“Bowling Together” Isn’t a Cure-All:
The Relationship between Social Capital and Political Trust in South Korea

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Abstract

While the social capital theory, popularized by Putnam, expects that associational life and social trust promote civic participation in political processes, some studies have demonstrated the opposite outcomes: weak or negative associations between social capital and political engagement. By applying these arguments of limited impact of social capital, this study examines the relationship between social capital and political trust in South Korea. Survey data on social capital was analyzed and it was found that both associational involvement and social trust were negatively related to commitment to voting and trust in political institutions. Furthermore, these negative relationships were mediated by citizen perceptions of poor institutional performance such as political corruption, suggesting that institutional performance is a crucial determinant of political engagement.

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Introduction

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, dynamic political processes were unfolding all over the globe. Some of them were blessings, but some others raised a great amount of concern. The most provocative political issue at the turn of the century was the political alienation of citizens. Scholars and politicians have at the same time woken up to the increasing tendency of citizen disengagement from institutional politics, so serious that one might diagnose it as political stagnation. Social capital theory stands out in this regard. Popularized by Putnam – though its theoretical foundations date back to the late nineteenth century when Tocqueville illuminated American democracy – social capital theory has significant implications for political reinvigoration, thereby calling for a great deal of scholarly attention. Social capital is believed to mobilize alienated citizens and lubricate political operations in society (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993, 1995a, b, 2000).

Social capital theory emphasizes two principal components: one, social networks established by associational engagement such as voluntary organizations, and the other, reciprocal norms and trust between citizens. At first glance, one might conclude that there is not much that is novel about Putnam’s thesis: pluralist theories in the 1960s and social movement theories in the 1980s had all identified the positive impact of social groups such as interest groups and civic organizations on the facilitation of political participation. Perhaps the distinctiveness of social capital theory is that it extracts political consequences from non-political social interactions (Norris, 2002: 137). Social capital theory focuses on a broad spectrum of social groups, including the strong ties of family and friends, community involvement such as the Parent-Teacher Associations
(PTA) and religious services, and hobby and leisure societies. All these groups are believed to reinvigorate political life, in one way or another. Moreover, the most remarkable theorization of social capital lies with trust. Social networks are said to function as schools that provide civic skills and elicit reciprocal norms and trust in other people, and such trust is considered another core element for political revitalization and effective governance, resulting in democratic stability (Putnam, 1993, 1995a,b, 2000).

For all the public appraisals of the potential contribution of social capital theory to real-world politics, however, the point that the theory regards non-political social interactions as a significant antecedent of political revitalization has caused a great deal of scholarly debate. Most of the criticisms have converged on the political implications of social capital, with arguments that the political aspect of civicness needs to be distinguished from the social one. Scholars have revealed empirical differences between social and political trust, as well as weak or negative associations between voluntary associational involvement and political participation (Foley and Edwards, 1999; Kaase, 1999; Levi, 1996; Navarro, 2002; Newton, 1999, 2001; Norris, 1996, 2002). Conceptually, it is argued that the terms used in social capital theory are too extensive, and that political capital needs to be separately termed (Harwood and Lay, 2001). According to these criticisms, Putnam’s thesis weighs too heavily on exclusively social activities in identifying the political implications of civil society, and overstates the political consequences of social capital.

The general concept of trust is especially troublesome. Social capital theory, by illustrating the matching trends between social trust and voting turnout, asserts that the decline of social trust between citizens has a bearing on the decline in electoral
participation. The regeneration of social trust is, therefore, believed to increase voting
turnout and other mode of civic participation in politics (Putnam, 1995b: 675). However,
to expect a revival of civic participation in conventional politics such as voting, trust in
political institutions – parliament and parties – rather than the generalized social trust, is
presumably a necessary condition. While in a recent version of his work Putnam states
that political trust is different from social trust (Putnam, 2000: 137), little focus has been
given to theoretically and empirically differentiating political trust from social trust and
to finding out how social trust is related to political trust. Rather, this trend of research,
by postulating associational involvement as a direct cause of political revitalization in
light of participatory democracy, disposes people to presume a positive relationship
between social capital and political trust.

This study examines the relationship between social capital and political trust in
South Korea, asking the question of whether social capital does indeed significantly
contributes to political revitalization. In particular, this study pays attention to previous
research on the limited impact of social capital and the differences between social and
political trust (Newton, 1999, 2001). Although associational involvement invigorates
trust in the general population of society, the generalized social trust is not automatically
transformed to trust in political institutions. On the one hand, the differences between
social and political trust might come into existence from the discrepant theoretical
perspectives as illustrated earlier. On the other hand, however, political contexts of a
given nation-state – especially the levels of democracy and civil society – could be a
factor explaining the disjuncture between social and political trust. While a considerable
amount of work has been conducted on social capital in established democracies,
focusing on the USA and European countries, only a few studies have examined social capital in the context of consolidating democracies (Blomkvist, 2001; Fox, 1996; Seligson, 1999). In an attempt to identify the differential impact of associational involvement on social trust and political trust and the relationships of social capital to political engagement, political trust and commitment to voting, this study applies the ongoing arguments of social capital to South Korean politics.

