

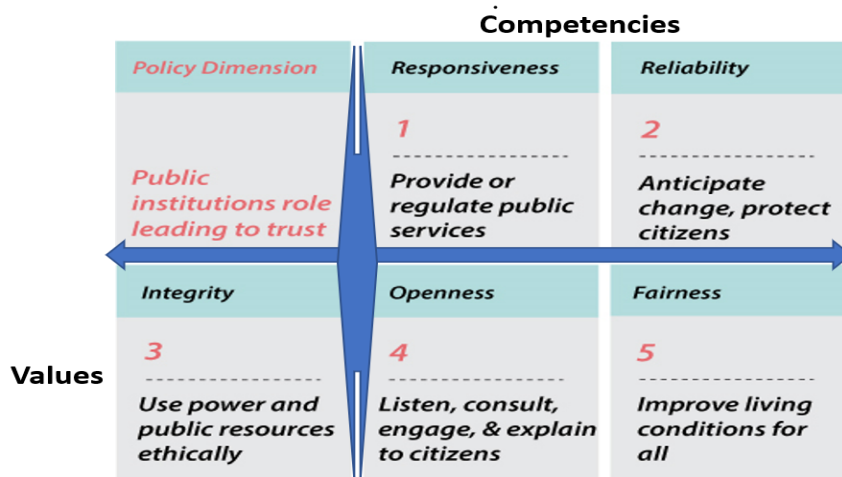
Restoring Trust in Government

Strategies and Tools to Actively Engage the Public

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines trust as: “a person’s belief that another person or institution will act consistently with their expectations of positive behavior.”¹ The complexities around trust range from trust between individuals and small groups (interpersonal trust) to trust of governments and other institutions (institutional trust).

Our research focuses on institutional trust in government, reflected in OECD’s 2017 analysis summary framework. In Figure One, Values (Integrity, Openness and Fairness) are distinguished from Competence (Responsiveness and Reliability). OECD has since expanded on this initial framework and provided more detailed ideas for improving trust in government.

Figure 1: Trust in Government OECD 2017 Framework



Trust in Government involves several additional facets. Geert Bouckaert has identified three aspects of trust that are key to government reform:

“Reform strategies have been driven by agendas to increase trust in the public sector. Three clusters of trust are defined: from society to the public sector, from the public sector to society and within the public sector.”²

Government’s trust of the public is often reflected in their approach to regulation and policy development. The World Economic Forum (WEF) cited the Finnish government’s efforts to trust the public in developing policies regarding innovation,

¹ OECD (2019), "Trust in government", in Government at a Glance 2019, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/7c8e6ca7-en>.

² Geert Bouckaert, Administration, Vol.60, no.1 (2012)

“By moving away from a top-down dictated process to a more co-created – in some cases even crowdsourced and crowdfunded – process for public sector innovation, the government sought to generate an outcome-focused and adaptable platform that encourages grassroots innovation through multistakeholder collaboration.”³

This speaks to the Values aspect of the OECD model -- promoting Openness, increasing the perceived Fairness of the process and promoting Integrity through inclusion.

How can research point to new ways to improve trust in government across the areas of policy development, regulation and program implementation? The WEF has recognized “Agile Governance” as essential in policy and regulatory actions, particularly as they affect emerging technology. Program implementation can also benefit significantly by implementing “Agile Governance”.

As an example of improved program implementation leading to improved trust, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) faced a significant deficit in trust over poor practices in the care and treatment of veterans. This became acute in 2014 after massive wait times for veterans seeking health care were disclosed. Starting in 2015, VA launched a concerted effort to collect, analyze and address veterans’ concerns by developing a “comprehensive customer experience data framework to identify, collect and analyze data on how veterans experienced their services.”⁴ By using this data and focusing on bolstering veteran’s trust, VA’s trust measures over 24 percent in five years.

Wholesale and Retail Trust

Research can help determine the extent and feasibility for actions to alter all aspects of trust in government. A distinction between Wholesale and Retail Trust comes from Don Kettl’s 2017 book, “Can Governments Earn our Trust?”. According to Kettl, Wholesale Trust “depends on creating confidence in the ability of government and its institutions, at the highest level, to represent its people and to perform fairly on their behalf.” In contrast, Retail Trust depends on “creating confidence in government’s ability to deliver on its policies fairly and effectively at the operational level where government connects directly with its people.”⁵

Kettl concludes that by focusing on execution of services and fulfillment of promises, government can improve trust, similar to the OECD focus on Responsiveness and Reliability. Moreover, Kettl’s discussion of Wholesale Trust connects with OECD’s description of the role of Values, though Kettl is less sanguine about government’s ability to influence Wholesale (Values based) Trust -- and suggests that some distrust is healthy for society.

