

Highlights from the OECD Webinar “Measuring Public Trust After A Pandemic And Economic Crises”

22 June 2020

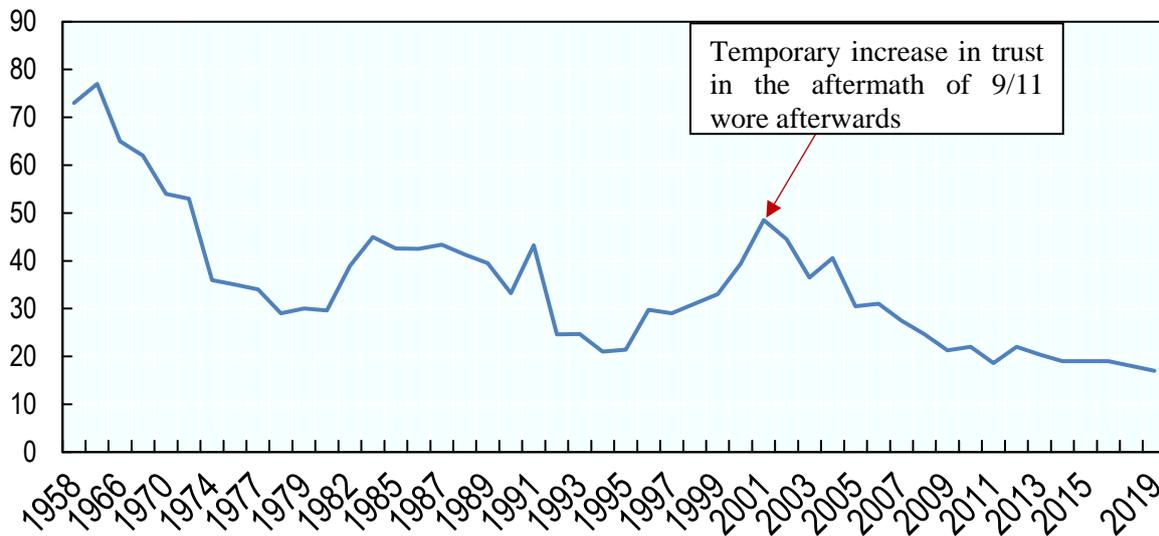
The first webinar of the OECD series “Building a New Paradigm for Public Trust” discussed recent evidence on public trust in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Particular attention was given to analysing the suitability of the [OECD competences and values framework](#) for understanding drivers of institutional trust in the current context, and the extent to which it can contribute to the supply of timely, sound and relevant indicators for informing decisionmakers as they design policies and services for an inclusive and sustainable recovery.

Despite reaching a peak during the COVID-19 crisis, trust is expected to decline as the “Rallying around the flag”¹ effect weakens

- Surveys such as the Edelman Trust Barometer and the European Quality of Life Survey report an increase in trust during the COVID-19 crisis. For example, the Edelman Trust Barometer shows an aggregate trust at 61% in May 2020 compared to 55% in January 2020.
- As expressed by Mrs Katju Holkeri, Head of the Public Governance Unit at the Ministry of Finance in Finland, “trust in public institutions need to be nurtured – it comes by foot and leaves on a horseback”. A recent study attributes the 30% increase of trust in the Finnish government from 2018 to a “rallying around the flag” effect resulting from the COVID-19 emergency ([EVA](#), 2020). It is likely that spikes in trust levels will fade away as time passes and challenges and trade-offs from the crisis become evident.
- Unfortunately, very few countries have series that are sufficiently long for analysing the effects of different types of shocks. In the case of the United States, data show that trust levels are volatile but tend to revert to their average value in the short to medium term. However, in the long run there has been a decline in trust levels.

¹ A “Rallying around the flag” effect is an observed increase in trust during sudden crises (e.g. natural disasters, terrorist attacks, epidemics) in which citizens align behind leaders, and pay less attention to other policy issues for a brief period of time.

Percentage of the population who trust the federal government always or most of the times (1958-2019)



Source: OECD calculations based on PEW research Centre

Trust is to governance what GDP is to macroeconomics: a key measure to take the temperature of success of public policies, but capturing an aggregate effect.

