

The Public Trust in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

This article examines the origins and the ethos of the principle referred to as the Public Trust. Further this article discusses a contemporary connotation of what has come to be known as the Doctrine of Public Trust. It studies the underlying concept and framework of trust from a sociological as well as economic/governance perspective on diverse primarily democratically governed countries. Lastly the article explores the challenges to the populace of differing democratic nations through the lens of the COVID-19 global pandemic. In this area, it grapples with whether the pandemic has influenced and/or exacerbated any trends concerning the Public Trust via the concomitant governance, both national and local, of individual nations and those governments' handling of the pandemic.

Keywords: public trust, trust, distrust, COVID-19 pandemic, governance, historical/cultural customs, expectations, culture, social trust

Introduction: What is Public Trust?

“... by late May, less than half the British public consider the UK government a relatively trustworthy source of news and information about coronavirus... [J]ust a quarter consider individual politicians trustworthy.”

---Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

Trust is intrinsic to the human experience. It is central to and affects all human interactions and relationships, whether for individuals, families, groups, communities, or institutions. It is likewise an individual experience within one's self as one develops and becomes increasingly

self-aware. From the moment of one's birth, or the establishment of an organization, one needs to reach a sense of consummation or self-actualization. Reaching such requires the liaison that is trust. Common experience leads individuals and groups to realize and appreciate that trust is itself a process—a process that will have successes and failures—a process that never ends. Effectively, the processes that comprise the value we collectively and individually define as trust, are extremely diverse, complex and evolve and shift over time. This includes the experience of trust in the processes of societal interaction and government. Within the nature of trust as an ongoing process and evolution, citizens can appreciate the complexities basic to what is known as Public Trust.

With this as a prelude, we now turn to the initial concept of the Public Trust, and how narrowly it was framed. In essence the term communicated the principle that the sovereign holds in trust (in the legal sense that property or land was held for the benefit of the people) some natural resource for public use regardless of private property ownership (Sax, 1970). The origin of the Public Trust can be traced back to the ancient laws of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. During those times, there was a belief that the sea, the seashore, the air and running water were common to everyone (Araiza, 2012). This creed then eventually became law in European states such as England and were further strengthened (codified) via the *Magna Carta*. These originally sovereign deemed rights were further fortified by supplementary laws in England and subsequently were adopted and became part of the common law of the United States.

In the US, the Public Trust Doctrine was initially adjudicated and ultimately accepted via the case of *Martin v Waddell's Lessee* in 1842. The decision in *Martin* was then consequently endorsed in *Illinois Central Railroad v. Illinois*, 146 US 387 (1892). This is important, as the Court (in *Illinois Central*) ruled that the common law public trust doctrine prevented the State from disregarding the public's right to the lands (except in the case of very small portions of land which would have no effect on free access). This brief summary of the somewhat anachronistic approach to the doctrine is significant as it provides a stark contrast to the more modern approach. The modern-day position to this Creed demonstrates less of a legalistic frame of reference, but instead a broader, more encompassing and fairly comprehensive perspective: one that defines it in more socio-capital and governance terminologies.

It is in this vein that Ali Farazmand, PhD, a Public Administration academic, informed that in contemporary society, citizens expect, hope, demand and, in some cases, disregard the rhetoric and/or language espoused by their governments when regarding the collective public interest (Farazmand 2004a, b:1). Though citizens may expect their governments to be responsible for all their works and for what they do in ensuring that the citizenry's needs are met, depending on the country and, in some cases, the cultural ethnicity of the citizenry, this expectation and the meeting of the expectation (primarily in democratic nations) are varied.

Trust as a Concept Regarding Governance

The Public Trust Doctrine has been a significant yet often taciturn segment of the ever-evolving democratic tableau. To implement policies and strategies effectively, it is important to improve citizens' trust in government (Beshi & Kaur, 2019). In their publication *Public Trust in Local Government: Explaining the Role of Good Governance Practices*, Beshi & Kaur wrestled

with the concepts of Good Governance vs. Sound Governance. They discussed the limitations and deficiencies of the concept of good governance and then encouraged the adoption of the more comprehensive concept of sound governance (Farazmand, 2017). Though these two academics analyzed and focused on the global dynamic of governance, they also grasped that in the application of governance on the local level, the postulation of good governance prevailed over sound governance. However, irrespective of these specific findings, for the purposes of this article, the use of the two concepts will be interchangeable.