This paper consists of six principal sections. In the first, second and third sections, it provides a literature review to distinguish political trust from social trust, and to discuss the relationship between social capital and trust in political institutions in the South Korean context. In the fourth section, survey data to test the current hypotheses are described, and the results of the analyses are illustrated in the fifth section. Finally, the paper concludes by considering the implications of the current study.

**Differentiation between social trust and political trust**

Perhaps, it is the concept of trust that has brought about fierce debates among modern and contemporary social scientists (Fukuyama, 1995). A major reason why social capital theory gave rise to persistent debates is likely to be because the theory brought trust to the forefront in explaining the operation of social capital. The problematic aspect of generalized trust in relation to associational involvement and political participation in social capital theory is that the complicated nature of trust is being oversimplified. Or, perhaps researchers have different understandings of the elusive concept of trust and attach different meanings accordingly. The reason for
making a distinction between social and political trust in this paper is not just for conceptual elaboration, but also because it involves differential behavioral mechanisms, which yield different predictions in terms of anticipating political revival.

Admittedly, political trust is different from social trust in terms of its origins and nature. Unlike interpersonal and social trust, which is based on direct contacts with close persons – kin, family, friends, and those in direct social relations – trust in political institutions and politicians is formed by indirect ways of learning, especially through the mass media (Kaase, 1999: 3, 12-13; Luhmann, 1989; Newton, 1999: 179, 2001: 205). Nevertheless, an array of cultural theories suggests that political trust is also fundamentally grounded on, and generated by, interpersonal trust, which is formed by socialization early in life and by cultural norms. These theories emphasize the importance of social trust in generating co-operative relations between individual citizens, eventually yielding vibrant civil society and political reanimation (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart 1990; Ostrom, 1990; Putnam, 1993; See Mischler and Rose, 2001, for a discussion of cultural theories). By assuming this, and particularly connecting its positive role to the political domain, social trust, more often than not, was regarded as inclusive of political nature, without being properly discriminated from political trust (Foley and Edwards, 1999; Jackman and Miller, 1996; Levi, 1996; Mishler and Rose, 2001).

Perhaps, the most obvious distinction was made by illustrating the empirical findings of a weak association between social and political trust. For example, Newton and Norris (2000) found that, by analyzing pooled data on 17 established democracies, correlations between social trust and confidence in public political institutions were very
weak. Kaase (1999) also demonstrated that interpersonal trust was only weakly associated with political trust in all nine European countries; he concluded that interpersonal trust “cannot assume the role of an important antecedent to political trust” (p. 14). Moreover, a series of empirical findings illuminated that social and political trust are not always closely related, but instead they hinge on a differential mechanism of formation and operation, respectively (Craig, 1993; Orren, 1997; Wright, 1976).

More importantly, political trust is more significantly related with political factors, while social trust is contingent upon social variables such as income, education, and social position, and closely linked to individuals’ life satisfaction. Many studies have identified that political trust does not necessarily have social causes, and is likely to be randomly distributed throughout social groups, encompassing variant socio-demographic factors (Abramson, 1983; Lawrence, 1997; Newton, 1999; Orren, 1997). Political trust is, instead, more strongly associated with such political variables as partisanship (King, 1997), the Left-Right political ideology (Kaase and Newton, 1995), and participation in political organizations, not social ones (Flanders, Billiet, and Cambre, 1996, cited in Newton, 1999: 184).

Essentially, as institutional theories suggest, it is performance of political institutions that most significantly influences citizens’ political trust. Political trust hinges on citizens’ rational evaluations of institutional performance, and the level of such trust in government is highly associated with government performance (March, 1988; North, 1990; See Mishler and Rose, 2001, for a discussion of institutional theories). As Newton (2001) notes, political trust “is not an expression of a basic feature of ‘trusting personalities’, but an evaluation of the political world. This makes trust scores a litmus
test of how well the political system is performing in the eyes of its citizens” (p. 205). A great number of studies have indeed illuminated that performance of political institutions, notably including political corruption, is a critical factor that determines the level of citizens’ political trust (McAllister, 1999; Miller and Listhaug, 1999; Norris, 1999; Otake, 2000; Pharr, 2000; della Porta, 2000). Also, Cusack (1999) found that citizens’ trust in local politics is significantly related to the level of satisfaction with local government performance in Germany.

