

Correlation of social trust to trust in institutions; which institutions and under which circumstances?

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Abstract:

Trust, both generalized trust in others (social trust) and trust in institutions has received the attention of scholars from various fields, for at least the last six decades. Social trust and trust in institutions are closely related, however different constructs. Studies have shown that social trust is correlated to trust in institutions. However, this does not hold true for all types of institutions and all types of institutional settings.

Overall, social trust is closely correlated to trust in some institutions, such as the police or the courts, as opposed to political/representative institutions, such as the parliament, the parties or the government. Trust in the latter is more correlated to partisanship, in the form of closeness in terms of affiliation or ideology. Trust in the police and the courts, on the contrary, is expected to be more correlated to social trust, being that these are the guarantors of social order and in charge of finding and punishing the trust breakers in a society. This distinction might however not hold true in all cases. The correlation might disappear if the police and the courts are not perceived as genuine guarantors of social order, but as being under the influence of representative institutions. Essentially, this will be the case in less democratic countries.

In this paper is made use of data from sixty countries around the world to test the above hypotheses. The findings show that social trust is correlated to trust in the police and in the courts but not to trust in representative institutions. The correlation though only holds for democratic countries, but not for less democratic ones.

Key words: social trust, institutional trust, political trust, democracy

Social trust is at the root of social relationships and community life itself, as social relationships are based on the predictability of intentions and behaviour of others toward us and on the assumption that others will behave toward us in the same way we behave toward them (Uslaner 2002; Rothstein 2005, p. 2; Baier 1986, p. 232). According to Good (1988, p. 32) “...without trust, the everyday social life which we take for granted is simply not possible”.

On the other hand, social trust has been found to be closely related to many normatively desirable factors. People who trust more tend to steal and lie less and are more liked by others (Rotter 1967); live longer and have better health (Jen et al. 2010), are more optimistic (Uslaner 2008, p. 49), less anxious (Erikson 1977), and have higher life satisfaction (Uslaner 2002). On the societal level, higher levels of trust are accompanied with more effective commercial relationships and exchange of good (Arrow 1972, p. 357), higher economic development (Dearmon and Grier 2009), higher social integration (You 2012), higher cooperation (Deutsch 1958; Martin 1998; Gambetta 1988) and harmony in community life (Putnam 2000; Rothstein 1998, p. 133; 2005; 2011), as well as better democracy and more stable institutions (Almond and Verba 1963; Rothstein 1998).

Trust in institutions is as important as social trust for a well-functioning society. Without it the citizenry will follow the rules and laws only through coercion or rewards (promised or actual). On the other hand, if the citizens trust institutions, they will follow the rules and laws voluntarily, which ensures the sovereignty of the citizens and makes governance easier. In order for the institutions to be trusted, they must be perceived as legitimate by the citizenry. With legitimacy here, is understood the “...property of an authority, institution, or social

arrangement that leads those connected to it to believe that it is appropriate, proper, and just (Tyler 2006, fq. 375)”

Social trust and trust in institutions are different, though related concepts. According to You (2012 p. 702) “...generalized interpersonal trust is distinguished from “institutional trust” (trust in institutions) or “political trust” (trust in political institutions) as well as from “particularized trust” (trust embedded in personal relations)”. Studies have demonstrated that social trust and trust in institutions are correlated (Mishler and Rose 1997; Rothstein and Stolle 2008; You 2012; Newton and Zmerli 2011).

According to Rothstein and Stolle (2008), the role of institutions is essential in generating social trust (for a different perspective see Inglehart 1999). But which institutions? Rothstein and Stolle (ibid., pg. 444) distinguish between two types of institutions: institutions on the representational side of the state machinery (political parties, parliaments, government cabinets) and institutions on the implementation side (police, courts, healthcare services, civil servants, etc.)

The distinction between the two types of institutions is made on the bases of ‘partisanship’, while the former are political institutions, implementing policies based on their ideology and that change when a new party comes to power, the latter are stable implementing rules on the bases of impartiality and do not change when a new party comes to power. Trust in representative institutions is more correlated to the match between the ideology/ideas of these institutions and the ideology/ideas of the citizens. Rothstein and Stolle (cit.) suggest that trust in implementation institutions, especially the police and judiciary, is correlated to social trust, while trust in representative institutions is not. That’s because the police and the courts “...are in the business of taking care of people who are better not to be trusted (ibid. pg. 445)”. Thus, people trust others based on the assumption that, if someone would break

their trust (and take advantage of them) the police and courts would punish the trust breakers. Everyone knows this, trust breakers included.

