

**Performance Still Matters:  
Explaining Trust in Government in the Dominican Republic**

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## **Abstract**

What explains low levels of trust in government institutions in democratizing Latin American countries? We examine this question in the Dominican Republic, employing data from three surveys conducted over 1994-2001. Our analysis finds that trust in government institutions is shaped primarily by perceptions of economic and political performance by government. There is little evidence of a relationship between civic engagement and institutional trust, and no relationship between democratic values and institutional trust. We find a curvilinear effect between socio-economic status and institutional trust, with middle-sector groups significantly less trusting of government institutions than either the poor or the wealthy. Age has a nonlinear effect as older generations, who experienced authoritarianism as children, are considerably more trusting of democratic institutions, contradicting predictions by culturalist early-life socialization arguments. We conclude that low trust per se is not the major challenge for governance.

## **Performance Still Matters: Explaining Trust in Government in the Dominican Republic**

Trust in government institutions may be viewed as the central indicator of the public's underlying feeling about its polity (Newton and Norris, 2000: 53). In the United States and other industrialized democracies, there is considerable evidence for a pervasive, if uneven, decline in popular confidence in political institutions, though no evidence of a similar drop in the commitment of the public to the principles of democracy or to democratic regimes (Pharr & Putnam 2000). Research seeking to understand the causes for and implications of this sharp decline has pointed to several major factors. One strand has focused particularly on citizen perceptions of the economic and political performance of government institutions (Lipset & Schneider 1987; Evans & Whitefield 1995; Mishler & Rose 2001). In turn, other scholars have argued that observable declines in social capital and in civic engagement in the United States help explain both declining levels of political participation and levels of trust in government institutions (Putnam 1995b; Putnam 2000), though this has been challenged by studies which have found either a negative relationship between civic engagement and trust in institutions (Brehm and Rahn 1997) or little relationship between the two (Newton 1999).

Latin America has been experiencing an unprecedented period of democratic rule. Yet, initially optimistic prognoses that democratic transitions would be followed by successful democratic consolidation have increasingly been replaced by more tempered analyses due to the region's poor economic and political performance and democratic fragility (Diamond, Hartlyn, and Linz 1999; Domínguez and Shifter 2003). Public opinion survey research in Latin America has provided evidence for high levels of dissatisfaction with democracy and extremely low levels of trust in government institutions, even lower than those experienced in the United States or Europe (Latinobarometer 2002; Bratton 2002; Norris 1999: 228-33; Payne et al. 2000: 35-37). One review of this data for Latin America concluded that disenchantment with democracy and lack of

confidence in key political institutions is more than just a reflection of poor economic times or dissatisfaction with policy outputs; rather, it appears "rooted in a more basic disappointment" in how fundamental processes, actors, and organizations of democratic systems in the region operate (Payne et al. 2002: 37). Yet, few studies of the region have explored directly the causes of low confidence in the institutions of democratic government (see Lagos 2001; Lagos 2003, and articles in Camp 2001).

In this paper, we explore alternative arguments regarding the factors that best explain institutional trust in the context of the developing world by examining data gathered in three national surveys conducted in the Dominican Republic. We find that views of government performance consistently have the strongest impact on institutional trust, but do not find that a basic disappointment with democratic processes explains levels of institutional trust. We see essentially no relationship between civic engagement and institutional trust, contrary to those who have found either positive or negative associations (Putnam 1993; Putnam 1995ba; Brehm and Rahn 1997). Furthermore, while research in industrialized countries finds that socio-demographic characteristics have almost no impact on trust, we find that socioeconomic status and age do have an impact, in ways not previously emphasized in the literature.

We begin by providing some background on the Dominican Republic and placing it in comparative perspective. Then we outline our expectations regarding factors that may shape trust in institutions including political interest and civic engagement, perceptions of government performance, democratic values, and socio-demographic factors. Next, we discuss our model and results. Finally, we conclude by drawing out the implications of our findings for democracy in the developing world.

## **I. The Dominican Republic in Comparative Perspective**

While considerable research has explored confidence in government institutions of advanced, industrialized democracies, less attention has been given to this issue outside the developed world where levels of confidence in democratic institutions are considerably lower (exceptions include Mishler and Rose 1997 and 2001 and Payne et al. 2002). To explore attitudes toward democracy and its institutions and to determine the factors that shape these attitudes, we use data taken from three nationwide public opinion surveys in the Dominican Republic, the Demos surveys, conducted in 1994, 1997, and 2001.<sup>1</sup> These data provide the opportunity to explore alternative hypotheses about the bases of trust in government institutions in a developing world democracy over a significant period in its political evolution.

Important processes of economic and political transformation have been underway in the Dominican Republic since the 1970s. By the 1980s, Dominican society showed substantially higher levels of urbanization, industrialization, and integration into the global economy through migration, tourism, communications, and trade than in earlier periods. In addition, in 1978 the basic elements of a political democracy, most significantly competitive elections, emerged (Espinal 1987; Hartlyn 1998). Pressures to enhance Dominican democracy increased in the late 1980s with the emergence and growth of new civil society organizations. By the mid-1990s, many of these organizations were engaged in seeking political reforms to improve the electoral system, decentralize government, and enhance the rule of law (Espinal 2001).