The notion that political trust hinges on citizen evaluation of government performance would be more consequential in new democracies, especially, in those countries with historical experience of political dislocation: as is evident in most new democracies, citizens have undergone an alteration of regimes from the former undemocratic systems to the present democratic ones. The regimes in which political trust was nurtured by cultural influence of early-life socialization no longer exist, and there might be a conflict between socialization and the performance influence of a current regime. In this circumstance, it is likely that institutional performance influence on political trust supersedes cultural influence (Diamond, 1999; Mishler and Rose, 2001: 31-2). Consequently, citizens are more sensitized to government performance, and the poor performance of political institutions, such as political corruption and exploitative conduct of public officials, are significantly influential on political trust. With memories of totalitarian regimes, citizens tend more to antagonize the legacy of undemocratic government. As a result, trust in political institutions relies on citizen evaluations of institutional performance, rather than being deeply grounded in cultural norms of early-life socialization.
**The relationship between associational involvement and political trust**

Originating in the Tocquevillian tradition of civic volunteerism, a number of studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between involvement in voluntary associations and social trust (Almond and Verba, 1963; Inglehart 1990; Ostrom, 1990; Putnam, 1993, 1995a,b, 2000; de Tocqueville, 1969; Verba et al., 1995). Noting the positive effects of interpersonal interactions on forming trust in others, the studies contend that voluntary organizations and associational activities are conducive to eliciting generalized social trust. Furthermore, if cultural theories of political trust are followed, political trust, as well as social trust, appears to be an outgrowth of vibrant associational life in society.

However, taking into account the foregoing speculation of the differences between social and political trust, it does not seem to be an easy task to prove a positive relationship between associational involvement and political trust. Although social capital theory expects that civic engagement in associational activities is the major resource revitalizing citizens’ political participation and enhancing the quality of governance, very little evidence exists to demonstrate the actual measure of individuals’ political trust in relation to associational involvement. In fact, there are the studies invoking a doubt on the positive relationship between associational activities and political trust. Above all, it was found that political trust, especially confidence in institutions, is not significantly associated with voluntary activism (Newton and Norris, 2000: 63-4). Considering the fact that a majority of people are not, indeed, engaged in
voluntary and associational activities, and that even participating people spend only a limited amount of time in those activities, it is hardly plausible to expect a significant contribution from such associations to the facilitation of political trust (Newton, 1999:172, 2001:207).

What is more, some studies argue that associations – at least some, though not all – are extraneous to promoting political participation (Babchuk and Edwards, 1965; Rogers et al., 1975). It seems unwise to believe that all forms of associations yield an identical pattern of political engagement. Apparently, different types of associations produce significant differences in terms of their political consequences (Boix and Posner, 1998; Eastis, 1998; Pollock, 1982; Seligson, 1999; Stolle and Rochon, 1998). Although many studies contend that associational involvement is positively related to political participation (for example, Erbe, 1964; Leighley, 1996; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993), the differential outcomes of associational activism in terms of its political consequences seem to, in part, depend on measurement of associational involvement (Ulzurrun, 2002).

Furthermore, Brehm’s and Rahn’s (1997) study of social capital provides a basis to reason that associational involvement is even negatively related to political trust. Relying on Tocqueville’s pluralistic view, they hypothesized a negative relationship between civic engagement in associations and confidence in governmental institutions in the United States. It is somewhat tenuous that they have drawn their hypothesis merely from the old argument of nineteenth century American society, but they found that an increase in civic engagement in associations resulted in lower confidence in national institutions, consistent with their hypothesis. Although Brehm’s and Rahn’s hypothesis was based on a liberal view of civic associations as resisting “the temptations of
centralization” (p.1004), the result of the negative association in and of itself, involves different interpretations. One might argue that, unlike the prevalent assumption of the spillover effects of civic associations, the reality is that members of associations may be more inclined to focus on their instrumental goals. Associations “are not particularly useful agents of the kinds of sanctions and information that are necessary to promote large-scale economic exchange. Nor is it clear that they produce norms of reciprocity with those outside the club; in fact, they may have just the opposite effect” (Levi, 1996: 47). Trust built within a group does not always extend beyond the group and, specifically, it does not overcome the free-rider problem (Boix and Posner, 1998; della Porta, 2000: 204).

**Social capital and political performance in South Korea**

While the foregoing review of previous studies illustrates cross-national theoretical perspectives on the limited impact of social capital on political revitalization, a country’s political context is another factor to be taken into account in explaining the relationship between social capital and political trust. South Korea is one of the new democracies that has experienced authoritarian regimes for a long time in its history. It was in 1987 that a competitive presidential election was first introduced after many years of military-backed dictatorship. And in 1992, the first civilian president was elected to take office. Although Korea achieved miraculous economic development under the authoritarian regimes, the level of democratization was considerably low. Nevertheless, citizens’ desire for democracy was fierce, and the constitutional changes that adopted free
competitive presidential elections and other relevant democratic transformation were, in effect, the results of anti-government demonstrations and protests of civic dissidents. Since the early 1990s, Korea’s political reform has rapidly progressed such that its Freedom House rating of political rights and civil liberties\(^1\) is “now the equal of that of Greece and Chile, and above that of Argentina, Brazil, the Philippines and such post-communist democracies as Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Russia” (Rose et al., 1999: 150).

Furthermore, a prosperous sign for a developing vibrant civil society is indeed observed from the evolution of civic associations for the past decade. As shown in Figure 1, the number of civic associations in South Korea consistently increased. In 1993, a total of 46,593 associations existed, and an almost 51 percent increase was revealed by 2001, resulting in 70,151 associations around the country (See Figure 1).