If this line of reasoning holds, we should expect to find a stronger correlation between trust in the police and courts and social trust than trust in representative institutions (government, parliament, political parties) and social trust. This is the first topic this paper aims to address.

The above line of reasoning brings forth a problem though. For this assumption to hold, one must perceive law enforcement institutions as trustworthy. In this particular case, being trustworthy means having integrity, impartiality and being efficient in performing their tasks. Integrity and impartiality assume independence of these institutions from representative ones. If courts and police are perceived as a mere extension to the representative institutions or as being influenced by, or even worse, subjugated to the latter, than trust on them will be a reflection of trust in representative institutions and not based on their integrity and impartiality. However, in several countries the courts and the police (as well as other institutions in charge of implementing public policies) are not truly independent of representative institutions. The stronger the rule of law and the more developed is the democracy of a given country, the more administrative and law enforcement institutions are independent of the representative ones; and vice versa. Thus, is plausible that the weaker the democracy, the more deeply politicized a society is, the less social trust and trust in institutions will be correlated.

Should the above reasoning hold true, we should expect to find differences in the correlation of social trust to trust in police and courts for countries with different levels of democracy. Essentially, a stronger correlation between social trust and trust in different types of institutions would be found in more democratic countries than in less democratic ones. This is the second topic this paper aims to address.

In line with the above rationale, were formulated two hypotheses: (1) there will be correlation between social trust and trust in implementation but not between social trust and trust in representative institutions; and (2) the correlation will be stronger in countries where there is a clear distinction between representative and implementation institutions.

METHODS

Variables and data sources

The variables in this study were six: social trust, trust in the police, trust in the courts, trust in government, trust in political parties, trust in parliament, and level of democracy.

Trust in the police and in the courts was taken as an indicator of what above were called implementation institutions. While there are others that fall into this category, the analysis was focused on these two as more universal and as the ones in which the distinction is expected to be clearer, given that the police and the courts are the examples par excellence of institutions that find and punish trust breakers.

Trust in the government (whenever trust in government is mentioned in this paper, it is meant the central government of a country, not regional or local ones), in the political parties and the parliament was taken as an indicator of what above is called representative institutions.

The data used for the study are from the World Values Survey, Wave 6 (WVS Wave 6 2010-2014) and from the Democracy Index 2015 (Economic Intelligence Unit 2015). The survey covers sixty countries.

For the data about social trust, trust in the police, trust in the courts, trust in government, trust in political parties and trust in parliament was used the dataset of WVS (2010-2014), respectively, variables nos. 24, 113, 114, 115, 116, and 117). The survey covers 60 countries around the world.

Social trust is measured on dichotomous scale, where *1 = people can be trusted* and *2 = you can't be too careful in dealing with people*. The other five variables are measured on a 1 – 4 scale, where *1 = a great deal of trust* and *4 = no trust at all*.

Average score for each variable was calculated for each country covered by the survey.

For the level of democracy were used data from the Democracy Index (Economic Intelligence Unit 2016). The Index provides numerical score for the level of democracy for each country and also ranks the countries into four groups, based on their democracy level: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes and authoritarian. For the purpose of this study, to make the distinction easier and divide the sixty countries under analysis into two roughly equal groups (as the EIU's ranking creates unequal groups, see

Table 2 - Types of democracy in the sixty countries included in the **analysis**), the four types of democracy were grouped into two categories. The labels of the two new categories retained the labels provided by EIU, for consistency (i.e. 'full democracies' and 'flawed democracies' were labelled 'full and flawed democracies').

The Index covers 167 countries, of which were included in the analysis the 60 countries covered also by the WVS Wave 6 (2010-2014).

Working hypotheses

The two general hypotheses presented in the previous section, were operationalized to reflect the identified variables. Specifically:

Hypothesis 1: There will be a stronger positive correlation between social trust and trust in police and courts than between social trust and trust in government, parliament and political parties.

Hypothesis 2: Correlation between social trust and trust in the police and the courts will be stronger in countries with a more

developed democracy than in countries with a less developed democracy.

Data analysis

The Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated for social trust and trust in police, trust in courts, trust in government, trust in parliament and trust in political parties for all 60 countries to test the first hypothesis.

To test the second hypothesis, the 60 countries were first divided into two categories, grouping the four categories of EIU into two (**Table 3 - Types of democracy in the sixty countries included in the analysis, grouped into two categories**, pg. 310). Then correlation coefficients were calculated for each subgroup.

