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**THE SOURCES OF PUBLIC CONFIDENCE
IN STATE COURTS
Experience and Institutions**

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Although much is known about public attitudes toward the U.S. Supreme Court, there is very little information about how citizens feel about courts in their own communities. This article hypothesizes that attitudes toward local courts are based primarily on four factors: (a) the actual experiences people have with these courts, (b) the methods by which local judges are selected, (c) the role of the mass media, and (d) various demographic factors. The authors find strong evidence that personal experience matters: Criminal jurors are more supportive of local courts, whereas defendants and those who have participated on either side of a civil case are not. Judicial selection methods, on the other hand, have no effect on citizens' attitudes, except among some educated citizens. Finally, no media effects are apparent.

Keywords: state courts; public opinion; confidence; trust

In the past twenty years, considerable research has been aimed at the factors that influence public support for the U.S. Supreme Court (see, e.g., Caldiera, 1986, 1991; Casey, 1974; Hoekstra, 2000; Jaros & Roper, 1980; Mondak & Smithey, 1997; Tannenhaus & Murphy, 1981). The Supreme Court, however, is only the tip of a very large judicial iceberg. The vast bulk of judicial business and the overwhelming majority of actual citizen contact with the courts are conducted at the local level. Yet with only a few exceptions (e.g., Rottman, 1999,

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2001; Rottman & Tomkins, 1999), very little is known about citizens' attitudes toward these lower level courts. Because our understanding of citizen response to courts is so heavily attuned to popular regard for the U.S. Supreme Court—itsself an exceptional court—it runs the risk of being both partial and incomplete. In this article, we seek to contribute to the development of a more comprehensive model of public opinion toward courts in the United States by focusing on attitudes toward local courts.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR LOCAL JUDICIAL INSTITUTIONS

Why does public opinion toward courts matter? The short answer is that courts, as much as if not more than other democratic political institutions, depend on the goodwill of the citizenry to remain viable. The legitimacy derived from public support is particularly important to judicial institutions, because possessed of “neither the purse nor the sword” (Caldeira, 1986; see also Tyler, 1990), they have limited powers to enforce their decisions.

A series of papers has examined the bases of support for the U.S. Supreme Court. Some have suggested that the Supreme Court derives support from a general, nonspecific reverence for the institution and its relationship to the Constitution (Casey, 1974; Jaros & Roper, 1980). Others find the wellsprings of support for the Court in the specific decisions the Justices make (e.g., Caldeira, 1986, 1991; Hoekstra, 2000; Mondak & Smithey, 1997; Tannenhaus & Murphy, 1981). Still others include in their models prevailing attitudes toward the rule of law (Gibson & Caldeira, 1992b).

Although the Supreme Court is obviously the most visible and important single court in the judicial system, it is not the one that handles most legal cases; nor is it the one that most people have contact with in any direct way. The overwhelming majority of civil and criminal cases—not to mention most state-level constitutional questions (Emmert & Traut, 1992, 1994)—begin and end below the Supreme Court level. Thus, any real-world interaction between citizens and judicial institutions almost always occurs at the local level. Local judicial institutions are where the rubber meets the road in terms of how

citizen attitudes may be formed or challenged by direct experience with the judicial system itself. If, for example, voters lack—or lose—confidence in these lower level courts, the literature on diffuse support can be read as arguing that the effectiveness of these institutions is diminished. One plausible outcome of this is that citizens could express their dissatisfaction at the polls, supporting, say, candidates or ballot propositions that get “tough on crime” or restrict the rights of plaintiffs in lawsuits. Thus, questions involving the popular legitimacy of local courts could have ramifications that go well beyond the courthouse, even if they stop short of threatening the actual survival of the institution. Thus, the processes by which popular attitudes toward local courts are shaped are of substantial interest.