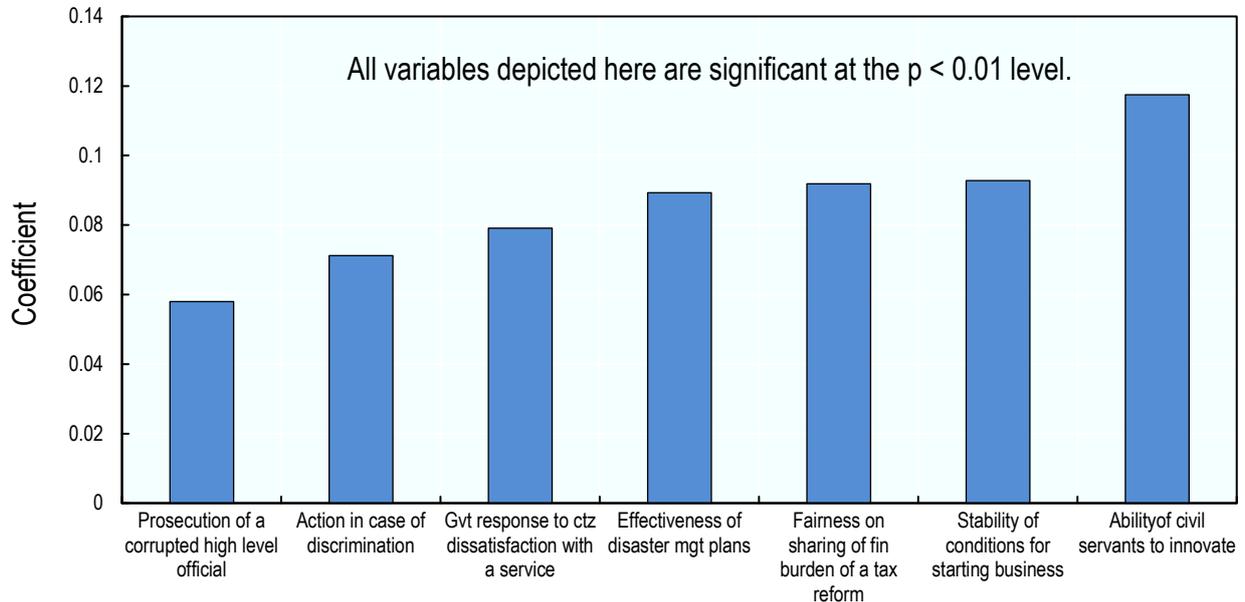
- Evidence shows that trust captures a wide array of phenomena, making it hard to base concrete policy actions on this metric. There are at least three institutional factors stemming from trust data: 1) political institutions; 2) law and order institutions and 3) non-governmental institutions ([González and Smith 2017](#); [OECD 2017](#)).
- According to a case study in Korea, there are some independent and some overlapping drivers of trust in the political and administrative levels of government. For example, while integrity influences mostly the political level, the ease of finding information or the fair treatment in service provision primarily influence trust in the administrative level ([OECD/KDI 2018](#)).
- Recent research has also demonstrated that while the outcome of public policies is important in shaping trust levels, the process is even more important ([Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2020](#))
- Aggregate data hide a diversity of experiences. Trust levels vary according to the needs and expectations of different population groups. For example, Finland has involved children in the *Lockdown Dialogues* in order to include their perspectives and make them aware of the value of their voice.

- There are wide variations by subnational regions in terms of trust, with capital cities displaying higher levels than rural areas. This can be explained by the difference in quality of services, as well as socio-economic characteristics of the population ([Eurofound 2018](#)).
- During the pandemic, and for the first time since data from the European Quality of Life Survey have been collected, people are reporting more trust in their national government than in the European Union. This could be signalling that expectations *vis-à-vis* the European Union have increased.
- During the pandemic, youth are showing higher trust levels in most institutions than other groups and show higher trust in the European Union than in national institutions. Snapshot data from a OECD Survey Youth Organizations shows that, on aggregate, trust in government has increased since the outbreak of COVID-19 for 43% of the youth organisations surveyed worldwide. Trust has remained stable for 36% of them, whereas it has decreased for 21% ([Youth and Covid-19](#)).
- Higher social insecurities (e.g. unemployment, old age insecurity) lead to lower trust. It is likely that these will worsen because of the socio-economic effects of the pandemic.
- More granular, disaggregated and widely available data are needed during a crisis, especially to understand impacts on different groups of population and geographies.

Government competences and values have a strong effect on citizens' trust

- The OECD framework on the drivers of institutional trust argues that trust is primarily driven by the competences (i.e. responsiveness, reliability) and values (i.e. openness, integrity, fairness) of public institutions ([OECD 2017](#)). The OECD has developed measurement instruments to capture each of these determinants ([OECD, 2017](#)). Both elements remain key in the current context, particularly as the crisis has confronted public servants with the need to take rapid decisions without always being able to follow procedures as in normal times.
- Both public sector integrity and the quality of public services are found empirically to be key determinants of public trust ([Murtin et al 2018](#); [Eurofound 2019](#)). Moreover, evidence from the Korean case study shows that perceived government capacity to innovate in service provision (responsiveness) and foresight (reliability) are the main drivers of trust in Korea. The quality and capacity to adapt of public services and the integrity with which the recovery measures will be conducted will remain key determinants of trust levels we will see in the future.

Drivers of trust in government institutions in Korea (2018)



Source: OECD/KDI (2018)

The COVID-19 emergency has made evident the need for more and better evidence on public trust and its drivers

- Measures of “distrust” should be improved to gauge the size of the groups that actively support exit behaviours (e.g. conspiracy theorists), as these may refuse to reply to questionnaires. Random samples (rather than opportunistic or quota sampling) are the only way of avoiding self-selection biases.
- Behaviour indicators, especially of voice (e.g. demonstrations) and exit (e.g. leaving public services for private ones), could help for having more precise measures of trust. A combination of measurements of perceptions, experiences and behaviours can give a better sense of where the issues are, and what policies are needed.
- Recent academic research shows that lockdown measures have resulted in widespread demand for strong leadership, willingness to give up individual freedom, and a sharp increase in support for technocratic governance during pandemics and crisis in general ([Amat et al, 2020](#)). It could be important to monitor if these trends maintain over time.
- The current crisis is more than ever shedding light on the importance of clear, coherent, targeted, innovative and effective communication between governments, public institutions and citizens. Particularly as “fake news” and disinformation are easily spread through social media.