

## The Importance of Trust in Government for Public Administration: The Case of Zoning

### Moral Commitment and Trust in the Public Service

*Many scholars argue that citizens with higher levels of political trust are more likely to grant bureaucratic discretion to public administrators than citizens with lower levels of trust. Trust, therefore, can relieve the tension between managerial flexibility and political accountability in the modern administrative state. Unfortunately, there is little empirical evidence showing that trust is actually associated with citizens' willingness to cede policy-making power to government. This article tests theories about political trust and citizen competence using the case of zoning. Trust in local government is found to be an important predictor of support for zoning, but trust in state government and trust in national government have no effect. These findings suggest that trust affects policy choice and helps determine how much power citizens grant to local administrators.*

Good governance requires communication between bureaucrats and citizens (Graham 1995; King and Stivers 1998; Stivers 1994), but this common conversation leads to inherent tensions.<sup>1</sup> Government employees need to have managerial discretion and flexibility so they can make quick and informed decisions on a variety of issues affecting the public. At the same time, our system requires political accountability—citizens must be able to monitor their government and feel assured that both elected and unelected officials are performing their jobs adequately. Ideally, citizens keep an eye on government, make a judgment about government performance, and adjust their preferred level of bureaucratic discretion accordingly.

Trust can reconcile the tensions between accountability and flexibility “by expanding citizens’ willingness to accept government authority” (Kim 2005, 611; see also Ruscio 1997). Unfortunately, there is little empirical work testing the relationship between political trust and the delegation of policy-making power to bureaucrats. In this article, we investigate the linkage between trust in government and bureaucratic discretion

using the critical case of public opinion on zoning. We examine a region where the decision of whether to zone is still under consideration in many counties and municipalities and expect that people with higher levels of trust in local government are more likely to cede responsibility to local government. We also test whether the effects of trust in national, state, and local government are consistent with theories of citizen competence.

#### Literature Review

Political trust has ebbed and flowed over the last four decades. According to data from the National Election Studies, 76 percent of Americans trusted the national government always or most of the time in 1964. By 1980, that number had fallen to 25 percent. Trust in federal government then rose during the early years of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, declined during the late 1980s and early 1990s, and began a steady rise to 56 percent in 2002.<sup>2</sup> Many argue that the declines in trust can be traced to major national events, including the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the Iran-Contra affair. Others believe that economic conditions and an increasingly negative media environment have fueled the waning trust in government (Citrin and Luks 2001).

Most research on political trust has focused on trust in national government (Miller 1974; Richardson, Houston, and Hadjiharalambous 2001), but some evidence suggests that trust in government is somewhat higher at the state level (Hetherington and Nugent 2001) and highest at the local level (Bowler and Donovan 2002; Rahn and Rudolph 2002).<sup>3</sup> These differences are probably attributable to the fact that citizens have more contact with their local government officials and generally identify more with smaller governments (Box and Musso 2004).<sup>4</sup>

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1972 and 1992 and found a 30 percent decline in trust in federal government, a 15 percent decline in trust in state government, and virtually no decline in trust in local government (Jennings 1998, 229). Individual state polls that have asked questions about trust in state government show stability or even slight improvements in trust in government in recent years. For instance, an identical number of citizens expressed high trust in the Wyoming government (51 percent) in 1994 as in 1998 (National Network of State Polls 2006). In North Carolina, the percentage of citizens trusting state government just about always or most of the time rose from 45 percent in 1998 to 52 percent in 2001 (National Network of State Polls 2006).

### Citizen Competence

Focusing on the effects of trust in government also raises questions about citizen competence. Do citizens assign different degrees of trust to each level of government? Are citizens' opinions on specific policy areas associated with trust in the level of government responsible for that service?