In spite of the central role local courts play in the American legal system, we know relatively little about the factors that shape public opinion toward these institutions. We need not, however, start from square one. A long research tradition, dating from David Easton (1975), understands public attitudes toward the U.S. Supreme Court in terms of specific and diffuse support. Specific support has its foundation in the reaction of members of the polity to particular Supreme Court decisions. Diffuse support, on the other hand, can be conceptualized as a generalized affective reaction to an institution. Rather than relating to specific policy outputs, diffuse support for the Supreme Court reflects citizens’ attachments to symbols of democratic institutions. Diffuse support, then, represents a reservoir of positive affect that can help institutions ward off attacks from other institutions or from elements in society at large.¹

How, then, might we relate this to the question of support for local courts? After all, local courts deal with very different subject matter than the Supreme Court does, and it is not likely that local court decisions are publicized and discussed to quite the same extent as those of the nation’s highest tribunal. Local courts adjudicate specific criminal and civil matters; their verdicts are generally of concern only to the parties directly involved in each case. Even indirect experience with these courts is likely to be quite distinct. Although the news media may cover all levels of the judicial system, their coverage of local courts concentrates mainly on the fate of defendants rather than the nature of the institution (Graber, 1989).

There is, of course, an even bigger difference in how citizens interact with local- and national-level courts. Very few Americans have ever entered the Supreme Court building in Washington; far fewer still are ever parties to a Supreme Court case. On the other hand, millions of citizens are asked to serve on local petit juries. They may also become involved as plaintiff or defendant in a civil suit. In short, compared to the federal judiciary, Americans are much more likely to have been inside a local courtroom.

In light of all these differences, it seems reasonable to suppose that Americans' evaluations of courts may be strongly influenced by their own personal experiences within the system and that this may be especially the case for local courts. We are not alone in making the argument that personal experience matters. Tyler (1990), for example, suggests that direct experience with courts significantly colors citizen perceptions of court legitimacy. But we can go further and spell out in more detail what kinds of experience will produce what kinds of evaluations.

The impact of experience is likely to be conditioned in large part on the nature of the contact each citizen has with the local courts. Given the adversarial nature of the system, defendants and plaintiffs may have a more negative impression of local courts than their fellow citizens. Criminal defendants, of course, rarely fare well in courtrooms and may additionally feel that judges are under pressure to administer lengthy sentences. Civil cases are typically marked by charges and countercharges, with plaintiffs and defendants (and their attorneys) attacking one another's integrity.

The experience of jury membership, on the other hand, may enhance respect for the system. Although few Americans enjoy being called for jury duty, most take their responsibilities seriously (see Hans & Vidmar, 1986). Their personal participation in the judicial process should increase their level of trust in its fairness. By having been a part of the administration of justice, jurors will presumably be more inclined to defend the system as impartial and honest.

Although evaluations of local courts may, in part, be based on individual experience ("How was I treated by the system as a plaintiff/defendant/juror?"), this may not be the only factor that shapes the overall assessment of local courts. It may be that the processes that elevate judges to the bench in the first place may color assessments of the

court. There are a variety of ways in which judges may be selected; they may be appointed, based either on the preferences of the governor or the legislature, or on the basis of merit, or they may be elected either on partisan or nonpartisan ballots. There is a substantial body of literature suggesting that the selection process used plays a substantial role in conditioning the decision-making behavior of state court judges (e.g., Brace & Hall, 1990, 1993, 1997; Hall, 1995; Hall & Brace, 1989, 1992; Wenzel, Bowler, & Lanoue, 1997). Research has also shown that citizens' attitudes toward these selection methods vary significantly (see Emmert & Glick, 1986, 1987, 1988).

By extension, then, selection procedures may "matter" by contributing to popular regard for the courts. For example, appointive systems provide judges a certain degree of insulation from the vicissitudes of public opinion and, to the extent that citizens find judicial independence comforting, may have a positive impact on evaluations of the courts. On the other hand, elective systems may reassure voters that judges are responsive to local concerns about the level of crime or the extent of civil judgments.

With these ideas in mind, we turn now to the development of models of public opinion toward local courts.

A MODEL OF PUBLIC TRUST IN THE COURTS

As noted above, our analysis will emphasize two factors: personal experience with the courts and the characteristics of the judicial selection process. We will thus specify several dummy variables indicating the extent of respondents' involvement with local courts. Specifically, we will include measures of whether a respondent has ever served in any of the following capacities: jury member, witness, plaintiff, or defendant. As suggested above, we will hypothesize that participation as a juror will enhance support for local courts, whereas service in the relatively less pleasant roles of plaintiff, defendant, and perhaps witness will decrease citizens' regard for the local judicial system.²

In addition, we will specify two dummy variables to capture the method of judicial selection employed in each respondent's home state. There are several variations on the theme, but essentially there are two basic methods by which local judges are selected: Either they

are appointed or they win office through popular election. In addition, under elective systems, candidates can either run with or without partisan labels.³ Our variables will be scored 1 if a certain selection method is used and 0 otherwise.⁴ The two measures will represent judicial selection by appointment and by partisan election (the excluded category in this case will be states in which judges are chosen by nonpartisan balloting). (On differences in selection methods, see Emmert & Glick, 1986, 1987, 1988.)

