All you need is trust

Informing the role of government in the COVID-19 context

Monica Brezzi (monica.brezzi@oecd.org), Santiago González (santiago.gonzalez@oecd.org), Mariana Prats (mariana.prats@oecd.org) Directorate for Public Governance, OECD

Measures of people's trust in government are commonly used indicators of public administration performance. During the pandemic for example, trust was found to be strongly correlated with citizens' compliance to measures designed to flatten the infection curve (Bargain and Aminjonov, 2020). In addition, a consensus is emerging that the erosion of people's trust in government is nurturing political polarisation, and favouring the emergence of populist movements (Devine et al. 2020).

Understanding what is captured by these metrics, and the role that trust plays in the implementation of policies, has become even more relevant during the COVID-19 crisis. The refinement of this understanding will contribute to the design of policy in the direction of an inclusive, fair and sustainable recovery, as well as monitoring its implementation, based on methodologically sound and relevant governance statistics.

Contrary to many existing trust measures, the OECD approach aims to understand citizens' perception and evaluation of the public sector, measure the influence of trust on policymaking, and identify public policy tools that can enhance trust.

Our focus is primarily on improving measures of trust in institutions and developing comparative evidence on its main determinants that are amenable to policy, namely responsiveness, reliability, integrity, fairness and openness as defined in the 'Framework of Citizen's Trust in Public Institutions' (OECD, 2017 – Table 1). With this in mind, through a dialogue with policy makers, data providers, academia and civil society the OECD is revisiting the way we understand public trust to take into account the long-term impact of COVID-19 and to improve the measurement of the main drivers of public trust.

An experimental module of questions covering these five drivers of trust is included in the OECD Guidelines for Measuring Trust (OECD, 2017). The module includes situational questions (e.g. How do you think government institutions would behave under a given specific circumstance? If X happens, do you trust government

Table 1. OECD Framework on the determinants of trust in government institutions

COMPONENT	DIMENSION	DEFINITION
Competence: ability of governments to deliver to citizens the services they need, at the quality level they expect	Responsiveness	The provision of accessible, efficient and citizen-oriented public services that effectively address the needs and expectations of people, and evolve over time along with these needs.
	Reliability	The ability of governments to minimise uncertainty in the economic, social and political environment facing people, and to act in a consistent and predictable manner in responding to this uncertainty.
Values: drivers and principles that inform and guide government action	Integrity	The alignment of public institutions with broader principles and standards of conduct in order to safeguard the public interest while mitigating the risk of corruption.
	Openness/Inclusiveness	The extent to which relevant information is shared with citizens in an accessible and usable manner, actions and plans are transparent and a comprehensive approach to interact with stakeholders is in place.
	Fairness	The consistent treatment of citizens and business in policymaking and policy implementation.

Source: OECD (2017a)

institutions to do Y?) with a 1-10 scale from most unlikely to very likely. The statistical feasibility and empirical relevance have been tested in six countries through the OECD TrustLab (Murtin et al, 2018) and three countries through specific country case studies (OECD/KDI 2018, OECD forthcoming 2021, OECD, forthcoming 2022). In addition, a small survey on the determinants of institutional trust will be fielded to 12 European countries in 2021 and 2022 through the European Social Survey.

While accurate measures of responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness and fairness remain relevant to understand the determinants of people's trust in government, additional insights into what shapes trust during a crisis can help governments build robust evidence for the recovery from COVID-19. Three elements are emerging that will require more attention – and better measurement – for public institutions to regain and maintain citizens' trust.

1. Identifying pockets of institutional distrust and advancing towards common measurement of the drivers

One way to enhance the understanding of institutional trust would be to improve the representation of different population groups that may be systematically excluded from population surveys. Especially in the case of non-official statistics, it is not uncommon for urban areas to be over-represented, and even in official statistics, surveys may explicitly exclude some groups such as inmates, people in nursing homes, and the homeless.

In addition, in many countries, there are often laws in place prohibiting the collection of data that differentiates people based on whether they belong to a certain group. For example, in Denmark, Finland, France-New Caledonia, Japan, Norway and Sweden, laws impede collecting data on the basis of ethnicity (Balestra and Fleischer, 2018).