However, the political consequence of the invigorating civic associations was not very promising. An evident example can be found in the trend of voting turnout for the same period. As illustrated in Figure 2, the number of voters who participated in presidential, parliamentary, and local elections gradually decreased. South Korean politics, unexceptionally, reflects the worldwide trend of declining voting turnout, which is more frequently observed in advanced industrial societies. The contrasting trends of increasing civic associations and decreasing electoral participation, although it is only a macro-level comparison, lead us to attend to the findings of a not-so-significant
relationship between associational membership and political participation (Norris, 2002: 160-1).

Certainly, the mechanism of social capital varies widely across countries, and explanations could be found in the context of South Korean politics. First of all, as mentioned earlier, citizens’ evaluations of institutional performance are seemingly more directly influential on the level of their political trust (Cusack, 1999; Newton, 1999, 2001). In particular, there is one issue that has consistently dampened trustworthy and effective governance in South Korea — political corruption. According to the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index based on surveys conducted in 2003, South Korea was ranked 50th among 133 countries. Compared with other newer-, semi- and non-democratic societies, Korea was still behind 22 other countries. The fight against corruption has been a primary election agenda at both national and local levels. Corruption scandals of public officials feature in most headlines of the mass media. Political corruption in South Korea is a critical factor that deprives the country of democratic enrichment. Given this circumstance of pervasive corruption, citizen evaluation of poor political performance would override any positive impact of associational activities. In so far as associational life leads to exposure to public life and political stimuli in one way or another (Verba et al., 1978), there could be a greater likelihood of associational participants perceiving national problems and political issues
seriously. Such political perceptions of negative aspects of institutional performance, such as corruption, would then lead to distrust in political institutions.

Secondly, civic associations in Korea are essentially in the developmental stage. Under authoritarian regimes, associational life is apt to be closed, restricted and passive, rather than open, liberal and vibrant. Although the level of democracy has advanced far in South Korea, cultural transition is, in general, slower than structural transition, and it is likely that the legacy of cultural norms brought about during the former regimes still remain in every corner of public life. Consequently, civic associations in South Korea might not be mature enough to provide the civic skills required for democratic citizenship. Although associations might be expansive beyond the boundaries of acquaintance, to embrace anonymous others in society rather than exclusively focusing on their instrumental goals, such positive influence at a societal level does not pertain to political implications. While it is believed that associational life stimulates political participation because exposure to public life and the practice of social skills upgrade citizens’ political qualities, this sort of argument is generally based on the circumstances of established democracies and it is not always applicable to associations in new democracies. Indeed, it has been argued that, in undemocratic regimes such as the former Soviet Union, social networks of trusted acquaintances function to isolate members from distrusted institutions, resulting in a negative relationship between the two (Mishler and Rose, 2001: 35; Rose, 1995; Shlapentokh, 1989). Such political legacy seems to, at least in part, still characterize social groups in South Korea.

Considering both the previous studies and the political contexts of South Korea described above, it is hypothesized that associational involvement and social trust are
negatively related to political engagement (voting participation and political trust). While associational activities might lead to a strengthening of generalized social trust, there is no direct link between vibrant civic associations and the building of citizen trust in political institutions. The spill-over effects of associational involvement, going beyond social boundaries, are not always evident. Furthermore, as illustrated earlier, citizen evaluation of institutional performance in terms of political corruption and other major political issues is an important factor that determines the level of political trust. Presumably, citizens who seriously perceive poor performance of political institutions are more likely to be disengaged from politics and to have lower political trust. This intervening factor of political perception seems to indirectly account for the negative relationship of social capital to political trust in South Korea.

Data and Analysis

This study analyses national survey data on social capital in South Korea. The survey was commissioned by the Government Information Agency, one of the South Korean government departments, and a research organization, World Research, conducted it. A multi-stage stratified random sampling method was employed to select 1,500 respondents representing the South Korean adult population aged 18 and over, residing in family households at the time of the survey. Face-to-face interviews were conducted between November 23 and December 7 in 2001, and a total of 880 interviews were satisfactorily completed. For the current analysis, non-responses to the questions of
the primary variables in examination were deleted, and as a result, the number of valid cases for analysis was 850.

*Associational involvement*

One of the primary variables in this analysis is associational involvement. In the survey, respondents were asked about their participation in associational activities. Among 850 respondents, the total number of associational participants was 336. Given that the current analysis aims at examining the political consequences of non-political associations, those participating in political organizations were removed from the category of associational participants, leaving the number of associational participants as 330. The categories of participating associations are shown below.

**INSERT TABLE 1 HERE**

Among the categories shown in Table 1, “social groups” comprise the greater majority of associations. Social groups, here, mean social gatherings between people who share a common background or interests, or social experience at one point in life; it includes, to name a few, alumni associations, leisure societies, and regional community groups. It is an extended meaning of friends, and the main goal of their social gatherings is to promote friendship by face-to-face social interactions. This is an equivalent form of the main categories of civic associations in Putnam’s study, such as “amateur soccer clubs, choral societies, hiking clubs, bird-watching groups, literary circles, hunters’
associations, Lions Clubs and the like” (Putnam, 1993: 91). Given that the current study raises the question of whether the political impact of such non-political associations is significant, this measure of associational involvement satisfies the primary research purpose.

