

Trust in Government Redux:

The role of information environments and cognitive skills

Pippa Norris

Harvard University

Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Cambridge, MA 02138.

Pippa.Norris@Harvard.edu @PippaN1

Synopsis: The concept of trustworthiness can be understood to involve an informal social contract where principals authorize others to act on their behalf in the expectation that the agent will fulfill their responsibilities, despite conditions of risk and uncertainty. When evaluating the trustworthiness of political institutions, public judgments are expected to reflect the quality of government procedures, especially the principles of competency, impartiality and integrity. The most extensive body of cross-national empirical research about these issues has focused largely on established liberal democracies, such as Nordic states, characterized by freedom of the press and media pluralism, as well as affluent post-industrial European societies with highly educated populations. This study theorizes that the accuracy of any public judgments of the trustworthiness of government procedures are likely to be mediated by the information environment in open and closed societies, as well as by the cognitive skills of citizens. To understand these issues, **Part I** summarizes the theoretical argument. To identify the drivers of trust, data is drawn from around 80 societies around the globe included in Wave 7 of the European Values Survey/ World Values Survey (2017-21). **Part II** examines individual-level data to analyze how far confidence in political institutions is strengthened by *subjective* perceptions about the quality of governance. For a more rigorous test, **Part III** compares objective performance indicators to see how far independent measures of the quality of government by monitoring agencies predict public judgments of the trustworthiness of core political institutions in each country -- and how far such relationships are condition by the type of information society, as well as by societal levels of education. **Part IV** highlight the key findings and considers their broader implications for understanding the conditions for trust and trustworthiness.

When evaluating the trustworthiness of political institutions, public judgments are expected to reflect the quality of government procedures, especially the principles of competency, impartiality and integrity. In particular, effective accountability mechanisms are often thought to be important by deterring abuses of power by elected politicians, ministers, and departments of state, so that governments serve the public interest. This argument underlies many attempts to restore public trust in government through implementing a wide range of institutional reforms, as exemplified by establishing independent electoral commissions safeguarding the integrity of elections, civil society watchdogs monitoring public sector malfeasance, the oversight role of committee hearings by parliamentary bodies scrutinizing executive orders, and civil service agencies monitoring the truthfulness, ethics, and probity of public sector officials.

Although commonly assumed, the empirical evidence supporting these sorts of claims deserves critical scrutiny. In particular, it remains unclear from previous research how far the accuracy of public judgments of the trustworthiness of government procedures are mediated by the information environment in open and closed societies and by the cognitive skills of citizens. The most extensive body of cross-national empirical research about these issues has focused largely on established liberal democracies, such as Nordic states, characterized by freedom of the press and media pluralism, as well as affluent post-industrial European societies with highly-educated populations.¹ It is less clear how far the general public has the capacity to make accurate and informed judgments of the quality of government in closed societies ruled by authoritarian regimes which repress independent media, such as China, Myanmar, and Iran, as well as among poorer populations in developing societies lacking literacy skills and education. To explore the global evidence, this study draws on the most recent wave of the European Values Survey/World Values Survey (2017-2021) covering around 80 diverse societies worldwide. The pooled cross-national data is used to examine three issues: 1) how far citizen's *subjective* views about the quality of governance, like perceptions of corruption and satisfaction with democracy, are consistently associated with attitudes of political trust; 2) more importantly, whether *objective* indices of the performance of democracy and good governance in each society predict public judgments of trustworthiness; and finally, 3) whether these relationships differ in open and closed information societies, and among high and low educated populations.

To understand these issues, **Part I** summarizes the theoretical argument. To identify the drivers of trust, **Part II** examines individual-level data to analyze how far confidence in political institutions is strengthened by *subjective* perceptions about the quality of governance. Models examine these relationships controlling for the sociodemographic and economic characteristics which are commonly

associated with political trust, controlling for the type of information society. The results confirm that citizens' trust in government is indeed strongly linked with their general feelings of satisfaction about the workings of the political system and the performance of democracy in their country, as well as with their perceptions about problems of corruption in the public sector. The more positively individuals regard the quality of their governance, especially its competency and integrity, the greater their trust in state authorities. These associations are very similar in both open and closed societies, suggesting that citizens associate these qualities with feelings of trust irrespective of the broader information environment. But are these attitudes the genuine reasons driving political trust – or are they simply rationalizations concerning prior preferences, reflecting processes of motivated reasoning? Unfortunately, the direction of causality in this recursive relationship cannot be determined from the individual-level analysis of cross-sectional surveys alone.

For a more rigorous test, **Part III** compares objective performance indicators to see how far independent measures of the quality of government by monitoring agencies predict public judgments of the trustworthiness of core political institutions in each country -- and how far such relationships are conditioned by the type of information society, as well as by levels of education, providing the cognitive skills useful to assess government performance. Indicators based on expert evaluations are selected from the Varieties of Democracy project's liberal democracy index and the World Bank Institute measures of six dimension of good governance.² The results of the analysis confirm striking contrasts in these relationships by the type of information environment, as theorized. In the open societies, trust in government is significantly correlated with objective indicators of the quality of government, such as control of corruption, government effectiveness, rule of law, and liberal democracy. The better the quality of government, in these societies, the stronger the public's judgments of the trustworthiness of these institutions. But no such relationship is observed in closed societies, where states limit independent media, repress critical voices, censor digital communications, and promote domestic news coverage favorable of the regime. Controlling for the type of open or closed societies, education also makes a significant difference, with objective indicators of the quality of good governance more weakly correlated with trust in government in less-educated societies, as expected. In this context, ordinary citizens lack the necessary information and cognitive skills which facilitate accurate assessments of the quality of government. The conclusions in **Part IV** highlight the key findings and considers their broader implications for understanding the conditions for trust and trustworthiness.