There are clearly positive and negative aspects to any method of selecting judges, and there is little guidance in the literature to help us determine whether voters prefer independence or accountability in their jurists. In general, however, we expect that more citizens are populists than elitists and that they prefer having an influence over political outcomes (Bowler & Donovan, 1998). Thus, we hypothesize that voters will be more supportive of local courts when they perceive judges as being accountable. Therefore, systems with elected judges should, all things being equal, generate greater support than systems where judges are selected through appointment.

But all things are not necessarily equal. It is quite possible that partisan and nonpartisan election systems may affect voters in different ways. Although citizens may like the idea that they have a say in the selection of local judges, they may not be enamored with the bickering and name calling that regularly attend partisan elections. Moreover, the existence of partisan labels may cause voters to question the integrity of the bench, especially when it is occupied by members of the less preferred party. Thus, it is possible that partisan election systems may also be characterized by relatively low levels of support.

All of the foregoing, of course, assumes that voters are at least vaguely aware of how judges are selected in their community. Because such knowledge is likely tied to education, we will also include interactive variables multiplying selection methods by education levels. If these interactive variables are significant, but the original measures of selection method are not, that would suggest that judicial selection systems influence attitudes toward the courts but only among the most educated citizens.⁵

There is one additional factor that might inform voters' attitudes toward their local courts: the mass media. The media not only report and provide commentary on local court activities (usually the more

sensational criminal trials of the moment); they also give voters a taste of courtroom drama through various “reality” shows such as *The People’s Court*. Although the cases portrayed on these shows may have little in common with the “real” judicial world, they may still influence public opinion about law and justice at the local level.

Clearly, not all media sources are the same. Television and radio news broadcasts and newspapers typically attempt to report objectively on judicial actions (though newspapers may also editorialize about various decisions). Talk shows, on the other hand, often provide analysis by commentators who have some sort of axe to grind. Radio stations can also provide information about the courts, much of it on call-in shows that emphasize especially notorious or heinous crimes. Finally, “reality” shows like *The People’s Court* and *Judge Judy* (examples specifically named in the survey we will use below) emphasize the dramatic and entertainment aspects of legal conflicts.

For each of these sources, our survey instrument asks respondents if they *regularly*, *sometimes*, *hardly ever*, or *never* receive information from the source in question. We then divide the four sources into “traditional” media (adding scores for news broadcasts and newspapers) and “sensational” media (adding scores for talk and “reality” shows). In general, we anticipate that media exposure will reduce public support for local courts because even traditional outlets (i.e., television and newspapers) concentrate on the adversarial nature of the system, where attorneys for the prosecution and defense make competing and contentious statements to the press. As Graber (1989) points out, “Crime and justice stories tend to focus on sensational events, often at the expense of significant trends and problems in the legal system that might benefit from greater public attention” (p. 268) (see also Graber, 1980).

We further expect that self-consciously confrontational media sources will have a particularly damaging impact on public regard for local courts. Talk radio is, after all, dominated by complaints and criticism of all political institutions, and reality shows sensationalize the judicial branch, emphasizing oddball cases and unusual participants.

We also include a battery of control variables tapping various demographic categories. We employ these measures because it is possible that certain groups may perceive that they fare better or worse in the courts than others. We know, for example, that members of racial

and ethnic minority groups make up a disproportionate number of criminal defendants and that they are less likely to be seen in roles of authority (e.g., prosecutor or judge). It is possible, therefore, that Black and Latino respondents may be less supportive of the courts than their nonminority counterparts (see Gibson & Caldeira, 1992a, for evidence that whereas Blacks' views of the U.S. Supreme Court are generally positive, they are less positive than those of Whites). Demographic control variables are also particularly necessary in this case because the questionnaire does not include any indicators of ideological or partisan preference, factors that correlate strongly with race and, to a lesser extent, gender and age. Thus, we will include three dummy variables indicating whether respondents are female, African American, or Latino. We will also include variables measuring the respondent's age and level of education.

