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Local Partisan Agreement and Trust

Mike Pulsipher and Kelsey Eyre

Introduction

Americans are more distrusting than ever. On every metric, there has been a noticeable and substantial decline in trust of government, media, and business. This important trend has received a lot of academic and press attention and has been identified in nearly every state and every demographic. Curiously, despite decades of falling crime, fraud, and corruption, Americans are also less trusting in each other. While changes in trust for government, media, and business have looked quite different for Democrats and Republicans, partisans have shown similar declining trends in general trust.

Understanding general trust, the extent to which one finds other people trustworthy, among partisans has become an increasingly meaningful and important topic to many political scientists. Past research has focused on individual-level influences like race and education, but questions remain regarding the importance of external variables such as local partisanship. Using a national survey in the United States, we explored the relationship between local partisan agreement and generalized trust. By local partisan agreement, we mean the degree to which a person's neighbors and fellow community members are politically similar. Using multivariate regression with data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), Federal Election Commission (FEC), and the U.S. Census Bureau, we found that the level of similarity between an individual and their local partisanship is strongly correlated with levels of generalized trust. If an individual agrees with their neighbors politically, they will generally be more trusting in people. Our findings highlight the significant lack of scholarship on external influences of generalized trust and the importance of future research on these types of influences.

Literature Review

Our research aims to contribute to the large body of scholarship addressing various implications and contributors to social capital (Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Uslaner 2002; Sztompka 1999). Few scholars have been as influential in understanding social capital and trust as Robert Putnam, who defines social capital as “features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam 1995). While Putnam’s work proposes several components of social capital, our research focuses on one key aspect: general trust.

Although there is no universal definition or conceptualization of general trust, we embrace the definition provided by Carl and Billari: general trust is “trust in other members of society; . . . distinguished from particularized trust, which corresponds to trust in the family and close friends” (Carl and Billari 2014). General trust is also distinguished from political trust: trust in political institutions and governing bodies (Hooghe and Oser 2017). Carl and Billari link higher general trust “to a variety of positive outcomes at the individual level, such as entrepreneurship, volunteering, self-rated health, and happiness” (Carl and Billari 2014). Because of the importance placed on generalized trust, many scholars have looked for significant indicators of general trust to understand how societies generate this kind of social capital.

Many factors are correlated with general trust. Putnam and Helliwell found a positive relationship between education and general trust (Putnam and Helliwell 1999). Additionally, general trust is highly correlated with race with whites generally showing higher trust than blacks and Hispanics (Stets and Fares 2019). Hooghe and Oser found that individual partisan strength is positively correlated with political trust but negatively correlated with generalized trust (Hooghe and Oser 2017). Furthermore, higher trust is generally associated with community wealth in a positive way (Leigh 2006). Most of the existing scholarship examined individual-level indicators of generalized trust while few scholars have looked at community-level factors. The lack of research on community-level indicators makes it difficult to compare our results to existing theories and explanations of general trust.

Previous research by Diana Mutz shows that cross-cutting exposure and diverse political networks lead to increased tolerance and more political ambivalence (Mutz 2006). However, this research does not necessarily indicate whether people trust each other more because of cross-cutting exposure. Mutz’s work also begins to highlight the differences in attitudes in homogeneous and heterogeneous densities. However, it is based on social networks, not geography and general attitudes of trust. An individual’s social network is not solely determined by geography. Therefore, though important, this research is not sufficient to understand the relationship between local partisan agreement and general trust. The work of Diana Mutz creates a great opportunity and space for new work on general trust.

Some research has addressed how geography and demographics often intersect. Most notably, Dr. Kathy Cramer lays out a framework on rural resentment in *The Politics of Resentment*. This background clarifies our understanding of resentment,

especially between rural conservatives and those they label as the “liberal elite” within their neighboring urban cities. Cramer’s book argues that one of the most influential divides in our country is not due to race or religion but the divide between rural and urban residents (Cramer 2016). The divide she identifies runs deep, creating classist divides between conservatives and liberals through measures including income and education. The implications of these findings inform our study in a very important way by helping us understand and differentiate between findings of class and findings of political parties.

