

HOW CAN WE BUILD TRUST IN POLITICS AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS?

IPPR research note in partnership with the John Smith Centre

February 2021

CONTEXT

IPPR hosted a research roundtable on trust in politics and public institutions in November 2020, with a range of expert stakeholders from across academia and civil society. The conversation focused on understanding contemporary challenges in relation to political trust, and what public policy action might build greater trust across the UK. This research note reflects key points from the discussion, which was held under the Chatham House Rule.

THE CHALLENGE: LOW TRUST AND GROWING DISTRUST

Examining trust requires careful definition. Political trust – the subject of this discussion – generally measures citizens’ trust in political actors and institutions and is distinct from generalised social trust (in neighbours, or a stranger on the street). Political trust, or lack of it, is in turn usefully distinguished from *mistrust*, or *distrust*. While political trust “makes good governance possible” and can be understood “as the glue that keeps the system together and the oil that lubricates the policy machine”, we must carefully characterise a lack of trust in order to trace its implications and respond appropriately (Devine et al 2020; Zmerli and Van der Meer 2017).

Recent work from academic researchers Dan Devine, Jennifer Gaskell, Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker has outlined a conceptual framework for measuring trust and navigating conversations about a lack of it in a ‘family of trust concepts’ (Devine et al 2020). They propose a measure of political trust based on the trust citizens express in the political system, or its component parts. A lack of trust can be associated with *mistrust* or *distrust*. Mistrust is best understood as the healthy scepticism of the critical citizen which “in the right measure, supports good governance by driving accountability” and is expressed through a degree of

vigilance in making judgements of the political system or parts of it. Distrust, meanwhile, is a distinct phenomenon closer to cynicism, which risks “disengagement and disorder”. Its consequences present potentially grave threats to democracy where they lead to withdrawal, aggressive and populist challenge, or empowerment movements that might threaten the rights of minority groups (ibid).

In the UK, political trust is low and distrust is growing, in a pattern observed across mature democracies. A majority of citizens in the UK, the US, Japan, France and Spain are now dissatisfied with democratic performance (Foa et al 2020). Within that group, all but France are new entrants since the 1990s.

We also know that trust in politics and public institutions is not shared evenly across the UK population. IPPR research with the John Smith Centre has explored trust deficits along lines of gender, income and age: where women express lower levels of trust than men, people on higher incomes are significantly more trusting than those on lower incomes, and younger people express more trust in politics than older people.

To explain low and falling levels of trust, commentators and researchers alike have pointed to polarisation, the spread of disinformation, and changing relationships with news media. The transformation in how we consume media, and the news sources that citizens trust, has been consistently linked to polarisation and growing distrust across electorates. Ambitions to foster a healthy degree of scepticism among citizens, and to establish strong and effective mechanisms of democratic accountability have been eclipsed by the increasingly acute challenge of disinformation: from news verification to large-scale conspiracy theories. Existing research demonstrates that in the age of social media, disinformation spreads further, faster, and more broadly than the truth (Vosoughi et al 2018).

For citizens, politicians, and our democratic institutions, the apparent erosion of trust in politics and democratic institutions raises profound questions about the state of our democracies, and their futures.

While a degree of mistrust of powerful actors and institutions may be a key component of a healthy democracy, distrust can lead to disillusionment, disengagement and accelerating polarisation. Where we can clearly observe these phenomena – most recently in the US, but also in a Brexit-era UK – they are cause for deep concern. Trust in politics and democracy is a key determinant of the efficacy of policymaking and government, which is in turn crucial for human flourishing. Where distrust results in lower voter turnout, it has potential to contribute to – or exacerbate – wider economic and social inequalities. As discussed above, a lack of trust that results in has potential to lead to rising support for illiberal political projects that put the interests of minority groups, and potentially even democracy itself, at risk.

In some areas, political trust deficits neatly reflect wider disparities in power across our society – for example, along lines of gender or income. In others, they reflect shifting patterns in social attitudes and behaviours. When we look at the relationship between age and political trust, for example, we see higher levels of trust and more optimistic assessments of the future among younger people - but

this is married with lower levels of formal political participation. As more pronounced intergenerational cleavages come to shape UK politics, understanding political trust across demographic groups and across the life-course is all the more urgent.