I: Theories why the quality of governance matters

The concept of trustworthiness can be understood to involve an informal social contract where principals authorize others to act on their behalf in the expectation that the agent will fulfill their responsibilities, despite conditions of risk and uncertainty.³ Performance in the agent-principal social contract is conceptualized as involving competency, so that agents or agencies fulfil specific responsibilities to their clients, while procedural mechanisms concerning standards of integrity and impartiality hold agents accountable for any general failures to do so.

An extensive body of empirical studies in multiple societies has sought to compare public trust against the government's record of competency when delivering public goods and services. 'Competency' means the ability to do something efficiently and well. For governments, this has commonly been measured using standard policy outcome benchmarks of macro-economic management in achieving widely agreed goals on valance issues, such as rising prosperity and full employment.⁴ If governments meet targets and prove adept at steering the economy, and more generally effective in delivering a broader basket of public goods and services like improved health care, better education, and stronger national security, this is widely expected to bolster public confidence. Yet at the same time political leaders may fail to deliver prosperity and development for multiple reasons beyond their control, such as the headwinds of global markets, rates of bilateral trade and international investment, the productivity and capacity of the workforce, the occurrence of specific 'shock' events like Covid-19 or natural disasters, and 1001 contingent factors, as much as the government's skills in steering the macroeconomy.

When evaluating government performance, judgments of trustworthiness can also be expected to reflect the quality of underlying procedures and institutions which strengthen accountability.⁵ In particular, researchers in organizational studies have theorized that trust is generally related to three judgment criteria which can apply across all types of agents and agencies, namely their reputation for competency (their capacity to deliver consistently according to expectations), integrity (their honesty and transparency), and impartiality (avoiding conflicts of interest).⁶ This is exemplified by processes in democratic governance safeguarding party competition and electoral integrity, which have been found to strengthen voter confidence through allowing citizens to kick out incompetent, corrupt or scandal-ridden governments through the ballot box.⁷ Similarly, political trust can be expected to be strengthened by the general quality of democratic governance, including through effective institutions undergirding rule of law, legislative scrutiny and oversight of executive actions, and transparency mechanisms monitoring the truthfulness, ethics, and probity of public officials.⁸ In liberal democratic states, institutions providing

effective checks and balances produce safeguards against the abuse of power by any branch of government, especially the executive, which should strengthen public trust.⁹

By contrast, if incumbent politicians, judges, civil servants, or governments usually prove demonstrably corrupt, inept, or self-serving, or are seen to be so, and if they can't be easily removed from office or held accountable through regular processes such as elections, sackings, or impeachment, then citizens can be expected to conclude that they are likely to continue to abuse their office in future. Accountability implies that agents have to give reasons justifying their conduct and any shortcomings are subject to formal or informal sanctions.¹⁰ This approach theorizes that the public will regard the regime and its agencies as more trustworthy where citizens express approval of the underlying fairness of the procedures governing the state. The procedural accountability argument goes beyond discontent with specific policy outcomes or administrative decisions in particular cases to tap more deep-rooted perceptions about how government institutions usually work and what generally protects against their failure to maintain ethical standards in public office. Even if I lack confidence in the past decisions or economic record of any individual political leader, for example, I may still have faith in the electoral mechanisms, and the constitutional and legal procedures, which constrain the abuse of power. If sufficient citizens lack faith in both their leaders and these institutions, however, then this raises risks of a major legitimacy crisis.

Previous empirical cross-national research lends at least partial support for procedural theories of trust. In particular, several studies observe that levels of public-sector corruption in a country are strongly linked with both social and political trust, in a reciprocal relationship.¹¹ Others have emphasized that political trust is strengthened by related qualities associated with good governance, including procedural fairness, transparency, and honesty.¹² One of the most comprehensive arguments by Bo Rothstein suggests that trust in government is widespread within the Nordic region because they are safe and secure societies characterized by universal access to comprehensive cradle-to-grave public services and welfare benefits, as well as having open societies and well-functioning systems of democratic governance, minimal problems of corruption, and professional standards of administration in the public sector.¹³ In the UK and US, as well, studies report that scandals involving lawmakers have damaged trust in parliament and the political process.¹⁴

For all these reasons, trust judgments can be expected to go beyond the specific record of competency demonstrated by individual agents and particular agencies, like their record of economic management, to reflect broader assessments about the effectiveness of accountability safeguards more

generally. This study starts by examining the individual-level links between trust and subjective perceptions of how government works, such as satisfaction with democracy and the political system, and perceptions of corruption, using data from the European Values Survey/World Values Survey. It is hardly surprising if subjective views of the quality of government are consistently related to feelings of trustworthiness. Unfortunately, the direction of causality in this relationship cannot be unraveled from analysis of cross-sectional survey data alone. For example, in a series of Gallup polls, around one third of Americans, and a majority of Republicans, said they believe former President Trump to be honest and trustworthy.¹⁵ This belief persisted, and even rose slightly over time, despite his record of continuous mendacity and outrageous lies. Fact checkers estimate that during his term in office, President Trump made over 30,000 false or misleading claims.¹⁶ This may reflect genuine but mistaken assessment of his character and verisimilitude by those who subsequently decide to vote for Trump. Or it could reflect their prior affective partisan loyalties, where loyal Republican voters and MAGA activists project this quality upon their party leader.

