

Political and Social Trust: Pathways, Trends and Gaps Some key findings

This is a presentation of some key findings of the report *Political and Social Trust: Pathways, Trends and Gaps*, published in Finnish by the Ministry of Finance in 2019. The report is edited by Maria Bäck (University of Helsinki) and Elina Kestilä-Kekkonen (University of Turku). It gathers together research articles, wherein authors discuss the concepts of political and social trust, as well as their measurement and fluctuations within different groups, from citizens to elites on both the national and international level. The specific purpose of the report is to present an overview of the most recent research on political trust and to provoke discussion on how concerned we should be about increasing inequality in this area. How much trust does society require in order to function properly as a whole and within different social groups?

Political and Social Trust: Pathways, Trends and Gaps is the final report of the CONTRE consortium (Pathways to Political Trust, 2015-2019), funded by the Academy of Finland. Thus, some of the central findings of the project are summarised in the report. However, since the aim of the report was also to bring together researchers working under the same theme within other projects, the group of authors also includes researchers from the projects BIBU (Tackling Biases and Bubbles in Participation) and TITA (Tackling Inequalities in Times of Austerity), financed by the Strategic Council at the Academy of Finland, and LegGov (Legitimacy in Global Governance), a research programme at the University of Stockholm. Researchers and experts from the University of Helsinki, the University of Tampere and the University of Turku were also invited to contribute.



Figure 1. Political trust in 32 European countries in years 2004–2017. Source: European Social Survey.

What does political trust mean and is it declining?

- Political trust of the citizens is based on their evaluation of whether the political system responds to their normative expectations
- Political trust fluctuates in Western democracies but it is not in a steep decline
- Short-term political trust is vulnerable to topical occurrences in society, such as economic downturn and scandals
- Scandals occur rather frequently in the post-modern media landscape – their impact on political trust depends on the type of the scandal, the characteristics of the politician involved in the scandal and the characteristics of the citizens observing the scandal, as well as their interplay

What explains comparatively high trust in Finland?

- In Finland, like in other Nordic countries, trust in political institutions and actors has traditionally been high
- Finland has several characteristics known to enhance high aggregate level political trust
 - Comprehensive welfare state – relatively high benefits for a wide range of people
 - Low unemployment
 - Protestantism – horizontal ties and low political corruption
 - Consensus democracy – shared power in government
- There is still a fair amount of political distrust among people in Finland and the mean level of trust tends to be closer to the middle of the scale than to the positive extreme.

What is the relationship between political trust and democratic support?

- Political trust fluctuates but support for democracy as an idea remains largely intact
- Liberal democracy requires political support and trust to function but also well-founded criticism for its renewal
- In Finland, citizens' perceptions of an ideal form of democracy and democratic processes vary according to their feelings towards the current democratic system, ideological stand, age and political sophistication
- Dissatisfaction with the current state of democracy and low political trust increase the willingness to change the democratic system
- Citizens leaning to the political left are more likely to support citizens' larger role in the decision-making, while citizens leaning to the political right support a minimal role

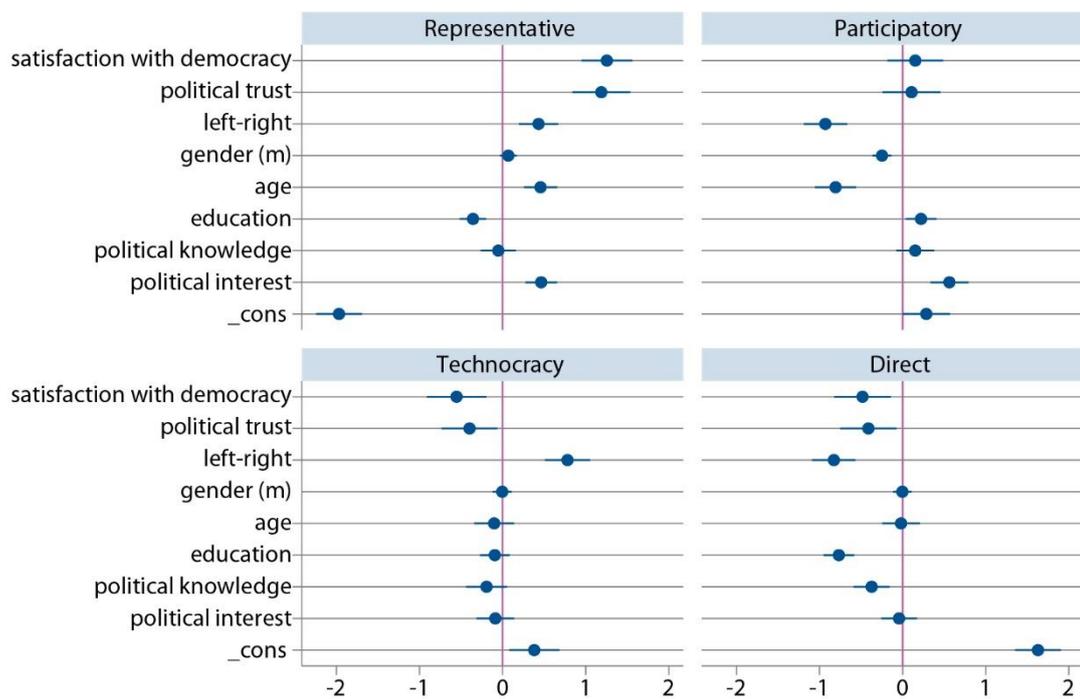


Figure 2. Support for different democratic processes. Source: Finnish National Election Studies.