FINDINGS

Descriptive data

The average level of social trust for all countries included in the analysis was above the midpoint of the scale (1.5) ($M_{social\ trust} = 1.75, SD = 0.16$). This was also the case for the representative institutions ($M_{trust\ in\ government} = 2.57, SD = 0.4, M_{trust\ in\ political\ parties} = 2.95, SD = 0.37, and M_{trust\ in\ parliament} = 2.74, SD = 0$). Trust in the police and the courts were below the midpoints of the respective scales (2.5), the latter being more trusted ($M_{trust\ in\ police} = 2.38, SD = 0.37, M_{trust\ in\ courts} = 2.42, SD = 0.39$) (

Table 1 - Descriptive data on the different types of trust for all countries).

Table 1 - Descriptive data on the different types of trust for all countries

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|----|-------------|----------------|
| Most people can be trusted | 60 | 1.758423414 | .1627770136 |
| Trust in the police | 60 | 2.382262322 | .3752767863 |
| Trust in the courts | 60 | 2.423258430 | .3908665612 |
| Trust in the government (in your nation's capital) | 60 | 2.574267982 | .4020795410 |
| Trust in Political Parties | 57 | 2.950635040 | .3778502709 |
| Trust in Parliament | 60 | 2.743279949 | .4376093179 |

Of the sixty countries included in the analysis, only 8 (13.3%) were categorized as 'full democracies'. The highest number of countries belonged to the category 'flawed democracy', with 23 countries (38.3%). 'Hybrid regimes' and 'authoritarian' were 13 (21.7%) and 16 (26.7%) respectively (

Table 2 - Types of democracy in the sixty countries included in the analysis).

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| | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------|-----------|---------|
| Full democracies | 8 | 13.3 |
| Flawed democracies | 23 | 38.3 |
| Hybrid regimes | 13 | 21.7 |
| Authoritarian | 16 | 26.7 |
| Total | 60 | 100.0 |

Grouped into two categories, the number of countries per each category is approximately the same, with full and flawed democracy at 52% (31 countries) and hybrid and authoritarian regimes at 48% (29 countries) - Table 3 - Types of democracy in the sixty countries included in the analysis, grouped into two categories).

Table 3 - Types of democracy in the sixty countries included in the analysis, grouped into two categories

| | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Full and flawed democracies | 31 | 52 |
| Hybrid and authoritarian regimes | 29 | 48 |
| Total | 60 | 100 |

Hypotheses testing

First hypothesis

The first hypothesis of the study is that, there will be a stronger positive correlation between social trust and trust in police and courts than between social trust and trust in government, parliament and political parties.

Social trust has a statistically significant correlation with trust in the police ($r = 0.298, p < 0.05$) and trust in the courts ($r = 0.308, p < 0.05$). On the other hand, there is no statistically significant correlation between social trust and trust in any of the representative institutions Table 4 - Correlations between social trust, trust in the police, trust in the courts, trust in the government, trust in political parties, and trust in the parliament - all countries).

Table 4 - Correlations between social trust, trust in the police, trust in the courts, trust in the government, trust in political parties, and trust in the parliament - all countries

| | | Trust in the police | Trust in the courts | Trust in the government | Trust in political parties | Trust in parliament |
|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Most people can be trusted | Pearson Correlation | .298* | .308* | .179 | .247 | .236 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .021 | .017 | .171 | .064 | .069 |
| | N | 60 | 60 | 60 | 57 | 60 |

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As it emerges from the analysis, overall, social trust is correlated with trust in the police and the courts, the institutions that are in charge of finding and punishing people who are prone to abuse the trust of others. No such correlation exists between social trust and representative/political institutions. The first hypothesis of the study is confirmed.

Second hypothesis

The second hypothesis, is that the observed correlation will hold true only for certain countries, namely the countries where there is a clear distinction line between representative and non-representative institutions. Level of democracy, as indexed by the Democracy Index of EIU (2016) was selected as an indicator of how clear a distinction there is between representative and non-representative institutions.

Table 5, below, shows the correlations between the variables divided by type of regime. As can be seen on the table,

for full and flawed democracies the correlation between social trust and trust in the police is statistically significant ($r = 0.596, p < 0.01$), as is correlation between social trust and trust in the courts ($r = 0.491, p < 0.01$).

Going down the ladder, for hybrid and authoritarian regimes there is no correlation between social trust and any of the types of institutional trust being analysed. All correlations are weak and statistically insignificant, in the same pattern as the correlation between social trust and trust in representative institutions. Hypothesis 2 is also confirmed.