Popkin's (1994) reasoning voter model suggests that citizens are surprisingly adept at making good decisions with limited information (see also Bowler and Donovan 2002). This model also has implications for how citizens navigate the federal system. Typically, state actors are held responsible for state issues, whereas U.S. senators are held responsible for national issues (Atkeson and Partin 1995; Stein 1990; but see Carsey and Wright 1998). Arceneaux (2006) finds that citizens are able to assign blame and responsibility to the appropriate level of government when issues are highly salient to the voter.

Uslaner presents a more negative view of citizen competence, arguing that citizens do not make meaningful distinctions about trust in different levels of government. He notes that "[p]eople who do not like the federal government do not like their state governments either" and "[s]hifting the locus of power will not solve the problem of trust in government" (2001, 133). Although Uslaner does not explicitly challenge the reasoning voter model, his findings clearly imply that citizens are unable (or simply refuse) to adequately navigate the complexities of the federal system. Consequently, they develop blunt, generalized attitudes toward government.

Two competing theoretical expectations emerge from these views of citizen competence. The reasoning voter model suggests that citizens will attribute blame and responsibility to the appropriate level of government. Higher trust in local government, but not trust in

state or national government, should be associated with a willingness to cede power to local government. Indeed, if trust in state government were associated with granting more power to local government, it would be inconsistent with the notion of an informed, reasoning electorate that understands and navigates the federal system. The contrasting view postulates that citizens will not be able to assign blame to the correct level of government and that there will not be a relationship between a citizen's political trust and the decision to cede power to government.

### The Case of Zoning

Zoning is an appropriate policy issue and, in many ways, a critical case for evaluating questions about trust in government, citizen competence, and bureaucratic discretion because authority over zoning decisions is fairly unambiguous. In most instances, local governments, rather than state or national governments, make decisions regarding zoning regulations and the decision of whether to zone. Because there is little empirical work examining these questions, it is imperative that we test this theory with a real policy area and a relatively unambiguous case.

The theory requires two initial steps before a citizen will agree to cede power to government. First, citizens must be able to identify the level of government that provides a particular service (e.g., national government provides military protection or local government administers zoning regulations). Second, citizens must assign a degree of trust to a particular level of government (e.g., a citizen trusts all three levels of government equally or trusts local government but distrusts state and national government). Under these two conditions, citizen A might know that zoning is a local function, have a high level of trust in local government, and cede power for land-use decisions to local government. Alternately, citizen B might have a low level of trust in local government and thus want to grant very little discretion to local government to

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make zoning decisions. Cases such as zoning, with clear policy responsibility, allow us to best evaluate the connections between trust and the decision to cede power to government. Furthermore, we believe that a specific policy area provides a more realistic test of the theory than generic and difficult to understand questions about bureaucratic discretion.

While appropriate for theory testing, zoning is also a politically interesting and substantively important policy area in its own right. Zoning is one of the few ways local governments can affect the development, usefulness, and distribution of their land—one of the three main factors of production (Logan and Molotch

1987; Oliver 2001; Peterson 1981). Zoning decisions affect the ways in which communities develop (Oliver 2001), economic development policy (Blakely and Bradshaw 2002, 185–187), growth management (Burby and Dalton 1994), and “not in my back yard” controversies (Matejczyk 2001). Moreover, zoning can be a chief weapon for managers and officials who face unprecedented growth, particularly on the urban fringe and in micropolitan areas. Because of its importance, many local governments have entire departments or commissions devoted to the question of zoning and land-use planning (Miller and Miller 1991).

Modern zoning can be traced to the 1910s as planners created zoning districts to regulate development and protect single-family homeowners (Fischel 2004). The use of zoning spread in the 1920s, and its legality was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1926 case *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Company* (Windsor 1980). Following this decision, the federal government delegated zoning decisions to the state courts, and states passed these decisions on to the local level (Windsor 1980). Since the advent of modern zoning, it has been one of the most important and contentious topics in local government administration (Clinger Mayer 1994; Fleischmann 1989; Fleischmann and Pierannunzi 1990; Windsor 1980).