Beshi & Kaur opined that in order to foster and enhance public trust, the government must be more vigilant, especially for law and the public interest (Diamond, 2007). They further posited that building trust is the result and determination of inclusive governance (Cheema, 2010) and that citizens are more likely to have trust in public officials and political institutions when governance is more effective and democratic.

Scholars have debated the principle of trust and have concluded it is a multifaceted, complex, and ambiguous concept, one which is difficult to define and therefore to investigate (Cheema, 2010; Van der Meer, 2010). Correspondingly, Grimmelikhuijsen concluded the concept of trust can have disparate shades of meaning (Grimmelikhuijsen *et al.*, 2013). Notwithstanding this perspective, there is collective academic agreement in the assumption that trust is a psychological state that involves a willingness to take risks based on positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of a person (or a group/collective) that trusts (Yang, 2006).

In extrapolation of this definition regarding the trust in government, Cheema stated it is based on the citizens' expectations as to the type, operation, and interaction of government with the citizenry and inclusive of the behaviour of politicians, civil servants and citizens themselves (Cheema, 2010). Nevertheless, some scholars believe that trust is based on beliefs rather than expectations (Thomas, 1998). Still, another group of scholars understand trust to refer to the level of confidence citizens have in their government to "do the right thing," to act appropriately and honestly on behalf of the public (Barnes and Gill, 2000).

In general, trust refers to a willingness to rely on others to act on our behalf based on the belief that they possess the capacity to make effective decisions and take the public's interest into account (Houston and Harding, 2014). Though this is a modern definition, it is important to note that the overall concept preserves its hereditities and foundation in the original principle as explained in the introduction.

Returning to Beshi & Kaur, they opined that trust in government is considered as indispensable for the effective functioning of a democratic government. Further, in a definition of trust in government, scholars believe trust is also necessary for the fair and effective functioning of public institutions (Jung and Sea, 2012; Parker *et al.*, 2008; Gordon, 2000). Porumbescu, a Professor of Public Administration, informed that, broadly speaking, public trust in government is important as it speaks to the quality of the relationship that exists between citizens and their government (Porumbescu, 2015). There are a number of theorists who view performance in public services as potential precursors for the public trust value citizens have towards their governments. They further link distrust predominately to the poor performance of public institutions (Yang and Holzer, 2006; Christensen and Laegrid, 2005; Uslander, 2002).

Historical Cultural Customs as a Component of Trust

The descriptor of culture in and of itself is a very cantankerous subject. To that end, the definition of culture lends to argumentation amongst the various factions of social scientists. Economists and sociologists have long clashed on its definition. The American Sociological Association views culture as the languages, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge and collective identities and memories developed by members of social groups that make their social environments meaningful (<https://www.asanet.org/topics/culture>).

Gerard Roland, a professor of both economics and political science, defined culture as the set of values and beliefs people in a given community have about how the world (both nature and society) works, as well as the norms of behavior derived from that set of values (Gerard Roland, 2015). Luigi Guiso *et al.* further narrowed the definition of culture in an attempt to identify a causal link from culture to economic outcomes and defined culture as the customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious, and social groups transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation (Luigi Guiso *et al.* 2006). Guiso further posited that culture has a direct impact on economic outcomes which also includes how individuals broadly and, in some instances, distinctly view and have trust in the government. Guiso agrees with the hypothesis of Becker who guides:

Individuals have less control over their culture than over other social capital. They cannot alter their ethnicity, race, or family history, and only with difficulty can they change their country or religion. Because of the difficulty of changing culture and its low depreciation rate, culture is largely a 'given' to individuals throughout their lifetimes (Becker, 1996).

Guiso further postulated that emigrants (to the US) from low trust regions such as southern Italy, tend to carry with them, paradoxically, their cultural ancestral feelings of mistrust to their chosen cities and towns in the US. The same holds true of individuals that are raised religiously, even if they reject religion as adults (Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales, 2003). Guiso continues and then quizzically and somewhat puzzlingly states that being raised religiously increases the level of trust by 2 percent. This is increased to 20 percent when the individual is a regular attendee to religious services, differentiating this to be broadly true in Western religions (meaning the denominations of Catholicism and Protestantism), but less so for Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

Guiso informed that culture can also directly affect political preference and the views on how much governments should intrude in on all things economic. These include regulations of the economic markets, income redistribution and the nationalization of certain industries and businesses. He further postulated that Americans with British, German, and Northern European ancestry, irrespective of religious belief, hold the collective view that more government intervention, specifically on the issue of income redistribution, is highly undesirable. It should be noted that this ancestral lineage, in the American context, denotes earlier immigration and longer generational influence on the burgeoning culture.