More rigorous tests come from correlating citizens' judgments of political trustworthiness with objective indicators of the quality of good governance and liberal democracy in a wide range of countries and types of regimes around the world. In general, estimates of trustworthiness in politics should be observed to be correlated with objective indices of the performance of democracy and good governance which strengthen accountability, integrity and impartiality, such as measures of judicial independence and rule of law, control of corruption, government transparency, and the overall quality of public sector management.¹⁷ By contrast, in general, mistrust is predicted to be far stronger in states where rulers manipulate elections, employ coercion against dissent, abuse human rights, profit from endemic corruption and crony capitalism, and fail to respect rule of law and constitutional constraints. But public perceptions are expected to differ in open and closed societies, and the information about good governance available to citizens. To update and review evidence concerning these arguments, this study compares political trust among the general public with expert estimates of the quality of governance and strength of accountability institutions in each country. These measures are derived from sources such as the Varieties of Democracy project and the World Governance Indicators which compiles expert data from multiple sources to estimate annual levels of political corruption, government effectiveness, and rule of law in nation-states worldwide.¹⁸ Skeptical orientations -- the capacity of citizens to make informed and accurate judgments of the trustworthiness of government -- is expected to be strengthened at individual level by educational qualifications and the cognitive and information processing skills derived from formal schooling, as well as by government transparency, freedom of expression, and media pluralism in society.

By contrast, both credulous trust (or gullibility) and cynical mistrust (blanket suspicion) are cultural biases expected to flourish under repressive regimes controlling information in closed societies through official censorship of the news media and internet, limits on independent journalism and public commentary critical of the authorities, and the existence of widespread misinformation and disinformation. Therefore, micro-level models control for individual levels of education, while macro-level models of political trust in this study control for freedom of information and expression and levels of education in each society, which are both predicted to mediate the links connecting public trust with the quality of government.

II: Subjective perceptions of the quality of government and trust

Different dimensions of trust display have been observed to vary substantially in both levels and trajectories even among relatively similar post-industrial societies and liberal democracies in Europe, such as political trust observed in Sweden and Denmark compared with Italy and Greece – and the global disparities in the performance of the state and types of regimes in power are even more substantial.¹⁹ Evidence for the theory can be tested more effectively where public trust in government is compared across a broad range of societies worldwide, to maximize contrasts among diverse types of open and closed information environments and regimes, as well as tracing fluctuations in political trust and government performance over time within societies. Micro-level analysis also provides leverage into understanding the ‘black-box’ cognitive processes which ordinary people use to arrive at trust judgments, such as where they get their information, how this is sifted and weighed, what thinking skills, prior knowledge, values, and heuristic shortcuts they employ, how they use intuition or reason to decide on trustworthiness, how groups and sectors differ in their evaluations, and so on.²⁰

To explore how far subjective perceptions of the quality of government are related to trust in government, the models in Table 1 use data from wave 7 of the European Values Survey/World Values Survey and enter satisfaction with the political system and the performance of democracy in each country, perceptions of corruption in the country, the involvement of corruption of state and local authorities as well as the civil service, and the frequency which ordinary people are thought to pay a bribe. The models control for the economic characteristics such as household income and financial security, and the socio-demographic factors like sex and age, which have commonly been found to be importantly related to trust. The dependent variable is a summary 100-point standardized EVS/WVS Trust in Government Index, summed from items measuring trust in government, parliament, parties and the civil service. ‘Open’ and ‘closed’ societies are classified based on the dichotomized Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem V10) Freedom

of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index, which is matched to the year of the survey fieldwork. The models are analyzed for both open and closed societies.

[Table 1 about here]

The results demonstrate that a remarkably similar range of attitudes towards the quality of government are linked with political trust for citizens living in both open and closed societies. Thus, not surprisingly perhaps, satisfaction with the political system and with the performance of democracy in their country were positively associated with greater political trust, while perceptions of widespread corruption were significantly related to lower confidence in government. Of these factors, satisfaction with the political system was most closely related to trust -- and indeed this proved to be the single strongest predictor in the models, based on comparing the size of all the standardized beta coefficients. The controls in the models did not change substantially so that the basic relationship between political trust and the pocketbook economy, demographic characteristics, and media use remain as discussed earlier.

To explore the basis of trust judgments in closed society in more detail, the 7th wave European Values Survey/World Values Survey data included a special battery of questions which were designed to monitor trust and assessments of the qualities of competency, integrity and impartiality in the performance of parliaments, governments, and the United Nations. These batteries were included in the standard questionnaire in selected cases of closed societies and autocratic states, including Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Philippines, Myanmar, Vietnam, Nicaragua, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Iran. Individual-level regression models examine the impact of perceptions of integrity, competency and impartiality in each agency on trust in parliaments, governments, and the U.N. Models control for the standard socio-demographic variables associated with trust in previous tables, including sex and age, as well as cognitive skills from education, use of news and social media, and household income.