What does social trust mean and why does the political system need it?

- Social or interpersonal or generalised trust refers to a person's perception that other citizens do not intentionally try to harm them but seek to be fair, trustworthy and generous
- Social trust is an important ingredient of social capital – often defined as social networks, norms of reciprocity and the trustworthiness that arises from them
- Social trust explains cross-country differences, e.g. in economic growth, the stability and effectiveness of democracy, social integration, cooperation and health
- At the country level, social trust correlates positively with the absence of corruption and the level of economic equality
- In Finland, at the individual level, higher level of education, good health, optimism about the future, participation in voluntary associations and trust in implementing institutions were all significant factors in estimating the level of generalised trust
- Social trust is an essential concept when measuring the cohesion of the Finnish elite structure, as it reflects the trust between elites and how these two have changed over time
- Social trust affects the cohesion among elites: growing disintegration and fragmentation of the elite structure is due to economic crises, political crises and decreased mutual trust
- Standard measures of social trust measure it rather poorly: the object of trust should be specified and the indicator should include several questions measuring different aspects of the phenomenon

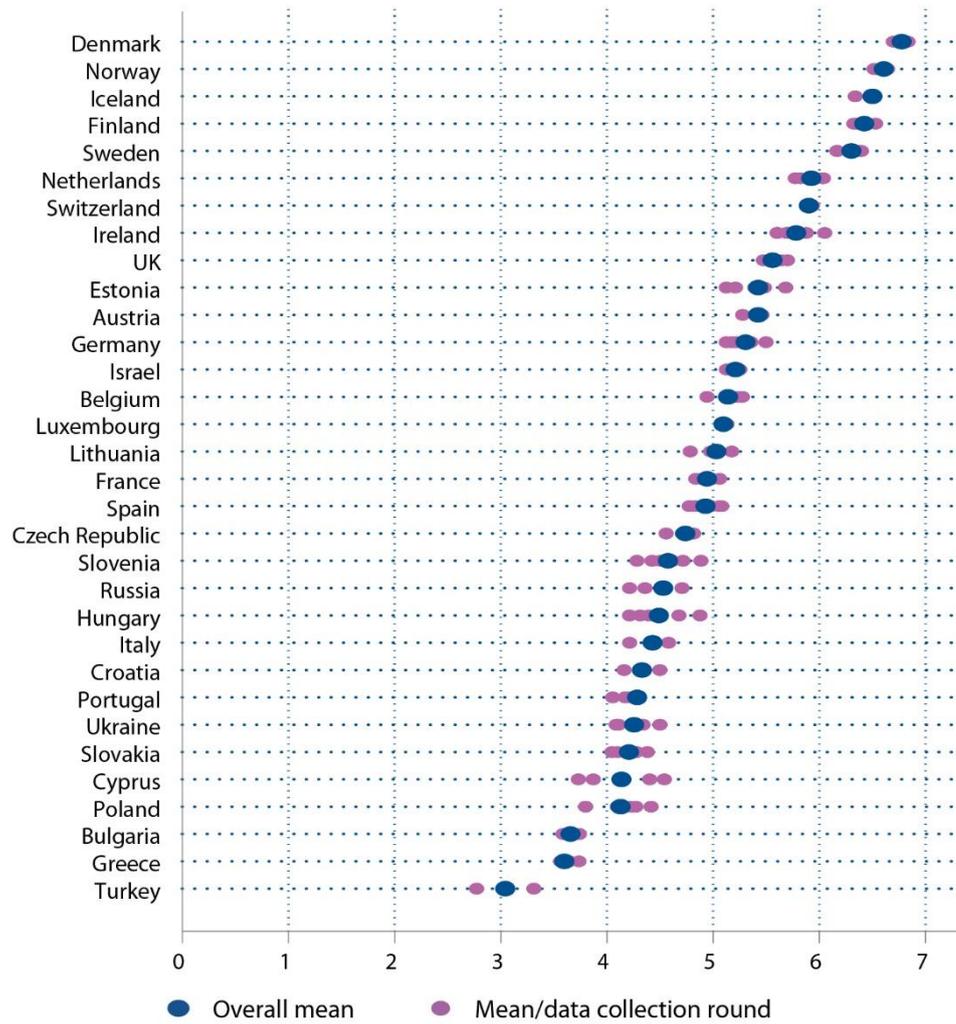


Figure 3. The mean level of social trust in European countries in years 2002–2017 (scale 0 to 10). Source: European Social Survey.