Guiso then contrasted this immigrant perspective with the views of those considered to be later arriving and of different religions (though not specifically so) to the Western European patriarchy. This immigrant perspective is decidedly more pro-redistribution. Correspondingly,

Americans of African and Hispanic persuasion as well as Native Americans, who may or may not share similar religious beliefs to their compatriots of Western European heritage, are significantly more in favour of redistribution.

Marsh, in his 2019 manuscript regarding social trust in Japan and Taiwan, echoed earlier perceptions that social and political trust are in decline (Marsh, 2019). Marsh chronicled that around the turn of the century an explanation of this phenomenon was sought by scholars such as Hall (1999), causing Paxson (1999) to suggest that generalized trust is low in societies where the rule of law is weak, and corruption is rampant. Other economic scholars were also interested in the component of trust as an indicator of economic growth. Some (Zak and Knack, 2001) used data from 41 societies to demonstrate that formal institutions, the absence of corruption and social homogeneity, amongst other factors, increase economic growth by building on the trusts that exist amongst people.

Marsh then attempted to falsify, in the philosopher Popper's meaning of falsification, the claim of Francis Fukuyama. Fukuyama asserted that Japan had a higher generalized interpersonal trust than relatively nearby neighbor Taiwan (Popper, 1974; Fukuyama, 1995). Fukuyama broadly characterized the United States, Japan, and Germany as high-trust societies. These nations, he claimed, can be contrasted with Italy, France, China, and "China-type" societies such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, which he branded as low-trust societies. A key component of being considered as a low-trust society by Fukuyama was to be labelled as "familistic," meaning family and kin ties are principally robust. However, trust in people one does not know is underdeveloped; he cited Italy and its customs and Chinese Confucianism, which chronicle the advancement of familial bonds above all other loyalties, as prime examples.

Marsh further labeled and contrasted these concepts of high and low trust as micro and macro levels of trust and utilizes the definitions from another economist (Hardin). Micro trust was deemed to be thick trust, which values a long sequence of trusting interactions with given persons such as siblings, parents etc. (Hardin, 1993). Macro trust is also considered to be system trust, which is trust in the stranger or generalized other, which are fostered by the government. Marsh posited that this type of trust is more cognitive than emotional. Yet when viewing this label through the lens of the global decline in the public trust as well as factoring in cultural norms, coupled with a global pandemic, this does not completely ring true. To trust someone whether it be a family member or a government body, means to trust that the intentions are to refrain from opportunism and self-absorbed interest-seeking. It is the expectation that the other will not engage in opportunistic behaviour even in the face of incentives for opportunism and the absence of formal mechanisms to monitor or control such behaviour (Woolthuis, Hillebrand and Nooteboom, 2005).

This author remains skeptical regarding the somewhat oversimplification espoused in some of the prevailing literature. This skepticism is due to the author's anecdotal yet experiential exploits and reasoning. However, notwithstanding this cynicism, the conclusions reached cannot be wholly and summarily discounted or dismissed, especially when consideration is given to and the confluence of the erosion of the Public Trust during the evolving COVID-19 pandemic.

The Public Trust in the Time of COVID-19

According to Gerard Hane, who wrote an opinion piece in the *Japan Times*, there was a concerted effort by the Japanese central government to decide who was to be the “voice” of the government during the crisis of the pandemic. On 26 March 2020, Prime Minister Abe appointed the economic policy minister, in spite of this being a public health crisis. Hane pronounced this choice as telling and that this specific appointment indicated where the government laid its priority, especially if one is cognizant of the impending Olympic Games, which were postponed to 2021 (Gerard Hane, 2019). Hane further highlighted the criteria most revered for such a person. He explained the qualities considered to be most coveted were whether they possessed a career of public service, a reputation for being committed to the societal good, and someone who could speak frankly to an international and domestic audience.