Various scholars have examined the effects of intergroup contact. Ryan Enos investigated how intergroup contact impacts exclusionary attitudes, including support for policies that would harm ethnic minorities. Enos finds that when individuals have geographic intergroup contact, individuals have an increase in exclusionary attitudes. His research focused on racial and ethnic groups rather than political groups, but he also found results suggesting that “repeated exposure to an outgroup can mitigate initial negative reactions” (Enos 2014). This work suggests the effects on trust resulting from partisan intergroup contact may dissipate as an individual interacts more with the community and has repeated contact. However, Enos’s research does not exactly translate to local partisanship and how perceived political differences impact various aspects of social capital. Nevertheless, Enos raises interesting questions about how time may interact with geography to impact social attitudes. We will return to this question in our theory and hypotheses.

Past scholarship has significantly touched on various attitudes and perceptions that result from cross-cutting social interactions but has failed to adequately examine locality-based political attitudes in relation to social capital. This research is crucial to understanding the role that these different political aspects play in social dynamics, especially in creating prejudice and distrust. Surprisingly little research has been done to understand the direct relationship between local partisanship and general trust. Our study aims to tackle this important question.

As mentioned earlier, previous research addresses how partisanship on the individual level impacts trust. Most notably in this body of research, Hooghe and Oser investigate how partisan identity impacts generalized trust. According to the researchers, partisan strength is negatively associated with generalized trust (Hooghe and Oser 2017). However, we believe an important piece of the puzzle is sorely overlooked: how partisan identity interacts with local partisanship. Our research is inspired by the work of Hooghe and Oser, and we aim to provide a more robust framework for how partisan identity/strength impacts generalized trust through understanding the interaction between local partisan agreement and partisan strength.

Theory and Hypotheses

Given the evidence that those exposed to out-groups tend to adopt exclusionary attitudes (Enos 2014) and people tend to associate with and trust members of their own party, it is important to study the impact of local partisan agreement on generalized

trust. While individuals tend to trust members of their own party, there may be a spill-over effect as people view the public within the context of their own community. Because of the past research and our theoretical framework, we hypothesize:

H1: Generalized trust is positively influenced by local partisan agreement with higher levels of trust among individuals that live in areas with higher proportions of like-minded party members and a less prevalent opposition party.

Enos finds that “repeated exposure to an outgroup can mitigate initial negative reactions” (Enos 2014). In the context of our research, this could indicate that long-term residency and repeated exposure to the community, whether as a minority or a majority, could lead to a decrease in any measured effect between local partisan agreement and generalized trust. Due to this literature, we hypothesize:

H2: The positive relationship between local partisan agreement and trust will be weaker for longer-time residents.

Our theoretical framework anticipates that individual partisanship interacts with local partisanship to impact generalized trust. It stands to reason that a stronger partisan identity will lead to a stronger effect. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

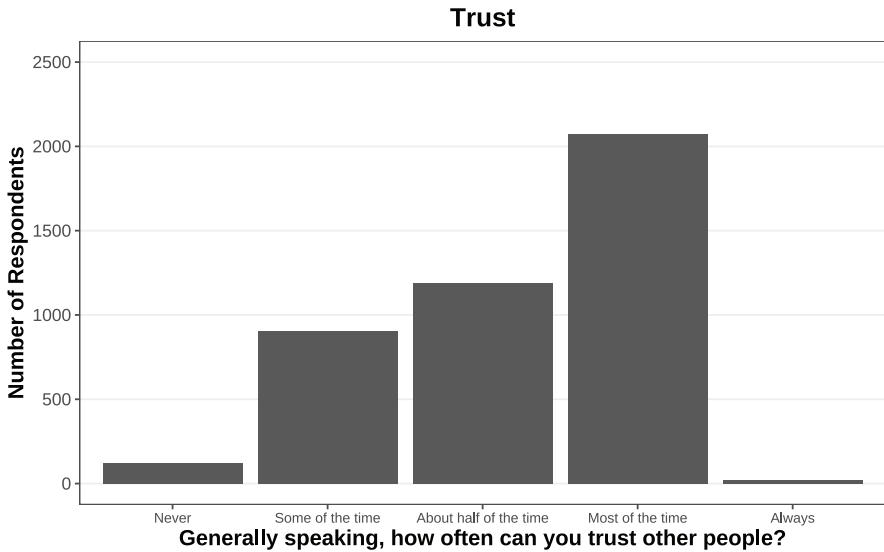
H3: The positive relationship between local partisan agreement and trust will be stronger for individuals whose party identity is more important.

