

*Balancing the Green and the Gold in the Natural State:  
Citizen Trust, Economic Growth,  
and Environmental Protection in Arkansas*<sup>1</sup>

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Through a survey of 767 Arkansas residents, we determine to what extent residents trust state officials to balance the “green” of environmental protection with the “gold” of economic development. We find respondents are split on their feelings of trust, with only a little over half stating they trust state officials on this matter. Feelings of trust are related to positive attitudes toward the state’s environmental protection agency, assessments of the state leaders’ desire for input, projections of the general direction of the state, personal retrospective economic evaluations, residence in a non-farming region, and a liberal political ideology. The degrees to which respondents stated they thought economic development and environmental protection were priorities which were not related to feelings of trust, suggesting that trust is a product of a variety of factors, none of which include assessments of how state officials are, in fact, balancing the “green” and the “gold.”

This research note seeks to determine the predictors of citizen trust in matters of economic development and environmental protection. Specifically, we seek to determine to what extent that citizens hold feelings of trust toward their state government to balance economic development with the protection of the state’s natural environment, and to determine the source of that trust. For assistance in answering this question, we turn to a template used in a study of local attitudes in West Texas (Somma et al. 1999). By using a customized variant of the Somma model, we examine the link between trust and attitudes toward governmental institutions generally, perceptions of openness in government, confidence in economic performance, and the respondent’s own political ideology. In addition, we include demographic variables in our analyses. Although extant studies examine the dynamics behind citizen evaluations of municipal services, similar studies conducted on state governments such as this one are quite rare. In short, by focusing on citizen attitudes of trust toward officials’ ability to balance the “gold” of economic development and the “green” of environmental protection, we hope to build on the work by Somma and his colleagues and shed further light on the topic.

There are several potential factors that could impact the degree to which a citizen trusts his or her state officials to balance economic development and environmental protection. Declining levels of trust in the federal

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government since 1964 have been extensively studied (e.g., Miller 1974; Citrin 1974; Useem 1982; Craig 1993). Lack of trust has been linked to political protests (Useem 1982), support for term limits (Karp 1995) and presidential vote choice (Hetherington 1998; 1999). Moreover, a substantial amount of literature has been produced aimed at predicting individual-level feelings of trust toward government. Many of these studies can provide insight into why some individuals trust their state officials to balance economic development and environmental protection, while others do not. Possible factors include general attitudes toward economic growth and the environment, state capacity and community attachment, personal economic security, party, ideology, and their own demographic characteristics.

### **Predicting Trust**

In order to assess the determinants of trust in state officials to balance economics and the environment, we surveyed a random sample of individuals residing in the State of Arkansas and asked them a series of questions pertaining to trust and predictors of trust.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 reveals that just over half of the respondents (53.8%) agree with the statement they “trust state leaders to balance the protection of the natural environment with economic development efforts.” Just over 40 percent do not agree with the statement. Thus, it appears Arkansas’ residents do not speak with a unanimous mind when it comes to speaking about trusting their state officials to balance the “green” and the “gold.”

In order to determine the source of this trust, additional questions were included. First, to determine whether attitudes toward trust can be linked to respondents’ perceptions of the issues of economic development and environmental protection, respondents were asked two open-ended questions about what they considered to be the “most important problem facing people of Arkansas today.” Their responses to these two questions were collapsed into a trichotomous dummy variable. If either (or both) of their responses included mention of economic matters, their response on this variable was coded as “1.”<sup>3</sup> If they mentioned an issue of environmental concern in either (or both) of their responses to the open-ended question, their response on this variable was coded “3.” If they failed to mention either, they received a “2.”<sup>4</sup> As Table 1 reveals, the economy looms large in the minds of Arkansas’ residents. Over a third (34.5%) of the respondents stated they thought economic matters were the most (or second most) important issue facing the state. Only a total of three respondents chose the environment as the most important issue. Finally, just under two thirds chose some other set of issues as the most important.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1. Frequencies and Descriptions of Variables**