Indeed, the “political test” of the 1990s was ensuring a transition to an enhanced democracy – namely, a democracy free of electoral fraud, with more institutionalized state agencies, a more independent judiciary, less corruption, more effective government performance, and greater inclusion. Several civic organizations, such as *Participación Ciudadana* (Citizen Participation), gained national prominence in this process. The growth in civic engagement during this period was aided by international assistance through a variety of programs to counterbalance the lagging Dominican state

and the inability of political leaders to modernize their parties and the government.<sup>2</sup> Overall, this period was one of intense political mobilization by civic organizations seeking political reform. Following what were widely considered fraudulent elections in 1994, subsequent electoral processes were generally considered credible; similarly, the naming of a new, legitimate Supreme Court in 1997 by means of a more open process was also seen as an important democratic advance. However, the extent of social reforms and improvements in governance over 1994-2001 was very modest, affected in part by lack of policy continuity as the presidency rotated across the country's three major parties.<sup>3</sup>

This was also a period of considerable economic dynamism within the country, centered on the expansion of light manufacturing in free trade zones, tourism, and remittances from a large migrant community. The Dominican Republic accumulated one of the best records of economic growth for the region between 1990 and 2001; the country's per capita GDP increased by 51 percent, a record superseded in the region only by Chile (56%). Public social spending also expanded over the 1990s, from 3.8 percent of GDP in 1991 to 6.6 percent in 1999. Yet, social spending in the Dominican Republic remained well below the regional average of 14 percent of GDP, and high state payroll costs and poor quality constrained the effectiveness of this spending. Although reliable trend data is lacking, it is estimated that over the second half of the 1990s there were also modest improvements in equity and in poverty rates, but these gains may have only returned the country to levels that existed in the 1980s (IDB 2001).

Given this comparably favorable economic and political performance, the period covered by these surveys may be termed the “golden years” of Dominican democracy, especially in light of the sharp economic downturn and political turmoil that the country has experienced since 2002. Due to the political mobilization and relative economic success during the 1990s in the Dominican Republic, two of the major theories concerning trust in government – those centered on civic

engagement as well as those focused on government performance -- would predict that the country would also display somewhat higher levels of trust than other countries in the region. In Table 1, we compare levels of trust in government institutions in the Dominican Republic with the regional average for Latin America.<sup>4</sup> Trust levels in government institutions in both the Dominican Republic and other Latin American countries remain considerably below those of industrialized countries and are comparable to levels found in post-Communist countries.<sup>5</sup> Trust in Congress and the judiciary is slightly higher in the Dominican Republic than in the rest of Latin America. And, Dominicans' trust in the presidency is more elevated than in other countries in the region. As both theories would anticipate, then, Dominicans on average were more trusting of their governmental institutions than their neighbors. However, this simple regional analysis does not allow us to discern which, if either, of these two major arguments is really operating at the individual level to produce the cross-national differences that we observe. In the rest of the article, we use the data from the Dominican Republic to explore the factors that may shape confidence in the government institutions of a fragile democracy at the individual level.

[Table 1 about here]

## **II. Explaining Trust in Institutions: Theories and Hypotheses**

It has been noted frequently that political support is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Norris (1999a), expanding on initial distinctions developed by Easton (1965, 1975), recently presented a classification of political support ranging from the most specific level of political actors, to regime institutions, regime performance, broad regime principles, and finally the political community of the nation-state. In this article, we focus on regime institutions, in particular trust in the key democratic institutions of the presidency, congress and the judiciary.<sup>6</sup> We turn now to a review of the major alternative explanations for trust in government which are explored in our analysis. One cluster of factors is based on theories linking institutional trust to civic engagement

while another links trust to citizen assessments of government performance. We also consider the potential roles of democratic attitudes and socio-demographic factors.

*Political interest and civic engagement.* How much and what type of political participation is good for democracy are controversial issues. In general we support the idea that more social and political participation produces better and more effective citizens, promotes better government performance, and facilitates the development of a higher quality democracy (Putnam 1993, 1995b, 2000; cf. Huntington 1975). At the same time, we are skeptical of the argument that civic engagement either positively or negatively impacts institutional trust.

In this article, we consider two components of political participation, a more passive political interest and a more active civic engagement. Political interest refers to general attentiveness to the political world, which involves a concern with political things and ideas, but does not necessitate civic or political action. Overall, we expect to find a positive relationship between political interest and institutional trust. Admittedly, some who are politically interested may be critical activists who are disappointed with the political system; however, the overall effect should be such that higher levels of interest are associated with higher levels of trust.

At the same time, building on a growing number of studies which find little relationship between social and political trust, or between civic engagement and political attitudes (Newton 1999; Pharr 2000; Newton and Norris 2000), we do not believe there is a clear connection between civic engagement and institutional trust.<sup>7</sup> Finkel, Sabatini, and Bevis (2000) argue that in the Dominican Republic participation in certain civic organizations has actually produced lower levels of trust in government because civic participation is likely to expose the disjuncture between the democratic ideal and reality, particularly when these organizations are critical of a government perceived as corrupt and illegitimate.. However, they do not control for common measures of government performance such as economic evaluations as we do here, so it is difficult to compare their findings

to those of previous research on participation and its consequences for trust in government.<sup>8</sup> In sum, despite the oft-cited conventional wisdom that civic engagement produces higher levels of trust, contradictory findings concerning this relationship, some even in the Dominican case, lead us to expect no strong relationship between engagement and trust.

*Government economic and political performance.* There are many reasons to believe that citizen perceptions of the economic and political performance of governments should impact their confidence in government institutions. A large body of research has demonstrated that citizens throughout many parts of the world assess government based on perceptions of their individual financial status and the health of the national economy (Fiorina 1978; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992; Kelly 2003).<sup>9</sup> As governments seem to deliver economic growth, jobs, access to education and other services, it is logical that citizens would trust them more.