Zoning has also been a source of conflict within the judiciary. The most recent high-profile battle on this issue was the 2005 Supreme Court case *Kelo v. City of New London*, in which the Court ruled that property owners must sell their land if it is needed for economic development, even if the property is not deteriorated and there is no guarantee of the new project's success (Lane 2005). By the November 2006 elections, just over a year after the *Kelo* decision, 34 states adopted laws or passed ballot measures restricting eminent domain (Pristin 2006).

Despite the controversy surrounding zoning, we know surprisingly little about citizens' opinions on the issue. This lack of research is particularly troubling because, in certain parts of the country, local governments are relying on initiatives and referenda to determine growth policies, underscoring the importance of public opinion on these issues (Gerber and Phillips 2003).

### Hypotheses, Data, and Methods

We have developed several hypotheses to explain opinions on zoning. First, we expect that citizens with higher levels of trust in local government are more likely to cede power to that government by supporting zoning, whereas trust in state and national government will have no influence. We also expect opinions on zoning to be driven by a host of other demographic and political variables. Unfortunately, we can find no extant studies examining public opinion on

zoning. Indeed, our knowledge of public opinion on zoning is limited to the finding that zoning and planning services are held in low esteem by the public (Miller and Miller 1991). As a result, most of our hypotheses are drawn from logical expectations rather than empirically validated research.

Ideology should also be a strong predictor of opinions on zoning. Because zoning is a case of government intervening in the free market, and ideological liberals are more apt to support an activist government, we expect that liberals are more likely to support zoning. We also expect that people of higher income and more educated citizens will have a greater desire to protect their property and thus will be more likely to support zoning.

We hypothesize that women will be more likely to support zoning because they are more concerned with the collective good (Kathlene 1989). We also expect that older people will support zoning because they are less wary of government intervention and will see zoning as a means of providing security for their property. Based on the work of Fischel (2001), we expect homeowners to be supportive of zoning as a means of protecting their property. Unfortunately, our survey did not include a question about homeownership, but we do include variables for age, education, and income—factors that are highly correlated with homeownership.<sup>5</sup> We hypothesize that people who are concerned enough about the collective good to register to vote will also be more likely to support zoning.

As Oliver (2001) suggests, where a person lives can have a substantial effect on political attitudes. Because western North Carolina is a traditional area with limited support for zoning, we expect that people who have lived in the region for a greater proportion of their lives will have different opinions on zoning than those who are relative newcomers. Finally, we believe that the salience of zoning will be an important predictor of opinions on this issue. In general, people who believe zoning is a highly important issue will be more likely to support zoning than those who are more passive on the issue.

To better understand the factors that influence support for zoning, we rely on data gathered in a November 2003 telephone survey of 668 randomly selected citizens in western North Carolina.<sup>6</sup> Table 1 displays summary data for the independent and dependent variables, and appendix A presents information about question wording and coding. The dependent variable, support for zoning, was operationalized through responses to the question, “How do you feel about zoning in the region?” Response categories were “strongly against,” “somewhat against,” “neither for nor against,” “somewhat in favor,” or “strongly in favor” of zoning in western North Carolina.

**Table 1** Description of Variables

Variable	Observations	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max
Zoning	631	3.13	1.37	1	5
Trust in local government	655	2.19	0.670	1	4
Trust in state government	654	2.14	0.608	1	4
Trust in national government	657	2.05	0.732	1	4
Conservative ideology	633	4.48	1.73	1	7
Time in region	652	0.627	0.373	0	1
Education	662	4.65	1.59	1	7
Income	563	4.88	2.71	1	11
Age	652	46.54	16.88	18	84
Female	668	0.63	0.48	0	1
Registered to vote	662	0.89	0.319	0	1
Salience of zoning	637	64.24	29.04	1	100

Respondent age ranged from 18 to 85 years; 48 years was the average age. More than half of the respondents (56 percent) were married, 8 percent were widowed, 11 percent were divorced, 3 percent were separated, and 16 percent had never been married. Educational attainment was slightly higher than that in the region's population, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Roughly 26 percent of the sample had a high school degree or equivalent, 28 percent had some college or trade school experience, 25 percent were college graduates, and 13 percent had a graduate degree. Females were slightly overrepresented (63 percent of our sample), but this is a common outcome with telephone surveys of the general public. The majority of the sample was white.