Data and Methods

To test our three hypotheses, we used three separate linear regression models, each with trust as the dependent variable. Because no past research has quantified local partisan agreement, our independent variable is a novel operationalization we labeled win/loss proportion. We will thoroughly explore the creation of this measure for clarity and future replication. Furthermore, previous research highlights other important factors that contribute to levels of general trust. We control for these factors and include our new measure for local partisan agreement.

Dependent Variable: General Trust

Using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), general trust is measured through the response to the question: “Generally speaking, how often can you trust other people?” Respondents reported trust on a five-point scale: *Never*, *Some of the time*, *About half of the time*, *Most of the time*, or *Always*. For quantitative purposes, we coded responses to this survey question on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=Never, 5=Always). This metric serves as the dependent variable in our analysis. The distribution of reported trust is skewed left with few respondents stating that other people can be trusted always or never.



We chose this measure of general trust because it is standardized with easy accessibility for replication in the future. Furthermore, it carries high internal validity as it directly measures the subject of our analysis: general trust. Finally, this measure employs a multi-point scale which is proven to significantly outperform dichotomous scales of general trust (Lundmark, Gilljam, and Dahlberg 2016). However, while this metric is both reliable and easily replicable, past research has indicated potentially better measures of general trust. We will explore this limitation further in our analysis.

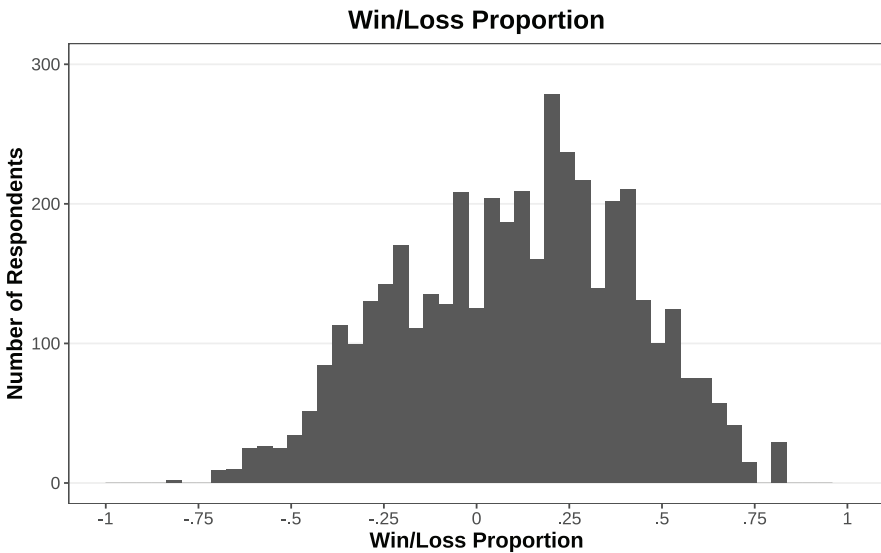
Independent Variable: Local Partisan Agreement

Due to limits in the data available and lack of scholarship regarding local partisan agreement, we operationalized our independent variable of local partisan agreement using a new metric we called win/loss proportion. Using Federal Election Commission (FEC) 2020 congressional district election return data, we calculated the win/loss proportion through the difference between in-party and out-party vote shares in the 2020 congressional races (exclusively among Democrats and Republicans). In-party refers to the candidate of same party that the individual self-identifies with while out-party indicates the opposition: Democratic candidates for self-identified Republicans and vice versa.

The following is an example to further illustrate this metric. For a respondent self-identified as a Republican in Utah County (in Utah's 3rd Congressional District), that individual's win/loss proportion is the difference of vote share between the Republican candidate John Curtis (in-party) and Democratic candidate Devin Thorpe (out-party). Curtis received 68.73% of the vote while Thorpe received 26.77%. The individual's win/loss proportion is then calculated as $0.6873 - 0.2677 = 0.4196$, indicating the

in-party candidate beat the out-party candidate by roughly 42 points. Inversely, a self-identified Democrat in that same district would have a calculated win/loss proportion of -0.4196 .