Similarly, citizen views regarding the political performance of governments on issues such as security, corruption, and policy responsiveness should also be associated with enhanced trust (Lipset and Schneider 1987; Mishler and Rose 1997; 2001; Turner and Martz, 1997). Miller and Listhaug (1999) present evidence that evaluations of political performance are as important as those of economic performance. There are many reasons to believe that in the Latin American context political issues, which are taken for granted in developed democracies, may shape citizens' views of their government. Specifically, issues such as the provision of security and the absence of corruption could be important predictors of institutional trust. Latin America has one of the highest rates in the world for violent crimes such as homicide, and household surveys in the region's major cities confirm extremely elevated victimization rates (Portes and Hoffman 2003; IDB 2000: 71-72). In turn, corruption presents a serious obstacle to long-term democratic stability and consolidation, undermining representation and the functioning of democratic institutions and thereby producing distrust (O'Donnell 1999). In a study of four Latin American countries, Seligson (2002) found that

experiencing corruption has a clear negative impact on citizen assessments of regime legitimacy.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, although much of the research on trust in more established democracies does not address these issues, we believe including perceptions of security and corruption is a crucial addition to this analysis of a developing democracy.

In sum, we expect that satisfaction with government's provision of public services and economic well-being should be strong predictors of trust in government institutions. Similarly, we consider that satisfaction with government's political performance, in the form of providing security and eliminating corruption, should also be a strong predictor of institutional trust.

*Authoritarianism and democracy.* Contrary to certain cultural theories, we do not expect to find a clear relationship between democratic values and trust in democratic political institutions.<sup>11</sup> In industrialized democracies, where there is an extremely high level of support for democracy across the population, individuals identified as possessing postmodern values have been among those least trusting of political institutions while also being the most committed to democratic values (Inglehart 1999; Dalton 2000). By extension, then, one might well expect those espousing democratic values in less-developed countries such as the Dominican Republic to be similarly divided in their trust in government institutions. Similarly, those who espouse authoritarian values may also be divided regarding their acceptance of (democratic) government authority. Thus, we do not expect to find support for the argument that individuals with authoritarian attitudes are more skeptical of the institutions of democratic government than those espousing democratic beliefs.

*Socio-demographic factors.* Most studies have found the impact of socio-demographic variables on trust in institutions to be weak or non-existent. This is true of research focused on industrialized democracies, as well as new democracies in Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe (Citrin and Muste 1999; Turner and Martz 1997; Mishler and Rose 1999; 2001). As one review notes, "[w]hether citizens express trust or distrust is primarily a reflection of their political lives, not their

personalities nor even their social characteristics" (Levi and Stoker 2000: 481). Nevertheless, in our analysis we include standard measures for age, gender, education, place of residence, and socioeconomic status. Additionally, we explore two non-linear relationships not generally explored in the literature in order to investigate the possibility that these socio-demographic variables may have previously undiscovered influences on trust. First, we are interested in a curvilinear relationship between socioeconomic status and trust. In the context of a general modernization argument, one would expect that trust would be associated with increased levels of education and increased socioeconomic status. On the other hand, an article employing 1995 Latinobarometer data found some evidence for the opposite result: poorer respondents expressed greater trust in institutions than wealthier ones (Turner and Martz 1997). Therefore, in the Dominican Republic we explore the possibility of a curvilinear relationship. We expect poorer sectors of society, who are most dependent on the state and most likely to enter into clientelist relations, and the most wealthy, who are likely to be able to achieve privileged access to state power, to have higher levels of trust in government institutions than middle-income groups. Middle-income groups structurally are the most likely to be frustrated with the failures of government (Lozano 2002: 324-386). Second, contrary to some culturalist early socialization views regarding authoritarian attitudes, we posit that older generations are likely to be particularly trusting of government institutions (even democratic ones) relative to younger generations, so with age there will be an exponential increase in levels of trust in government institutions.

### **III. Model and Analysis<sup>12</sup>**

#### **A. Variables and measurement**

In order to explore the popular legitimacy of the Dominican Republic's new democracy, we examine citizens' trust in the three key institutions of democratic government as our dependent variable.<sup>13</sup> This approach enables us to tap the extent to which respondents display confidence in the

government institutions that constitute democracy. In the presidential democracy practiced throughout much of the Western Hemisphere, the presidency, the congress, and the judiciary are the major institutions that constitute government; thus, our measure incorporates trust in each of these three branches of government.<sup>14</sup> We develop a seven-point, additive scale of *trust in government institutions* (from a low of 0 to a high of 6) with Cronbach's Alpha scores over .70 in all three survey years (1994 =.73; 1997 =.71; 2001=.77) indicating high scale reliability.<sup>15</sup> Over the period under analysis, levels of trust in an absolute sense remain quite low. Average trust in 1994 is 2.63; it increases to 2.88 in 1997, and then declines to 2.66 in 2001.<sup>16</sup> In the regression analysis below we employ this trust in institutions scale as our dependent variable and examine the hypotheses discussed above with regard to the four major categories of independent variables: political interest and civic engagement, government economic and political performance, attitudes toward democracy, and socio-demographic factors.

To examine hypotheses regarding political interest and civic engagement, we define two independent variables, *political interest* and *civic engagement*, which may be considered forms of passive participation and active participation, respectively. Political interest taps into respondents' attentiveness to the political world. This type of participation involves a concern with political things and involvement with political ideas, but does not necessitate civic or political action. We measure this type of participation using a seven-point, additive scale of political interest based on three questions about news exposure, political conversations, and political interest (Cronbach's Alpha: 1994 =.74; 1997=.72; 2001=.71). Alternatively, civic engagement is concerned with respondents' interactions in organized civic or political life. This is the sort of participation that arguably produces social capital. Here people are not only required to participate in the world of political ideas, but also to engage actively. The civic engagement scale incorporates respondents' membership in eight types

of civic associations, attendance at neighborhood and party meetings as well as efforts to convince others about political candidates (Cronbach's Alpha: 1994=.71; 1997=.65; 2001=.65).<sup>17</sup>