The 23-county western North Carolina region has two metropolitan areas (Asheville and Hickory–Lenoir–Morganton) and six metropolitan counties, but the region's racial and economic demographics resemble those of nonurban America. According to data from the 2000 U.S. Census, the region has a white population of 91.4 percent (compared to 88.9 percent in nonurban America), a 17.6 percent college graduation rate (compared to 16.4 percent in nonurban America), and a poverty rate of 12.3 percent (compared to 11.0 percent in nonurban America). See appendix B for additional county-level demographic and political characteristics of the region.

Western North Carolina has a traditionalistic subculture, with a history of limited government (Elazar 1966; see also Luebke 1990). In a more recent analysis, Lieske (1993) finds that all but two counties in western North Carolina can be characterized as "border," the most common subculture in the United States.<sup>7</sup> The border subculture is "predominately white, include[s] significant concentrations of residents whose ancestors came from the 'border' regions of Great Britain, such as the (Scotch)-Irish; [is] egalitarian in social structure; and favor[s] traditional family-oriented life-styles" (Lieske 1993). Based on the demographic and cultural characteristics of the region, these data have a reasonable level of external validity, particularly when generalizing to nonurban areas of the United States.

Unlike other potential samples in which zoning policy may be more uniform, this sample is suitable to test our hypotheses because there is considerable variation in opinions and policies about zoning in the western North Carolina region. Zoning was originally authorized for municipal governments in North Carolina in 1923 and for county governments in 1947. In 2006, five of the 23 westernmost counties had countywide zoning, seven had partial zoning (zoning existed in some municipalities but not countywide), and 11 had no zoning (Owens and Branscome 2006). Not surprisingly, the question of whether to zone at all is still very much an open debate for many western North Carolina counties. For instance, in a recent county commission race, a candidate likened zoning to totalitarianism and communism (Hendershot 2002). Some of the most common zoning debates involve issues of ridgetop development and restrictions on big box retailers. Despite the historical opposition to zoning, as more people move to western North Carolina from other parts of the country, there is a growing movement in support of increased zoning.