However, collecting data for the aggregate may mask significant differences across groups, and, so, constrain the ability to tackle disparities. For example, a recent population survey in the United States revealed that 45% of non-white Americans display low levels of trust in the federal government compared to 31% of white-Americans.[1]

Moreover, differences may occur at the sub-national level. Recent research for 173 regions in 28 EU countries found that variations in the level of trust in public administrations within countries can be large. For example, in Italy, Austria, Spain and Portugal more than 6% of the country variance of trust in public administrations is explained by regional variation (Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2020). More granular and disaggregated data can clearly help to better understand and reveal important pockets of distrust and in turn help to deliver better policy responses.

Finally, the questions in the experimental module on the drivers of institutional trust could be expanded and refined to better capture how citizens experience and evaluate their governments' performance and the robustness of governance principles such as integrity, openness and fairness. With these data, "good governance" could be assessed as experienced by citizens and not just on the design of policymakers.

In the context of a COVID-19 recovery, this information could also be used to increase government's accountability with regards to their recovery strategy, at a time when many regular oversight and accountability processes have been disrupted due to safety concerns. For example, data would help to identify whether vulnerable population groups and territories gain fair access to government services and benefit from measures put in place to mitigate the economic consequences of COVID-19.

2. Enhancing citizen's participation and better monitoring political attitudes

At a time when countries are defining measures for their long-term recovery from COVID-19, it is of utmost importance to understand how the public is involved, whether governments are listening to people's concerns and, equally, considering their interests. Ensuring open and equal access to policymaking processes is at the core of democratic public life, and effective policies.

For example, the "2020 Adaptation Strategy" of the city of Milan (Italy)[2] provides evidence that engaging people in open conversations that allow them to express their needs and expectations can not only improve service delivery, but also policy design. Participation and institutional trust are positively related. Civic-minded citizens are more participative and have higher levels of trust than passive citizens (Almond & Verba, 1963; Brehm & Rahn, 1997). Additionally, trust in public institutions is positively correlated with government "openness", which can be interpreted as "providing an explanation of government's actions".[3]

People's belief that they have a say in what government does (described as external political efficacy), and that they can participate and understand politics (described as internal political efficacy) are positively correlated with engagement and participation (Figure 1). Besides, high levels of political efficacy are considered desirable for the stability of democracies, as they are linked to people's feeling that they have power to influence governments' actions (Schulz 2005).

Of some concern however is that 60% of Europeans consider that mainstream parties and politicians do not care about people like them (Fundamental Rights Survey 2019),[4] while according to the YouGov Cambridge Globalism Survey,[5] 70% of respondents believe that the will of the people should be the highest principle in their country's politics. This, together with lower global turnout levels, as well as participation gaps based on demographic characteristics or socioeconomic status, have increased concerns regarding democratic legitimacy, substantiating the necessity to better understand the impact of efficacy on participation in its many forms.[6]

Better data on political attitudes will be key to anticipating democratic deficits and developing different strategies for governments to strengthen their efforts to improve efficacy, in its external (for example, developing new institutional mechanisms or channels to encourage participation) and internal dimension (for example, including more practical civic curricula at school).

Results from the 2012 European Social Survey, show a gap between the ideal view of democracy (expectations) and assessments of how democracy actually works. While people's evaluation of how democracy works is aligned with experts' evaluations (World Bank World Governance Indicators), people's expectations of a well-functioning democracy correlate negatively with the quality of governance in their own country. Monitoring people's expectations as well as their evaluations of democracy can aid our understanding of trust in government.
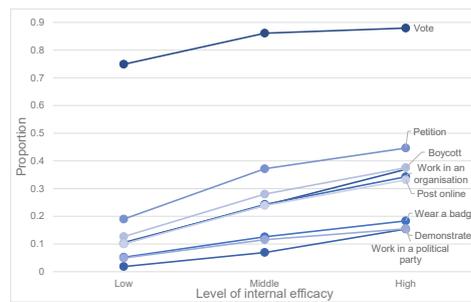
3. Capturing perceptions of long-term sustainability

The COVID-19 crisis has put governments through a 'stress-test' to deliver on the needs of people and

Figure 1. Political efficacy in its external and internal dimension corresponds to higher
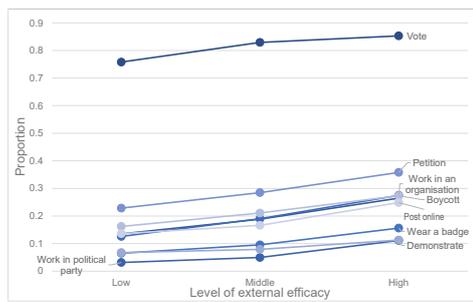
Source: ESS, 2018 Round 9

businesses and made clear the need for coordinated, coherent and simple institutional communication strategies. We know that trust, once lost, is hard to restore. Trust in others and in public institutions are at risk in times of crisis, and at the same time they play a protective role against systemic shocks like the current pandemic.