We also know levels of trust are shaped by political identities, as evidenced by the ways in which new political identities have conditioned trust in UK politics since the 2016 EU referendum (Jennings et al. 2020). More recently still, levels of trust in government through the Covid-19 pandemic have varied dramatically across the UK. An opinion poll in April 2020 found 70 per cent of respondents in Scotland reported high levels of trust in the Scottish government as a source of information on coronavirus. By contrast, just 54 per cent of UK-wide respondents reported the same level of trust in the UK government (Survation 2020).

This research note focusses on exploring policy solutions that could help to foster greater levels of political trust across the UK. The roundtable discussion is reflected below.

BUILDING TRUST

Addressing inequalities

In our conversation, trust was consistently linked to power – or lack of it – and to how power operates. Social and economic inequalities were widely perceived to be key dynamics shaping citizens' low levels of trust in those in power. While inequality has shot up the political agenda through the pandemic and ambitions to 'level up' regional inequalities across the UK, participants wanted to better understand what is driving a lack of political participation, turnout, and representation within communities that have historically held less power.

A strengthened social fabric

There was broad agreement that the strengthening democracy and democratic institutions relied on strengthening our social fabric and pushing against a tendency to view political trust in isolation. There was some feeling that the trend of low trust in politics and public institutions could not be effectively countered through a narrow focus on decision-making processes and formal political power, but instead relied on a wider analysis of how bonds of trust are fostered between citizens and their governments or elected representatives.

Collective institutions were seen to play a key role in restoring trust. Some felt that a stronger social safety net would provide an important mechanism for strengthening social solidarity building trust in government, including by enabling fuller participation in democratic life for a wider portion of people across society. Others saw a need for new or restored collective institutions and pointed to the decline of labour unions as part of a broader erosion of political and social trust.

There was also feeling that more and better-quality political education, starting from a younger age, would be an effective means to foster greater trust. Recent

UK research suggests trust gaps can be clearly observed among school-age children, with significant differences by gender and ethnicity: white British girls start from a lower baseline of expressive participation (measured, for example, by their likelihood of signing a petition, or contacting their MP) than boys, or girls from a minority ethnic background. White girls' likelihood of participating in political activity also increases more sharply as a result of political education (Weinberg 2020). The same research establishes that citizenship and political education have a clear positive effect on political participation (ibid).

Some participants made the case for a curriculum around politics that talks about how people can be involved in changing politics – or in wielding power – rather than just in observing it. This was linked to a focus on civic engagement and on the information required to navigate civic and political processes effectively. Some suggested this could be strengthened by votes at 16, supported by evidence from Scotland that suggests 16- and 17-year-olds accessed more information from a wider range of sources than any other age group during the 2014 independence referendum campaign (Eichhorn 2014).

Place and proximity to power

Shifting power from centralised institutions and dominant groups was recognised as central to building broad-based trust. For some, this would be best realised as a shift from central to (more) local decision making, such as through the greater devolution of powers to existing local, regional, or national governments. One participant highlighted that this shift would rely on the recognition by the centre that “it doesn't have all the answers”. This analysis was extended to include devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, which were seen to replicate centralised structures of government on a national level. Here, the levelling up agenda has a clear opportunity to consider how to effectively transfer power to local decision-makers, and in places to go further by democratising decision-making processes at the sub-state level.

Proximity to power across the UK is however shaped not just by place, but by multiple dimensions of inequality. We know that groups who are systematically underrepresented in public life and in democratic institutions report lower average levels of trust in politicians and public institutions. IPPR research with the John Smith Centre has pointed to trust deficits experienced by women and people on lower incomes – reflecting imbalances of representation in our parliaments (John Smith Centre 2020). People's proximity to political actors and their ability to leverage networks were considered a fundamental component of political trust in our discussion.

Brexit identities now appear to condition levels of trust. During the Brexit referendum campaign, nearly a third of people who went on to vote leave (29 per cent) said they had 'no trust' in MPs in general, compared to just 12 per cent of people who went on to vote remain (Jennings, Stoker and Devine 2020). A study following the 2019 general election found this trend had reversed, with leave voters now significantly more trusting of MPs, and more satisfied with democracy, than those who voted remain (ibid).

Concerns have been raised in recent months about the potential impact of lower levels of trust in the UK government, public health officials and the NHS among black and minority ethnic groups in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, to which black and minority ethnic Britons are disproportionately exposed (Public Health England 2020). These concerns have been amplified once more by concerns about vaccine take-up in ethnic minority communities, where trust in government and the health care service is low.