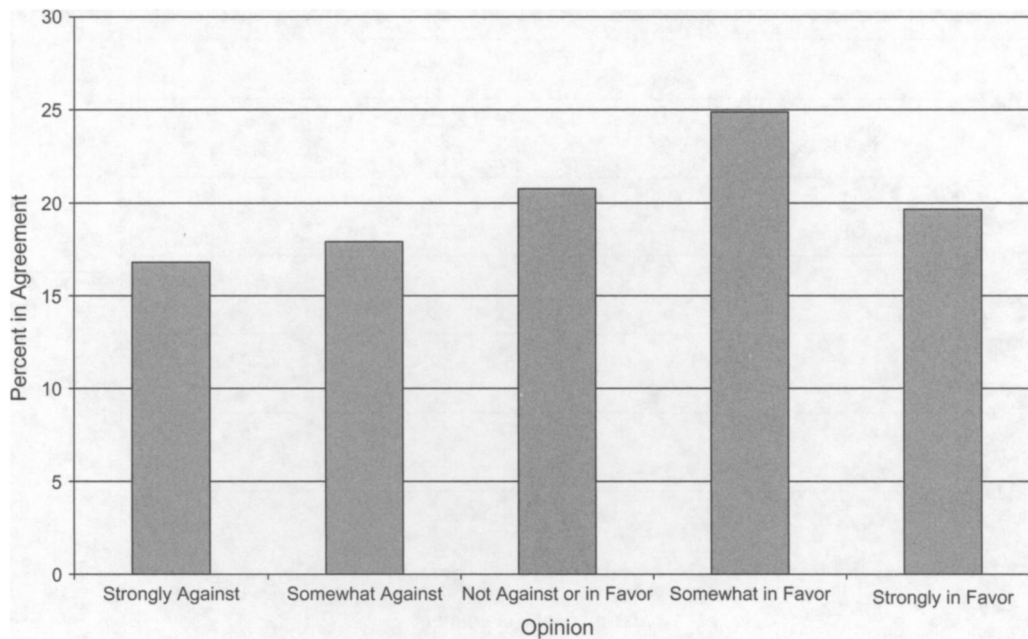
## Results

Before examining the results of the model, we pause briefly to consider the distribution of our three major independent variables: trust in national, state, and local governments. As expected, we find that trust in local government receives the highest level of support, followed by trust in state government, with trust in national government receiving the least support.

Next, we consider the distribution of responses about zoning (our dependent variable). As figure 1 suggests, opinions on zoning are mixed. Although leaning toward the positive side, the distribution of responses on this question approach normality and the median score is 3, suggesting that about as many citizens in our sample support zoning as oppose it.

Because the dependent variable is ordinal and measured on a five-point scale, we use ordinal logistic regression to estimate the model. Recall that the model includes independent variables for trust in local, state, and national government; a variable representing how long a person has lived in western North





**Figure 1** Distribution of Responses About Zoning

Carolina; education; income; age; ideology; gender; whether a person is registered to vote; and zoning salience.<sup>8</sup> Because Oliver (2001) argues that geography is an important factor in determining an individual's relationship to government; as counties are the primary geographic unit in our study, we cluster our standard errors at the county level.<sup>9</sup>

As the results in table 2 demonstrate, we see strong support for our hypotheses regarding trust in government. Trust in local government is associated with higher levels of support for zoning, but trust in state and national government has no influence. It appears that citizens with higher levels of trust in local government are willing to cede power to that level of government by supporting zoning.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 2** Ordinal Logistic Regression Results Predicting Support for Zoning

Variable	Coefficient (SE)
Trust in local government	.402 (.148)***
Trust in state government	-.264 (.167)
Trust in national government	.118 (.175)
Conservative ideology	-.120 (.057)**
Time in region	-.614 (.277)**
Education	.099 (.080)***
Income	.109 (.030)
Age	.021 (.005)***
Female	.125 (.123)
Registered to vote	.111 (.270)
Salience of zoning	.022 (.004)***
N	474
Chi square	283.04
Prob. chi square	.000

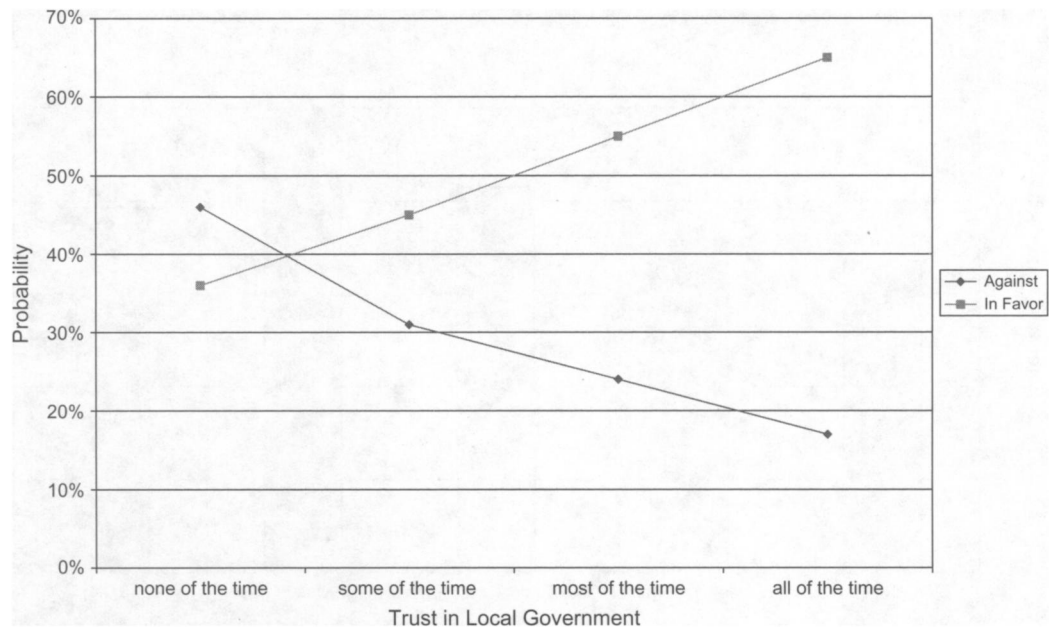
Note: Standard errors are robust standard errors, clustered on county.