To examine arguments regarding the importance of citizen views of government economic and political performance, we examine four distinct components. The first, *evaluation of services*, taps respondents' assessments of a variety of government-provided services including public transportation, public education, public hospitals, social security (IDSS), electricity, potable water, and affordable housing (Cronbach's Alpha: 1994 =.82; 1997=.77; 2001=.74.) The second component assesses the extent to which government is perceived to be fulfilling its economic responsibilities. Therefore, we employ *pocketbook economic evaluations*, how respondents feel about their personal economic situation, to determine if Dominicans' trust in their government is shaped by their evaluations of its economic performance.<sup>18</sup>

The analysis also incorporates questions tapping two critical non-economic components of government performance. One is the provision of *security*. As one of the most basic duties of government is to ensure the safety of its citizens, we include respondents' assessments of their personal safety as a government performance variable. We anticipate that respondents who feel less safe than they did five years ago will not be as likely to trust government as those who feel safer. The final indicator of performance involves respondents' perceptions of *corruption* in government. We utilize a question that asks respondents whether they would characterize the problem presented by corruption in government as very serious, serious, somewhat serious, or non-existent. Less serious perceived corruption should be associated with greater trust.

Finally, we include variables assessing the effects of democratic attitudes and of socio-demographic factors. With regard to democracy, we employ a question which asks respondents to indicate whether or not they favor democracy even if there is sometimes disorder.<sup>19</sup> We incorporate demographic factors expected to influence respondents' trust in government, namely socioeconomic

status, education, sex, place of residence, and age. Additionally we include two squared terms: one for socioeconomic status because we have hypothesized that it has a curvilinear relationship with trust such that people at the extremes will be more trusting than those of average means, and one for age to test the idea that older generations will be much more trusting of government institutions than younger ones.

## **B. Explaining Trust in Government in the Dominican Republic**

We have hypothesized a model of legitimacy in developing democracies such as the Dominican Republic in which institutional trust is shaped by participation and civic engagement, government economic and political performance, democratic attitudes, and socio-demographic characteristics. In Table 2, we display the results of ordinary least squares models assessing the multivariate relationships between these variable groups and our dependent variable trust in government institutions.<sup>20</sup> Separate analysis is conducted on the samples from each of the three survey years. The over-all model fit for each of the three survey years is very similar (R-squared varies from .14 in 1997 to .17 in 1994) and the results are very stable as well, even though the surveys were carried out over an eight-year period and under three presidential administrations, each from a different major political party.<sup>21</sup> The potentially most important difference in the analysis over the three surveys is the developing significance of the political interest variable.

[Table 2 about here.]

Let us begin then by examining how citizens' participation levels shape their trust in government. We expected that political interest would be positively related to institutional trust, and we find support for this hypothesis in both 1997 and 2001, but not in 1994. This evolution could be a consequence of political changes in the country, as the later surveys were taken under administrations viewed as more democratic. In 1994, the survey was carried out when a semi-authoritarian incumbent was seeking re-election, just prior to the polarized elections, whereas the

subsequent surveys were taken at midpoints between presidential and congressional/municipal elections.

With regard to the role of civic engagement in influencing trust in democratic institutions, we did not expect to find a clear direct relationship. Indeed, we find considerable ambiguity in our results. In 1994, civic engagement has no significant effects on trust. In the next survey year, we see that civic engagement has a slight negative impact on trust (statistically significant only at the  $p \leq .1$  level); in turn, in 2001 civic engagement has an equally slight positive impact on trust ( $p \leq .1$ ). These findings are closest to the view that there is little or no relationship between civic engagement and trust in government institutions, rather than clearly confirming either a positive or a negative impact. Thus, we do not find support for the view that civic engagement has a strong positive direct influence on institutional trust because civic engagement connects people to each other and to the political process. We also cannot support the alternative view that increased engagement creates more critical citizens who are less trusting of government.<sup>22</sup>

The clearest result in Table 2 is that performance matters for institutional trust, much like earlier literature has found. This is true with regard to both economic and political performance. Our first measure of government performance, evaluation of government services, consistently has one of the most important effects on trust. In all three years, a positive evaluation of one more government service (a one-point increase on the scale) yields an increase of about .20 on the trust scale. So all else being equal, a person who evaluates all seven services positively will score almost two points higher on the trust scale than one who evaluates all seven negatively. Economic evaluations also prove to be an influential predictor, having a significant, positive impact on trust in all three years, most strongly in 2001.

Additionally, our expectations about people's evaluations of political performance, measured as perceptions of safety and corruption, are clearly borne out in the empirical analysis. We can see

that in 1994 and 2001 people who felt less safe than five years earlier were less trusting than people who had the same sense of security. Additionally, in 1997 those who had a greater sense of safety were more trusting than the reference category. Perceptions of corruption likewise prove to influence trust in government consistently over time. Over the whole period, respondents who regard corruption as less of a problem are more trusting than those who consider it a very serious problem, the excluded group. For example in 1994, respondents who saw corruption as serious scored .38 points higher on the trust scale than respondents who saw it as very serious, while those who thought corruption a minor issue scored .75 points higher, and those who saw no problem at all scored 1.01 points higher (all coefficients  $p \leq .01$ ). Only in 2001, do we find an insignificant corruption coefficient, and this is likely due to the small number of respondents who thought corruption did not exist in that year ( $n=56$ , under 3% of the sample).<sup>23</sup> Together these findings indicate that government performance evaluations are statistically and substantively significant predictors of trust in government.

