

Political Trust

Webinar: Regímenes y Políticas de Cohesión Social:

Del análisis a la implementación

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Subject

The stability of democratic regimes rests, amongst others, on some level of political support and social cohesion.

In line with David Easton's concept of system support (1965), political trust represents an important ingredient.

Arguably, political trust is associated with numerous beneficial outcomes.

Citizens are politically more interested, more inclined to vote and to abide by the law.

Not less important, political and social trust are consistently and positively associated with each other.

Political trust in times of crisis

Political trust is the most volatile element of the concept of political support. That is, citizens' trust in political institutions is also subject to macro-level developments, e.g. economic growth, unemployment, corruption, scandals, etc.

Yet, political trust is a valuable heuristic for governments that intend to implement or reform public policies as they are perceived to be trustworthy actors and acting in the common interest.

What have we learnt about the relevance of political trust during the Covid pandemic?

Apparently, there are two effective models to make citizens follow lockdown instructions:

- Implementable sanctions high/severe enough to coerce people
- Trustful citizens that follow the rules/restrictions of trustworthy institutions and actors (Swedish model?)

How do some countries currently fare compared to others and what does political trust have to do with it? E.g., the U.S., Denmark, Chile....

What will be the consequences of the pandemic for the role of the state?

Well, it depends!

In Europe, we observe huge financial programs, both at the national and European level, to counteract the enormous economic fallouts.

The role of the state is changing as demands for its multifold interventions have skyrocketed, not least with regard to unemployment/furlough schemes.

Political trust, i.e. trustworthy political institutions, should be better at implementing effective reforms which, in turn, results in a trust boost. Of course, current political interventions are integrated into an already existing and effective institutional setting.

Components of political trust, common indicators

'I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence (4), quite a lot of confidence (3), not very much confidence (2) or none at all (1)?

The police

The courts

The government (in your nation's capital)

Political parties

Parliament

The civil service'.

Mokken scale analysis, twelve trust items, pooled data (Hi and H scale coefficients and means), 'Search' procedure (exploratory)

	Political trust scale		Social trust scale	
	Hi (Z-scores)	Mean (Rank)	Hi (Z-scores)	Mean (Rank)
Police	0.51 (168.76)	2.59 (1)		
Courts	0.57 (191.54)	2.52 (2)		
Civil service	0.55 (185.62)	2.33 (3)		
Government	0.59 (200.53)	2.28 (4)		
Parliament	0.62 (207.93)	2.16 (5)		
Political parties	0.59 (190.02)	1.99 (6)		
Family members			0.19* (50.89)	3.74 (1)
People known			0.47 (136.06)	2.93 (2)
Neighbours			0.45 (129.40)	2.75 (3)
Other religion			0.56 (163.48)	2.38 (4)
Other nationality			0.57 (167.58)	2.31 (5)
Unknown people			0.54 (156.08)	2.02 (6)
	0.57 (330.13)		0.52 (238.33)	

'Dark sides' of political trust

The risk in these polarized times is that we focus too much on the rise of populism and the concomitant rise of distrust in political, economic or scientific elites and political institutions.

As important and timely as these studies currently are, they deflect the attention from phenomena that may not be uncommon in authoritarian regimes and seem to become more relevant in young or even established democracies.

Support for government and incumbent parties is high in some CEE countries despite the undermining of core democratic principles such as the rule of law or the freedom of the press; Hungary, illiberal democracy or Poland, other consequences: weakening of the European cohesion. Brazil is another interesting case in point.

'Dark sides' of political trust

While there is certainly a myriad of reasons that might explain high levels of support and trust I believe that the current times should take us scrutinize the normative foundation.

My main concern can be translated into the question: How valuable are principles of liberal, participatory, deliberative democracy to you? And how do they impact on your trust in political institutions in a given political context?

More concisely, I argue that political trust research could benefit if it was more explicitly connected to the assessment of citizens' democratic preferences and understanding (Norris, 2011 or Shin 2017).

Table 3: Linear regression analyses of attitudes towards democracy and political trust (beta coefficients)

	Importance of democracy Model 1	Evaluation of democracy Model 2	Political trust Model 3
Sex (0=male)	-.008	.008	.009
Age in 7 classes	.099***	.050*	.068**
Level of education (1-4)	.167***	.134***	.101***
Need for cognition (1-4)	.054**	-.040	-.024
Openness to experiences (1-7)	.074***	.022	-.004
Conventionalism (1-7)	-.024	.076***	.123***
Liberal notions (1-10)	.220***	.106***	.057*
Social democratic notions (1-10)	.052*	.066**	-.005
Undemocratic notions (1-10)	-.067**	.011	.062**
Political interest (1-4)	.081**	.047	.210***
Mainstream media (1-5)	.085***	.155***	.131***
Social media (1-5)	-.035	-.080***	-.058**
Leftist ++ ^a	-.042*	-.137***	-.106***
Leftist +	.004	.004	.017
Rightist +	.016	.020	.034
Rightist ++	-.037*	-.032	-.061**
Left-Right-Don't knows	-.043*	-.056*	-.074***
N	2,384	2,348	2,397
Adjusted R ² in %	21.0	11.7	16.7

Notes: ***p<.000, **p<.01, *p<.05; data is weighted by 'poids_gl' (design weight); ^a=reference category is the centre position (5 and 6 on the left-right scale); t-values in parentheses; tests for multicollinearity did not yield any noteworthy results.

Conclusions

In other words, my true concern is that we fail to sufficiently contextualize our object of research interest. Democracies all over the globe show signs of weakening.

To value the presence/existence of political trust without taking citizens' attitudes towards democratic principles into consideration is telling us only part of the story.

The role of the media as an amplifier of government messaging becomes relevant – of particular interest could be the level of direct or indirect media control (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic or Serbia); or, as for example in the U.S. the level of media concentration. Similarly, the role of social media becomes ever more critical and ambiguous.

With increasing political polarization, we could see in the future a widening trust gap between electoral winners and losers.