New processes

We also heard ideas about how new processes and approaches to decision making could support better engagement between citizens and their elected representatives and public institutions – and, in doing so, build greater trust.

There was broad agreement that reducing the perceived distance between politicians and the public was an important component of building trust. How that might be done, however, was less clear. While the most recent elections to Westminster have delivered gradual improvements towards a representative parliament at the UK level (at least in terms of gender and ethnicity), research highlights systemic problems political recruitment across the UK (see, for example, Norris and Lovenduski 2008). What's more, political science literature raises questions about which candidates or elected officials garner the highest levels of trust among the public (Valgarðsson et al 2020).

Existing research finds that listening and engagement between politicians and the public can build trust, and that 1 on 1 interactions can demonstrate 'trustworthiness', and that speedy and personalised responses to citizen enquiries can positively effect citizen satisfaction and likelihood of re-engagement (Soo et al 2020). Participants felt, however, that foster greater trust on the scale required in the UK would rely on new processes for engaging with politicians and decision-making processes. These included participatory decision making (discussed in more detail below), as well as efforts to revisit how decisions and actors are scrutinised and subject to public accountability, and a reassessment of the norms and values that are associated with politicians and other key actors in public life.

Participants stressed the need to challenging traditional methods of engagement relied upon by constituency politicians, which were often founded on lazy or unchallenged assumptions about how groups of people see the world, or what their key interests or concerns lie. This was seen to be a particular barrier to better engagement with minority communities, including minority ethnic communities, who participants felt were often perceived by politicians to vote as a block and/or to hold homogenous views.

Stronger accountability mechanisms

We discussed the role of political norms in shaping and sustaining a healthy and accountable democratic culture, and the effects that changing norms might have on levels of trust. While the election of President Trump in the US has been widely

recognised as exploding many of the norms and behaviours long associated with presidential office, and politicians more widely, some have extended this analysis to UK politics in recent years (see, for example, Sullivan and Adam 2019). More effective scrutiny of elected politicians was perceived by some to be key to building trust. Effective scrutiny was understood to help foster norms and behaviours that could support a more trusting and inclusive political culture and conduct in politicians that could in turn foster greater trust. There was some agreement that more effective mechanisms to uphold standards on ethics and competence in public life could play an important role here.

Some felt that more direct links between citizens and democratically elected decision-makers throughout their elected terms would be a means of fostering greater trust. Others stressed, however, that people often lacked the time, resource or inclination for more direct engagement with formal politics.

Participatory policy making – and its limits?

For some participants, participatory policy processes were a clear route to building trust. Existing evidence suggests that people tend to trust participatory processes more than established institutions or mechanisms, linked to their ability to see people ‘who look like me’ involved in decision-making processes. Research on participatory policy making is, however, a relatively new field in which some key questions remain unresolved, and there are clear areas for further research. There are some grounds for caution: existing research shows perceptions of participatory processes tend to be shaped by how they’re framed and who participates (French and Laver 2009).

Participants felt that politicians often aren't sure where they fit into more participatory processes, and that they require a different sort of language and fluency to traditional modes of engagement and decision making. Some argued that in order to seize the opportunities presented by more participatory policy making, democratic institutions should be transformed to take on a facilitator/curator role, whereby they convene citizens and support participation in decision making and service design processes.

We heard concerns, however, about the limitations of participatory policy making as a catch-all solution. Bringing politics into people’s lives was seen as an important goal, and key to tackling intensifying polarisation, but it was also seen to be a multi-faceted challenge that, done poorly, risked reconstructing the same inequalities seen in our existing systems of political representation. Participants urged that time is huge barrier to participation for all sort of people, and particularly those who are already less likely to participate in formal politics: linking into work patterns, caring responsibilities, and financial security or lack thereof.

Participants highlighted examples of citizens assemblies being used to tackle specific policy agendas, such as the climate emergency, or as established and permanent structures at the local level, as in the London borough of Newham. There was some agreement that while there was a time and a place for citizens

assemblies, particularly as a means of supporting better policy making on a particular issue, but that they did not provide a silver bullet solution that could build trust across the population, and across political divides at a national scale. Some felt that citizens assemblies risked 'passing the buck' on difficult decision making, and indeed risked being less accountable than our existing system of directly elected representatives. Participants also raised the challenge of wider citizen buy-in to outcomes determined through intensive and immersive participatory processes that rely on a small number of citizens to come to a decision, and the challenge of scaling participatory decision-making, which can both be very resource intensive, and can vary in quality depending on the resource invested in them.