With regard to democratic attitudes, we found no significant relationship in any of the years, and even the direction of the coefficient was inconsistent across the surveys. Rather than a conventional modernization argument, then, which would expect a positive relationship, this finding provides support for the view that a country like the Dominican Republic possesses both trusting and skeptical democrats, and trusting and skeptical authoritarians.<sup>24</sup>

The socio-demographic variables generate some interesting results. We find evidence supporting our hypotheses regarding the connections between trust and the independent variables of socioeconomic status and age, which we believe deserve further exploration in other developing democracies. Given the effects of market-oriented economic reforms and of clientelist politics in the context of a process of democratization, we argued there is a U-shaped relationship between socioeconomic status and institutional trust, with the poorest and wealthiest trusting government

institutions more than middle-income sectors. We find that in both 1997 and 2001, the socioeconomic status variable and the squared term are jointly significant (1997 at  $p \leq .01$  level; 2001 at  $p \leq .05$  level).<sup>25</sup> This finding indicates that socioeconomic status has an initially negative impact on trust but that as the level of socioeconomic status increases the negative effect diminishes and eventually transforms into a positive one.<sup>26</sup> In practical terms this means that people at the extremes, the rich and the poor, are more trusting than those in the middle of the socioeconomic status scale.

In turn, age is also shown to have a nonlinear relationship with trust in 1997 and 2001 (jointly significant at the .01 level in both years). However here we have a positive squared term, meaning that as age increases, its positive impact on trust increases exponentially such that older people are much more trusting than the young. This suggests that potentially both generational effects (as people get older, they become more trusting) and cohort effects (the older generation, which grew up under more isolated, authoritarian circumstances are more trusting of state institutions and/or the younger generation, socialized in a more globalized, skeptical era may never be as trusting, even as it ages) are operating, though we would need longer-term survey data to sort these out more definitively. In any case, the fact that older generations are clearly more trusting than younger ones indicates we can reject culturalist arguments that low-levels of trust in democratic institutions in newly-democratic countries are influenced by early-life socialization experiences under authoritarianism, confirming what Mishler and Rose (2001) found for post-Communist societies. Finally, we find limited support for the hypothesis that increased levels of education are positively associated with greater institutional trust; in all three surveys the coefficient for education is positive, but is only statistically significant in 2001.

Overall, given the relationship between institutional trust and socio-economic status and age, we find stronger links from social characteristics to trust than much of the previous literature suggests, indicating that certain life experiences due to structural positions in society (middle-sectors

groups) or age (older generations) may condition institutional trust in newly-emerging democracies like the Dominican Republic.

## **Conclusions**

This article helps clarify the factors shaping trust in the government institutions found in emerging democracies such as the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic experienced a comparatively more successful record of economic growth than much of the rest of Latin America, though in a context of high levels of poverty and inequality and limited advances in social measures and governance reform. Concomitantly, its over-all levels of institutional trust were slightly higher than the regional average, but were still quite low. Our results indicate that this low trust in government institutions is rooted primarily in perceptions of poor performance by government, rather than being a direct consequence of low civic engagement, general attitudes about democracy or early socialization under authoritarianism. In this regard, our results are similar to those found in recently democratized post-Communist societies, which also have low average levels of institutional trust (Mishler and Rose 2001). The very different nature of the authoritarian legacies in the Dominican Republic compared to post-Communist countries further buttresses the value of these findings regarding the centrality of performance variables across recently democratized countries and the lack of support for arguments based on early life socialization. One would expect that this pattern would hold for other Latin American countries during this time period, which experienced both worse records of economic and political performance and lower average levels of trust than the Dominican Republic.

We found consistently that a variety of performance measures matter for explaining institutional trust in the Dominican Republic, including evaluations of government services as well as general economic evaluations, perceptions of security, and assessments of corruption. This was true even though each survey was carried out under a president of a different political party, over a

seven year period and with fluctuations in over-all levels of trust. The single most important factor explaining levels of trust in government institutions was citizens' evaluation of the provision of basic services, such as education, health, and transportation.

Research on the relationship between civic engagement and trust in government has produced conflicting results, with some studies (Putnam 1993, 1995b) arguing that civic engagement yields better government performance and greater trust in democratic institutions, while other work, some specific to the Dominican context, (Brehm & Rahn 1997; Finkel et al. 2000) presents evidence that such participation may yield less trust in government institutions. Our analysis does not clearly support either of these competing hypotheses and rather finds little evidence of a relationship between civic engagement and institutional trust. Therefore, we can conclude that Dominicans' perceptions of government's economic and political performance have a much more important role in shaping their trust in government institutions than does their participation in civil society organizations and activities. Nevertheless, given the conflict in earlier research and the ambiguity of our results concerning the connection between engagement and trust, it is clear that this is an issue which will require further research, particularly in the context of other developing democracies.

Our findings with regard to democratic values and socio-demographic factors point to other challenges for emerging democracies such as the Dominican Republic. We did not find any relationship between democratic attitudes and trust in institutions, just as previous literature identifying different levels of trust within both democratic and authoritarian groups would lead one to expect. The middle-income sector, often considered a crucial support group for democracy, turns out to be significantly less trusting of government institutions than either the poor or the wealthy. They are the sector most likely to seek more institutionalized relations with government, rather than through clientelist ties or special access due to wealth, and thus are most likely to be frustrated by the lack of progress toward this goal. Older generations, who experienced authoritarianism as

children, are considerably more trusting of democratic institutions, challenging culturalist early-life socialization arguments which would predict the opposite. At the same time, the fact that the young are considerably more distrustful than older groups, while not being more democratically oriented, raises potential concerns about the implications this generational difference may have for the future of Dominican democracy.

Whether the consequences of these patterns may ultimately be negative or positive for democratic legitimacy and stability remains uncertain. The view which has most often been advanced in the context of Latin America, given the particularly low levels of trust found throughout the region, is that disenchantment with democratic institutions may ultimately lead to disillusionment with political democracy itself, potentially threatening democratic stability (Payne et al. 2002). However, in industrialized countries, the growth of critical citizens who have strong allegiance to democratic values but eroding confidence in government institutions is viewed in more mixed terms. Some fear this pattern could enhance cynicism, generating both apathy and explosive protest politics, whereas others argue that the mix of contentious and institutional politics may enrich democracy in these countries (Norris 1999b; Tarrow 2000).