Government critics decried this selection and formed the opinion that because of previous Japanese central governmental missteps, this specific choice, with the above-mentioned, defined criteria became a virtual necessity. Despite these blunders, Muto *et al.* state that the Japanese, due to their famed belief and trust in government, have broadly followed the guidance of the government, albeit that the guidance like most information and guidance surrounding COVID-19 has been in state of flux. Through their study, it has been shown that the number of those that follow the governmental advice has somewhat declined. However, the authors do provide a caveat and state they are unsure whether this is due to factors other than a decline in the Public Trust. (Muto *et al.*, 2020). According to the study 80 percent of all surveyed adhered to the guidance which called for the avoidance of closed spaces with poor ventilation, crowded spaces, and close-contact settings (dubbed the 3 C’s). Additionally, 85 percent reported practicing social distancing. This was regardless of gender and age, though more females and more older participants were supportive of social distancing. Further, 86 percent adhered to the recommended hygiene guidance, while 77 percent adhered to the suggested coughing etiquette.

When asked where they received their information regarding the virus, almost 90 percent stated that their information came from TV news programs and internet news sites with about 50 percent trusting these sources. In comparison, information received from the government (central and local) was received by 60 percent of the population and it was trusted by 50 percent of the participants of the study, with the local government being the most trusted source. Compare and contrast this level of trust in Japan with that of Sweden. In her article, “What can we learn from Sweden’s approach to COVID -19: WHO coronavirus briefings” Linda Lacina, quoted Mr. Michael Ryan, the Chief Executive Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) Emergencies Programme. He stated that Sweden’s approach in April 2020 of the pandemic, which had received almost uniform criticism in its use of “herd immunity” as a way of combatting the pandemic, was based on the trust in its government of its citizenry. This meant that the citizenry trusted that this governmental choice was the most effective (Lacina, 2020).

Correspondingly, this choice has led to a decline in the trust of the government and specifically its handling of the pandemic. There was a significant recorded drop in confidence/trust in the government’s advice in June 2020 from 63 percent to 45 percent. This precipitous drop in confidence led to a direct and concerted shift in governmental policy. A similar occurrence happened in the United Kingdom. This drop in confidence was heralded as a direct result of the government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic. A new poll carried out by *YouGov* for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that trust in the government

over the course of the coronavirus pandemic has plummeted since April. *The Guardian* quoted the institute's director, as saying: "I have never in 10 years of research in this area seen a [precipitous] drop in trust like what we have seen for the UK government in the course of six weeks." The Institute reported that less than half, 48 percent, said the government was relatively trustworthy in late May, which was down from 67 percent just six weeks earlier (El-Bar, 2020).

The same poll found that the British public were worried about false or misleading information about coronavirus from the UK government. The percentage of the public worried about the government providing false or misleading reached 38 percent (up 11 percent). Analogously, the public distrust of the information emanating from politicians reached 40 percent (up 9 percent). The poll chronicled the number of the British public who believed that the UK government was doing a good job responding to the crisis was down 21 percent since April. This included a 25 percent drop for those in the political center, and a 21 percent drop for those on the right. Similarly, only 27 percent believe the coronavirus situation in the UK is heading in the right direction, which is down from 35 percent in April. Further, 25 percent believe the UK is on the wrong track, which is up from 10 percent in April.

The US trends appear to be mirroring those exhibited in the UK and to a degree in Sweden—namely a lack of public trust in the governments' handling of the pandemic. In April, broadly due to state mandates such as stay-at-home orders, various media outlets reported a flattening of the curve related to coronavirus and coronavirus deaths. As a result of the success of those stay-at-home orders, many states, in May, rescinded those very same orders, allowing businesses to open, albeit with restrictions. However, in June, coronavirus cases and corresponding deaths were on the increase resulting in (as of 22 June 2020) 2.4 million cases of COVID-19 and just over 115,000 deaths (Boyle, J, June 2020). In May 2020 36 percent of Americans reported that the worst of COVID-19 was in the past, which was an increase from April (31 percent) and March (12 percent). Corresponding to the increase in COVID-19 cases as detailed above, there was a sizeable reversal in June 2020, which saw 30 percent had the same sentiment.

Correspondingly, the public trust in the information provided by government (in all of its forms) collectively decreased. Trust in the federal government has decreased by 15 percentage points since March, and less than half (48 percent) informed that they trusted the information from the federal government either a great deal or a fair amount. Trust in state government has also declined (13 percent) since March, but not yet equal to the federal government. Confidence in the government has also shown a decline, as barely half of Americans reported having confidence in the federal government in June, compared to 59 percent in March.