Finally, we will specify a control variable measuring respondents' trust of government institutions in general. We do this to account for the possibility that positive (or negative) attitudes toward local courts are simply a manifestation of a more generalized positive (or negative) assessment of society's institutions. This measure is an index created from questions asking respondents about their level of confidence in the media, the schools, and the medical profession. We assume that if people distrust institutions in general, they are less likely to trust courts specifically.

Before we move to the data analysis, it might be useful to summarize our major hypotheses:

1. Respondents who have served as jurors should have a more positive view of community courts than do their fellow citizens.
2. People who have been involved in civil litigation, either as plaintiff or defendant, should display a more negative attitude toward the local judiciary; likewise, criminal defendants should also possess more negative views.
3. States with judicial selection systems that allow for direct partisan election of judges should engender less public support for local courts than systems with nonpartisan elections. In addition, systems that select judges by appointment rather than election should also elicit lower levels of support.
4. People who are regular consumers of the mass media will have a more negative attitude toward local courts, particularly if their media sources include talk shows and "reality" courtroom programs.

5. African Americans and Latinos should have less positive views of local courts than their nonminority counterparts.

DATA AND RESULTS

Our data on public evaluations of the courts are taken from a telephone survey of 1,826 adults conducted in 1999 by the Indiana University Public Opinion Laboratory in collaboration with the National Center for State Courts (to view the survey, see http://www.Nsconline.org/WCP/Publications/Res_AmtPTC_PublicViewCrtsPub.pdf). These respondents were drawn from each of the 48 contiguous states. They were asked to rate several public institutions, including “the courts in your community.” Because we are interested in public evaluations of these lower courts, this survey provides an ideal data source. Respondents were given a 4-point scale ranging from *a great deal of confidence/trust* to *no confidence/trust at all*.⁶ This measure will serve as our main dependent variable below. We combined these data with state-level data including variables on the judicial selection processes used by each state.

However, the survey goes beyond simply tapping respondents’ generalized attitudes toward state and local courts. It also asks them to evaluate 18 more specific characteristics of the local judiciary ranging from the representativeness of juries to the honesty of judges to the influence of the wealthy and special interests (see the appendix for coding information for all 18 items). In our analyses below, we will make two assumptions about these 18 survey items: (a) that these specific measures inform—and thus influence—more general notions of trust and confidence in local courts and (b) that these specific assessments are correlated with one another and may operate along one or more related dimensions.

The first assumption—that assessments run from the specific to the general—is a relatively straightforward one. The second assumption can be tested directly. We subjected these 18 items to a factor analysis, the results of which may be seen in Table A1 in the appendix. As the table indicates, these variables generate a single factor. In Tables 1 and 2, below, we compute a score on this factor for each respondent and

refer to the resultant variable as citizens' "specific evaluations" toward local courts.

Because we expect these specific evaluations to have a causal impact on more generalized trust, it is possible that our other independent variables—for example, personal experience and selection systems—may have both direct and indirect effects on voters' overall confidence in local courts. A variable would show an indirect effect if it had a significant impact on specific evaluations of the courts but not on overall trust itself (assuming, of course, that our specific evaluations measure displayed the expected significant relationship with overall trust).

We now proceed to testing our hypotheses. The first column of Table 1 presents the results for our model of generalized trust and confidence, whereas the second column reports the results for our index of specific evaluations. As the table indicates, specific evaluations of local courts do, indeed, have a highly significant impact on general trust. In addition, seven other independent variables are statistically significant in explaining citizens' attitudes toward their local courts. Latino ethnicity, level of education, trust in societal institutions, self-reported knowledge, jury service, status as a defendant, and one measure of judicial selection all display significant effects.

Our results reveal that individual courtroom experiences do, indeed, have a meaningful impact on attitudes toward the local court system. As expected, defendants are clearly less sanguine about the courts, presumably because their experiences therein have not been pleasant ones. As far as jury service is concerned, jurors apparently leave the court with a stronger sense of confidence and trust in the system. Status as a plaintiff or witness, on the other hand, has no apparent direct impact on confidence or trust in local courts.