For continuity of results, we did not include self-identified independents in our analysis as they cannot have a degree of local partisan agreement when they themselves are not partisan. Similarly, we excluded respondents self-identified with third parties because these individuals are always in the political minority and do not experience a sufficient degree of variation in local partisan agreement to adequately examine. This calculation of win/loss proportion resulted in a distribution with theoretical values ranging between -1 and 1 (-1 indicates an entirely dominating out-party, 1 indicates an entirely dominating in-party, and 0 indicates a perfect balance between party vote shares). The actual values ranged from -0.8206 to 0.8206 with a mean of 0.1054 and a median value of 0.1325 . The distribution was slightly left-skewed with most observations in the positive because most partisans live in districts where their respective in-party outperformed the out-party, hence they are in the political majority of their locality. The distribution of win/loss proportion can be seen below.



We posit there are several significant advantages with this operationalization of local partisan agreement. Win/loss proportion is an effective measure because it measures the extent to which one's in-party performs in contrast to the out-party. Another advantage is that this metric employs a direct measurement of partisanship through election returns, which provides a more precise measure than survey methodology because it has no margin of error.

This operationalization of local partisan agreement also contains a few disadvantages. First, our measure does not account for partisans other than Democrats and

Republicans. However, among ANES respondents, less than 4% of respondents reported self-identification with a third party. Second, our measure of win/loss proportion only accounts for one election result (2020) and is therefore more susceptible to outlier congressional races or unusual circumstances that would be impossible to adequately control for in our analysis. Future analysis should include a more comprehensive picture of local partisanship. Finally, this measure is on the congressional district level and may not accurately reflect the true locality or community of the respondent because of gerrymandering. Gerrymandered or unusually drawn congressional districts may not reflect the true social geography of our respondents. We will explore these and other limitations further in our analysis. However, with all limitations considered, we argue that the win/loss proportion remains an effective and reasonably reliable metric for measuring local partisan agreement given the difficulty of measuring this factor with limited geographical information.

Additional Variables

Past scholarship highlights the importance of controlling for other indicators of general trust. Perhaps most importantly is a measure of partisan strength as discussed by Hooghe and Oser (2017). Using ANES, we use party importance as a measure of partisan strength with the question: “How important is being [a Democrat/a Republican] to your identity?” Respondents reported party importance on a five-point scale: *Extremely important*, *Very important*, *Moderately important*, *A little important*, or *Not at all important*. We coded responses to this survey question on a scale of 1 to 5 (1=Not at all important, 5=Extremely important). This metric serves as a control variable in Models 1 and 2 and an interaction variable in Model 3 to test our third hypothesis that the relationship between local partisan agreement and trust will be stronger for individuals whose party identity is more important. Similarly, to test the second hypothesis, we include a variable measuring how long they have lived at their current address (logged years) as an interaction in Model 2 and a control variable in Models 1 and 3.

ANES also includes information for important control variables including party affiliation, education, income, sex, age, race and ethnicity, marital status, religious affiliation, and region. Finally, to control for confounding variables on the district level, we used data from the U.S. Census Bureau to control for district education, median income, median house value, unemployment, and racial demographics.

Model

To test the first hypothesis, we analyzed the relationship between each respondent’s local partisan agreement and measure of trust through multivariate regression (Model 1). To test the second hypothesis, we included an interaction variable between local partisan agreement and the number of years the respondent lived at that address (Model 2). To test the third hypothesis, we included an interaction variable between local partisan agreement and party importance (Model 3).

Results

Through multivariate analysis, we investigate the relationship between local partisan agreement (win/loss proportion) and trust, controlling for other relevant factors. Model 1 shows this relationship, without any interactions, is positive and statistically significant. These results indicate that when individuals identify with the political majority, they tend to report higher levels of generalized trust. The larger the win/loss proportion is, the greater the impact on generalized trust. These findings corroborate our first hypothesis.