Item	Categories	%	N
<i>Dependent Variable</i>			
I trust state political leaders to balance the protection of the natural environment with economic development efforts.	0=Disagree/ Strongly Disagree	40.5	311
	1=Agree/ Strongly Agree	53.8	413
<i>Attitudes towards Economic Growth and Environmental Protection</i>			
What do you think is the most important problem or issue facing people in Arkansas today?	1=Economy	34.5	264
	2=Other	65.1	499
	3=Environment	0.4	3
<i>Perceptions of State Capacity</i>			
The Arkansas Dept. of Environmental Quality is effective at enforcing environmental laws & regulations.	1=Strongly Agree	5.8	38
	2=Agree	59.6	393
	3=Disagree	28.2	186
	4=Strongly Disagree	6.4	42
Political leaders value the input of ordinary citizens when making important development decisions.	1=Strongly Agree	4.3	31
	2=Agree	39.2	284
	3=Disagree	41.7	302
	4=Strongly Disagree	14.8	107
The state government is more effective at managing environmental policies than is the federal government.	1=Strongly Agree	8.7	67
	2=Agree	48.8	374
	3=Disagree	27.2	209
	4=Strongly Disagree	3.9	30
<i>Community Attachment</i>			
Do you feel that Arkansas is generally headed in the right direction or the wrong direction?	1=Right	85.1	599
	2=Wrong	14.9	105
How would you rate Arkansas as a place to live as compared to other states?	1=Much Better	40.2	301
	2=Better	28.3	212
	3=Same	19.5	146
	4=Worse	8.9	67
	5=Much Worse	3.1	23
What about living in Arkansas now as compared to, say, five years ago?	1=Much Better	15.2	109
	2=Better	27.5	198
	3=Same	39.6	285
	4=Worse	14.7	106
	5=Much Worse	2.9	21
<i>Economic Evaluations</i>			
Would you say you are better off financially, worse off, or about the same compared to a year ago?	1=Better	41.2	312
	2=About the same	39.8	302
	3=Worse	19.0	144
Do you think that a year from now you will be better off financially, worse off, or about the same as now?	1=Better	42.6	312
	2=About the same	45.6	334
	3=Worse	11.7	86
<i>Political Explanations</i>			
Party	1=Republican	29.8	210
	2=Independent	34.8	245
	3=Democrat	35.5	250
Ideology	1=Liberal	17.7	127
	2=Moderate	41.8	300
	3=Conservative	40.5	291

Three questions were included that sought to determine if a link exists between the respondents' attitudes toward state leaders and the respondents' feelings of trust. The first question asked what the respondents thought of the state's Department of Environmental Quality. Roughly two-thirds (65.4%) of the respondents stated they agreed or strongly agreed the agency could effectively enforce environmental laws and regulations. The second question was aimed at assessing the respondents' attitudes toward political leaders generally, with over half (56.5%) stating they disagreed (or strongly disagreed) that leaders did, in fact, value the input of ordinary citizens. The third question aimed at tapping respondents' attitudes toward the state's capacity to manage the environment, as compared to that of the federal government. Over half (57.5%) agreed (or strongly agreed) that state officials were more effective.

To assess the respondents' levels of community attachment, they were asked three questions directed at their attitudes toward Arkansas as a state, generally. An overwhelming majority (85.1%) of respondents stated they thought the state was headed in the right direction. When asked to rate the state as a place to live compared to other states, over two-thirds (68.5%) stated they thought Arkansas was better (or much better) than other states. When compared with living in Arkansas five years ago, 42.7 percent of respondents stated they thought it was better (or much better) today.

Also included in the model were three contextual measures of regional political culture in Arkansas, originally developed by Parry and Schreckhise (2001). Factor loading scores were generated by principal components analysis, derived from county-level economic and demographic census data.<sup>6</sup> The first component was deemed "Delta." Counties receiving a high loading score on this component were largely located in the eastern and southern portions of the state—counties near or adjacent to the Mississippi River and considered near or part of the Mississippi Delta. This area is characterized by high poverty, unemployment, out-migration, a large African-American population, and a very pure form of Elazar's (1966) Traditionalist political culture. The second component is reflective of urban areas. A highly skilled workforce, large numbers of residents in management positions, large populations, and lower rates of home ownership characterized counties receiving a high loading score on this component. Finally, a third independent component was labeled "Rural." Counties receiving a high loading score on this component were heavily dependent on agriculture, as a large portion of the residents in these counties worked in agriculture, owned land dedicated to agriculture, and a large portion of the county resident's income was derived from farming.