This debate takes on more immediate relevance in Latin America, where commitment to democratic principles is shallow, where government institutions are in fact less democratic and probably less worthy of trust, and where societies are marked by high levels of inequality and poverty. Some argue that too much trust leads to complacency and facilitates clientelism and abuse of power. In turn, others claim that too little trust may lead to apathy, skepticism, or even revolt; of particular concern may be cynical and widespread distrust of political institutions (Mishler and Rose 1997; Diamond 1999). In an emerging democracy like the Dominican Republic, the potential benefits of having a group of democratic and critical citizens who are engaged with the political process could be very significant in helping to induce necessary reforms to improve democratic

governance. At the same time, the attendant risks of regime instability and democratic erosion are likely to be higher than in industrialized countries because of the much lower levels of regime performance and the potential for growing numbers of alienated, distrusting citizens to be mobilized by less than fully democratic appeals, as is already evident in several countries in the region.

Our results in the Dominican Republic indicate that low trust per se is not the major challenge for governance (see also Warren 1999). The high levels of skepticism in government institutions are driven more by perceptions of poor governance and poor performance than by a sweeping rejection of government institutions or inherited legacies from an authoritarian past. The key way to improve institutional trust, thus, is to satisfy basic demands of providing for economic well-being, government services, security, and reduced corruption.

## Appendix: Question Wording and Descriptive Statistics

*Trust in Government Institutions:* This dependent variable is a seven-point scale ranging from zero to six. The scale is derived from three survey questions which ask respondents how much they trust three government institutions: the judiciary, the Congress, and the president. Specifically, they were asked if they have much trust, a little trust, or no trust in each of the three institutions. An additive scale from these three questions was then created. Each response of “much trust” was given two points; each institution in which they indicated “a little trust” counted for one point, and no points were given for a response of “no trust.” High Cronbach’s alpha scores indicate that the additive scale is appropriate (1994 =.73; 1997 =.71; 2001=.77). Scale Mean: 1994 – 2.63; 1997 – 2.88; 2001 – 2.68.

*Political Interest:* The political interest scale is generated from three questions. “Do you read, listen to, or watch political news frequently, sometimes, or never?” “Do you talk about politics with other people frequently, sometimes, or never?” “Do you have much interest, a little interest, or no interest in political topics?” Responses to these questions were cumulated to create a scale ranging from zero to six. Cronbach’s alpha scores for this scale are all over .70 (1994 =.74; 1997=.72; 2001=.71). Scale Mean: 1994 – 2.42; 1997 – 2.61; 2001 – 2.46.

*Civic Engagement:* We measure civic engagement using a 14-point scale. Respondents score a point for each of the following organizations in which they indicate membership: community organizations, parent associations, peasant organizations, unions, CEBs, professional associations, sport clubs, and women’s groups. Additionally, we incorporate responses to three questions about other forms of participation. “How often do you attend meetings to resolve neighborhood or community problems: frequently, sometimes, or never?” “How often do you attend political party meetings: frequently, sometimes, or never?” “How often do you try to convince others to vote for the candidates you prefer?” Here answers of “frequently” score two points, “sometimes” one point, and “never” zero. Again we find acceptable Cronbach’s alpha scores

indicating scale reliability (Cronbach's Alpha: 1994=.71; 1997=.65; 2001=.65). Scale Mean: 1994 – 2.75; 1997 – 2.34; 2001 – 2.04.

*Evaluation of Services:* This scale combines respondents' assessments of seven government services: public transportation, public education, public hospitals, social security (IDSS), electricity, potable water, and affordable housing. One point is scored for each positive evaluation; the scale ranges from zero to seven. The scale is highly reliable with alpha scores all over .7 (Cronbach's Alpha: 1994 =.82; 1997=.77; 2001=.74.) Scale Mean: 1994 – 2.36; 1997 – 2.02; 2001 – 2.44.

*Pocketbook Evaluations:* "Would you say your personal economic situation is very good, good, average, bad, or very bad?" Range: 1-5. Scale Mean: 1994 – 2.69; 1997 – 2.50; 2001 – 2.49.

*Safety:* "When you are in your house or go out, do you feel more safe, the same, or less safe than five years ago?" From this question we generated two dichotomous variables: more safe and less safe. Respondents who answered "the same" serve as the reference category in the analysis. In 1994, 43 percent of respondents felt less safe while 30 percent felt safer. Three years later, 49 percent felt less safe, and 28 felt safer. In 2001, 67 percent were less safe while only 13 percent were safer.

*Corruption:* "In your opinion is political corruption a very serious problem, a serious problem, a minor problem, or is there no corruption at all in the Dominican Republic?" We created three dichotomous variables and treated the response of "very serious" as the reference category. 1994: 48 percent responded that corruption was "serious," 8 percent "minor," and 2 percent said there was "no corruption." 1997: 55% "serious," 7% "minor," and 2% "no corruption." 2001: 43% "serious," 4% "minor," and 2% "no corruption."

*Democratic Attitudes:* "In general which do you prefer: democracy even though sometimes there is disorder or more order even though there is less democracy?" Respondents who preferred democracy to order scored a one, and those who favored order scored zero. Mean: 1994 – .31; 1997 – .34; 2001 – .37.

*Socioeconomic Status:* SES is measured using a scale developed by the authors of the survey (see Duarte et al. 1996). Respondents are asked if they have the following items in their home: radio, music set, freezer, running water, stove with oven, color television, private car, and electricity. Each item is then weighted according to the percent of respondents in that survey year who own the item, with less common items given greater weight. Then these weighted values are added together to generate a scale that ranges from zero to 25. Scale Mean: 1994 – 7.09; 1997 – 7.37; 2001 – 8.76. In the multivariate analysis, the scale is centered such that the mean is subtracted from each respondent’s score in order to avoid collinearity with the squared term. The squared term is generated by squaring the centered scale.

