward public figures suggest they did not believe it important to assess the trustworthiness of people beyond their immediate circle of family and friends—or, perhaps, that they lacked the capabilities to do so.

It seems plausible that youths (indeed, all individuals) would be more likely to seek out trustees and expand the objects of their trust judgments if they perceived that distant figures played an important role in their lives. One way to make a personal connection to public life is to become civically engaged. Even though the relationship between civic participation and trust is a complex one, the two entities nevertheless appear to be intimately connected (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Uslaner, 2000). According to Flanagan (2003), civic engagement, such as participation in community-based associations, can have positive effects on youth's trusting dispositions. Involvement in civic life may not lead directly to trust, but it may help youth understand that a healthy democracy requires an engaged citizenry that holds public figures and institutions accountable. Our work suggests that, when youths engage in the process of judging the trustworthiness of distant others, they seek out appropriate qualities in public leaders. They will look for leaders to demonstrate competence in their official role, express a genuine concern for the best interests of their constituency, and display a commitment to fulfill their leadership role in a fair, disinterested, and honest way.

they're thinking to themselves. So I would have a really hard time truly trusting someone from a distance.

Given the need to hold public figures and institutions accountable, citizens must have appropriate strategies for assessing the trustworthiness of people beyond their immediate circle. Many of the young people in our study relied on direct interactions with others in the context of ongoing relationships. However, there are other criteria for judging another's trustworthiness. When firsthand knowledge of a person's record of trustworthiness is lacking, one can look at secondary credentials such as professional licenses, awards, popularity, or the backing of a trusted "middleman" (Sztompka, 1999). Indeed, several of the participants in our study talked about relying on such evidence in situations where they did not have a personal history with someone. For instance, some participants mentioned using evidence of professional qualifications to assess the trustworthiness of medical practitioners. Others said they trust certain elected officials because their parents trust them.

In some cases, the middleman may not be an intimate associate but a public figure, such as a journalist or even a political figure. Today's public institutions are distinguished by their scale and complexity, and the information about them bombards us on a regular basis through a variety of media channels. This state of affairs makes it difficult for individual citizens to acquire and synthesize the information necessary to judge the trustworthiness of public figures and institutions (Hardin, 2002). In this context, the role of the "trustee" serves a particularly important function (Gardner, 2005). Trustees gather, synthesize, and impart to citizens the knowledge required to make informed trust judgments about public figures. Trustees are seen as expert at gathering and distilling relevant information, and they are able to express their insights in a clear and compelling manner. Additionally, they have a well-known and wide-reaching forum to share their information with the public. Above all, they are seen as disinterested, as not having a personal axe to grind. For these reasons, figures experienced in politics or the media make good candidates for trustees.

Trustees were plentiful 50 years ago, from political figures like Dean Acheson, John McCloy, and George Kennan, to media journalists such as Walter Cronkite, Eric Sevareid, and Edward R. Murrow (Gardner, 2005). Today, however, trustees seem to be harder to find. In fact, few of the participants in our study named public figures as mentors or trusted individuals, and fewer still could name a media figure on whom they relied for information. It is perhaps not surprising that such a situation exists in today's media-saturated environment. The number of news organizations has grown considerably since the middle of the 20th century, as has the number of media channels through which information is delivered. Cable television, podcasts, and blogs have joined

## Remaining Questions and Future Directions

The theory and research reviewed in this chapter raise several questions relating to the concept of trust and its role in a democratic society. First, the competing definitions and explanations put forth by scholars suggest that trust is not a simple concept that is easily summarized. Some scholars view trust as a belief that forms the basis of cooperative actions, while others argue that trust itself is an action. To some, the trust process is purely rational, but to others trust includes affective elements. There are also discussions about the proper object of trust, as well as the degree to which trust changes or remains stable over time. A decisive resolution to these tensions seems unlikely. Indeed, it may not be necessary, or even desirable, to solve these tensions. Given the contextual nature of trust, different conceptions may be required to understand a variety of trust situations, from trust in one's parents to trust in one's president.

