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OVERVIEW OF TRUST IN STATES AND IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS. HOW CITIZENS TRUST IN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS?

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ABSTRACT

Trust has a cohesive force, it is an organizing force, and counteracts disunity in organizations. It can provide a forum for common understanding and interpretation, and is suitable for remedying misunderstandings and misinterpretations. It is a supporting element in the interpretation of reality, which is a challenge of all times, especially with regard to states and public institutions. But why do we trust an institution, or why not? What makes citizens trust the state more, and what objective factors destroy their trust? Today we are experiencing a period burdened by wars, the effects of which are felt in every part of the world. Mental and physical security is at stake - it can be said that the citizens of states are exposed to the highest risk. In the meantime, the OECD's trust research of the past two years can be analyzed with curiosity and contains lessons, with numerous rankings, comparisons, and lessons. It should be emphasized that states can do something to increase the sense of security and are doing so in line with the initiatives formulated following the 2021 OECD trust survey.

KEYWORDS: State, Trust, Organizational Trust, Public Institution.

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INTRODUCTION

Global trends such as decreasing public trust, political polarisation and increasing mis- and disinformation have sparked interest in understanding the impact of a lack of trust on democracies. This paper provides an analysis on the socioeconomic characteristics, perceptions of political voice and forms of political engagement of individuals who express a lack of trust in public institutions, with the objective of understanding the impacts of lack of trust on democratic governance and identifying governments' actions to engage citizens in policymaking. The paper draws on data from the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions, first carried out between November 2021 and March 2022 across 22 OECD countries and can serve as basis for further analysis of data collected through new rounds of the OECD Trust Survey.[20]

Trust in government and public institutions is driven by many interacting factors. The OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions distinguishes different categories of factors that influence levels of trust. First, public governance drivers assess the degree to which people expect institutions to be reliable and responsive in formulating and implementing policies and services and to uphold the values of fairness, integrity and openness.

Second, trust levels relate to the perceived capacity of government to address complex and/or global challenges. Finally, various individual and group-based cultural and socio-economic factors and political preferences influence trust (OECD, 2024). The relationships of these multiple factors with trust levels need to be explored simultaneously. [16]

Institutional trust is a complex, context-dependent, dynamic phenomenon that can also create positive feedback loops, which is why researching it only seems easy. Measuring it is easy, as the vast majority of respondents have no problem answering a question such as "How much do you trust the government (parliament, courts, etc.) on a five-point scale, where 1: I don't trust it at all, 5: I trust it completely?" It is undoubtedly an advantage that trust is not a complicated mental construct, and everyone thinks they are familiar with the concept and the emotion it covers. [12]

Trust is defined as a person's belief that another person or institution will act consistently with their expectation of positive behaviour (OECD, 2017). The OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (OECD, 2024) provides the original data to explore people's experience with, and expectations of, public governance. The 2023 wave of the survey collected data from nearly 60 000 respondents across 30 OECD countries, up from 22 countries in 2021. Most countries were surveyed in October-November 2023. The 11-point response scale is aggregated as follows: 0-4 = Low or no trust/unlikely; 5 = Neutral; 6-10 = High or moderately high trust/likely. An advisory group of public officials, national statistical office representatives and international experts contributed to the development, oversight and implementation of the survey. [20]

Research of Prat's et al (2024) identifies and describes who are the individuals with a lack of trust, and whether/how they engage in political activities, based on their socioeconomic and demographic characteristics and using their responses to four different questions included in the 2021 OECD Trust Survey on political engagement, political agency and policy priorities. They first describe and compare trust-lacking individuals by demographic, socioeconomic characteristics and political engagement, and then carry out a cluster analysis to analyse profiles or clusters of trust and political engagement accounting for multiple characteristics and perceptions simultaneously.

In this article, I would like to examine and present the most significant questions of the abovementioned and connected relevant research.

OECD Survey analysis declares, that global trends such as decreasing public trust, political polarisation and increasing mis- and disinformation have sparked interest in understanding the impact of a lack of trust on democracies. This paper provides an analysis on the socioeconomic characteristics, perceptions of political voice and forms of political engagement of individuals who express a lack of trust in public institutions, with the objective of understanding the impacts of lack of trust on democratic governance and identifying governments' actions to engage citizens in policymaking. The paper draws on data from the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (OECD Trust Survey), first carried out between November 2021 and March 2022 across 22 OECD countries and can serve as basis for further analysis of data collected through new rounds of the OECD Trust Survey. [20]