[Table 2 about here]

The results in Table 2 confirm that trust in each of these bodies was indeed strongly correlated with subjective perceptions of their competency and efficiency, impartiality, and freedom from corruption. Overall, all these factors proved to be strong and significant predictors of trust, explaining a high level of variance in trust in these institutions. Perceptions of corruption were confirmed as strong predictors of trust, as many other previous studies have reported, but citizens living in these societies prioritized competence and impartiality even more highly as criteria associated with trust. Therefore, even in closed societies, many ordinary people offer plausible reasons for their trust in these agencies, suggesting

internal consistency in their deliberative thinking. People living under strikingly different types of regimes around the world seem to desire much the same qualities in how their governments work.

III: Objective indicators of trustworthy governance

Unfortunately, however, the analysis of cross-sectional survey data alone is unable to determine the direction of causality in any of these relationships and complex reciprocal processes are likely to influence subjective attitudes. Do ordinary people consider the government's record of integrity and competency – whether there have been major financial and bribery scandals about kickbacks for cronies or leaders tainting the administration, whether public services like schools and clinics have improved, whether the economy has grown - and then subsequently decide on this basis to trust those in authority? Or do citizens have confidence in the government for many other reasons, like affective partisan identification, the personal qualities of particular leaders, habitual predispositions towards state authorities, or deep-rooted social identities -- and evaluate the performance and integrity of political institutions accordingly through these cultural filters? Observing that people generally satisfied by the way their political system works are also more likely to trust political authorities is hardly unexpected.

But are public perceptions about how the quality of government informed and accurate, reflecting independent evidence of real-world conditions, or are these judgments erroneous by being either too negative (and cynical) or too positive (and thus credulous) compared with reality? To explore this further, public trust in political institutions needs to be compared against objective indicators of the quality of the institutions of democratic governance. Here we can take advantage of the contemporary proliferation of independent measures of so-called 'good' government and/or democratic governance, derived from either official statistics, expert surveys, or international monitoring NGOs.²¹ This is exemplified by global data on public sector corruption, electoral integrity, rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, parliamentary effectiveness, transparency, accountability, media censorship, and so on. In particular, the World Bank Institute, the Quality of Government project, and the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem 11.0, January 2020) datasets provide many macro-level indices widely used for ranking regime institutions, countries and regions in the world.²² The study selected measures of government integrity, impartiality and competence which are widely used in the research and policy communities, as well as analyzing some new indices. Many previous empirical studies have been limited to comparing countries in specific regions of the world or to states with liberal democratic regimes. The procedural thesis can be tested most effectively however where public trust is compared across a broad range of open and closed societies, national cultures, and global regions, thereby maximizing variance in historical experiences of democracy

and autocracy, the imprint of cultural legacies, as well as tracing political trust over time during periods of regime transitions within countries.

Mean levels of political trust in each society and wave are estimated using the pooled EVS/WVS Trust in Government 100-point standardized index (for parliaments, governments, political parties and the civil service). This index can be estimated and compared most consistently in surveys contained in most recent (7th) wave of the pooled EVS/WVS dataset (2017-2021). 'Open' and 'closed' societies are classified based on the dichotomized V-Dem Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index which is matched to the year of the survey fieldwork. The mean EVS/WVS Trust in Government Index for each nation is compared with the six World Bank Good Governance indices, as well as a summary Good Governance Index compiled from these, and the Liberal Democracy index from V-Dem.

[Table 3 about here]

Table 3 shows the results of the simple correlations at macro-level in all the open and closed societies. In the 43 open societies, all the relationships are positive, moderately strong, and significant. In other words, it seems that irrespective of the indicators of good governance and liberal democracy which are selected for comparison, public confidence in political institutions is consistently linked with procedural performance in this context. This confirms the importance of control of corruption for political trust, as reported in many previous studies.²³ But it also adds other standards of good governance, such as government effectiveness (competency), rule of law (integrity) and liberal democracy (accountability), which function as equally strong predictors of political trust. By contrast, in the 35 closed societies under comparison, however, public trust is not significantly related with any of the six World Bank indices monitoring good governance. And the indices measuring voice and accountability and liberal democracy are significant and strong, but *negatively* linked with political trust in closed societies. Most strikingly, the more autocratic the regime, the more the public expresses trust.

[Table 4 here]

Do cognitive skills, civic awareness, and reasoning capacities reinforce these patterns, as theorized? These cannot be measured directly from the available macro-level data but as a proxy the UNDP Index of Education can be used to classify the general population in open and closed societies. This standardized index is measured by combining average adult years of schooling with expected years of schooling for students under the age of 25, each receiving 50% weighting. The Index was dichotomized around the mean to categorize the formal level of education among the population living in low and highly

educated societies. Table 4 displays how far trust is correlated with the quality of governance indices breaking down the results by the average levels of educated populations in each society. The results show that in the closed societies, the coefficients are insignificant, as already observed, except for the link connecting the liberal democracy index negatively with trust in government among the low educated societies. In open societies, coefficients are stronger – and these are consistently both significant and positive among open societies with more educated populations. The only correlations which are significant in open societies with lower levels of education are negative – for the good governance index and government effectiveness. The evidence therefore confirms the argument that open societies (with freedom of expression and alternative sources of information) provide an environment facilitating public evaluations of trustworthiness to be more closely related to the actual quality of good governance. This process is further reinforced in countries with more educated populations (and thus the cognitive skills, literacy and numeracy, and general knowledge derived from formal schooling).