*Education:* “What was the last course you passed in primary school, high school, or university?” Respondents are then given ordered scores based on their level of completion. “Did not go to school” = 0; “primary, 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade” = 1; “primary, 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade” = 2; “incomplete secondary” = 3; “completed secondary” = 4; “incomplete university” = 5; “complete university” = 6; and “graduate school” = 7. Mean: 1994 – 2.1; 1997 – 2.2; 2001 – 2.2.

*Male:* Mean: 1994 – .50; 1997 – .56; 2001 – .43.

*Rural:* Respondents who lived in rural areas scored one on this variable, and those who lived in Santo Domingo or other urban areas were given a zero. Mean: 1994 – .38; 1997 – .35; 2001 – .36.

*Age Group:* Respondents were asked their age. From this variable we then created eleven ordered age groups: 18-19=1; 20-24=2; 25-29=3; 30-34=4; 35-39=5; 40-44=6; 45-49=7; 50-54=8; 55-59=9; 60-64=10; 65 and over = 11. Mean: 1994 – 5.4; 1997 – 5.4; 2001 – 5.6. In the regression analysis this variable is centered to avoid collinearity; the squared term is created from this centered variable.

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<b>Table 1. Trust in Government Institutions: Comparing Latin America and Dominican Republic</b>						
	<b>Congress</b>		<b>Judiciary</b>		<b>President</b>	
	<u>1997</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>1997</u>	<u>2001</u>	<u>1997</u>	<u>2001</u>
Latin America	10%	6	12	8	15	9
Dominican Republic	12	12	18	18	39	28

Note: The Latinobarometer has four response categories and Demos has three so the table includes only those respondents who indicated that they had a lot of trust in the relevant institution.

Source: Latinobarometer and Demos surveys.

<b>Table 2. Trust in Government Institutions in the Dominican Republic</b>			
<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>1994</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>2001</b>
<b>Participation</b>			
Political Interest	-.04 (.03)	.08** (.03)	.07** (.03)
Civic Engagement	.01 (.02)	-.04† (.02)	.03† (.02)
<b>Democratic Attitudes</b>			
Democracy over Order	.09 (.09)	-.04 (.08)	-.01 (.07)
<b>Government Performance</b>			
Evaluation of Services	.22** (.02)	.20** (.02)	.22** (.02)
Pocketbook Evaluations	.10* (.05)	.08† (.04)	.17** (.04)
Less Safe <sup>a</sup>	-.24* (.10)	-.12 (.10)	-.37** (.09)
More Safe <sup>a</sup>	.08 (.11)	.29** (.11)	.06 (.13)
Corruption: Serious <sup>b</sup>	.38** (.09)	.19* (.08)	.46** (.07)
Corruption: Minor <sup>b</sup>	.75** (.16)	.39* (.17)	.64** (.18)
Corruption: Does not exist <sup>b</sup>	1.01** (.34)	.97** (.28)	-.02 (.31)
<b>Demographic Factors</b>			
Socioeconomic Status	-.02† (.01)	-.03** (.01)	-.02* (.008)
Socioeconomic Status <sup>2</sup>	.001 (.001)	.003** (.001)	.002* (.001)
Education	.05† (.03)	.03 (.03)	.06* (.03)
Male	.26** (.08)	.03 (.08)	.02 (.07)
Rural	.04 (.11)	.17† (.09)	-.004 (.08)
Age Group	.02 (.02)	.04** (.01)	.04** (.01)
Age Group <sup>2</sup>	.004 (.005)	.008† (.005)	.01** (.004)
Constant	1.33** (.20)	1.60** (.18)	1.18** (.16)
R-squared (Significance)	.17 (.00)	.14 (.00)	.15 (.00)
Number of Observations	1547	1676	2078
<sup>a</sup> Reference Category: "The Same";			
<sup>b</sup> Reference Category: "Very Serious Problem"			
Note: Robust Standard Errors in parentheses. ** p ≤ .01; * p ≤ .05; † p ≤ .10			

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The surveys were commissioned by the Democratic Initiatives Project (PID), housed at the Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (PUCMM), and funded by the USAID. They were conducted by PROFAMILIA's Instituto de Estudios de Población y Desarrollo (IEPD). The 1994 survey was conducted in January and February; the 1997 survey in June and July; and the 2001 survey in May and June. Basic analysis of these surveys and an explanation of the survey methodology may be found in Duarte et al. (1996); Duarte, Brea and Tejada (1998); and Duarte and Brea (2002).

<sup>2</sup> For an assessment of the civic education program in the Dominican Republic, see Finkel et al. 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Joaquín Balaguer of the Reformist Social Christian Party (PRSC), who governed in a semi-authoritarian fashion, was re-elected in 1994 in controversial elections and agreed to a shortened two-year term. In 1996, Leonel Fernández of the Party of Dominican Liberation (PLD) gained the presidency, with the support of urban, middle-sector groups. He was replaced in 2000 by Hipólito Mejía of the populist Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD).

<sup>4</sup> For these questions, full country by country results are not publicly provided by Latinobarometer, which is why only a regional average is presented in Table 1.

<sup>5</sup> For example, data in Newton and Norris (2000: 56) for Japan, the United States, and five Western European countries show that on average 53 percent of respondents in the early 80s, 43 percent in the early 90s and 39 percent in the mid 90s indicated either "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in parliament/Congress. In turn, Latinobarometer data for "a lot" or "some" confidence in Congress averaged across 17 Latin American countries was 27% in 1996 and 23% in 2002. Data on trust in 1994 and in 1998 across political and civil institutions in nine post-Communist countries

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reflecting levels roughly comparable to those of Latin America may be found in Mishler & Rose (1997 and 2001).