Table 1: OECD framework on drivers of trust in public institutions, 2021

Levels of Trust in Different Public Institutions		
Trust in national government, local government, civil service, parliament, police, political parties, courts, legal systems and intergovernmental organisations		
Public Governance Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions		
Competencies	Responsiveness	Provide efficient, quality, affordable, timely and citizen-centred public services that are co-ordinated across levels of government and satisfy users.
	Reliablilty	Anticipate needs and assess evolving challenges. Minimise uncertainty in the economic, social and political environment.
Values	Openness	Provide open and accessible information so the public better understands what government is doing.
	Integrity	Align public institutions with ethical values, principles, and norms to safeguard the public interest. Take decisions and use public resources ethically, promoting the public interest over private interests while combating corruption.
	Fairness	Improve living conditions for all. Provide consistent treatment of businesses and people regardless of their background and identify
Cultural, Economic and Political Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions		
Individual and group identities, traits, and preferences, including socio-economic status; interpersonal socialisation and networks. Distrust of and disengagement from the political system.		
Perception of government action on intergenerational and global challenges		
• Perceptions of government commitment to and effectiveness in addressing long-term challenges.		

Source: From OECD (2022), Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy: Main Findings From the 2021 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions, https://doi.org/10.1787/b407f99c-en

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a kind of connection between cooperation and trust. [2] In the optimal case, the state and its citizens live together in effective cooperation and manage their affairs. Citizens' attitudes and perceptions towards public institutions as organizations vary. The extent to which we trust a state or a country depends on many factors. The "trust index" is a well-known tool and opportunity in the business world aimed at consumer trust, since turnover and purchases are where there is trust - in the long term. We can buy in a bad store once, order a bad product - but we will not repeat this decision - based on common sense and sound and conscious financial decision-making. [6], [10], [5], [9]

Trust in government depends on many factors, both at the individual and societal level. The OECD Framework on the Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions provides an overview of these drivers, covering both public governance-related drivers of trust (governments' competencies and values) as well as individuals' socioeconomic factors, political attitudes and behaviour, and the government's capacity to address complex and global challenges. [20]

Not only questions related to the "object" of trust can be raised, but also questions related to the subject of trust. Is it possible to examine not only a person's trust in someone or something, but also, for example, an organization's trust in other organizations? How is this conceptually interpreted and made tangible and measurable? Herian and Neal (2016) see it necessary in all cases to clarify the type of actors the investigation of trust is aimed at. They basically distinguish nine possibilities depending on whether the type of trust recipient and trust giver is a person, group or institution. [11]

The relationship between the state and citizens can also be characterized by a kind of duality: the individual rightfully expects the state to protect him, but in return he gives up certain privileges, which he transfers to the state. Such can be centralized regulations, which appear in the form of laws. [8]

Following the sharp decline in public trust following the 2008 global financial crisis, OECD countries called at the 2013 OECD Ministerial Council for greater efforts to understand trust in public institutions and its impact on economic performance and people's well-being. As part of this mission, the OECD's Public Governance Committee developed a unique policy and analytical framework to measure the drivers of public trust and to better link the policy dialogue on trust with a practical reform agenda. The framework assesses the trustworthiness of institutions, aiming not only to assess the extent to which people trust public institutions, but also to assess their expectations about their future behaviour and performance. The OECD defines trust as "a person's belief that another person or institution will act in accordance with their expectations of positive behavior. Trust in government can therefore be understood as citizens' expectations that the government will carry out its

mandate competently, while acting for the benefit of society." [20]

The basic question of Boda et al.'s (2016) research is whether public institutions work better if people trust them. Their starting hypothesis is that expectations related to normative (ethical) and, within that, procedural fairness influence institutional trust. Their studies also examine alternative and complementary explanations – as they do not believe that fairness is the only aspect that affects trust. The most important alternative explanations are related to individual utility and the perceived effectiveness of institutions. Their assumption is that people in a better social position trust institutions more.

The second research question concerned the presumed effect of trust and procedural fairness on cooperation with institutions and laws. Although there is ample evidence in the literature for the existence of this effect, it was noted that the overwhelming majority of research was conducted in the American context. The question is whether the mechanism linking trust and perceptions of fairness with cooperation and compliance can also be demonstrated in Hungarian conditions. It is noted that most studies – for example, Tyler's works (Tyler, 1990, 2011) – only examine attitudes and not actual behavior. In other words, the effect of trust that is demonstrated actually refers to the willingness to cooperate, and it is assumed that the declared willingness then appears in actual behavior. [2]

According to Prats et al. (2024), trust in government depends on a number of factors, both at the individual and societal levels. The OECD framework on drivers of trust in public institutions provides an overview of these drivers, covering both the drivers of trust in public governance (government competencies and values) and socio-economic factors, political attitudes and behaviour of individuals, and the ability of government to address complex and global challenges. Yet, while the literature suggests a generally positive impact of trust on social and economic outcomes, the consequences and variants of a lack of trust in public institutions are understudied and are equally important to study in the context of established democracies. Global trends such as declining public trust, political polarization, and increasing misinformation and disinformation have sparked interest in understanding the impact of a lack of trust on democracies. [20]

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study by Parts et al. (2024) draws on data from the OECD Survey on the Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (OECD Trust Survey), which was first conducted between November 2021 and March 2022 in 22 OECD countries, and can serve as a basis for further analysis of data collected in subsequent rounds of the OECD Trust Survey.