Trust gaps among citizens

Inequality

- Countries with higher levels of income inequality and material deprivation are more likely to witness lower levels of trust than countries with lower level of income inequality and material deprivation.
- At both macro-level and micro-level, social trust is related to the social standing of the individual
- Finland is an example of a country that has been able to construct a secure society with trustworthy institutions despite the difficult periods in its history. These structures in society reduce poverty and social exclusion.

Social groups

- Social class is an important determinant of an individual's level of political trust
- In particular, a citizen's subjective class position, i.e. her class identification, merged with the objective class position, i.e. occupation, is significant. Class identification with higher social class, compared to one's own objective class position, increases the likelihood of higher level of political trust.
- Political trust is also a strong mediator of social class differences in voting and a moderate mediator in institutional political participation
- In non-institutional participation political trust is a moderate mediator, but it is negative – citizens, who have a high trust in institutions, are not likely to participate in them.
- In electoral activity, political trust has only a limited role in tackling the socioeconomic bias in participation

Immigrants

- In order to integrate the immigrant population to the political system, creating trust between the native and immigrant-origin population is of key importance
- Trust is particularly important when recruiting immigrants to stand as candidates in elections: parties should recruit so-called "agents of trust", i.e. immigrant-origin actors that have a prominent position in their respective societies, to their organisations and candidate lists
- Parties should help the process of trust building between parties and immigrant groups by determining the political preferences of different ethnic groups and subsequently transferring their political message and information on voting rights to immigrant voters.

Trust in international relations

European Union

- In a majority of the Member States, the economic downturn and migration crisis have led to a declining trust in the Union and its institutions.
- People in Finland have, however, become more trusting of the EU during the past decade, and support for the EU membership and the euro have also increased.
- In Finland, younger cohorts are highly supportive of integration.
- Recent events in the world politics, i.e. the election of Donald Trump, the rise of populism and growing authoritarian tendencies in Russia and Turkey, may strengthen the public support for European integration.
- Being supportive of globalisation and immigration correlates with higher trust in the EU.

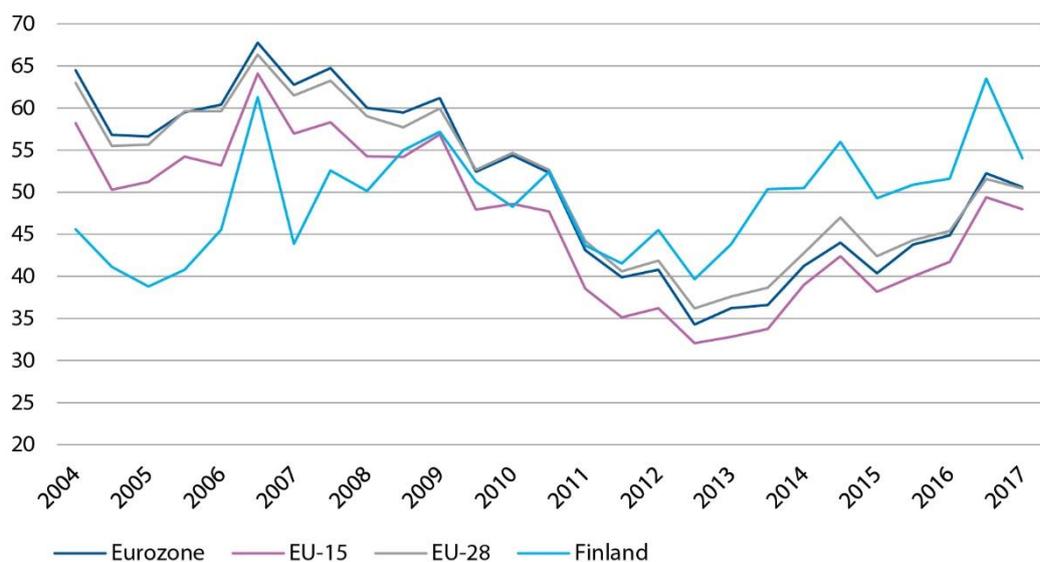


Figure 4. Trust in the European Union in years 2004–2017. The share of citizens who trust the EU.
Source: Eurobarometers and Gesis ZACAT.

United Nations

- The perceived legitimacy of the UN varies across countries, and there is not a general 'legitimacy deficit'.
- UN legitimacy has remained remarkably stable over time, challenging the idea of a consistent decline.
- There is no evidence to support the notion that new modes of global governance would enjoy greater legitimacy than the UN, even among the elites that negotiate the institutions of global governance.

Interstate relations

- The main factor that characterises international politics, and distinguishes it from domestic politics, is the lack of supreme authority above the state actors, namely international anarchy.
- The lack of supreme authority generates unresolved uncertainty to international relations.
- Security dilemma – a condition where states hedge against what they perceive as the uncertain intentions of other actors, thus creating a mutual spiral of suspicion.
- The absence of trust may aggravate the security dilemma, and potentially lead to catastrophic consequences. By contrast, the presence of trust can facilitate interstate action, such as diplomatic negotiations or defence cooperation.