THE GENDER GAP

WOMEN AND TRUST

A Trilogy on Trust

JOHN SMITH CENTRE
PROMOTING TRUST IN PUBLIC SERVICE

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FOREWORD

Evidence that women are less likely to be politicians and less likely to participate in politics is not in short supply. That women trust less than men is a global trend.

The systemic under-representation of women in elected politics and public life leads numerous organisations and campaigning groups like ours to set out to pull down the structural barriers that women face. Yet at the last UK General Election we saw more women than men walking away from the House of Commons at a younger age and with fewer years served. In this report we find women turning away from institutionalised forms of politics, preferring to protest and sign a petition than write to their MP or vote. We want to better understand why that is, while at the same time encouraging more women to enter public service.

This briefing exists to provide a snapshot of the academic literature in the arena of women and trust. It sits alongside a fresh analysis of a field study commissioned by the John Smith Centre of 1,400 UK adults' attitudes towards politicians and our public services.

This is one of three briefings in our Trilogy of Trust. The other two focus on young people and those on low incomes. Collectively these three groups represent those most exposed to the economic crisis that will follow COVID-19. How institutions, governments and elected officials respond to that crisis will affect their lives more than most. The degree to which they trust those people and institutions matters.

We hope this briefing stimulates debate as to why trust is so low and what can be done about it.

You can access all three briefings and more detail on the work of the John Smith Centre at www.johnsmithcentre.com.

Kezia Dugdale
Director of the John Smith Centre

OUR MISSION

The John Smith Centre exists to:

- Make the positive case for politics and public service.
- Promote civilised debate across the United Kingdom and to defend representative democracy, rooted in high quality research.
- Support people with talent, but not the means, to access politics and public life.

We set out to fulfil this mission through a number of activities including:

- Academic and practical research
- Employability initiatives
- Events, conferences and discussion panels
- Internship and leadership programmes
- The John Smith Public Service Award

You can follow all our work and discover details of our forthcoming events by visiting our website: www.johnsmithcentre.com

Acknowledgements

The field study commissioned by the John Smith Centre was designed by Professor Chris Carman and Dr Fraser McMillan from the University of Glasgow and conducted in 2019.

In January 2020, IPPR was commissioned to analyse the data and to provide a snapshot of other academic literature in the area. Specific thanks should go to Rachel Statham, Senior Research fellow.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between gender and political trust has been the subject of interest for researchers, political strategists and women's organisations for decades. With women's representation and participation in politics substantially lower than men's in democracies across the globe, political trust and political participation are increasingly examined through a gendered lens. This has been explicitly linked to the structural barriers women face as participants in democracies, as prospective leaders within public life, and as potential candidates for elected office (UN Women 2020).

Across major economies, women trust less than men. Studies from the US and the UK have found that gender has significant effect on trust (Hetherington 2005; Paterson 2008).

The Edelman Trust barometer records a persistent trust gap between men and women in major economies from 2012-2019. In the UK, a majority of women surveyed reported that they distrusted key institutions, establishing a gender trust gap in the UK, alongside South Korea, France, Italy, Argentina, Brazil, Turkey, Japan, Ireland, Spain and Russia. According to Edelman's 2019 poll, the trust gap between men and women is as wide as 7 percentage points (Edelman 2019).[1]

A longer view suggests that political trust amongst women has not been consistently weaker than amongst men. Research exploring the relationship between gender and trust has presented inconsistent findings: some studies have found women to be more trusting than men (Glaeser et al. 2000; Paterson 2008); and others less trusting (Leigh 2006). Other studies establish that women have lower levels of political participation, and display greater political apathy, when compared to men (Van Deth & Elff 2004).

It's clear that when it comes to understanding the relationship between gender and trust, what we measure matters. Schoon & Chen's 2011 longitudinal study using data from 1991 and 2000 found that women's responses to statements including "no political party would benefit me" and "politicians are in politics for their own benefit" were significantly less negative than men's. Women reported higher levels of political trust than men at both time points, and in both cohorts (Schoon & Cheng 2011). In a 2016 paper, Jennings et al. found that female respondents in the UK were more likely to believe politicians have "the leadership qualities to speak hard truths" and reported less negative perceptions when asked if politicians are "short-termist" and "media orientated". The difference in agreement between the genders to each of these statements was 7 percentage

1 Gender disaggregated data for the 2020 Trust Barometer is not available.

points (36 per cent of female respondents compared to 29 per cent of male respondents) and 4 percentage points (78 per cent of female respondents compared to 82 per cent of male respondents).

