

# Effects of Trust in Parliament

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**T**rust is not a hot quality of government variable. It belongs to the family but it is a distant cousin at most. Trust is more of a prerequisite or facilitating factor further back in the funnel of causality than an operative QoG variable closely impacting different societal outcomes. But even if trust is a distant causal factor in the background it should not be underestimated. Its importance derives from the fact that trust supposedly lowers all forms of transaction costs in a society. Most things become more efficient and take less time in a society where people trust each other and trust leading institutions (Luhmann 1989, Misztal 1996, Holmberg 1999). Consequently, trust up to an undefined level is grease not gravel in a society. Suspicion is harmful, but so is in all likelihood blind faith too. Trust on a “lagom” high level is best. And it should preferably be based more on knowledge and evaluative cognitions than on affects and preconceived notions.

Trust comes in all different forms (Bouckaert and van de Walle 2003). In our case the focus will be on trust in parliament. If we have to pick just one type of institutional trust, confidence in parliament is a rather obvious choice. Parliaments are – or should at least be - a central decision making institution in all (democratic) systems (O’Brien, Stapenhurst and Johnston 2008). Parliaments are rule makers and if you do not have faith in the rule maker it is difficult to live by the rules. Hence, trust in parliament is probably more important for the functioning of a society than trust in many other institutions (Rolef 2006).

Empirical political science research has since long realized the importance of trust in parliaments. Few other trust objects have been so extensively measured across time and across national systems as trust in parliament (Bratton et al 2005, Brothén 2008). Trust in parliament can also be viewed as a proxy for generalized confidence in one’s own country’s political system and/or democratic regime. In our case, we will rely on data from the World Value Surveys collected in the years 1999-2002 for some seventy countries.

The potential importance of trust in parliament for good and desirable societal outcomes can be tested in many different areas. I have chosen to do a fairly extensive and broad examination involving some twenty different outcome areas; from health and ecological outcomes to economic and social outcomes. Two softer but not less relevant feel good outcomes are also included – the extent to which people feel happy and are satisfied with their lives.

### **Trust in Parliament Rank Ordered Across Different Countries**

Measuring political trust in the WVS studies entails a special problem in authoritarian and non-democratic systems. People are not free to speak their mind or might be afraid to be overtly critical of government institutions. It is probably easier to express low trust in parliament in United Kingdom than

in China or Pakistan. Consequently, the validity of the trust results from many authoritarian countries could be put in question. In many instances we suspect that trust estimates will be too high.

In order to be able to control for this problem all of our analyses will be conducted two ways – first among all cases, including non-democratic nations, and second only among European and OECD countries where authoritarian regimes are less prevalent and where the quality of survey research results are more reliable.

In Table 1 all seventy six countries who took part in WVS 1999-2002 are rank ordered according to the percentage of their citizens who express trust in the national parliament. At the top we find nations where high proportions of the citizenry express trust. Toward the bottom are countries where people have less confidence in their parliament.

**[Table 1 about here]**

Our suspicion that authoritarian countries would exhibit not believable high levels of parliamentary trust is vindicated by the results. At the top of the rank order in Table 1 we find countries such as Vietnam, China, Bangladesh, Tanzania, Uganda and Pakistan; all of them with more than 75 percent of their citizens “volunteering” a high degree of confidence in the parliament. In the extreme cases of Vietnam and China the proportion of people supposedly trusting the parliament is 97 and 95 percent, respectively. Obviously, these are not trustworthy results.

The first democratic countries on the list appear on rank eight and ten with about 70 per cent of their citizens trusting the parliament. These most high ranking nations with believable estimates are Iceland and Norway.

At the bottom of the list we find countries like Macedonia, Peru, Lithuania, South Korea and Argentina with only between 7 and 11 percent of their citizens expressing confidence in the parliament. As these results reveal, we can not complain about a lack of variance in the trust variable. Variability can not be much better than from a high of 97 percent (Vietnam), alternatively 72 percent (Iceland), to a low of 7 percent (Macedonia).