\*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ . All tests are two-tailed tests.

Many of the coefficients for the other variables are in the expected direction. People with higher incomes and older people are more likely to support zoning. Gender and education, however, are not significant predictors of support for zoning. We had expected that people who are registered to vote would be more likely to support zoning, but this hypothesis is not confirmed. Obviously, age, income, education, and voter registration are related, introducing potential multicollinearity problems. To test for these effects, we analyzed separate models, including voter registration (without education, income, and age) and education (without income, age, and voter registration). In both of these alternative model specifications, the independent variables in question achieve significance. Although controlling for other factors provides a clearer sense of the causal mechanisms at work, it may mask the fact that, considered alone, registered voters are more likely to support zoning. A local official considering a referendum on the issue may find this a particularly useful piece of information. The same is true for education—it is a significant predictor when considered alone, but not once other relevant demographic factors are included in the model.

We also find that liberals are much more likely than conservatives to support zoning regulations. Although zoning is an administrative function, clearly there is a political component. Finally, the model reveals that those who believe zoning to be a salient issue are most likely to support zoning.<sup>11</sup>

To learn more about the substantive impact of trust in local government on zoning opinions, we computed the probability of being strongly or somewhat in favor of zoning and strongly or somewhat against zoning for



**Figure 2 Predicted Probabilities for Opinions on Zoning by Trust in Local Government**

different levels of trust in government while holding all other variables at their sample means (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000; Tomz, Wittenberg, King 2003). These results are presented in figure 2 and indicate that trust in local government has large substantive as well as statistical significance. The probability of being strongly or somewhat in favor of zoning increases approximately 10 percent for every one-unit increase in level of trust, rising from 36 percent to 65 percent as we move from the lowest level of trust in government to the highest. Likewise, the probability of being strongly or somewhat against zoning moves from 46 percent to 17 percent as one moves from low to high trust in local government. The largest decrease is found as we move from trusting government none of the time to some of the time. From there, the decline is roughly linear.

### Discussion and Policy Implications

Despite the expansive literature on trust in government, there is little empirical evidence associating levels of individual political trust and a citizen's willingness to cede policy-making power to government. Using the case of zoning, we find that trust does matter, and in the way we would expect—individuals with high

levels of trust in local government are likely to support zoning. The substantive impact is quite large as the probability of an individual being in favor of zoning moves from 36 percent for someone with low levels of trust in local government to 65 percent for someone with high levels of trust in local government.

We also demonstrate that trust in state government and trust in national government have no effect on opinions on zoning. This finding is consistent with reasoning voter models, articulated by Arceneaux (2006), Atkeson and Partin (1995), Popkin (1994), and Stein (1990), in which citizens accurately assign blame and responsibility. In our case, trust in local government is associated with increased support for zoning, whereas trust in state or national government, each with comparatively little responsibility over this policy area, has no influence over opinions on zoning. Had we seen the opposite—trust in national or state government associated with support for zoning—it would be a sign that the decision to grant power to various levels of government is more arbitrary and less reasoned.