**Social trust**

Social trust was measured by aggregating two questions: (1) “How much would you agree to the following statement – It is pleasant for me to live with other people?” with four response categories (“a great deal, somewhat, little, not at all”); and (2) “When an emergency situation happens to you, how much sincere help would your neighbors give to you?” also with four response categories. As a result, a seven-point scale has been created to represent social trust.

**Political trust and commitment to voting**

For political trust, a question asking how much the respondents trust in parliament and parties was used. Parliament is the major institution of representative democracy, and thus, trust in parliament is considered the most valid measure of political trust. There are empirical and theoretical supports for the idea that trust in parliament is more fundamental in representing political trust, and the fluctuation of political trust indicates the change in the level of public trust in parliament. (Newton 2001: 205). The responses
Commitment to voting was represented by the level of the respondents’ agreement to the statement, “Election is very important and people should participate in voting.” A four-level response category was given to the respondents, with the highest category “very much agree” and the lowest “not at all agree.”

*Perceptions of political performance*

As stated earlier, one of the main arguments of this study is that citizens’ evaluation of political performance intervenes between social and political trust. The more likely they are to perceive political institutions as poorly performing, the less likely they are to trust those institutions. To measure political perceptions, a question item asking “what is the most serious problem in our society” was used. Sixteen response categories were given to respondents to answer this question. The response categories included the major issues such as political corruption, poverty and the poor, inflation, social welfare, regional conflict, and several minor issues. For instance, the selection of political corruption as the most serious problem facing the country indicates that the respondents perceive political corruption as pervasive. This measure indicates that, compared with those not choosing political corruption as the most important problem, they are more prone to negatively evaluate political performances because of political corruption. Therefore, four dummy variables were created out of this question to represent four major issues, which are critical determinants of citizen evaluation of
political institutions: political corruption, inflation, poverty, social welfare. For example, to measure perceptions of poverty, the responses that selected the poverty issue were coded as 1 and all other responses were coded as 0.

Trust in other social institutions

Meanwhile, as will be explained later, it is conceivable that trust or distrust in political institutions expressed by associational participants may reflect a general tendency of trust or distrust, regardless of types of institutions (i.e. associational participants are less trusting of not only political institutions but also other non-political social institutions). Therefore, it is worth examining the relationships between associational involvement and other types of social institutions as well. Fortunately, the current survey contains questions measuring the level of trust in various kinds of social institutions, including government civil service, the national courts, educational institutions, the army, religious organizations, medical institutions, the press, the police, social and civic organizations, and major companies (private enterprise). The examination of these various social institutions on their relationships with associational involvement will clarify the research questions relating to the political impact of associational life.

Results
The first stage of the analysis aimed at finding out the impacts of social capital, political perceptions, and commitment to voting, on political trust, by looking at the proportion of the variance in political trust accounted for by each predictor variable. To this end, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis has been performed. Political trust was first regressed on the demographic factors, which were followed by associational involvement, social trust, political perceptions, and commitment to voting, in that order. The sequence was arrived at based on the theoretical consideration that associational activities lead to social trust, and political perceptions and commitment to voting intervene between social trust and political trust. The result of this analysis is shown in Table 2.

As hypothesized, associational involvement turned out to negatively influence political trust when demographic factors were taken into account (b=-.14, p<.05, See model 2). Although this result was estimated before applying the remaining variables, it is obvious that associational activities do not facilitate trust in political institutions. Moreover, model 3 shows that the negative relationship was indeed mediated by social trust; social trust also negatively affects political trust and the effect is highly significant (b=-.21, p<.01). As the \( R^2 \) increase shows, social trust is one of the most influential predictors of political trust, solely explaining eight percent of the variance in political trust (\( \Delta f = 73.21, p<.01 \)). Contrary to the common assumption that social trust is positively correlated with political trust, this result upholds the view that political trust
comes into existence by a mechanism different from that of social trust. As stated earlier, trust in political institutions is more likely to be determined by political factors, and citizen perceptions of institutional performance are believed to mediate the negative relationship between social and political trust (Newton, 1999, 2001).

Model 4 demonstrates the impact of political perceptions on political trust. Among the four political issues, political corruption shows the largest effect ($\beta=-.17$, $p<.01$). As hypothesized, the corrupt conduct of politicians and public officials appears to be a significant factor that reduces citizen trust in political institutions. In addition, the issue of poverty was found to be another significant factor that erodes political trust ($\beta=-.11$, $p<.01$). The poverty issue seems to have absorbed public attention due to the recent economic crisis in 1997, because of which Korea had to rely on an International Monetary Fund loan. The economic crisis resulted in large scale unemployment and the mass media frequently focused on the indigent and desperate lives of those out of a job. In the eyes of citizens, therefore, the poverty issue has become an overt indicator of whether the government and political institutions perform well or not.