In Table 2 many of the authoritarian countries with less trustworthy survey results are excluded. Now the rank order is restricted to forty five countries with higher quality in survey research and more credible results. Most non-democratic regimes are not present anymore. The trust list is now headed by a couple of small countries in Northern Europe – Iceland, Norway, Luxembourg and The Netherlands. United States is found on rank nineteen with United Kingdom in place twenty three. Russia is placed toward the bottom on rank forty. Lowest ranked is Lithuania, followed by South Korea and Czech

Republic. Among the low ranked is also New Zealand; a bit surprising or maybe we have discovered a measurement error?

[Table 2 about here]

### **Potential Trust Effects**

Given these rank orders in institutional trust across some seventy nations in total or across forty five countries with believable survey results, the interesting question becomes what kind of relationships there are between trust in parliament and a set of different societal outcome variables. The chosen outcome variables are about twenty and they represent a wide variety of areas from health and ecology to economics and social welfare. With one or two exceptions the normatively desirable outcomes is in most cases pretty unequivocal. Most of us agree that good health, low infant mortality, improved drinking water, low carbon emissions, high GDP per capita and a high Human Development Index rating are positive things. The opposite with bad health, dying infants, fouled water, lots of CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions and on average poor people with low HDI scores is worse. This is clearly more negative outcomes.

However, for some of our outcome variables agreement on what is the most desirable outcome is less obvious. Should a society be characterized by equality or inequality, low or somewhat higher unemployment levels, generous or less generous welfare provisions? Being a Swede I have opted for the Swedish solution. In the analysis I have classified high equality, low unemployment and generous welfare benefits as something positive for a society. And I have as well defined as positive feel good outcomes like many people being subjectively happy and satisfied with their lives. Only misanthropes think unhappiness is preferable to happiness.

Our study should be seen as a first rather crude benchmark. We restrict the investigation to a series of bivariate correlational and regression analyses with trust in parliament defined as the independent variable and the different outcome variables as the dependent variables. This is a rather original way of analyzing trust in parliament. In most other research on the subject trust in parliament is treated as a dependent variable, something to explain. And in that kind of research many of our societal outcomes are defined as independent explanatory variables (Hibbing and Pattersson 1994).

In most cases I would think this to be the most sensible way of studying the subject. If trust and outcomes are related, the most likely causal flow would probably originate and stem from the outcome side, not from the trust side. Peoples´ perceptions of different forms of performance and outcomes impinge on trust more than trust and resulting lowered transaction costs have an effect on outcomes.

But even if - in the interplay between trust and outcomes - the former plays the minor role, it can have an independent role. Trust is not only a reflection of outcomes in society. To a degree, trust is also an active agent of its own. At least, that is the hypothesis that we will entertain in this paper.

The results in the form of simple bivariate correlation coefficients and whether the potential effects of trust are positive or negative on the outcome variables are presented in Table 3. The direction of the effects (positive or negative) is determined by the leaning of the estimated regression lines. Two sets of results are presented in the table – one for all seventy six cases and a second for the limited number of forty five mostly European and OECD countries.

**[Table 3 about here]**

We can start by looking at the results from the analysis involving all countries, including many non-democratic ones with dubious results when it comes to trust in parliament. Our hypothesis is to find at least medium sized correlations, and what we have defined as positive relations between trust in parliament and the outcome variables. Given this expectation, the results are a disappointment. A majority of the relationships are non-existent or have the wrong direction – potential effects are negative instead of positive. This is the case for no more than sixteen of our twenty two analyzed relationships.

For example, in the full data set, high trust in parliament is related to *short* life expectancy, *high* infant mortality, *bad* water quality and *low* HDI scores. Hence, a conclusion could be that countries where people trust their parliament tend to be countries where life is pretty miserable. But that would be a wrongful conclusion. And the reason is that the measurement of trust is unreliable in many mostly authoritarian countries.

When these countries with questionable measurements of trust in parliament are excluded the results look quite different and much more in accordance with what we expect. Now very few relationships are non-existent or negative (only three). Most potential effects are positive (nineteen) and some relationships indicate a respectable strength with correlations around .60. When we restrict the analysis to countries with trustworthy measures of trust in parliament it is very clear that the trust variable has a potential positive effect on many desirable societal outcomes. For instance, rather strong effects are found for outcomes like long life expectancy, sustainable environment, improved drinking water, high GDP per capita, generous social benefits and subjective feelings of happiness.