Predictors of General Trust			
VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Win/Loss Proportion	0.0898** (0.0426)	0.240* (0.124)	0.0893 (0.0968)
Years at Address (logged)	0.0212 (0.0177)	0.0284 (0.0185)	0.0212 (0.0177)
Win/Loss Proportion x Years at Address (logged)		-0.0622 (0.0484)	
Party Importance	0.00244 (0.00983)	0.00246 (0.00983)	0.00242 (0.0104)
Win/Loss Proportion x Party Importance			0.000182 (0.0305)
Republican	-0.0717** (0.0293)	-0.0706** (0.0293)	-0.0717** (0.0293)
Education	0.0956*** (0.0128)	0.0955*** (0.0128)	0.0956*** (0.0128)
Male	0.00496 (0.0260)	0.00527 (0.0260)	0.00496 (0.0260)
Age (logged)	0.283*** (0.0439)	0.281*** (0.0439)	0.283*** (0.0439)
White	0.309*** (0.0378)	0.308*** (0.0378)	0.309*** (0.0378)
Black	-0.130** (0.0562)	-0.128** (0.0562)	-0.130** (0.0562)
Religious	0.0754** (0.0351)	0.0752** (0.0351)	0.0754** (0.0351)
District Unemployment	-0.0233 (0.0148)	-0.0229 (0.0148)	-0.0233 (0.0148)
% District Black	-0.0295 (0.220)	-0.0388 (0.220)	-0.0295 (0.220)
% District White	0.0871 (0.178)	0.0875 (0.178)	0.0871 (0.178)
Constant	3.692*** (1.274)	3.674*** (1.274)	3.691*** (1.274)
Observations	4,314	4,314	4,314
R-squared	0.124	0.124	0.124

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Includes controls for income, sexual orientation, region, and other individual and district level factors.

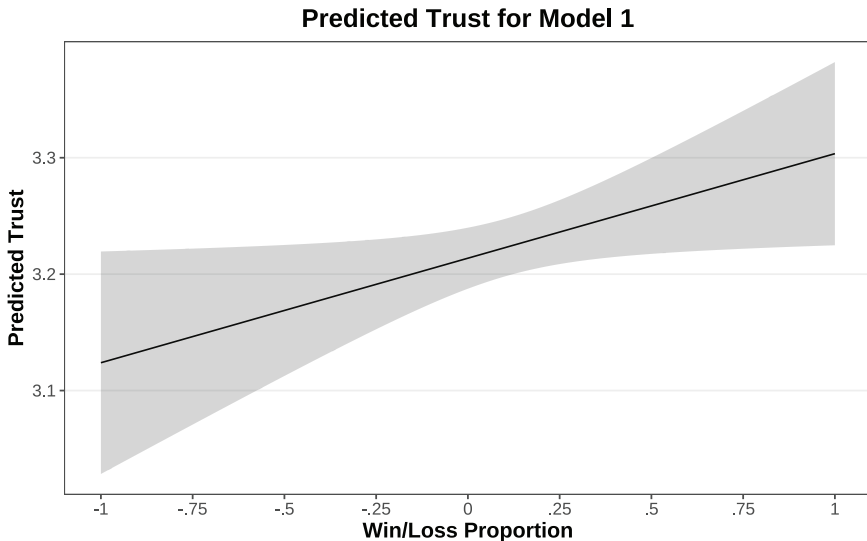
See Appendix for full regression table.

To investigate our second hypothesis, that the relationship between local partisan composition and trust will be weaker for longer-time residents, we employed an interaction between local partisan agreement and the number of years the respondent lived at

that address in Model 2. All other control variables remained the same. As expected, the first variable measuring local partisan agreement remained positive while the interaction was negative, indicating that the relationship was strongest among newer residents in each area. However, this interaction was not statistically significant. This may be the result of insufficient data; therefore, we recommend future analysis on our second hypothesis.

Our third hypothesis, that the relationship between local partisan composition and trust is stronger for individuals with higher levels of party importance, was tested using Model 3. Model 3 employed another interaction term between local partisan agreement and party importance. As hypothesized, the interaction term was positive, indicating the relationship between local partisan agreement and generalized trust was stronger for individuals reporting higher party importance. However, neither the win/loss proportion nor the interaction was statistically significant. These results were unsatisfactory for a full conclusion; therefore, we also recommend future analysis on our third hypothesis.