Our measures of judicial selection processes produce significant effects in only one case. Among more highly educated voters, partisan appointment systems are, as hypothesized, associated with a lower level of support for local courts. Otherwise, attitudes toward community courts are unrelated to the mechanisms by which judges are chosen. Different selection systems may have an impact on judges' behavior (Brace & Hall, 1990, 1993, 1997; Hall, 1995; Hall & Brace, 1989, 1992; Wenzel, Bowler, & Lanoue, 1997), but there is no apparent evi-

TABLE 1
Estimates for Model of Public Regard for Local Courts

	<i>Dependent Variables</i>			
	<i>General Support</i> <i>(Ordinary Least Squares)</i>		<i>Specific Support</i> <i>(Ordered Probit)</i>	
Specific support	.38***	(8.16)	—	
Personal experience				
Witness	.08	(0.77)	.03	(1.06)
Jury member	.20**	(2.21)	.07	(1.06)
Defendant	-.38***	(-3.54)	-.19**	(-2.52)
Plaintiff	.09	(0.78)	-.18**	(-2.37)
Selection method				
Partisan election	.10	(0.71)	-.09	(-0.96)
Appointment	.02	(0.09)	-.15	(-0.95)
Partisan × Education	-.09**	(-2.09)	-.02	(-0.52)
Appoint × Education	.01	(0.21)	-.02	(0.59)
Media				
Regular media	-.03	(-1.31)	.03	(1.52)
Sensational media	.01	(0.51)	.01	(0.91)
Demographics				
Black	-.1	(-1.08)	-.26***	(-4.02)
Female	.01	(0.12)	-.08	(-1.47)
Latino	.22**	(2.12)	-.02	(-0.27)
Age	.000	(0.18)	.00	(1.55)
Education	.06*	(1.71)	.02	(0.83)
Knowledge about local courts	.10*	(1.91)	.06	(1.58)
General trust	.21***	(11.10)	.15***	(13.35)
Constant	—		-.96***	(-4.82)
Cut 1	0.45	(0.28)	—	
Cut 2	2.15	(0.29)	—	
Cut 3	3.07	(0.29)	—	
Pseudo R^2/R^2		.13		.21
LLR chi-square (18 <i>df</i>)		371.95		—
<i>n</i>		982		1,004

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are *t* values. LLR = log-likelihood ratio.

*Significant at .10 level. **Significant at .05 level. ***Significant at .01 level.

dence that they have an effect on less educated citizens' attitudes toward the judiciary.

There is also no evidence of a media effect on assessments of local courts. Neither of our indicators of media attention is significant. Apparently, the real-life experiences people have with courts influ-

ence their opinions to a far greater degree than either “objective” or more “controversial” media sources.

Finally, at least one of our control variables provides an unexpected result. According to our analysis, Latinos are more positively disposed toward local courts than are their fellow citizens.⁷ In addition, more knowledgeable and educated respondents are also more supportive. Also, as expected, overall trust in societal institutions correlates with confidence in the local judiciary.

The second column of Table 1 investigates the possibility of indirect effects by modeling our index of specific evaluations of community courts. In this case, four independent variables achieve statistical significance. Plaintiffs, defendants, and African Americans all give local courts lower marks on these specific indicators than do their fellow citizens. On the other hand, citizens who possess a higher regard for institutions in general provide more positive assessments of local courts.

We are most interested here in how these findings contribute to our overall model of trust in community courts. Given that our factor variable has a strong (and significant) positive impact on our general measure of trust, we can conclude that whereas there is no direct relationship between status as a plaintiff and trust in local courts, there is clearly an indirect link (through specific evaluations).⁸ The same is true for African Americans. Furthermore, we can conclude that status as a defendant and trust in government have both direct and indirect effects on overall trust and confidence in local courts.

In this initial analysis, we have specified our measures of personal experience with the courts without regard to whether the respondent participated in a criminal or civil case. It is likely, however, that there are important distinctions between citizens’ reactions to these two types of cases. Criminal defendants, for example, face much greater peril than their civil counterparts, who may be at risk of losing money but not their freedom or life. We might expect, therefore, that criminal defendants will be more negatively disposed toward local courts than their civil counterparts.