The deviant cases where the relationships are non-existent or very weak or even negative are of course of a special interest. They indicate instances where the trust variable is irrelevant or where it has been overrun by other more potent variables. There are two outcomes with negative relationships with trust

in parliament – carbon emissions and GDP growth. Countries with high trust in parliament tend to emit more CO<sub>2</sub> and to have a somewhat lower economic growth rate than nations with less trusting populations. However, the conclusion from these results should not be that trust in parliament somehow is a causal agent here, indirectly causing high carbon emissions and slow economic growth. A more accurate model would relegate the trust variable to a less prominent place in the background with spurious effects and highlight other causal factors having to do with, for example, production systems and the development of the economy. People trusting their parliament is not to be blamed.

### **Trust in Parliament Matters**

If we only see through all the bad measurements of trust in many authoritarian systems, our simple benchmark study clearly indicates that trust in parliament matters for a whole host of desirable societal outcomes and for the good society. But, of course, this is only the beginning. Now comes the task of making the model more complicated by introducing additional variables and test whether trust in parliament truly has any independent effects after we have controlled for other potential causal variables.

That is, however, an assignment for another day and for another paper. For now, we can appreciate that trust in parliament in most cases dances with the angels. When we started the analysis by looking at the results based on all available WVS data – including data from many authoritarian countries with dubious surveys – it first looked like trust in parliament danced with someone else. But now we know better. Trust in parliament matters on the positive side.

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## Appendix

**Table 1. Trust in Parliament. Rank Ordering of 76 Countries (Percent and Mean)**

Rank	Country	Trust in parliament (%)	Trust in parliament (mean)	Rank	Country	Trust in parliament (%)	Trust in parliament (mean)
1	Vietnam	97	3.7	39	Belgium	36	2.2
2	China	95	3.3	40	Germany	36	2.2
3	Bangladesh	89	3.3	41	United Kingdom	36	2.2
4	Tanzania	79	3.2	42	Chile	35	2.2
5	Uganda	77	3.1	43	Moldova	35	2.1
6	Pakistan	76	3.0	44	Venezuela	34	2.1
7	Azerbaijan	74	2.9	45	Italy	34	2.2
8	Iceland	72	2.8	46	Hungary	34	2.2
9	Iran	70	2.9	47	Brazil	34	1.9
10	Norway	69	2.7	48	Algeria	33	2.0
11	Egypt	68	2.9	49	Poland	33	2.2
12	Jordan	65	2.8	50	Ireland	31	2.2
13	Luxembourg	63	2.6	51	El Salvador	31	2.1
14	Philippines	61	2.7	52	Australia	31	2.2
15	South Africa	60	2.7	53	Armenia	30	1.9
16	Netherlands	55	2.6	54	Latvia	27	2.0
17	India	55	2.6	55	Bulgaria	27	2.1
18	Malta	52	2.4	56	Estonia	27	2.1
19	Sweden	51	2.5	57	Ukraine	27	2.0
20	Zimbabwe	50	2.5	58	Slovenia	25	2.1
21	Portugal	49	2.4	59	Colombia	25	1.9
22	Denmark	49	2.5	60	Greece	24	2.0
23	Spain	48	2.4	61	Serbia and Montenegro	24	2.0
24	Taiwan	46	2.5	62	Mexico	23	1.9
25	Albania	45	2.3	63	Croatia	23	2.0
26	Nigeria	45	2.4	64	Morocco	22	1.8
27	Switzerland	44	2.3	65	Japan	22	2.0
28	Finland	44	2.4	66	Bosnia and Herzegovina	20	2.0
29	Turkey	43	2.2	67	Russian Federation	19	1.8
30	Indonesia	43	2.4	68	Romania	19	1.8
31	Slovakia	43	2.3	69	New Zealand	15	1.9
32	Uruguay	42	2.2	70	Dominican Republic	12	1.8
33	Canada	41	2.3	71	Czech Republic	12	1.8
34	Austria	41	2.4	72	Argentina	11	1.7
35	France	41	2.2	73	Korea, South	11	1.7
36	Georgia	41	2.2	74	Lithuania	11	1.8
37	United States	38	2.3	75	Peru	10	1.8
38	Belarus	37	2.2	76	Macedonia	7	1.5