Of the three models tested, Model 1 appears to be the most robust model for measuring the effect of local partisan agreement on general trust. Using Model 1, the relationship between win/loss proportion and trust while holding all other factors constant can be visualized below.

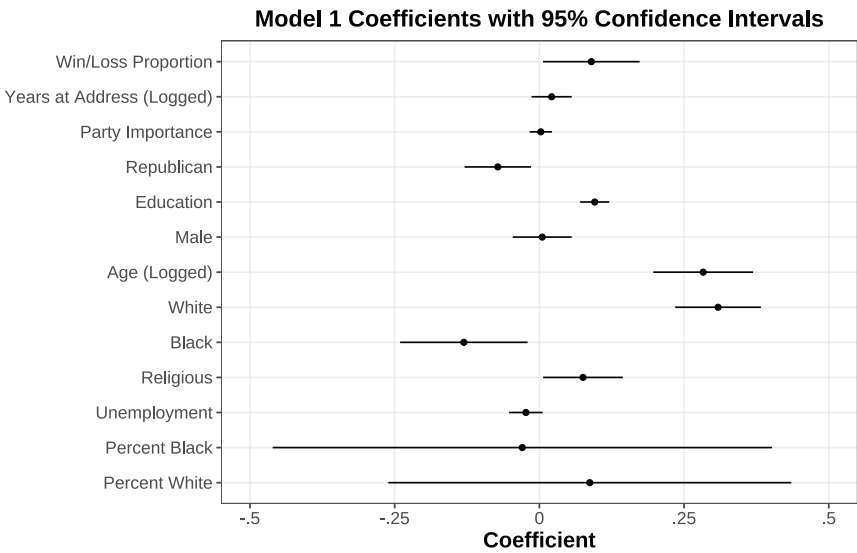


The results show a moderately substantive relationship between win/loss proportion and general trust. A significant increase in the win/loss proportion results in a modest increase in general trust. This could be the result of several factors. As mentioned earlier, the distribution of our five-point measure of general trust was very narrow because of the limited number of response options. With a low variance of responses,

detecting large and interpretable effects becomes a near impossibility. Therefore, the practical implications of our findings will be better understood through future analysis and research.

Discussion

Our analysis also opens the door for important comparisons to be explored in the future. Several comparisons of predictors of trust can be seen below by comparing Model 1 coefficients. The full table of results and coefficients for all three models is included in the appendix.



According to our analysis, some of the most statistically significant predictors of trust include party affiliation, education, age, race, religious affiliation, and some community factors. Most of these factors were anticipated and past scholarship explored their relationships. Interestingly, some community-level factors including unemployment and racial composition of the congressional district appear to have no significant effect on the level of trust while the level of partisan agreement has a significant effect. However, as we will explore later, some limitations may apply especially when comparing coefficients of win/loss proportion and racial compositions.

Although future analysis is needed to best interpret the practical implications of our findings, we are confident in our first hypothesis of the relationship between local partisan agreement and general trust as substantiated through Model 1. However, we found no evidence to suggest that the relationship between local partisan agreement and trust is weaker for long-term residents. Finally, no evidence supported hypothesis that the relationship between local partisan agreement and trust is stronger for

individuals with higher levels of party importance. However, several limitations to our analysis apply.

Limitations

As mentioned earlier, one major limitation is that the smallest unit of analysis for local partisan agreement available was on the congressional district level. This may not reflect individuals' local partisan reality due to the size of the unit of interest, as well as possible gerrymandering that could significantly impact the community one is associated with. This large and often manipulated unit of analysis hinders our internal validity as we are likely not accurately measuring local partisan agreement for many individuals in our study. Little can be done to address this limitation besides more comprehensive future research. These limitations around our independent variable of local partisan agreement should be considered when evaluating the difference of coefficients in our linear regression model. This particularly applies to coefficients of district-level variables, including racial demographics.