In July 2020, the Pew Research Center reported a similar finding. They reported that the perception of public trust in the federal government by Americans has been steadily declining, to the point that 75 percent of Americans believe public trust is shrinking. It has been revealed that there has been a precipitous decline for the past 20 years; and 36 percent believe this is due to the performance of the federal government (Rainie, L., Keeter, S., and Perrin, A., 2020).

Others cite concerns of corruption and the poisoning of the political process by corporations. A further 14 percent lay the current public trust malaise at the feet of the current administration. Interestingly 86 percent of Americans believe the decline in the public trust can be improved upon, making the case for local communities being the breeding ground for a groundswell of improved confidence, as well as better leaders, engaging in superior leadership

Articles

skills. The distrust amongst 69 percent of the people stems from a lack of transparency by the federal government, as it is believed that the form of government intentionally withholds important information from the public that it could safely release (Rainie, L., Keeter, S., and Perrin, A., 2020).

Cevat Giray Askoy *et al.* in their paper, “The Political Scar of Epidemics,” queried the political legacy of the coronavirus pandemic. They concluded that during an individual’s impressionable years, which they label as being between 18-25 years of age, there will be a persistent negative effect regarding confidence in and trust of political institutions and leaders. The paper further hypothesized that this negative effect correlates to a loss of confidence in healthcare-related policies at the time of the epidemic (Askoy et al, 2020). The paper concluded by stating trust and confidence in government are important if a society is to organize and mount an effective collective response to an epidemic. They labeled this distrust or lack of public trust as significant and that it is large and persistent.

Askoy *et al.*, further postulated that this lack of public trust is largest in settings where there is existing doubt in the effectiveness of government. They further informed that countries where there is a decidedly limited (cohesive) strength of government are the countries most at risk. The current pandemic situation can result in the further erosion of trust in political leaders and institutions. Askoy *et al.*, further stated that residents in democracies sharply revise their confidence and trust in governments and its leaders in a downward direction following significant exposure, which is not seen in autocracies. They speculated this occurs because the public trusts and expects their democratic governments to be responsive to their concerns. Where that response is deemed to be inadequate, the citizenry then revises their attitudes unfavourably. Lastly, the paper advised that there is an enigmatic yet circular aspect to this democratic phenomenon. Low levels of trust allow an epidemic to spread and where the spread of the epidemic reduces trust in government, this then leads to deeper distrust, thereby leaving the government in the hands of those that have the least respect for it.

Conclusion

Through a parsing of the views of the economic academics as well as the data, there seems to be a consensus as to the origins and historical component of the epistemology of the Public Trust Doctrine. Over time it has evolved, and it is less about issues involving land and more about a social contract and compact between the government and its citizenry. During times of global crisis, as exhibited in this current time of COVID-19, this all has been tested. Clearly there has been a weathering of sorts globally across the board regarding this necessary, though sometimes fragile, bond. This is irrespective of cultural mores and country customs. However, the percentage of decline is subject and relative to the historical levels of trust as exhibited by the various citizenries and their chronological levels of trust in their respective governments.

In these current times, the crises experienced in view of the COVID-19 pandemic raise up vastly enormous questions regarding the Public Trust and the outcry of citizens for needed assistance so to reach healing on the many levels of human experience. Just as individuals must deal with the complexities of trust’s processes in any human interaction, the world’s citizens are raising voices and actions so that the critically essential expectations of the times are met successfully both for the present and also for the future. As explored and discussed in this article, there is a need for each individual to ascertain what is needed in this time of health crisis

and for the years to come as well. Truly to be “Public Trust,” today requires that we evaluate and move to change, develop and demand the positive evolution of government, and leaders to be instruments of true change who work to restore the fullness of holistic health to one and all.

In this time of challenge, what new commitments must be made to restore and bring needed actualization and fulfillment to the trust for which the entire public yearns?



The above photograph is the work of Jordi Play, taken on March 24, 2020. It captures a COVID-19 patient placing his trust in a healer's care at the Hospital de Sant Pau in Barcelona, Spain. The photograph and licensing information are found at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coronavirus_Covid-19_crisis_\(49697960832\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coronavirus_Covid-19_crisis_(49697960832).jpg)

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Articles

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