Political trust matters because of its relationship to engagement or participation in politics. We know that distrusting citizens are less likely to cast a vote (Hooghe 2018). Recent literature on political participation found that women were more likely to participate in "non-institutionalised" forms of participation - those with no direct relationship to the electoral process, or to the functioning of key political institutions – than more formalised means of political participation. Hooghe and Marien (2012) found that while women were less likely to participate in institutionalised politics – by contacting their elected representative, or voting – they were more likely to take part in non-institutionalised participation – by signing a petition, attending a public demonstration or boycotting certain products. While sizeable gender gaps in participation persist, there is a clear need to better understand political trust amongst women, and women's attitudes towards politics and public life.

KEY FINDINGS

We have undertaken new analysis for this briefing of a 2019 survey commissioned by the John Smith Centre, of 1,424 people living in Scotland, Wales and England. Within this survey sample, we found that:

Fewer women than men said they trust politicians: Fewer than 1 in 8 women reported high levels of trust in politicians, and 1 in 4 reported high levels of trust in their local MP.[2]

Fewer women than men thought democracy was working well in the UK. Fewer than 1 in 4 women surveyed thought democracy was working well in the UK.[3]

Fewer women than men agreed that politicians keep promises made during an election campaign: Just 1 in 4 women surveyed agreed, compared to nearly 1 in 3 men. [4]

2 12% of women reported high levels of trust in elected politicians, compared to 16% of men. 26% of women surveyed reported high levels of trust in their MP, compared to 31% of men.
The survey data used for this analysis asked respondents to describe their gender identity. Respondents who identified as 'male' or 'female' are categorised as 'men' or 'women' here. Sample sizes for respondents whose gender identity is not 'male' or 'female' were too small to be presented in this analysis.

3 24% of women agreed that democracy was working well, compared to 31% of men.

4 24% of women agreed with the statement "The people we elect as MPs try to keep the promises they made during the election campaign", compared to 32% of men.

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Figure 1: Fewer women than men report high levels of trust in elected politicians, or their local MP

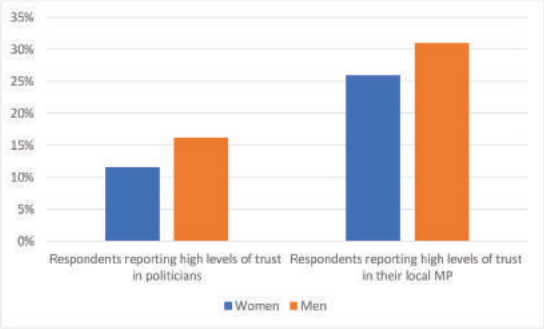
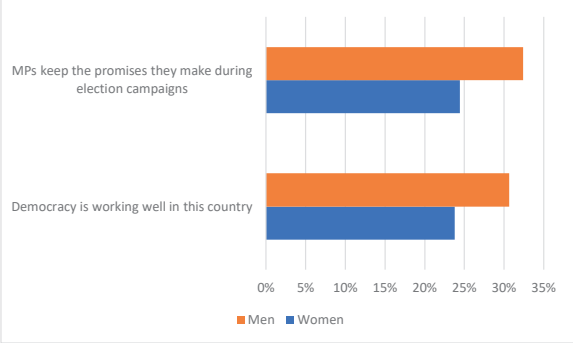


Figure 2: Fewer women than men agree that MPs keep their promises, or that democracy is working well



Across a range of measures, we found gender gaps in levels of political trust. Women reported lower levels of political trust than men, fewer women than men thought democracy was working well, and fewer women than men agreed that politicians keep the promises they make during an election campaign. Given women's systemic under-representation in elected politics and public life in the UK, this trust gap is particularly concerning. While it might reflect gendered barriers to participating in politics, it may also present an obstacle to political participation in and of itself.