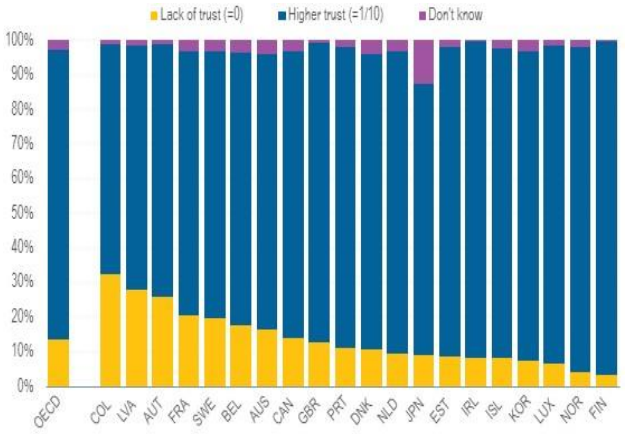


Figure 1. Proportion of respondents indicating a lack of trust in the national government by country
Source: OECD Trust Survey (2021)

Figure 1. shows the proportion of respondents indicating a lack of trust in the national government (response = 0 on a scale of 0-10) in 2021, on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all and 10 means completely trust the national government. The figure shows the proportion of 0 responses (highlighted in yellow) in each country. "Don't know" was a separate response category.

The study argues that it may be important to learn more about the characteristics of respondents expressing a lack of trust in order to understand the possible causes of a lack of trust and its consequences for political behavior. Recent studies suggest that people with a lack of trust are generally politically disengaged and apathetic, and that their lack of trust can arise for a variety of reasons and manifest itself in different ways. Distrust involves skepticism and critical evaluation of the functioning and governance of public institutions. [4]

While distrust is associated with the control and accountability expected of critical citizens in a democracy, distrust involves structural and emotional beliefs that are difficult to change with government policies and actions. [13]

In other words, only a segment, and not all, of distrustful people may exhibit cynical distrust [13] and display political behavior such as withdrawal from politics or support for non-establishment or populist movements. Distrust and active distrust in public institutions are distinct, suggest different psychological beliefs, and lead to different political attitudes and behavior. [20]

RESULTS

Prats et al. (2024) expect, based on their research, that not all respondents who do not trust the government are equally disengaged and apathetic. In fact, among those who lack trust, some may be critical of the government and democratic political systems and may feel that they have no right to influence government actions (indicating low external political efficacy), yet believe in their own political capacity (indicating higher levels of internal political efficacy).

This group of people who distrust the government selectively engage in non-traditional forms of political participation, such as demonstrations and boycotts, driven by critical thinking and challenging attitudes towards politics. In contrast, we expect the second group of people who lack trust to exhibit political apathy (distrust), withdraw from all political activities, and exhibit low levels of political agency, feeling that they have little influence on political processes and outcomes. Table 2. summarizes the general expectations based on the literature review.

Table 2. Expectations: Lack of trust and political engagement

	Lack of confidence, apathy and withdrawal	Lack of trust, confidence in the ability to participate in politics, and lack of commitment
Social economics	Younger; economically vulnerable	
Policy preference	Politically in opposition. Reducing inequalities is the most important political priority.	
Political participation	Low participation in political activities in general	Low participation in traditional forms of engagement; high participation in unconventional political activities
Political effectiveness	Does not feel like they have a political say; low confidence to participate in politics	Does not feel like he has a political say; high confidence in participating in politics

Source: OECD Trust Survey (2021)

Prats et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the characteristics of people who do not trust their government in 20 OECD countries and their relationship to the different dimensions examined in the 2021 OECD Trust Survey, including political engagement, political agency and different ways of taking positions along the government-opposition continuum. The analysis concluded that not all people who do not trust their government are equally cynical mistrustful, most feel that they have no voice, but many nevertheless have a critical attitude towards politics. There are not only similarities but also significant differences in political attitudes and engagement among those who do not trust public institutions.

The data show that respondents who lack trust in their national government are more likely to have financial concerns (78% feel financially concerned), low levels of education (29% have a lower education level) and prioritise 'materialist' issues over 'post-materialist' concerns, such as reducing public debt (mentioned by 55%) over climate change (mentioned by 41%). Most importantly, this trust-lacking group also feels less able to participate in politics (42%) or to have a say in what government does (7%), compared to higher trusting respondents (45% and 54% respectively).