[Figure 1 about here]

To look further at these relationships, and identify patterns and outliers, Figure 1 illustrates how the composite Good Governance Index from the World Bank Institute, compiled from expert estimates, compares with the Trust in Government Index in 80 societies from the most recent (7th) wave of the European Values Survey/World Values Survey. The closed societies are nearly all scattered across the bottom two quadrants, summarized by a relatively flat best fit line, characterized by relatively poor quality governance according to the WBI estimates but sharply divergent public trust in the authorities, ranging from exceptionally low trust in Mexico, Lebanon and Brazil to exceptionally high confidence expressed by respondents in China, Vietnam and Tajikistan. The main exception is affluent Singapore, dominated by the center-right ruling People's Action Party in power since independence in 1965, but governed by pragmatic leaders and an effective public sector bureaucracy, generating stability and growth, with minimal corruption.²⁴ The residual imprint of regional cultural legacies can also be observed, with Latin America and Central European nations often skeptical mistrusters, but Central and South-East Asian countries far more trusting. Among open societies, however, there is a significant correlation where better quality governance according to the objective indices is closely associated with greater public trust. Thus, among the open societies and long-established liberal democracies, the evidence confirms the familiar contrasts, with Mediterranean European nations exemplified by Italy and Spain far lower in both good governance and political trust than Nordic Europe, as shown by the location of Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

[Figure 2 about here]

The contrasts in attitudes towards government authorities and political institutions between open and closed societies is even sharper when compared using the V-Dem liberal democracy index. As Figure 2 illustrates, political trust steadily rises with more democratic open societies – illustrating the differences between low-trust/poorer quality newer democracies in Tunisia (during the time of the survey, prior to the presidential invocation of emergency powers and suspension of parliament), Croatia and Peru compared with the high trust/long-established democracies including New Zealand, Canada and Germany. Among the closed societies, however, the reverse pattern can be observed, where the public expression of political confidence in the state grows with more *repressive* autocratic regimes with the worst record of human rights and political freedoms. This includes in China where power has been increasingly consolidated in the hands of President Xi Jinping, in Myanmar where the military junta retook control of the state in February 2021 before imprisoning Aung San Suu Kyi and other democratically elected leaders, and Turkey, which has experienced backsliding in media freedom and academic freedom following the attempted coup in 2016 against President Erdogan. Other cases in this category include Iran under the hardline rule of President Ebrahim Raisi and the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Thailand which suspended elections after the 2014 military coup d'état, Tajikistan governed since 1994 by President Emomali Rahmon, Russia under Vladimir Putin, and Ethiopia where communal tensions and fighting in the north threaten civil war between the government led by Abiy and the Tigray People's Liberation Army.

IV: Conclusions and discussion

The study suggests several key findings.

Firstly, at micro-level, citizen's subjective perceptions of the quality of governance are usually closely associated with political trust -- and this relationship proved similar in both open and closed societies. Expressions of confidence in parliament, government and the United Nations were consistently associated in the minds of respondents with whether they met the criteria of competency, impartiality and integrity, serving as proxy evidence suggesting underlying processes of deliberative thinking. The more internally consistent the reasons associated with trust in each of these institutions, the more this can be understood to reflect genuine beliefs. The fact that many people say that they trust agencies which they also regard as more competent and efficient, or honest and impartial, is far from surprising, however, and the analysis of subjective perceptions alone is unable to sort out authentic reasons for trust from post-hoc rationalizations.

For more convincing evidence, the study compares *objective* performance indicators in a wide range of countries to see how far public judgments of the trustworthiness of core political institutions

were correlated with independent measures of the quality of government -- and compared how far such relationships are condition by the type of information society and the levels of education in each society. Indicators based on the expert evaluations were selected from the Varieties of Democracy project and related World Bank Institute measures of six dimension of good governance.²⁵ The results of the analysis confirm the striking contrasts observed by the type of information environment, as theorized. In the open societies, trust in government was indeed significantly correlated with objective indicators of the quality of government, such as control of corruption, government effectiveness, rule of law, and liberal democracy. The better the actual quality of government in these societies, according to independent estimates, the stronger the perceived trustworthiness of the institutions. But in closed societies, no such significant relationship linking trust with good governance indices can be observed, with political trust proving stronger in more authoritarian states, not more democratic countries.

What explains the observed mismatch between performance and trust – generating either overly-cynical or overly-credulous judgments? Several alternative explanations can be proposed, including cultural value preferences about what constitutes an effective policy performance or good governance, the role of response bias on sensitive questions carried in social surveys, and the impact of the information environment.

One possible argument suggests that many people living in absolute authoritarian states like China, Thailand, and Vietnam, and citizens in electoral autocracies such as Russia, Ethiopia, and Egypt, may express relatively high political trust in their regime if this reflects their underlying authoritarian values and authentic preference for how their country should be governed. For example, citizens in unstable states like Afghanistan, Haiti, and Myanmar, with recent experience of deadly political violence, deeply disruptive economic crisis, humanitarian disasters, or armed conflict, may prefer being governed by strongman leaders if they believe that this will lead to conditions of greater security, economic development, and social order, while rejecting the instability and turmoil associated with flawed and stalled transitions to electoral democracy. The desire for material growth and prosperity in developing societies may outweigh public preferences for democracy and freedom. This view suggests that the expressions of trust towards leaders observed in authoritarian states and closed societies like China and Vietnam may therefore reflect authentic public preferences in these political cultures. This raises complex issues when interpreting evidence about the legitimacy of authoritarian regimes, and the relationship between culture and institutions, which deserve fuller attention in future research but which cannot be fully unpacked here.²⁶ On the other hand, the evidence in this study does demonstrate that the desirable

values associated with political trust among citizens living in repressive states like China and Russia were very similar to those found in open societies and liberal democracies like Sweden and Canada; in both contexts, governments were regarded by citizens as more trustworthy if they were *perceived* as competent, honest, and impartial. Similarly, subjective trust in government was found to be strengthened among citizens with direct experience of economic prosperity and security. These appear from this evidence to be certain shared values about what people want from their leaders in many societies around the world irrespective of the types of regime in power.