Finally, commitment to voting was added to the equation, and it was found to positively affect political trust ($b=.08$, $p<.05$). People who are strongly committed to voting tend to be more trusting of political institutions. It is more or less clear-cut that electoral participation has a positive relationship with political trust given that political institutions of representative democracy operate by means of elections.

While the hierarchical analysis estimated the effects of predictor variables on political trust, it does not provide an overall picture of the causal relationships between the predictor variables. Next, in order to examine the causal relations between the factors
influencing political trust, a path analysis has been conducted. Several findings have been observed from this path model (See Figure 3). Firstly, a contrasting result was observed between social trust and political trust in terms of their relationships with associational involvement. Associational involvement was found to positively affect social trust (path coefficient=.15, p<.01), whereas it negatively influences political trust as already demonstrated by the hierarchical analysis (path coefficient=-.08, p<.05). Associations, as the social capital theory contends, emerge to generate trust in anonymous others in society. However, the political consequences of trust-building activities of associations do not appear to be promising. Although trust in others and society in general are facilitated by weak ties of associations, voluntary participation in civic associations does not promote citizen trust in political institutions, nor participation in elections (path coefficient=.02, p=.59).

SECONDLY, CITIZENS’ POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE EXERT
SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE ON COMMITMENT TO VOTING, AS WELL AS ON POLITICAL TRUST. THOSE WHO PERCEIVED POLITICAL CORRUPTION, POVERTY, AND SOCIAL WELFARE AS SERIOUS PROBLEMS WERE LESS LIKELY TO BE COMMITTED TO VOTING. AGAIN, POLITICAL CORRUPTION SHOWS THE LARGEST EFFECT AMONG THE VARIABLES OF POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS (PATH COEFFICIENT=-.17, P<.01). IT HAS BECOME OBVIOUS THAT ONE OF THE PLAUSIBLE CAUSES OF THE DECLINING VOTING TURNOUT IS POOR PERFORMANCE OF POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS. CITIZENS BECOME DISENCHANTED WITH POLITICS BECAUSE
they are disgusted with corrupt politicians and dissatisfied with incompetent government and parties.

Thirdly, the negative relationships of social trust to political trust and commitment to voting are affected by citizen perceptions of political performance. The paths passing through political perceptions show that social trust exerts negative influence on commitment to voting and political trust, at least in part, due to the negative political perceptions. The indirect effects of social trust on commitment to voting and political trust via political perceptions were calculated in order to compare the relative contributions of the direct and the indirect effects to the total effects. For commitment to voting, the indirect effects through political perceptions made a substantial contribution, which is about 62 percent of the total effects of social trust. In other words, almost two-thirds of the variance in commitment to voting caused by social trust, come from political perceptions. For political trust, the contribution made by the indirect paths leading through political perceptions is relatively small. The indirect effects of social trust via political perceptions contribute 12 percent of the total effects of social trust on political trust. The relatively small contribution made by the indirect effects indicates that the direct path of social trust accounts for the remaining large proportion of the variance in its relationship with political trust. Put another way, to some extent, social trust in this path model directly exerts a negative influence on political trust without the effects of the intervening factors.

One way to explain the negative relationship between social and political trust is citizen expectations. Citizen expectations matter in the evaluation of government performance and the formation of trust and distrust in political institutions. For example,
Miller and Listhaug (1999) identified that distrust of government is associated with a high level of citizen expectations of government performance in the United States, Norway, and Sweden. Citizens have democratic ideals of how government functions, and they are less likely to be trusting of government when they perceive it as falling short of their ideals. Although Miller and Listhaug focused on the established democracies, it also seems to be the case in newly-established consolidating democracies, as they contend (p.216). Citizens in new democracies observed such political dynamics as regime change and party realignment, and, presumably, they tend to hold high expectations of democratic performance from new regimes and political institutions: i.e. there would appear to be a gap between citizens’ ideals of how democracy works and the reality of what is happening in political institutions (See also, Rose et al., 1999). Exposure to political stimuli via associational activities renders citizens more idealistic about representative democracy and such ideals bring about a rather negative evaluation of the practice of political institutions in reality, leading to distrust in political institutions.

Another possible cause of the negative relationship is concerned with the political contexts of new democracies. As mentioned earlier, in new democracies, political institutions have not yet fully received public support as the legacy of undemocratic regimes still remains in public life. Under this circumstance, social trust could have an “inverse relationship” with trust in political institutions, such that “people use trusted networks to insulate themselves from distrusted state institutions” (Mishler and Rose, 2001: 35). A consideration of this political context seems to provide an explanation for the negative relationship between social and political trust in South Korea.
Meanwhile, one might pose the question of whether citizen distrust is not confined to political institutions but is also observed in regard to non-political institutions. It might be the case that distrust of political institutions is an expression of general distrusting attitudes towards all-round types of social institutions. Put differently, associational participation might elicit negative sentiment towards the operation of societal institutions, regardless of the types of associations. Hence, the next analysis sought to examine the relationships between associational involvement and trust in various kinds of social institutions, inclusive of public and private institutions. The relationships were estimated by bivariate correlations.