Though it seems less obvious, service on a criminal jury may also be a qualitatively different experience from service on a civil jury. The former inherently raises profound questions of guilt, innocence, and justice; whereas in the latter, the stakes are lower, and the cases may

TABLE 2
Estimates for Model of Public Regard for Local Courts
(Dividing Between Civil and Criminal Courtroom Experience)

	<i>Dependent Variables</i>			
	<i>General Support</i> (<i>Ordinary Least Squares</i>)		<i>Specific Support</i> (<i>Ordered Probit</i>)	
Specific support	.38***	(8.07)	—	
Personal experience				
Witness (civil trial)	.11	(0.79)	-.12	(-1.24)
Witness (criminal trial)	.05	(0.38)	.19*	(1.91)
Jury member (civil)	.12	(0.99)	.00	(0.00)
Jury member (criminal)	.21*	(1.94)	.06	(0.85)
Defendant (civil)	-.30*	(-1.91)	-.23**	(-2.08)
Defendant (criminal)	-.28	(-1.52)	-.43***	(-3.38)
Plaintiff	.00	(0.00)	-.11	(-1.05)
Selection method				
Partisan election	.10	(0.73)	-.10	(-1.05)
Appointment	.01	(0.02)	-.16	(-1.04)
Partisan × Education	-.09**	(-2.15)	-.01	(-0.42)
Appoint × Education	.01	(0.20)	.02	(0.59)
Media				
Regular media	-.03	(-1.40)	.03	(1.57)
Sensational media	.01	(0.45)	.01	(0.88)
Demographics				
Black	-.11	(-1.21)	-.26***	(-3.97)
Female	.03	(0.36)	-.08	(-1.54)
Latino	.21**	(2.06)	-.01	(-0.07)
Age	.00	(0.22)	.00*	(1.72)
Education	.06*	(1.81)	.02	(0.88)
Knowledge about local courts	.10*	(1.97)	.06*	(1.68)
General trust	.21***	(11.18)	.15***	(13.43)
Constant	—		-.92***	(-4.64)
Cut 1	-0.91	(0.25)	—	
Cut 2	0.64	(0.25)	—	
Cut 3	1.48	(0.25)	—	
Pseudo R^2/R^2	.10		.22	
LLR chi-square (18 <i>df</i>)	244		—	
<i>n</i>	982		1,004	

NOTE: Numbers in parentheses are *t* values. LLR = log-likelihood ratio.
 *Significant at .10 level. **Significant at .05 level. ***Significant at .01 level.

often appear petty and unnecessarily vindictive. Thus, it is quite possible that the “beneficial” effects of jury service seen in Table 2 may accrue more to criminal than to civil jurors.

The results of our reanalysis may be seen in Table 2. In the first column, we see that the effects of jury service on trust in local courts occur, as expected, primarily in the case of criminal jurors. The coefficient for this group is nearly twice as strong as the equivalent coefficient for civil jurors, and it is the only one of the two that reaches significance.

A difference can also be seen between civil and criminal defendants, with only the first group achieving significance. We would, however, insert a word of caution here. Despite the differences in significance, the two coefficients (.275 and .298) are nearly identical, and their *t* values (1.52 vs. 1.91) are not all that far apart. Clearly, both groups are contributing to the strong significant relationship between defendant status and trust in courts that we saw earlier.

The second column of Table 2 once again presents the results for our factor-based measure of specific evaluations of local courts. Here, it is apparent that both criminal and civil defendants have a more negative attitude than other respondents, with the coefficient for criminal defendants being much higher. This suggests that both groups (but especially criminal defendants) have a significant indirect effect on generalized trust in local courts. Interestingly, witnesses in criminal cases also show a significant effect here, in a positive direction, suggesting that experience as a criminal witness has a positive indirect effect on overall regard for the local judiciary. Otherwise, the results once again mirror those reported in the second column of Table 1.

CONCLUSION

As we noted at the outset of this article, courts depend on legitimacy and public trust to function successfully. If citizens lose faith in the fairness of judicial proceedings, courts may be subject to restrictions on their jurisdiction from Congress and/or state legislatures. Moreover, in the case of local courts, public confidence may have implications for voting behavior and public policy. Therefore, it is important to know which factors contribute to building and eroding trust in the judicial branch of government.

We hypothesized that support for local courts could derive from personal and more general sources, somewhat analogous to notions of

specific and diffuse support that appear in the literature on citizens' assessments of national-level courts. On the personal level, our findings have provided substantial evidence consistent with our assumptions. Direct experience—especially in the role as defendant or juror—clearly affects attitudes toward local courts.

On the more general level, however, our hypotheses did not fare as well. Here, we hypothesized that judicial selection methods would have a significant impact on citizens' regard for their community courts. With only one exception, however, we found that this was not the case. This exception, however, was consistent with our expectations. More educated voters, that is, those most likely to be aware of judicial selection systems, were much less trusting of courts presided over by judges chosen in partisan elections. Nevertheless, we can conclude that most voters in most states are either ignorant of or unaffected by how their local judges are selected. Although it may be true that voters have definite opinions about the relative merits of different selection systems (Emmert & Glick, 1986, 1987, 1988), these opinions apparently do not greatly influence confidence in the local judiciary.