Another potential explanation suggests that response bias in surveys could be at least partially to blame for the non-congruent cases and thus the apparent errors in judgments. People living in repressive authoritarian state may express relatively high confidence in the state and political authorities in response to direct survey questions, despite being ruled in practice by corrupt and incompetent government leaders, if respondents disguise their genuine mistrust of those in power, for fear of retribution, should any public criticism come to the attention of the authorities. List count experiments documented elsewhere suggest that support for political leaders is often considerably inflated by using direct questions in repressive societies.²⁷ Substantial disparities were apparent between the direct expression of trust in their leader and the estimated levels of trust using the indirect question format. Citizens living in the world's most repressive states lacking freedom of expression, such as in Iran, China and Myanmar, may therefore report that they trust the authorities in response to survey questions, as they are hesitant to express honest criticism of their government in a public record. Given this evidence, response bias is therefore likely to be *part* of the answer, with self-censorship generating inauthentic answers in surveys containing political-sensitive questions about trust in the authorities.

The final argument suggests that subjective beliefs about trustworthiness are poorly correlated with objective evidence of actual government performance due to the broader information environment. People living in closed societies like China and Vietnam may express relatively high trust in their government and leaders because they receive one-sided misinformation, including state propaganda lauding the positive achievements and record of the authorities while silencing criticism. These messages are bolstered by the population's actual experience of remarkably rapid economic growth in these societies. By contrast, media coverage of governments in liberal democracies and open societies provides two-sided information from both supporters and critics of the authorities. In closed societies, the public is likely to regard the government as trustworthy, even where this conflicts with the objective record of corruption and incompetence, after long exposure to state propaganda, disinformation, and

misinformation presenting a positive image of the authorities, as conveyed through the main channels of mass and social communications.

Like general macro-economic performance indices, therefore, judgments of the quality of governance are also consistently mediated by the type of open or closed information society. In other words, citizens everywhere seem to generally trust leaders more if they *believe* them to be competent, honest and disinterested, as theorized. In information environments with plural media and freedom of expression, citizen's judgments correlate more closely with *objective* measures estimating the actual quality of political institutions, suggesting the public in this context has the capacity to make relatively informed and knowledgeable evaluations of their leaders. In states lacking freedom of speech and the press, citizens also trust governments more if the authorities are *believed* to have similar qualities of competency, integrity and impartiality. But these subjective perceptions turn out to be relatively poorly correlated with objective indicators of the quality of governance. Overall, therefore, the results confirm the thesis that in authoritarian states lacking a free press and freedom to dissent, citizens are more likely to be misled when evaluating untrustworthy leaders, or else they are self-censoring in their public expressions of dissent. In this context, citizens are more susceptible to either credulous or cynical errors of judgment, depending upon the legacy of the predominant societal culture.

Table 1: Perceived quality of governance and political trust

		OPEN SOCIETIES				CLOSED SOCIETIES			
		B	SE	Beta	Sig.	B	SE	Beta	Sig.
PERCEIVED QUALITY OF GOVERNANCE	Satisfaction with the political system (low to high)	1.50	0.04	0.22	***	2.02	0.05	0.28	***
	How democratically this country is being governed today	0.67	0.04	0.09	***	0.67	0.05	0.09	***
	Perceptions of corruption in the country (low to high)	-0.85	0.04	-0.11	***	-1.15	0.04	-0.14	***
	Involved in corruption: State authorities (low to high)	-2.84	0.15	-0.12	***	-4.58	0.16	-0.18	***
	Involved in corruption: Local authorities (low to high)	-1.80	0.16	-0.08	***	-1.60	0.17	-0.06	***
	Involved in corruption: Civil service (low to high)	-1.36	0.15	-0.06	***	-0.61	0.16	-0.02	***
	Frequency ordinary people pay a bribe (low to high)	-1.54	0.11	-0.08	***	1.09	0.11	0.05	***
ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS	Income scale (low to high)	-0.30	0.05	-0.04	***	-0.44	0.05	-0.04	***
	Currently unemployed (0/1)	-0.76	0.33	-0.01	*	-0.46	0.35	-0.01	N/s
	Lived poverty Index (low to high)	0.09	0.01	0.08	***	-0.04	0.01	-0.03	***
	Feel financially secure (low to high)	3.27	0.11	0.15	***	1.19	0.12	0.05	***
	Household financial security (low to high)	0.35	0.10	0.02	***	0.78	0.11	0.03	***
	Satisfaction with financial situation (low to high)	0.24	0.04	0.03	***	0.10	0.04	0.01	*
	Standard of living compared with your parents (Worse/Better)	0.66	0.12	0.03	***	2.10	0.13	0.08	***
CONTROLS	Sex (male)	-0.13	0.17	0.00	N/s	0.17	0.19	0.00	N/s
	Age (years)	-0.02	0.01	-0.02	***	-0.04	0.01	-0.03	***
	Education (Low to high scale)	-1.41	0.13	-0.06	***	-2.35	0.13	-0.09	***
	News media use (newspapers, TV News, radio news)	0.07	0.03	0.01	**	0.27	0.03	0.04	***
	Social media use (internet, FB/Twitter, mobile phone, email)	0.10	0.02	0.03	***	-0.17	0.02	-0.05	***
(Constant)	51.30	0.97			66.50	1.04			
Number of respondents	29,432				31,380				
Number of Societies	42				38				
Adjusted R ²	0.31				0.37				