As Table 3 shows, distrust in political institutions among associational participants is not partly a general tendency to distrust societal operation; associational involvement was not significantly related to most non-political institutions. In fact, the result of bivariate correlations reveals that associational activities might be a potential cause of the waning of support for the practice of representative democracy in South Korea. While associational involvement does not have a significant relationship with other social institutions, it was negatively related to national legal institutions, government civil service and the police, in addition to parliament and parties. It is somewhat revealing that, amongst the various social sectors, it is to the three powers of the state that associational involvement is negatively related. That is, people involved in associational activities are more likely to be distrusting of political, governmental, and
legal institutions. The crisis of representative democracy is often regarded as decreasing public support for representative institutions: administration, legislation, and the judiciary. Citizens turn their attention away from these institutions and, instead, either depend on alternative means of opinion expression or remain completely silent and insulated. The findings of the current study demonstrate that the applicability of the social capital thesis that effective governance and political reanimation are fostered by associational activities, to South Korean context, is tenuous.

**Conclusions and discussion**

In sum, this study has analyzed survey data on social capital in South Korea to identify the causal relationships between social capital (associational involvement and social trust) and political engagement (commitment to voting and political trust), by focusing on the intervening variables of political perceptions. The hierarchical regression and the path analysis demonstrated several findings worth discussing. First of all, consistent with the arguments of the limited impact of social capital (Foley and Edwards, 1999; Harwood and Lay, 2001; Kaase, 1999; Levi, 1996; Navarro, 2002; Newton, 1999, 2001; Newton and Norris, 2000), it was proved that social capital does not contribute to revitalizing civic participation in institutional politics in South Korea; both associational involvement and social trust negatively influenced trust in political institutions, and neither of them had significant relationships with commitment to voting.

Secondly, as Newton’s (1999, 2001) accounts of political trust illustrate, political perceptions of institutional performance indeed determined the levels of political trust
and commitment to voting in South Korea. The perceptions of poor performance, such as political corruption and poverty, resulted in reducing the commitment to voting and trust in political institutions. Moreover, the negative relationships of social trust to voting and political trust were mediated by these political perceptions. It is obvious that citizens’ evaluations of political performance play an important role in the relationship between social trust and political engagement. In particular, the effects of social trust on commitments to voting are strongly mediated by political perceptions, as revealed by the estimation of the indirect effects.

Finally, in questioning whether associational involvement is negatively related, particularly to political institutions, or whether it actually has negative relationships with other kinds of social institutions, bivariate correlations between associational involvement and various types of public and private institutions were conducted. The resulting analysis demonstrated that associational involvement was negatively related to parliament and parties, government civil service and the police, and the national courts, but not to all institutions. Put another way, participants in associational activities are not cynical about society’s institutional operations in general, but rather, their distrust tends to converge on the core institutions of representative democracy: administrative (government civil service), legislative (parliament and parties), and the judiciary.

Overall, the arguments of the limited impact of social capital (Foley and Edwards, 1999; Harwood and Lay, 2001; Kaase, 1999; Levi, 1996; Navarro, 2002; Newton, 1999, 2001; Newton and Norris, 2000) were found to be a valid account for the relationship between social capital and political engagement in South Korea. Although their arguments are on the whole in line with Putnam’s social capital theory, Brehm’s and
Rahn’s (1997) particular finding of the negative relationship between associational engagement and confidence in institutions also turned out to be applicable to social capital in the context of South Korea. This study, consistent with those previous studies, suggests that social capital has a limited impact on political revitalization, at least in terms of conventional politics in South Korea. Although the scope of this study is limited to South Korea, the findings observed provide implications for examining social capital in new democracies, which share similar historical experience and political contexts.

As noted at the beginning, this study has been initiated by attending to the puzzle over the political consequences of the social relations illuminated in the social capital theory. The findings of this study confirm that Putnam’s thesis and other supporting arguments for social capital were in fact correct, but only in the respect that associational involvement results in an increase of social trust. Civic associations are certainly of significant value; face-to-face social interactions and extended social relations nurture social trust in the general public in society. Civic associations appear to be, following Putnam’s conceptualization, “bridging” networks that are inclusive of heterogeneous outsiders. Ultimately, the enhanced trust between citizens will, in turn, facilitate civic cooperation and co-ordination for community development and the enrichment of civil society (Putnam, 1993, 1995a,b, 2000).

However, based on these findings, there seems to be little space for anticipating a positive political outcome from social trust in these causal relations. Contrary to the social capital thesis that social trust promotes citizens’ political participation, social trust did not appear to be a direct cause of political revitalization; it was found that people with high social trust were less likely to be committed to voting and less likely to trust
political institutions. While it is expected that associational participants trust their neighbors, attach themselves to the community, and become collaborative for social benefits, this stock of social capital does not necessarily result in a high level of political capital: social networks should not be regarded as involving significant political impacts. Although it is undeniable that social interactions are conducive to yielding vibrant political life in some aspect, there is no apparently positive connection between social trust and the enhancement of political engagement in the context of South Korea.