Two additional questions were included to determine respondents' assessments of economic conditions with 41.2 percent of respondents stated

they thought they were better off today financially than they were a year ago, 39.8 percent thought they were doing about the same, and 11.7 percent thought they were doing worse. When asked about their future, 42.6 percent stated they thought they would be doing better, 45.6 percent thought about the same, and 11.7 percent thought they would be doing worse. Two potential political explanations of trust were included, those of the respondents' political party affiliations and their political ideologies. Respondents were evenly divided between the three options for party affiliation—29.8 percent claimed to be Republicans, 34.8 percent claimed to be independent of party affiliation, and 35.5 percent stated they were Democrats. Fewer respondents claimed to be liberals (17.7%) than moderates (41.8%) or conservatives (40.5%).

The above-mentioned variables were included in a LOGIT model to determine if they could be related to citizen trust of leaders to balance economic development and environmental protection. In addition to the survey items and county-level contextual factor scores, additional demographic measures were included in our analysis in order to determine whether trust can be linked to a person's gender, education level, income level, age, or length of residence in Arkansas. The results of the model are displayed in Table 2.

Five variables stand out as relatively strong predictors of respondents' evaluations of the trustworthiness of state officials' ability to balance state economic development and environmental protection efforts. Two of the variables measuring citizen attitudes toward governmental capacity have significant coefficients. The more likely a respondent was to have a negative evaluation of the state Department of Environmental Quality or to have a negative assessment of the value political leaders place on citizen input, the more likely they were to feel that economic development and environmental protection would not be balanced. Thus, it appears that attitudes toward state-government capacity generally are related to attitudes of trust toward specific state officials.

Four other variables are also related to feelings of trust. The more likely the respondent was to say the state was "headed in the right direction" and the better they thought their financial situation would be in the future, the more likely they were to report feelings of trust, although the latter only approaches standard levels of statistical significance. Also coming close to standard levels of statistical significance is the respondent's ideology. The more liberal their political ideology, the more likely they were to express feelings of trust, as well. Respondents in counties with high Rural Factor scores were less likely to express high levels of trust—perhaps owing to the fact they feel their farming-dependent livelihoods are more affected by environmental regulations than other respondents.

**Table 2. Logit Model of Attitudes of Trust toward Economic-Environmental Balance**

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Economics-Environment Dummy Variable						
The Arkansas Dept. of Environmental Quality is effective at enforcing environmental laws & regulations.	-.353	.252	1.968	1	.161	.703
Political leaders value the input of ordinary citizens when making important development decisions.	-.994	.206	23.384	1	.000	.370
The state government is more effective at managing environmental policies than is the federal government.	-1.205	.184	43.040	1	.000	.300
Do you feel that Arkansas is generally headed in the right direction or the wrong direction?	.024	.084	.080	1	.777	1.024
How would you rate Arkansas as a place to live as compared to other states?	-1.020	.393	6.725	1	.010	.361
What about living in Arkansas now as compared to, say, five years ago?	.037	.116	.103	1	.749	1.038
Would you say you are better off financially, worse off, or about the same compared to a year ago?	.009	.131	.005	1	.944	1.009
Do you think that a year from now you will be better off financially, worse off, or about the same as now?	-.335	.175	3.663	1	.056	.715
Delta Coefficient	.103	.205	.252	1	.615	1.108
Urban Coefficient	.015	.131	.013	1	.908	1.015
Rural Coefficient	-.047	.074	.402	1	.526	.954
Sex	-.421	.147	8.236	1	.004	.656
Education	.197	.244	.651	1	.420	1.217
Income	-.103	.095	1.166	1	.280	.903
Race	.075	.060	1.582	1	.208	1.078
Age	-.254	.345	.543	1	.461	.776
Number of Years in Arkansas	.009	.022	.155	1	.694	1.009
Party	-.021	.021	1.019	1	.313	.979
Ideology	-.093	.163	.325	1	.569	.911
Constant	.349	.180	3.771	1	.052	1.418
	8.003	1.301	37.847	1	.000	2990.980
N = 768	Model $\chi^2 = 153.287$	Significance = <.001				
	df = 20	-2 Log likelihood = 447.041				
		% predicted correctly = 74.6				