Note: The model uses OLS regression with individual-level survey data in 80 societies where the dependent variable is the EVS/WVS Trust in Government standardized index (including government, parliament, parties, and the civil service). The table presents the beta (B), standard error (SE), standardized beta coefficients, and their significance (P.). All models were tested and found to be free of problems of multicollinearity. P.

*=.05 **=.01 ***=.001 N/s not significant

Source: European Values Survey/World Values Survey wave 7 (2017-2021).

Table 2: Criteria associated with trust in closed societies

	Parliament				Government				United Nations			
	B	SE	Beta	Sig.	B	SE	Beta	Sig.	B	SE	Beta	Sig.
COMPETENCY: The agency is usually competent and efficient	0.31	0.01	0.36	***	0.29	0.01	0.33	***	0.26	0.01	0.29	***
IMPARTIALITY: The agency usually wants to serve the country/world	0.19	0.01	0.22	***	0.22	0.01	0.25	***	0.22	0.01	0.24	***
INTEGRITY: The agency is usually free of corruption	0.11	0.01	0.13	***	0.08	0.01	0.10	***	0.08	0.01	0.10	***
Sex (male)	-0.01	0.02	0.00	N/s	-0.01	0.02	0.00	N/s	0.00	0.02	0.00	N/s
Age (years)	0.00	0.00	0.05	***	0.00	0.00	0.05	***	0.00	0.00	0.02	*
Education 3-categories low to high	0.00	0.01	0.00	N/s	-0.03	0.01	-0.02	***	0.00	0.01	0.00	N/s
Income 10 pt scale low to high	0.00	0.00	0.01	N/s	0.01	0.00	0.03	***	0.01	0.00	0.01	N/s
Use of news media	0.01	0.00	0.04	***	0.02	0.00	0.06	***	0.02	0.00	0.06	***
Use of social media	0.00	0.00	-0.01	*	0.00	0.00	-0.02	N/s	0.01	0.00	0.05	***
Constant	0.40	0.05			0.51	0.05			0.44	0.05		
Adjusted R2	0.38				0.37				0.29			
N.	11089				11626				10403			

Note: The model uses OLS regression with individual-level survey data in 10 societies where the dependent variable is the EVS/WVS Trust in each agency i.e. the national parliament, national government, and the United Nations (*). The table presents the beta (B), standard error (SE), standardized beta coefficients, and their significance (P.). All coefficients were checked to be free of problems of multicollinearity. P. *=.05 **=.01 ***=.001 N/s not significant. The TrustGov battery was included in surveys in 10 closed societies (Ethiopia, Iran, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nicaragua, Philippines, Tajikistan, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe).

Source: World Values Survey 7 TrustGov surveys (2017-2021)

Table 3: Quality of governance and societal-level trust in government

	Open societies		Closed societies	
	Correlation (R)	Significance (P)	Correlation (R)	Significance (P)
Good Governance Index (WB)	0.558	***	-0.147	N/s
Control of corruption (WB)	0.581	***	-0.013	N/s
Government effectiveness (WB)	0.589	***	0.046	N/s
Political stability (WB)	0.398	**	-0.059	N/s
Rule of law (WB)	0.579	***	0.004	N/s
Regulatory quality (WB)	0.514	***	-0.140	N/s
Voice and accountability (WB)	0.520	***	-0.603	***
Liberal democracy index (V-Dem)	0.365	**	-0.639	***
Number of societies	43		35	
Number of respondents	29,432		31,380	

Notes: Simple correlations between the EVS/WVS Trust in Government 100-point standardized index (for parliaments, government, political parties and the civil service) and macro-level objective indices of good governance in each society, matched to the year of the survey. R=Correlation coefficient P *** Coefficient is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed). ** Correlation coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Open and closed societies are categorized based on the V-Dem Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information index (dichotomized around the mean).

Sources: European Values Survey/World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2021); WB World Bank Institute Worldwide Governance Indicators; V-Dem Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem 11.0)