**Comment:** The results come from World Values Survey 1999-2002 and the QoG dataset. The higher mean the more trust.

**Table 2. Trust in Parliament Ranked Among 45 European and OECD Countries (Percent and Mean)**

Rank	Country	Trust in parliament (%)	Trust in parliament (mean)
1	Iceland	72	2.8
2	Norway	69	2.7
3	Luxembourg	63	2.6
4	Netherlands	55	2.6
5	Malta	52	2.4
6	Sweden	51	2.5
7	Portugal	49	2.4
8	Denmark	49	2.5
9	Spain	48	2.4
10	Albania	45	2.3
11	Switzerland	44	2.3
12	Finland	44	2.4
13	Turkey	43	2.2
14	Slovakia	43	2.3
15	Canada	41	2.3
16	Austria	41	2.4
17	France	41	2.2
18	Georgia	41	2.2
19	United States	38	2.3
20	Belarus	37	2.2
21	Belgium	36	2.2
22	Germany	36	2.2
23	United Kingdom	36	2.2
24	Moldova	35	2.1
25	Italy	34	2.2
26	Hungary	34	2.2
27	Poland	33	2.2
28	Ireland	31	2.2
29	Australia	31	2.2
30	Armenia	30	1.9
31	Latvia	27	2.0
32	Bulgaria	27	2.1
33	Estonia	27	2.1
34	Ukraine	27	2.0
35	Slovenia	25	2.1
36	Greece	24	2.0
37	Serbia and Montenegro	24	2.0
38	Croatia	23	2.0
39	Japan	22	2.0
40	Russian Federation	19	1.8
41	Romania	19	1.8
42	New Zealand	15	1.9
43	Czech Republic	12	1.8
44	Korea, South	11	1.7
45	Lithuania	11	1.8

**Comment:** The results come from World Values Surveys 1999-2002 and the QoG dataset. The higher mean the more trust.

**Table 3. Correlates of Trust in parliament (r)**

Societal Outcome Variables	All Available Countries in the QoG Data Bank			Limited Number of Countries , mostly European and OECD		
	r	Effect of QoG	n	r	Effect of QoG	n
<b>Health Outcomes</b>						
Subjective Health	.00	None	45	+.37	Positive	15
Life Expectancy at Birth	-.33	Negative	74	+.51	Positive	45
Infant Mortality Rate	+.41	Negative	70	-.28	Positive	40
Mortality Rate Children < 5 years	+.39	Negative	75	-.30	Positive	45
Prevalence of HIV	+.20	Negative	71	-.10	Positive	42
<b>Ecological Outcomes</b>						
Environmental Sustainability Index	-.17	Negative	74	+.56	Positive	43
Air Quality	-.33	Negative	74	±.00	None	43
Water Quality	-.14	Negative	74	+.36	Positive	43
Improved Drinking Water Source	-.26	Negative	61	+.46	Positive	32
Carbon Emissions	-.20	Positive	76	+.17	Negative	45
Forest Cover Change	+.10	Positive	66	+.40	Positive	37
<b>Economic Outcomes</b>						
GDP per Capita	±.00	None	71	+.59	Positive	43
GDP Growth	±.00	None	71	-.14	Negative	43
Gini Index	±.00	None	75	-.37	Positive <sup>1)</sup>	44
Unemployment	-.14	Positive	30	-.22	Positive <sup>1)</sup>	29
<b>Social Outputs/Outcomes</b>						
Social Security Laws	-.36	Negative	61	+.10	Positive	37
Benefit Generosity Index	+.68 <sup>2)</sup>	Positive	18	+.68	Positive	18
Relative Poverty Rate	-.45	Positive	29	-.36	Positive	27
Human Development Index	-.36	Negative	74	+.47	Positive	44
<b>Subjective Feel Good Outcomes</b>						
Happiness	+.24	Positive	75	+.59	Positive	44
Life Satisfaction	±.00	None	76	+.59	Positive	45
The Good Society Index (GSI)	-.14	Negative	70	+.58	Positive	41

<sup>2)</sup>The same countries as in column 2

<sup>1)</sup>less inequality and less unemployment

**Comment:** Results come from the QoG data bank and WVS 1999 – 2002. Trust in parliament is seen as a QoG variable. “Effect of QoG” indicates whether trust in parliament is positively or negatively related to a “good” outcome in the societal outcome variables. The set of European and OECD countries include countries with more reliable and trustworthy survey research; countries where the trust in parliament results are plausible. n = number of countries.