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

To answer the question: “why do some trust state government to balance the ‘green’ and the ‘gold,’” one must look at a variety of possible explanations. From the analysis presented herein, it appears that variables measuring citizens’ attitudes toward state capacity do a fairly good job of predicting their feelings of trust in balancing matters of economic development with environmental protection. Simply stated, in the case of Arkansas, if a person thinks the state Department of Environmental Quality is doing a good job, and if they feel political leaders value their input, then they will have a favorable opinion toward state officials’ abilities to balance economics with the environment.

Moreover, there does appear to be some evidence to support a community attachment explanation. If the respondent feels that the state is headed in the right direction, the more likely they are to state they trust state officials. At the same time, there was no discernable relationship between the respondent’s level of trust and their general evaluation of the state when compared to five years ago and to other states. Although not quite within standard levels of statistical significance, retrospective economic evaluations appear to predict of levels of trust. The “ruralness” of the area and the political ideology of the respondent are additional predictors.

What is perhaps most interesting is the fact that attitudes toward economic development and environmental protection, generally, did not have an effect on the respondents’ levels of trust. Individuals most concerned about economic development or environmental protection were just as likely as others to trust state officials’ abilities to balance the two. Although a rather large percentage of respondents stated they were concerned with economic development, such a concern did not translate into a mistrust of state officials. This is true even when only slightly more than half of all the respondents stated they trusted the state officials to balance the “gold” and the “green.” This suggests that any general feelings of mistrust of state officials is not a product of the state officials not balancing economic-environmental matters, but instead a product of a variety of other factors, including the respondent’s attitudes toward government officials generally, their prospective evaluations of the state’s direction, their geographic location, their prospective economic evaluations, and, of course, their own political ideology.

To be sure, these are findings from only one state and one which possesses a reputation of being a largely rural, poor state with a relatively uneducated and conservative populace. At the same time, however, the northwest portion of the state, where the home offices of Wal-Mart and Tyson Foods are located, is one of the fastest growing regions in the

country.<sup>7</sup> Politically, Arkansans possess very similar views on the most divisive political issues as the rest of America, such as abortion and flag-burning;<sup>8</sup> the distribution of individuals' partisan loyalties resembles the distribution of the rest of the nation.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it could be said with a certain degree of confidence these findings could be generalized to the rest of the country, though additional studies employing similar methods ought to be conducted on other states.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup>Data for this study were collected from the 2001 Arkansas Poll administered by the University of Arkansas' Survey Research Center. Using random digit-dialing, a total of 767 households were surveyed October 17-20, 2001. The cooperation rate was 31 percent.

<sup>3</sup>Responses which received an economic code included: the economy, unemployment, low wages, economic growth, the stock market, finances, job security, and lack of economic development.

<sup>4</sup>Only one respondent chose both economic matters and the environment as the two most important issues. This respondent was dropped from the analysis.

<sup>5</sup>Other issues respondents stated were one of the two most important issues facing Arkansas were War/Terrorism (12.5%), Education (12.4%) and Health/Medical Insurance (4.4%).

<sup>6</sup>Additional information regarding the derivation of the factor scores is available from the authors.

<sup>7</sup>Northwest Arkansas was named in 2003 by the Milken Institute as having the fastest growing economy in the country, <http://www.milkeninstitute.org/research/research.taf?cat=indexes&function=detail&ID=24&type=BPC>.

<sup>8</sup>For example, a September, 2001 Harris Poll survey found 32 percent of Americans considered the economy to be the most important issue facing the U.S., [http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/index.asp?PID=275](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=275); also <http://plsc.uark.edu/arkpoll/fall99/policy/press.htm>.

<sup>9</sup><http://plsc.uark.edu/arkpoll/fall01/results/ideology/index.htm>, Stanley and Neimi (2000, 112).

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