Yet, results of the analysis highlight that not all trust-lacking respondents are equally disengaged. While the group of people who lack trust in government are less likely to participate in national elections compared to higher-trusters (74% and 81%, respectively) and tend to politically position themselves in opposition to government, many of them actively engage in a variety of forms of participation such as demonstrations (13%), or more unconventional activities, such as posting political content online (27%) or boycotting products for political reasons. Not all respondents who express a lack of trust are to the same extent engaged in formal and informal ways of political participation. Overall, the findings suggest that part of individuals who lack trust actively participate in political activities but lack confidence in their influence or political voice. In other words, they are politically engaged but disenchanted. The main difference between those who feel more disenchanted and those who are apathetic is their confidence in their ability to participate in politics. This finding provides actionable advice for governments: institutions need to continue and further invest in shaping political attitudes by promoting a culture of political engagement and civic education. [20]

This research sheds light on the nuanced facets within the trust spectrum, differentiating between individuals indicating political disengagement and a pervasive cynicism toward the political system and public institutions, referred to as distrust, and individuals reflective of more critical assessments and a disposition to work within the political system, known as mistrust. This deeper analysis of the trust family's distinct characteristics contributes to our understanding of the dynamics surrounding trust in government, thus offering valuable insights for both academic scholarship and practical policymaking. The new round of the OECD Trust Survey has also included additional survey questions (for example, on sources of information and the information ecosystem) to open

potential avenues for further research and deepen our understanding of a lack of trust in public institutions and its multifaceted implications on democracy [15].

Pusztai's (2018) study on trust in higher education draws attention to the fact that student distrust, whether general, affecting public institutions, including the education system, or institutional role partners (teachers, administrators), is, overall, multiple faces of the same social fact, which may be a predictor of social homelessness in the next generation of graduates. [18]

Boda's (2016) study examined the problem of legal compliance from the sociological approach to law. The basic premise of this is that law is a specific form of social control, the specificity of which is, among other things, that its enforcement is ensured by the state. However, the role of the state cannot be reduced to mere coercion – there are numerous theoretical and empirical arguments in favor of the fact that law cannot function solely on the basis of coercion.

Among the sociological explanations of legal compliance, the above-mentioned authors dealt with the role of legitimacy and trust. Their choice of topic is justified on the one hand by the fact that scientific interest in the role of trust has increased in recent years, and numerous studies have been directed at examining the roots of trust, its effects, and its role in legal compliance on the one hand, and its role in legal compliance on the other. On the other hand, it is a recurring claim that institutional trust, and within this trust in the legal system, is low in our country and this is related to the legitimacy problems of the legal system. The data show that the level of trust in the legal system is not particularly low in international comparison – it corresponds to our level of development and is higher than similar data in neighboring countries. It is true that the level of trust in individual institutions is more strongly correlated with each other than in Western European countries, and in particular the connection with political institutions is stronger.

Perhaps this means that the legitimacy of individual institutions and the system as a whole is fragile, that is, what Easton called "diffuse support" for the political system is weak, and "specific support" for political leadership is relatively strong.

At the same time, international studies examining the roots of trust – apart from minor differences – have not found any significant differences between the Central European and Western regions. However, the data do not support the relationship between trust and law-abiding attitudes/behavior, and the main reason for this is that the usual way of measuring law-abiding attitudes clearly gives contradictory results in Central and Eastern European countries. In precise terms, we must say that the methods used so far are not suitable for examining this relationship. However, there are arguments that there are no interpretable results not only because of the method of investigation, but also because the legitimacy aspect plays a negligible role in domestic law-abiding due to the specificities of our legal culture. However, further research is needed to determine this. [3]

A conclusion may review the main points of the paper, do not replicate the abstract as the conclusion. A conclusion might elaborate on the importance of the work or suggest applications and extensions.

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I presented research results regarding the relationship between public institutions and trust that highlight how citizens' perceptions of institutional transparency, accessibility, and responsiveness fundamentally shape their willingness to rely on and cooperate with the state. The relationship between trust and public institutions has already been pointed out by many researchers, but at the same time significant gaps remain in understanding how different spheres of public life—such as education, local governance, and civic participation—interact to influence citizens' broader trust orientations.

This research pointed out the relationship between the public sphere and the perceived legitimacy of state institutions, as well as between institutional performance and citizens' everyday experiences. In particular, the multifaceted cooperation with teachers, professional stakeholders, and community actors emerged as an important dimension of institutional trust formation. These aspects—and the comparative examination of their interrelations—have not been compared so far, and therefore it was not possible to formulate the dynamics of trust-building processes directly.

Based on the results of our research, moderate and cautious generalizable conclusions can be drawn, because the empirical patterns identified are context-dependent, influenced by local institutional cultures, political environments, and the varying expectations that citizens hold toward different public institutions. Nevertheless, the study draws attention to the fact that strengthening trust in public institutions requires not only structural reforms but also sustained efforts to enhance communication, participation, and meaningful cooperation between the state and its citizens.

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