There are also persistent structural barriers to participating in democratic processes that expand to participatory processes too. These vary across people facing additional pressures from financial insecurity, caring responsibilities, or other access barriers that need to be addressed in the design of participative processes if they are to avoid replicating some of the barriers to entering traditional political forums. This was seen to require investment in the time, resource and infrastructure to support full participation – in a system that at a minimum would resemble the support offered to people undertaking jury duty, and that included financial compensation for participants' time.

There was some difference of opinion between those that saw (more) participatory policy making as the primary tool for building trust and those who were concerned that while offering clear value in resolving certain policy problems, new processes such as citizens assemblies were not a panacea. While there was clear promise offered by the explosion of more participatory policy processes, important questions remain unresolved, and further innovation is clearly needed. This area was identified as an important avenue for further research.

New roles for public institutions

We discussed the new roles public institutions could take on to build greater trust among citizens and service users. Some suggested that formal political institutions should take on new roles as facilitators of broader conversations, bringing diverse groups of people together and reaching beyond those already involved in politics and decision-making.

There was some discussion of potential reforms to the House of Lords, and/or the role a citizens' second chamber could play in improving the quality of scrutiny and strengthening representation. Participants stressed the need to progress towards greater public accountability for elected politicians – including the need for politicians moving into secular spaces to address local issues and open to more probing questioning. Some felt mechanisms of political engagement had broken down, and the link between communities and their elected representatives had been frayed. It was suggested that better use of technology could engage more people in decision making processes and in direct dialogue with elected representatives. Participants also urged a shift in responsibility; arguing that democratic institutions need to be more proactively responsive to declining trust

and to actively work to build trust – rather than waiting for voters to change or placing responsibility on citizens or external forces.

For some, electoral reform – and proportional representation in particular – represented an opportunity to strengthen then relationship between citizens and elected officials, and to challenge polarisation.

CONCLUSIONS

Conversations about trust require a level of clarity and definition to avoid conflating a wide variety of factors or phenomena. Our conversation questioned whether mistrust was mischaracterised as a democratic threat rather than an asset in a healthy democracy that can stimulate change and foster greater accountability. There was shared concern that characterising *distrust* as a distinct force was key to understanding how shifting attitudes might fuel democratic disengagement, unfounded conspiracy, and extremism. Any effective strategies for building trust and strengthening democratic engagement will rely on effective diagnosis of the challenge before us. Further research on different expressions of trust (or lack of it), where it is concentrated or lacking, and how it is developed or eroded, will play an important role in shaping a public conversation about the health and future of our democracy and democratic institutions.

The following participants took part in the roundtable discussion:

Carys Roberts, executive director, IPPR (chair)

Dr Jennifer Gaskell, research fellow, Trustgov project at the University of Southampton

Kunle Olulode, chief executive, Voice4Change England

Professor Will Jennings, professor of political science and public policy and principal investigator at Trustgov Project

Jacqui Mckinlay, director, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

Professor Graeme Smith, director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster

Dr James Weinberg, lecturer in political behaviour, Sheffield University

Cassie Staines, policy manager, Full Fact

Lisa James, research assistant, UCL Constitution Unit

Professor Rosie Campbell, director, Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London

Fiona Weir, chief executive, Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust

Alastair Harper, head of public affairs, Shelter

Frank Strang, Solas Festival

Viktor Orri Valgarðsson, research fellow, Trustgov Project at the University of Southampton

Dr Kirstie Hewlett, Research Associate at the Policy Institute, Kings College London

Robyn Lucas, Robertson scholar, John Smith Centre at the University of Glasgow

Jordan Cavell, Robertson scholar, John Smith Centre at the University of Glasgow

Ross Barclay, Robertson scholar, John Smith Centre at the University of Glasgow

Tim Durrant, associate director, Institute for Government

Kezia Dugdale, Director, John Smith Centre at the University of Glasgow

Alison Hopper, Centre Development Manager, John Smith Centre

Harry Quilter-Pinner, director of research and engagement, IPPR

Rachel Statham, senior research fellow, IPPR

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