Finally, our findings demonstrate a very real racial and ethnic divide in attitudes toward local courts in the United States. We hypothesized that African Americans and Latinos, being underrepresented among attorneys and judges and overrepresented in the ranks of criminal defendants, should have more negative evaluations of their community courts. Latinos, however, generally held more positive opinions, whereas the only significant important for African Americans was indirect through specific evaluations. It is beyond the scope of this study to speculate on the possible explanations for these results, but the subject certainly does bear further investigation.

We must necessarily be cautious in interpreting our results. For one thing, our survey instrument lacks many desirable items. As noted above, it includes no indicators of respondents' partisanship or ideological predilections. It is possible, therefore, that any effects of these factors may "leak" into the coefficients for some of our other variables (though it is unclear where such leakage might be occurring).

Nevertheless, our findings represent an initial step toward understanding how public support of local courts is structured. They indicate that citizens clearly use direct (firsthand) information in making

their judgments. Moreover, they suggest some intriguing possibilities, including the following: (a) The adversary system of justice employed in American courts may scar both defendants and plaintiffs and subsequently reduce their confidence in the system. (b) On the other hand, other sorts of participation in the courtroom (for example, as a criminal juror) may foster greater support for the local judiciary. (c) More tentatively, at least some voters' attitudes toward local courts are influenced by the methods used to select judges.

Clearly, more research is needed to build on these initial findings. Future scholars should delve further into the question of just how much voters know about judicial selection methods and the consequences of that knowledge or lack of knowledge. Second, they should investigate in greater depth the impact of demographic factors, especially race and ethnicity, to see if our findings with regard to African Americans and Latinos hold up. Finally, although we found no effect of the mass media on citizens' attitudes toward community courts, a more ambitious study of the topic might consider the content of media messages in addition to questions of mere exposure.

APPENDIX

Question Wording and Response for the Specific Support Variables (Listed in Order of Their Appearance in the Factor Analysis)

Survey question: Now I'd like to ask how you feel about some other issues related to the courts in your community. How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of these statements? Would you say you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

- a. Courts protect defendants' constitutional rights.
- b. Most juries are not representative of the community.
- c. Judges are generally honest and fair in deciding cases.
- d. Judges do not give adequate attention and time to each individual case.
- e. Courts are out of touch with what's going on in their communities.
- f. Court rulings and decisions are understood by the people involved in cases.
- g. Courts do not make sure their orders are enforced.
- h. The media's portrayal of the courts is mostly accurate.
- i. I would prefer that a judge ignore the law to ensure that a defendant is convicted.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? Would you say you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?

- a. When a person sues a corporation, the courts generally favor the corporation over the person.
- b. Judges' decisions are influenced by political considerations.
- c. Elected judges are influenced by having to raise campaign funds.
- d. Courts generally make reasonable efforts to ensure that individuals have adequate attorney representation.
- e. It would be possible for me to represent myself in court if I wanted to.
- f. It is affordable to bring a case to court.
- g. Cases are not resolved in a timely manner.
- h. Courts adequately monitor the progress of cases.
- i. Court personnel are helpful and courteous.

Results modeling each of these 18 specific evaluations as a dependent variable in the model set out in the second column of Table 1 are available. The overwhelming majority of these models show some impact of personal experience. Given the high degree of collinearity between these variables of overall assessment, using them as separate independent variables is obviously problematic. Using subsets of these variables is also problematic because there is no prior theory about which specific evaluations are likely to impact the overall assessment and which are not. Therefore, we took the approach adopted here: factor-analyzing the specific variables and seeing this underlying factor as both predictor of overall assessment and as being itself shaped by specific evaluations.