These findings are important because trust has the potential to relieve the tensions between political accountability and managerial flexibility. To have this effect, trust must be competently exercised and related to opinions on bureaucratic discretion. The competent exercise of trust allows citizens to properly monitor government and hold bureaucrats accountable for their actions. At the same time, trust is what allows citizens to grant the flexibility required for bureaucrats to effectively govern.

Local government administrators and elected officials who wish to garner support for zoning should work to increase trust in local government—even in the face of

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a population which has relatively little trust in other levels of government. Although political culture and civic disengagement make enhancing trust difficult, research suggests the importance of maintaining credible commitments, as well as being honest, competent, fair, and benevolent (Kim 2005). It is also possible that the relationship between trust and zoning is reciprocal.

The literatures on participatory planning (Beierle and Konisky 2000; Clavel 1986) and participatory institutions (Fung 2004, 2006) demonstrate the value of public participation for democratic governance. Political leaders and administrators might consider more open land-use planning decisions to increase citizen trust.

We hope that future studies will expand this line of research by examining policy areas controlled by national and state governments. In addition, future work should evaluate the effects of political trust in more complex policy areas where the level of government in charge is not as clearly defined. Finally, although we believe our sample is representative of a large portion of the United States, we hope that future studies will include national samples to better identify geographic differences in the ways citizens grant discretion to public administrators.

### Acknowledgments

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### Disclosure Statement

All data and copies of all supplemental analyses will be available on the contact author's Web site (<http://paws.wcu.edu/ccoooper/html/replication.html>). The data collection was conducted through Western Carolina University's Institute for the Economy and the Future.

### Notes

1. For an excellent review of this literature, see Kramer (1999).
2. Over the years, the Gallup Poll has also included a number of questions about trust in national government.
3. Notable exceptions examining trust in subnational governments include Hetherington and Nugent (2001), Rahn and Rudolph (2002, 2005), and Uslaner (2001). However, all of these articles explore the predictors of trust and ignore trust as independent variables.
4. Although he does not specifically examine trust, Oliver (2001) finds that when holding the level of government constant, efficacy is higher in smaller cities.
5. Based on an analysis of data from the 2000 National Election Studies, age, education, and income correctly predict more than 70 percent of the variation in whether someone is a homeowner.
6. The data come from a general poll of the region, conducted through a computer-assisted telephone interviewing station at a regional public university. In addition to determining opinions about zoning, the survey was designed to address a number of questions about western North Carolina. Phone calls were conducted weekdays from 4:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Saturday. The sample included roughly 3,800 phone numbers that were selected using random-digit dialing. Of these numbers, 515 were ineligible because of nonworking or disconnected number, 522 were no answers, and 993 were refusals.
7. The two exceptions are Jackson County, which he calls "rurban," and Buncombe County, which he finds is part of the "blackbelt" subculture.
8. We also estimated five other model specifications. One included race as an independent variable. The second included dummy variables for each county. The third included a dummy variable for county population size (1 = above the median for the county, 0 = below the median for the county). The fourth included a dummy variable for whether the county had zoning (2 = countywide zoning, 1 = partial zoning, 0 = no zoning). The fifth included partisan identification (3 = Democratic, 2 = independent, 3 = Republican). None of these alternative independent variables was significant. Further, they did not alter the significance of any of the other variables in the model, except for the partisanship variable where ideology became insignificant. Copies of these supplemental analyses will be made available at <http://paws.wcu.edu/ccoooper/html/replication.html>.
9. As Zorn (2006) notes, robust standard errors can be used to account for unobserved differences across data that are "clustered" together. We cluster on the county because there are likely unobserved factors within counties that could influence opinions on zoning.
10. To see whether these results are due to multicollinearity between trust in local, state, and national government, we also estimated three alternative models—one with trust in local government as an independent variable (but not state or national government), one with trust in state government (but not local or national), and one with national

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