Our discussion of trust's role in democratic life calls into question the nature of the relationship between trust and civic engagement. Putnam describes the relationship as a "virtuous circle" in which trust and civic engagement are reciprocally related (Putnam et al., 1993). By this account, people who trust their fellow citizens are more likely to participate in voluntary associations, such as bowling leagues, parent-teacher associations, and church organizations. Participation in these associations, in turn, strengthens trust and encourages continued cooperation among citizens. Empirical investigations of Putnam's virtuous circle indicate that the relationship between trust and civic engagement may be more complex (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Uslaner, 2000).

Empirical investigations of trust among young people reveal additional complexities that bear further consideration. Since trust is initially formed in the context of close relationships, youths tend to view trust in primarily interpersonal terms. Many of the youths we interviewed either struggled to judge the trustworthiness of distant figures and institutions or simply did not regard the endeavor to be personally meaningful. Yet, such judgments are necessary for the healthy functioning of democracy. Without a public willing to assess the trustworthiness of society's leaders, these leaders have little incentive to behave in a trustworthy manner. Thus, it appears that additional strategies for judging trustworthiness are needed when interpersonal models prove inadequate.

Trustees emerge as one possible resource for assessing public figures and institutions. Trustees are themselves public figures who are seen as disinterested gatherers, distillers, and clear communicators of the information needed to hold leaders accountable to the public. The complexity of today's global world makes it impossible for individuals to do this job themselves. At the same

## Summary

time, it may be particularly difficult for individuals to identify trustees in today's media-rich environment with its huge volume of information, much of it inconsistent if not contradictory between their personal lives and public life. It remains to be seen whether trustees can, in fact, emerge in such a context.

Even if trustees can be properly identified, individuals must care enough to seek out and listen to them. Many of the young people in our study appeared uninterested in assessing the trustworthiness of anyone they did not know personally. If the individual or institution was not seen to have personal relevance, they did not see a need to engage in a trust judgment. We have suggested that civic participation may be one way for youths to draw connections between their lives and public life; yet, we do not know precisely what forms of civic participation would be most likely to facilitate such connections.

Finally, the youths who did actively assess the trustworthiness of distant others showed that they held high standards for public leaders. They did not require complete alignment between their beliefs and the beliefs of leaders, provided the latter were open and honest about their viewpoints. However, participants did expect leaders to act in a consistent and disinterested manner and to follow through on their pre-election promises. While these qualities are certainly appropriate markers of trustworthiness, they prove somewhat challenging to embody in today's world. The endless news cycle, the expanding definition of a "reporter," and the copy-and-paste functionality of the new digital media make it particularly difficult for leaders to establish their trustworthiness. It becomes harder to maintain consistency and the appearance of authenticity when messages are taken out of context and when every word and action is analyzed and compared to previous words and actions. Though no easy resolution exists, it is crucial for current and future leaders to consider carefully how they will communicate their trustworthiness from a distance and through diverse media channels.

We have examined trust from a variety of perspectives, including theoretical conceptions, methodological approaches, and cross-cultural considerations. Additionally, we have examined the role of trust, trustworthiness, and distrust in democratic society. Our exploration of trust in the lives of young people served to illustrate how trust is conceived and applied in everyday life. As the 21st century proceeds, societies will continue to become more complex, interconnected, and media saturated; consequently, trust will become increasingly necessary to promote cooperation among diverse actors. Cultural differences in conceptions of

trustworthiness of distant individuals and institutions. Citizens must be willing to engage in this difficult task in order to hold public leaders accountable. Ultimately, however, if trust is to benefit society, leaders must prove to be worthy of trust.

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## References and Further Readings

trust will warrant special consideration as societies become more pluralistic. At the same time, growing complexity, interconnection, and media saturation will challenge our ability to acquire and synthesize the information necessary to judge accurately the



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