TABLE A1
Factor Analysis of Specific Support Variables
(principal factors; one factor retained) (*n* = 1,047)

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Eigenvalue</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Proportion</i>	<i>Cumulative</i>
1	2.82224	1.89916	0.8165	0.8165
2	0.92308	0.50921	0.2671	1.0836
3	0.41387	0.12314	0.1197	1.2033
4	0.29074	0.04715	0.0841	1.2875
5	0.24359	0.12027	0.0705	1.3579
6	0.12332	0.06550	0.0357	1.3936
7	0.05782	0.06777	0.0167	1.4104
8	-0.00995	0.02456	-0.0029	1.4075
9	-0.03451	0.02781	-0.0100	1.3975
10	-0.06232	0.02770	-0.0180	1.3795
11	-0.09002	0.01090	-0.0260	1.3534
12	-0.10092	0.02656	-0.0292	1.3242
13	-0.12748	0.01887	-0.0369	1.2873
14	-0.14635	0.02041	-0.0423	1.2450
15	-0.16676	0.03617	-0.0482	1.1967
16	-0.20294	0.01339	-0.0587	1.1380
17	-0.21633	0.04441	-0.0626	1.0754
18	-0.26074	—	-0.0754	1.0000

(continued)

TABLE A1 (continued)

Variable	Factor Loadings	
	<i>I</i>	Uniqueness
protect	.46834	.78066
represnt	-.31452	.90108
honest	.54937	.69819
attentn	-.37834	.85686
goingon	-.50241	.74759
undrstd	.40769	.83379
orders	-.26394	.93034
accurat	.25396	.93550
ignore	-.02933	.99914
sues	-.38282	.85345
politicl	-.57266	.67206
influnce	-.48455	.76521
attorney	.46654	.78234
myself	.19240	.96298
afford	.36044	.87008
timely	-.29148	.91504
monitor	.39231	.84609
helpful	.41549	.82737

NOTE: For *overall assessment of courts*, respondents answered the question, "Overall how much trust do you have in the courts in your community?" on a 4-point scale where 1 = *great deal*, 2 = *some*, 3 = *only a little*, and 4 = *none*. For *experience*, defendant, witness, jury member, and plaintiff are all dummy variables (1 = of that category, 0 = not). For *demographic controls*, variables were Latino and African American (1 = named category, 0 = not); gender (1 = female, 0 = not); age (in years); self-reported knowledge (four categories: 1 = *a lot*, 2 = *some*, 3 = *a little*, and 4 = *nothing*); and education (six categories: 1 = *less than high school*, 2 = *high school*, 3 = *some college*, 4 = *college graduate*, 5 = *some graduate work*, and 6 = *graduate degree*). For *process*, party = partisan elections as means of judicial selection (0, 1); appointed = purely appointed means of judicial selection (0, 1). Interactions are just straightforward multiplication of process with the education variable.

NOTES

1. We should note that the posited relationship between diffuse and specific support is not without its critics. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1995) provide an especially trenchant but thought-provoking critique.

2. For some of our variables, we have reversed the polarity in response categories from the original survey instrument to make the findings more intuitively clear.

3. In some cases, the impact of partisanship can be quite intense. In the recent elections in Texas (which elects trial court judges on a partisan ballot), two incumbent judges who had been appointed by Governor Bush to fill positions on newly created courts had the unenviable plea-

sure to run as Republicans in predominantly Democratic districts against stiff opposition from Democratic opponents. In spite of strong support from the local legal community, neither incumbent succeeded in drawing more than 40% of the vote.

4. Our data are taken from a Web site provided by the U.S. Department of Justice (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/sco9802.pdf>). When a state had different systems for selecting different types of local judges, we chose the system for selecting judges for the primary state trial courts. Also, in states that allow for gubernatorial appointment for midterm judicial vacancies, we looked only at the regular selection method. That is, if a state regularly elected judges through partisan balloting, it was coded as a partisan elections state regardless of whether the governor had the power to make midterm appointments.

5. We also considered that attitudes toward selection systems interact with voters' information—rather than education—levels. However, the strongest effect were found using the education measure, so it is included here.

6. The survey divided respondents into two groups. The first was asked to what extent they trusted the institutions. The second group was asked to report the extent to which they had confidence in those institutions. Although trust and confidence represent slightly different stimuli, the correlations between the two items and a battery of independent variables are sufficiently robust to persuade us that, for our purposes at least, they represented similar stimuli to survey respondents.

7. We also tested the possibility that there was an interactive relationship between race and court characteristics. No significant relationship was apparent.

8. Because our two independent variables (overall levels of trust and “specific evaluations”) are measured differently, we use different analytical tools to estimate each model: ordered probit in the first case, ordinary least squares regression in the second. Because of this, we are unable to calculate the indirect effects of our variables of interest on overall trust.

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