Another important limitation involves our dependent variable of general trust. Past research suggests the most accurate measures of general trust involve a seven or eleven-point scale for responses (Lundmark, Gilljam, and Dahlberg 2016). While our measure does not allow for that high of response variation, our use of a five-point scale appears to be sufficiently accurate. Nevertheless, our analysis, and future analysis, would be improved through a seven or eleven-point scale or an index of questions. This increased accuracy would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the practical impacts of local partisan agreement.

Our final major limitation applies to the scope of our study. Our research only examines the relationship between local partisan agreement and general trust for Democrats and Republicans in the United States. While most individuals in the United States identify as either a Democrat or a Republican, it is important to note that our results have no relevance to the relationship between local partisanship and trust for independents or third-party members. Furthermore, the scope of our data limits our conclusions to the United States; future analysis is required to study general trust in other democracies.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate that local partisan agreement acts as a reliable predictor of generalized trust after controlling for other relevant factors. These findings strongly support our first hypothesis that generalized trust is positively influenced by local partisan agreement. Interestingly, we found no evidence to support the hypotheses that local partisan agreement interacts with time lived in the community or party importance. This reality suggests our theoretical framework may be lacking and future analysis is needed.

The results of our analysis also highlight the importance of further investigation into the relationship between one’s political reality/surroundings and generalized trust. Our analysis alone cannot reliably generate a causal relationship between these factors; therefore, further research is needed to determine the causal link between local partisanship and the level of generalized trust.

Appendix

Predictors of General Trust – Full Table

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Win/Loss Proportion	0.0898** (0.0426)	0.240* (0.124)	0.0893 (0.0968)
Years at Address (logged)	0.0212 (0.0177)	0.0284 (0.0185)	0.0212 (0.0177)
Win/Loss Proportion x Years at Address (logged)		-0.0622 (0.0484)	
Party Importance	0.00244 (0.00983)	0.00246 (0.00983)	0.00242 (0.0104)
Win/Loss Proportion x Party Importance			0.000182 (0.0305)
Republican	-0.0717** (0.0293)	-0.0706** (0.0293)	-0.0717** (0.0293)
Education	0.0956*** (0.0128)	0.0955*** (0.0128)	0.0956*** (0.0128)
Income	0.0155*** (0.00226)	0.0155*** (0.00226)	0.0155*** (0.00226)
Children	-0.0187 (0.0303)	-0.0188 (0.0303)	-0.0187 (0.0303)
Male	0.00496 (0.0260)	0.00527 (0.0260)	0.00496 (0.0260)
LGBTQ+	-0.0459 (0.0559)	-0.0465 (0.0559)	-0.0459 (0.0559)
Age (logged)	0.283*** (0.0439)	0.281*** (0.0439)	0.283*** (0.0439)
White	0.309*** (0.0378)	0.308*** (0.0378)	0.309*** (0.0378)
Black	-0.130** (0.0562)	-0.128** (0.0562)	-0.130** (0.0562)
Married	0.0137 (0.0293)	0.0133 (0.0293)	0.0137 (0.0293)
Religious	0.0754** (0.0351)	0.0752** (0.0351)	0.0754** (0.0351)
% District with Bachelor’s Degree+	0.00551** (0.00232)	0.00557** (0.00232)	0.00551** (0.00232)
Median Household Income (logged)	-0.289** (0.128)	-0.288** (0.128)	-0.289** (0.128)
Median Household Value (logged)	0.0508 (0.0640)	0.0497 (0.0640)	0.0508 (0.0640)
District Unemployment	-0.0233 (0.0148)	-0.0229 (0.0148)	-0.0233 (0.0148)
% District Black	-0.0295 (0.220)	-0.0388 (0.220)	-0.0295 (0.220)
% District White	0.0871 (0.178)	0.0875 (0.178)	0.0871 (0.178)
Midwest	0.0560 (0.0425)	0.0575 (0.0426)	0.0560 (0.0425)
South	-0.000842 (0.0404)	0.00138 (0.0404)	-0.000842 (0.0404)
West	0.123** (0.0501)	0.125** (0.0501)	0.123** (0.0501)
Constant	3.692*** (1.274)	3.674*** (1.274)	3.691*** (1.274)
Observations	4,314	4,314	4,314
R-squared	0.124	0.124	0.124

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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