Yet, there are limitations in this study which prevent the conclusion that associational involvement negatively influences citizens’ political life, in all aspects. Citizens’ disaffection with conventional politics does not necessarily mean the entire withdrawal from political spheres. They might be interested in an alternative means of political activities. Kaase (1999), for instance, found that lower political trust leads to more active involvement in non-institutionalized political participation. It might be the case that associational participants are turning away from conventional politics and national institutions, and instead seeking alternative means of political engagement. Whether low political trust expressed by associational participants indicates the general tendency of political cynicism, or attention to an alternative stream of political process, will remain unproved unless a comprehensive examination including various modes of political behavior is conducted. Unfortunately, the survey employed in this study does not contain measures of political behavior other than political trust and commitment to voting. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate the impact of social capital on an extensive set of political behavior, both conventional and unconventional, in future studies.
Citizen disaffection with politics has been a serious public concern, and that is why the social capital theory absorbed an enormous amount of attention because it was believed to provide a key to the cure for the political alienation of citizens. Social trust is undeniably a civic virtue to be valued in democratic societies. Vibrant civil society apparently relies on how well citizens trust each other and co-operate for mutual social benefits. However, due to the excessive emphases given to social trust by the social capital theory, the factors intervening between social trust and political engagement, which might be more important ingredients of political revitalization, have been more or less obscured. Without eradicating political corruption and improving institutional performance, social trust will be of no effect in terms of invigorating political life. If building social trust is one way to strengthen a healthier conduct of democratic politics, the other way of necessity is to improve institutional performance and therefore to increase citizen support. Future scholarship is encouraged to focus on investigating how the intervening factors play a role in determining the impact of social capital on political life.
Notes

1 According to the Freedom House annual surveys, South Korea achieved a mean score of 2.5 (2 for political rights and 3 for civil liberties) in the 1988-89 survey, which indicates a “free” country, and a score of 2 (2 for both scales) in the 1993-94 survey. Scores ranging from 1 to 2.5 indicate “free,” 3 to 5.5 “partly free,” and over 5.5 up to 7 “not free” (See Freedom in the World Country Ratings at www.freedomhouse.org).

2 Categorization of the level of democracy was referred to in Pippa Norris’s work, Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism (2002). In the book, Norris classified political systems based on Freedom House ratings of political rights and civil liberties: older democracies, newer democracies, semi-democracies, and non-democracies. South Korea was classified as a newer democracy, and ranked 19th among newer democracies, after both Freedom House ratings of democracy and the UNDP human development index were taken into account (See Norris, 2002: 225-230).

3 Although most of the studies investigating social trust used the General Social Survey (and the World Values Survey) question item (“Generally speaking would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”), the current survey question items are believed not to yield a significant deviation from the GSS item. The questions of social trust in the current survey focus on weak-tie and thin trust, just as the contents of the questions used in other social capital research. An underlying logic is that if one gives a positive response to the questions of social trust in this survey, he or she should also give a positive answer to the GSS question.
References


Table 1. Categories of participating associations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid percent</th>
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<tr>
<td>Social service</td>
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<td>Religious organizations</td>
<td>80</td>
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<td>Environmental organisations</td>
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<td>0.6</td>
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<td>Consumer groups</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
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<td>Human rights groups</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
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<td>Hobby groups</td>
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<td>6.1</td>
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<td>Arts associations</td>
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<td>1.2</td>
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<td>Workers’ groups</td>
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<td>Social groups</td>
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<td>0.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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Table 2. Hierarchical regression analysis to estimate the impacts of social capital, political perceptions, and commitment to voting, on political trust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
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<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
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<td>b</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>b</td>
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<td>.04</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<td>-.09*</td>
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<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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<td>-.29**</td>
<td>-.18**</td>
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<td>-.17**</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.08*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>.13</td>
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<td>73.21**</td>
<td>7.36**</td>
<td>5.51*</td>
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Notes. N=850, *p<.05, **p<.01. Entries for b are unstandardized regression coefficients, and those for β are standardized coefficients.
Table 3. Correlations between associational involvement and trust in institutions

<table>
<thead>
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<th>r</th>
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<td>Education system</td>
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<tr>
<td>Military</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National courts</td>
<td>-.07*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government civil service</td>
<td>-.09**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churches</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press</td>
<td>-.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitals</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>-.07*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private enterprise</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Notes. N= 850, * p < .05, ** p < .01. Entries for r are bivariate correlation coefficients.
Figure 1. The number of civic associations in South Korea

Source. Korea National Statistical Office
Figure 2. Voting turnout in elections in South Korea

Source: Korea National Statistical Office.
Figure 3. Path model for the relationships between social capital, political perceptions, commitment to voting, and political trust

Notes. The paths leading from associational involvement are not shown here, except those leading to social trust and political trust, because none of the other paths was significant. * p<.05, ** p<.01