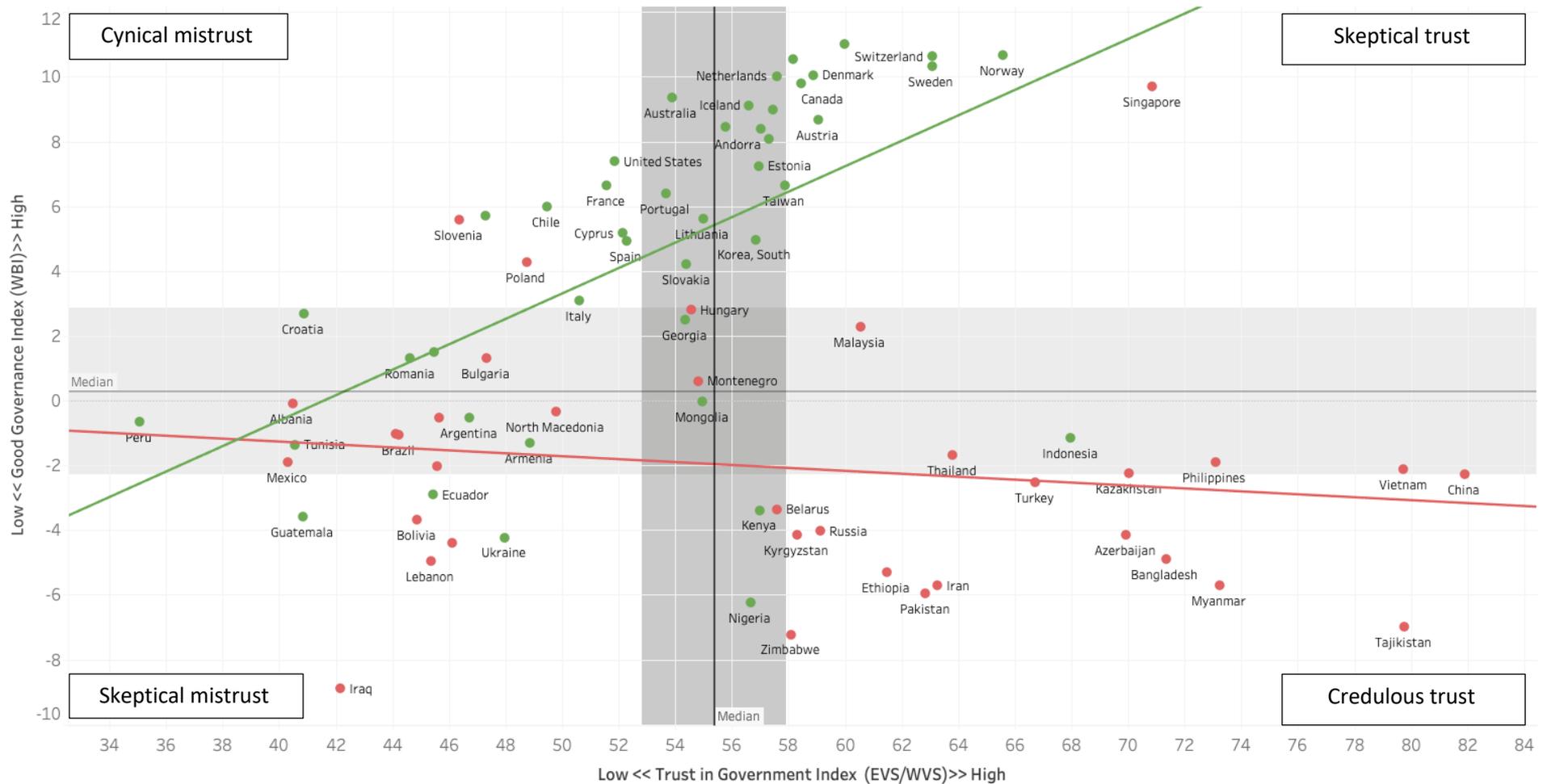
Table 4: Quality of governance and societal-level trust in government, with levels of education

	Open societies				Closed societies			
	Low education		High education		Low education		High education	
	Correlation (R)	Significance (P)	Correlation (R)	Significance (P)	Correlation (R)	Significance (P)	Correlation (R)	Significance (P)
Good governance index	-0.95	***	0.78	***	0.14	N/s	-0.60	N/s
Control of corruption	-0.56		0.77	***	0.14	N/s	-0.11	N/s
Government effectiveness	-0.88	**	0.76	***	0.36	N/s	-0.05	N/s
Political Stability	-0.77		0.46	**	-0.03	N/s	-0.24	N/s
Rule of law	-0.50		0.75	***	0.23	N/s	-0.13	N/s
Regulatory quality	-0.79		0.76	***	-0.01	N/s	-0.08	N/s
Voice and accountability	-0.76		0.72	***	-0.47	N/s	-0.67	N/s
Liberal democracy index	-0.10		0.54	***	-0.58	***	-0.56	N/s
N. respondents	41169		22965		20104		52253	
N. societies	9		31		26		10	

Notes: Simple correlations between the EVS/WVS Trust in Government 100-point standardized index (for parliaments, government, political parties and the civil service) and macro-level objective indices of good governance in each society, matched to the year of the survey. Societal education is categorized by the UNDP Education Index dichotomized around the mean. R=Correlation coefficient P *** Coefficient is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed). ** Correlation coefficient is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Open and closed societies are categorized based on the V-Dem Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information index (dichotomized around the mean).

Sources: European Values Survey/World Values Survey Wave 7 (2017-2021); WB World Bank Institute Worldwide Governance Indicators; V-Dem Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem 11.0)

Figure 1: Good governance and trust in government



Notes: The horizontal axis is the EVS/WVS Trust in Government standardized scale (including government, parliament, parties, and the civil service). The vertical axis shows the Good Governance Index as derived from the six World Governance Indicators (World Bank Institute). Open Societies (Green) and Closed Societies (Red) are categorized by the V-Dem Freedom of Expression Index (dichotomized).

Source: European Values Survey/World Values Survey wave 7 in 80 societies (2017-2021); <https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/>.

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