Table 5 - Correlations between social trust, trust in the police, trust in the courts, trust in the government, trust in political parties, and trust in the parliament in different types of democracies

| | | | Trust in the police | Trust in the courts | Trust in the government | Trust in political parties | Trust in the parliament |
|---|----------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Full and flawed democracies | Most people can be trusted | Pearson Correlation | .596** | .491** | .190 | .231 | .293 |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | .005 | .307 | .212 | .110 |
| | | N | 31 | 31 | 31 | 31 | 31 |
| Hybrid and authoritarian regimes | Most people can be trusted | Pearson Correlation | -.036 | .096 | .272 | .344 | .255 |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | .853 | .621 | .154 | .085 | .182 |
| | | N | 29 | 29 | 29 | 26 | 29 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION

The relationship (or lack thereof) between social trust and trust in institutions is of paramount importance, both on practical and theoretical grounds. As social trust is desirable, being that it is accompanied with normatively desirable factors, it makes sense to understand its relationship with systemic factors that can encourage or hinder its development. Trust in the institutions of a society is one of the factors that has been identified to have a correlation with social trust (Rothstein and Stolle 2008). However, not all institutions are the same.

Representative institutions, such as the government, the political parties and the parliament are less stable over time

than other institutions, such as healthcare services, civil service, police and courts. While political power shifts over time from one party to the next, the pillars of a democratic state that respects the rule of law are more stable institutions, the ones that directly implement laws and public policies, serve the citizens on a day to day bases, and protect them from wrongdoers. The findings demonstrate that it is trust in the latter that correlates with social trust, while trust in the formers does not. One of the reasons for this difference is that trustworthiness on the representative institutions is mostly grounded in partisanship and a sense of belonging, people will tend to trust more a government, or political party that reflects their political affiliation or ideology. Thus, trusting representative institutions will have little relationship with trusting or not trusting others.

On the other hand, institutions such as law enforcement agencies, healthcare services, judiciary bodies, etc. are of a different type. In a well-functioning democracy, these operate on the grounds of professionalism, integrity and impartiality. Their role is not policy making, but rather implementation of policies in an impartial and professional manner. Thus, if these institutions operate on these principles, trust on them should correlate with social trust. This holds particularly true for the police and the courts, as these are specifically the institutions in charge of protecting the citizens from wrongdoers. The rationale is that if the police and courts operate impartially, show high integrity, and are efficient, citizens will tend to have a higher trust in others. This doesn't come necessarily because they believe that others are good, but because society as a whole operates under the assumption that whoever breaks the trust, she or he will have to deal with the negative consequences that derive from doing so.

However, this holds true for well-functioning and stable democracies, where there is no undue influence or control of representative institutions over the police and the courts. If a

democracy is weak and institutions are not consolidated, this will lead to the citizens losing trust in the courts and the police; or perceiving them as trustworthy or not based on political affiliation and partisanship, same as representative institutions. Essentially, in weaker democracies, the courts and the police are perceived as mere extension of the representative apparatus and as shifting as the latter (with a change in power in the country the police and courts will also shift their behaviour to match the preference of the new rulers).

The negative effects of this phenomenon do not reflect only in the lack of necessary guarantees that would make social trust thrive but go well beyond. Lack of correlation between social trust and trust in the police and the courts shows that, in less developed democracies, these institutions fail to provide a safe environment and the necessary guarantees for a high well-being for their citizens. This would mean that they are essentially, failing to properly fulfil the very role they exist for.

CONCLUSIONS

Several studies have shown the importance of social trust for a well-functioning society. This being the case, understanding how social trust is generated and maintained is very important. While different theories on the origins of social trust exist, this paper has focused on the systemic theories, the ones that see trust in relationship to trust in the institutions of a society.

Studies in this direction suggest that trust in institutions is correlated to social trust, but the pattern does not hold true for all institutions. Specifically, trust in the police and the courts is more strongly correlated to social trust, as these institutions are directly engaged in finding and punishing people who abuse the trust of others. But in order for this to hold true, the police and the courts should be perceived as guarantors of the rule of law, and not as mere extensions or even mechanisms at the service of elected representatives. In

less developed democracies we are faced with a scenario in which trust in the police and the courts does not correlate with social trust.

The findings support the hypotheses that trust in the police and the courts will correlate better with social trust than trust in representative institutions, and that this correlation will depend on the level of democratization of the country. In more developed democracies there is a correlation, but in less developed ones no such correlation can be found.

This suggests the importance of having truly independent, and not subjected to the influence of elected representatives, implementation institutions. While elected representatives will govern for some time and are subject to accountability in each electoral cycle, the judiciary and the police are different. They represent the rule of law and should be guarantors of institutional continuity, despite which party is in power at a given point in time. Being impartial ensures that the citizens feel safer and more protected by law enforcement and the judiciary, which leads to higher social trust.

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