PUBLIC SERVICE PERCEPTIONS BY GENDER

Perceptions of public service also differ between men and women. When asked which groups of people they considered to be public servants, women were more likely to consider key workers to be public servants. A higher proportion of women compared to men saw police officers, nurses, schoolteachers, refuse collectors, bus drivers, personal carers, supermarket cashiers and bank managers as public servants. Gender gaps were most pronounced in the heavily feminised roles of nursing and caring. Notably, there was also a large gender gap in perceptions of elected politicians: nearly 11% fewer women than men viewed politicians as public servants.

Figure 3: Who do we consider to be a public servant? Gender gaps in perceptions of public service

% of respondents who consider this job role a public service

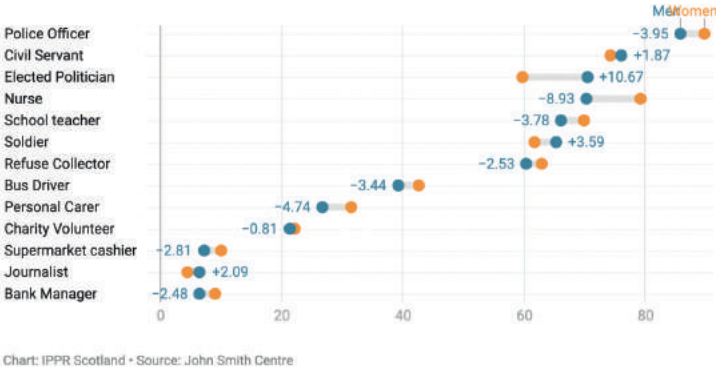


Chart: IPPR Scotland • Source: John Smith Centre

Note: IPPR Scotland analysis of John Smith Centre data. Chart created with datawrapper.

Women were least likely to consider journalists, bank managers of supermarket cashiers to be public servants – although attitudes towards the supermarket workers could now be changing in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the value of key workers was in the spotlight during lockdown.

TRUST IN KEY INSTITUTIONS BY GENDER

When asked how far they trust different groups, we also found a clear gender divide in political trust. Just 1 in 4 women reported high levels or trust in their local MP, compared to 31% of men (or just less than 1 in 3).

Figure 4: Fewer women report high levels of trust in key political institutions

% of respondents who report high levels of trust

Note: IPPR Scotland analysis of John Smith Centre data. Chart created with datawrapper.

Fewer women surveyed reported high levels of trust in politicians, UK government, UK parliament, or their local MP as compared to men. This trend of gender trust gaps is particularly notable given women's visible under-representation in these institutions: MPs, key figures at the UK parliament, and the most visible representatives of UK government are disproportionately male. When asked about how far they trusted their local council, or the police, this gender gap was reversed, and more women reported high levels of trust. This perhaps reflects women's greater likelihood of using or relying on key public services as compared to men, which might foster greater trust in these institutions (Women's Budget Group 2016).

HOW DO LEVELS OF TRUST VARY BETWEEN WOMEN?

Lower political trust levels among women have also been shown to be greater amongst different female demographics. In 2019, following a survey of 2,000 women aged 18-30, the Young Women's Trust reported that confidence in politicians had fallen amongst 69% of respondents from levels surveyed in the preceding year. Levels were shown to have fallen to a larger degree amongst women aged 18-24 (72% reported less confidence in politicians) and amongst young women with disabilities or long-term health conditions (70% felt less confident) (YWT 2019).

There was no statistically significant difference in levels of political trust between women who identified as middle class as compared to women who identified as working class, nor between women with or without a degree-level qualification. Due to data limitations, we were not able to break down this sample to explore attitudes amongst women by ethnicity, or disability status.

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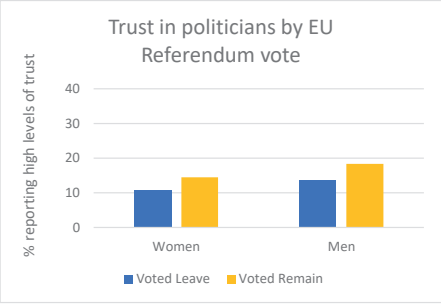
TRUST BY VOTE CHOICE