<sup>6</sup> For a complete explanation of how we operationalize our dependent variable, see Section III below. Other analysts (e.g. Brehm and Rahn 1997) have also employed this set of democratic institutions in their analyses of political trust.

<sup>7</sup> See Putnam (1993, 1995a) for the argument linking high levels of social capital and civic engagement to better governance and higher trust in political institutions. In turn, Brehm and Rahn (1997) have argued that civic engagement may in fact negatively affect confidence in government institutions.

<sup>8</sup> Other valuable analyses of the impact of civic education programs include Finkel (2002 and 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Because of the lack of appropriate questions in the surveys, we are unable to examine the relative role of retrospective versus prospective evaluations, and of sociotropic versus pocketbook evaluations, thus we do not discuss these issues here (cf. Lewis-Beck & Paldam 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Seligson (2002) argues that actual experiences with corruption, rather than perceptions of corruption, should be employed to examine their impact on regime legitimacy, because it is possible that low trust may be impacting perceptions of corruption rather than the opposite. But he finds a strong correlation between overall levels of corruption measured by Transparency International and his survey data exploring actual experiences with corruption across the countries. He does not explore at the individual level the relationship between encounters with corruption, perceived corruption, and regime legitimacy. In the absence of measures of encounters with corruption in the Demos surveys, and congruent with a number of other studies, we explore the link from perceptions of corruption to institutional trust.

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<sup>11</sup> Some cultural theories hold that distrust is inherent in authoritarian political cultures or learned through childhood socialization under a repressive regime. These theories would lead us to expect authoritarian attitudes to be negatively related to trust in democratic institutions (c.f. Mishler and Rose 2001).

<sup>12</sup> See the Appendix for further details concerning question wording, coding, and summary statistics.

<sup>13</sup> The Spanish word *confianza* means both “confidence” and “trust,” we use both English terms here.

<sup>14</sup> Earlier research (see for example Brehm and Rahn 1997) has also employed a similar approach analyzing trust in these three institutions jointly.

<sup>15</sup> Cronbach’s (1951) alpha is a scale reliability coefficient which is computed from the interitem correlations of the scale components and aids in determining if it is appropriate to sum a set of variables to create a single additive scale. Typically values of alpha over .6 are considered good, and those over .8 are considered excellent. The alpha values for the trust in government scale therefore indicate that it is statistically appropriate to create an additive scale from the three components: trust in the presidency, in congress, and in the judiciary. Factor analysis provides additional statistical support for the scale; all three variables load onto a single factor (Eigenvalues over 1.2 in every year) with factor loadings all around .7.

<sup>16</sup> Much of the change in the level of trust is driven by changing views regarding trust in the presidency; given the nature of this institution focused on one individual, it is not surprising that it is the most variable of the three, as also found in industrialized democracies. Analysts of trust in industrialized democracies have argued that trust remains conceptually distinct from, even though it is influenced by, views on the current incumbent (see Newton 1999; Norris 1999). Payne et al. (2000: 36) discuss the greater variability of trust in the presidency in Latin American countries; in the

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case of the presidency respondents are the most likely to combine sentiments about the incumbent with confidence in the institution.

<sup>17</sup> In factor analysis these variables also grouped together. We also conducted an analysis removing the variables which could be considered more “political” than “civic” and found no difference in our results. The absence of questions in the survey focused on social trust and inter-personal trust prevent us from examining the relative potential weight of these attitudes on trust in institutions.

<sup>18</sup> Despite other research indicating the importance of sociotropic economic evaluations (Lewis-Beck 1985), the DEMOS surveys do not measure this variable; therefore, we use only pocketbook evaluations here.

<sup>19</sup> The Demos surveys did not include questions regarding democratic attitudes which would permit the construction of a more complex scale; as elaborated below, we believe this has not affected our findings.

<sup>20</sup> OLS with robust standard errors is used in order to account for heteroskedasticity in the dependent variable. All our analysis was conducted using STATA, version 7.0.

<sup>21</sup> In order to ensure that the effects of the independent variables were not driven by a unique relationship with just a single component of the trust scale, we conducted additional analysis using trust in each government institution as a separate dependent variable. These models yielded no important differences from the models displayed in Table 2 where the trust scale is used as the dependent variable.

<sup>22</sup> We also examined whether civic engagement impacted institutional trust indirectly, by shaping citizen perceptions of government performance. We did so by removing the measures of government performance from the regression equation. In 1994 and 1997, we found no support for

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the hypothesis that civic engagement has an indirect influence on trust at the individual level via perceptions of government performance. In 2001, the effect was positive and significant.

<sup>23</sup> In 2001, the Dominican Republic was included for the first time in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. According to the index, corruption was a very serious problem in the country as it ranked 63<sup>rd</sup> out of 95 countries and 12<sup>th</sup> among the 18 Latin American countries included.

<sup>24</sup> Employing other questions in the survey about preference for democracy or satisfaction with democracy also led to similar insignificant results, without affecting the overall model.

<sup>25</sup> Friedrich (1982) has demonstrated the importance of calculating conditional significance tests for interactions and squared terms. These calculations, which are not shown, indicate that in 1997 and 2001 SES has significant effects on trust at all levels except near the top of the SES scale, meaning that the effect of status on trust is not significant among the top 25 percent of respondents on the scale. In 1994, the effect of SES is marginally significant ( $p \leq .1$ ) for the bottom 75 percent of respondents on the scale as well.

<sup>26</sup> In 1994, SES has the greatest negative impact on trust among respondents who scored around 17 on the uncentered scale; at that point on the scale the effect turns around and becomes increasingly positive. In 1997, the greatest negative effect is among respondents who scored around 12; and in 2001, the greatest negative effect is among those who scored around 13. See Appendix for an explanation of the SES scale.