To understand the long-term impact of COVID-19 recovery policies, we should also include measures on the perception of long-term sustainability of those policies, in addition to measures of trust in the outcomes (government competence) and the processes (government guiding values) related to these policies. For example, recent data from Finland, a country that has maintained high levels of trust in government even during the pandemic, showed that the share of people believing that others are not complying with COVID related restrictions doubled between June and October 2020 (from 30% to 60%), and those perceiving low compliance also reported lower levels of trust.

Citizens' trust in the sustainability of government choices can take different forms, such as beliefs about whether the state can afford to maintain benefits given fiscal challenges, or continuity of public services and predictability of government actions. For example, an analysis on the results of targeted social interventions introduced by the government of Colombia since the pandemic shows that these measures have mitigated the impact of the crisis on extreme poverty and contributed to the inclusion of people in the formal economy. Around 45% of beneficiaries of financial aid have used the account generated to receive government benefits for their own savings, signalling confidence in the medium-term sustainability of this intervention.

The COVID-19 crisis has shed light on the importance of public trust for effective policy implementation, still there is room to improve and extend the evidence base on the drivers of trust and develop complementary measures (e.g. on compliance and long-term sustainability). The OECD is committed to advance in this direction; more information on the work currently being conducted is available at http://www.oecd.org/fr/gov/webinar-series-building-a-new-paradigm-for-public-trust.htm.

---

1 Pew Research Center, September, 2020, "Americans' Views of Government: Low Trust, but Some Positive Performance Ratings" https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/09/PP_09.14.20_views.of_.government.full_.report.pdf

2 Milan's "2020 Adaptation Strategy was defined after the COVID-19 lockdown, and is based on extensive consultation with citizens who submitted proposals on sustainability (e.g. expanding bicycle lanes), timing, spaces and services (e.g. increasing green areas) and labour (e.g. smart-working).

3 Highlights from "The ties that bind: Government Openness as Key Driver of Trust", September 11th, 2020, OECD Webinar series Building a New Paradigm for Public Trust

4 https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2020-fundamental-rights-survey-human-rights_en.pdf

5 https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/04ld9273ze/Globalism2020%20Guardian%20Populism%20Annual%20Comparison.pdf

6 For example, a Pew Research Center Survey found that American adults under 30 are the ones more likely to be politically informed by social media, they have lower political knowledge than other groups and are less politically engaged. https://www.journalism.org/2020/07/30/americans-who-mainly-get-their-news-on-social-media-are-less-engaged-less-knowledgeable/

References

Almond, G., and Verba, S. (1963) The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. doi:10.2307/j.ctt183pnr2.

Balestra, C. and L. Fleischer (2018), "Diversity statistics in the OECD: How do OECD countries collect data on ethnic, racial and indigenous identity?", OECD Statistics Working Papers, No. 2018/09, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/89bae654-en.

Brehm, J., & Rahn, W. (1997) "Individual-Level Evidence for the Causes and Consequences of Social Capital", American Journal of Political Science, 41(3), 999-1023. doi:10.2307/2111684.

Murtin, F., et al. (2018), "Trust and its determinants: Evidence from the Trustlab experiment", OECD Statistics Working Papers, No. 2018/02, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/869ef2ec-en.

OECD (2017a), Trust and Public Policy: How Better Governance Can Help Rebuild Public Trust, OECD Public Governance Reviews, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264268920-en.

OECD (2017b), OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264278219-en.

Schulz, W. (2005) Political Efficacy and Expected Participation among Lower and Upper Secondary Students. A comparative analysis with data from the IEA Civic Education Study. Paper prepared for the ECPR General Conference, Budapest.

Van de Walle, S and Migchelbrink, K. (2020) Institutional quality, corruption, and impartiality: the role of process and outcome for citizen trust in public administration in 173 European regions, Journal of Economic Policy Reform, DOI: 10.1080/17487870.2020.1719103