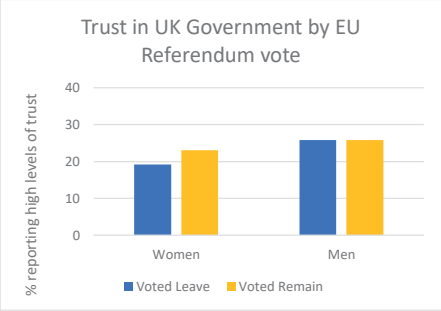
We found that levels of trust in politicians were higher amongst women who voted remain, as compared to women who voted leave in the 2016 EU referendum – a statistically significant difference. Fewer women who voted either leave or remain reported high levels of trust in politicians than men who voted the same way. Trust levels amongst both groups, however, remained very low: only 14% of women who voted remain reported high levels of trust in politicians, compared to just over 1 in 10 women who voted leave.

Figure 5: Trust in politicians by EU referendum vote



A greater share of women who voted leave or remain reported high levels of trust in UK government, but there is a trust gap: women who voted remain reported higher levels of trust, with over 1 in 5 reporting high levels of trust in government. Only 19% of women who voted leave reported high levels of trust in government, compared to 23% of remain-voting women, or 26% of leave-voting men.

Figure 6: Trust in government by EU referendum vote



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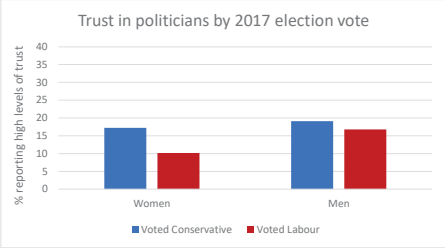
While a leave vote has been associated with higher levels of political distrust, lower levels of trust in a what was a pro-Brexit government by 2019 amongst women who voted to leave the EU, as compared to women who voted to remain, is of particular interest, and worthy of further study.

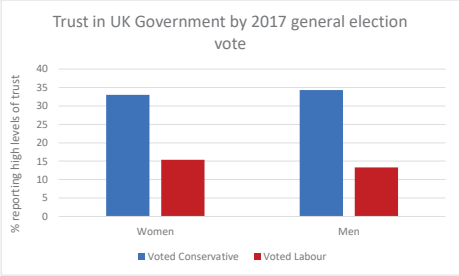
If we look at political trust by 2017 General Election vote, the picture is less clear. Amongst Labour voters, there was a stark difference in the proportion of women and men reporting high levels of trust in politicians. Just 1 in 10 women who voted Labour in 2017 reported high levels of trust in politicians, compared to 1 in 6 men who voted the same way.

Figure 7: Trust in politicians by 2017 General Election vote



Across women surveyed, a greater share of Conservative voters reported high levels of trust in politicians as compared with those who voted Labour at the 2017 General Election. When we looked at trust in government, we observed less of a gender gap between Conservative and Labour voters. While it's possible that Conservative voters are more trusting in government, the difference seen here more likely reflects a "winners' bias", where respondents who voted for the winning party at an election are more likely to report higher levels of trust in the government formed by that party.

Figure 8: Trust in UK government by 2017 general election vote



CONCLUSIONS

Fewer women than men report high levels of political trust across a series of measures. Political trust amongst women is low: fewer than 1 in 8 women reported high levels of trust in politicians. Fewer than 1 in 4 women thought democracy was working well in the UK, and only a similar number expected politicians to keep promises made during an election campaign.

We found clear gender gaps in perceptions of public service, as well as trust in institutions: fewer women reported high levels of trust in politicians as compared to men, and fewer women than men perceived politicians to be public servants. Perceptions of public service across a range of roles appear to be gendered: women were substantially more likely than men to perceive care work, through roles such as nurses and personal carers, to be public service.

Fewer women reported high levels of trust in key political institutions as compared to men – though this does not appear to be the case across all key institutions. A higher proportion of women reported high levels of trust in the police, and their local council, but more men reported high levels of trust in UK government, parliament, and their local MP.

Women who voted remain were significantly more trusting in politicians than those who voted leave – despite a pro-Brexit majority at the House of Commons at the point this study was conducted. We also observed that fewer women who voted Labour at the 2017 General Election reported high levels of trust in politicians as compared to men who voted the same way.

It's clear that the relationship between gender and political trust ought to be further explored, particularly in seeking to understand how distrust amongst women can be tackled; structural barriers to women's participation in politics lowered; and equal representation realised.

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