Trust in the Time of Covid

³ Agile Governance Reimagining Policy-making in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, The World Economic Forum Global Future Council on Agile Governance

⁴ <https://ourpublicservice.org/our-work/time-for-a-change/>

⁵ Donald F. Kettl [Can Governments Earn our Trust?](#) (2017)

The pandemic has also made analysis of trust even more important for government leaders. The OECD notes that the pandemic has underscored the criticality of trust and transparency to maintaining public health given the need for people to understand and comply with extraordinary measures in extraordinary times: “they are also key to a society’s capacity to absorb and bounce back from shocks.”⁶

Georgetown scholar Donald Moynihan observes that “The longer the pandemic goes on, the more trust will decline in institutions that have to make visible, salient decisions amidst changing circumstances, information and trade-offs while serving a population with wildly varying preferences.”

Moynihan suggests a focus on work to improve Responsiveness and Reliability to reverse the damage to the public’s trust in government. This is true generally, but the effects of inequality during the pandemic must also be recognized. As the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities observed in November of 2021:

“The impacts of the pandemic and the economic fallout have been widespread, but remain particularly prevalent among Black adults, Latino adults, and other people of color. These disproportionate impacts reflect harsh, long-standing inequities — often stemming from structural racism — in education, employment, housing, and health care that the current crisis has exacerbated. Households with children also continue to face especially high hardship rates. Considerable evidence suggests that reducing childhood hardship and poverty would yield improvements in education and health, higher productivity and earnings, less incarceration, and other lasting benefits to children and society.”⁷

Inequality continues to be corrosive to trust in government. Blue Wooldridge observes, “Inequality undermines trust and community. It renders government vulnerable to special interests seeking to maximize short-term profit. Inequality, especially rising inequality, promotes status competition, social divisiveness, and weakens the will of the many to organize to defend common interests against the specialized interests of the few. Inequality corrodes social bonds, erodes friendship, diminishes civic participation, and attenuates trust in government.”⁸

The IBM Center recently released a report on using data to improve equity in health care based on expert insights from leaders in government and health care, which would address several aspects of building trust across communities of color.⁹

⁶ OECD Government at a Glance 2021 p. 5

⁷ <https://www.cbpp.org/research/poverty-and-inequality/tracking-the-covid-19-economys-effects-on-food-housing-and>

⁸ <https://icma.org/sites/default/files/SOCIAL%20EQUITY-%20THE%20FOURTH%20PILLAR%20OF%20PUBLIC%20ADMINISTRATION%20Wooldridge%20%26%20Bilharz.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.businessofgovernment.org/report/using-data-advance-racial-equity-healthcare>

Measuring Trust

The United Nations has called trust in public institutions “crucial for building peaceful and inclusive societies.”¹⁰ The UN Secretary General highlighted the current trust deficit as follows,

“With turbulence on the rise, trust within and among nations is on the decline. We see this trust deficit also in streets across the world, as people vent their frustrations and voice their feeling that political establishments are out of touch, incapable or unwilling to deliver.”¹¹

In fact, the UN cites the lack of trust as threatening its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially, SDG 1 eliminating poverty, SDG 13 combatting climate change, and SDG 16 building peaceful and inclusive societies:

“Trust is integral to the functioning of any society. Trust in each other, in our public institutions and in our leaders are all essential ingredients for social and economic progress, allowing people to cooperate with and express solidarity for one another. It allows public bodies to plan and execute policies and deliver services.”¹²

The World Bank has found that countries with high levels of trust show lower levels of corruption, a higher quality of government, lower crime levels, higher levels of political participation, higher levels of compliance with the law, and higher levels of economic growth. These studies are based on the trust of the public in its government’s values and ability to fulfill its promises.¹³

Measuring public trust in government is difficult but research can point to constructive efforts. Again, the UN cites OECD:

“A comprehensive review by the OECD found that despite their limitations, opinion surveys remain a simple, intuitive and cost-effective method of measuring trust and in particular identifying general patterns and trends over time and across countries.”¹⁴

Surveys can measure trust. Multi-Country Surveys include the Edelman Trust Barometer, the Gallup World Survey, the World Values Survey and the composite OECD Trust in Government Survey. Individual nations surveys exist for the United States, and more recently countries like Finland and South Korea.

¹⁰ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2021/07/trust-public-institutions/>

¹¹ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm19934.doc.htm>

¹² <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2021/07/trust-public-institutions/>

¹³ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33346/Building-Trust-in-Government-through-Citizen-Engagement.pdf?sequence=5>

¹⁴ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2021/07/trust-public-institutions/>

The United States has two major single country surveys that have the benefit of a long history. The Pew Trust in Government Report: 1958-2021¹⁵ shows current levels of trust in the United States at all-time lows, a result echoed by the Gallup Trust in Government Survey.¹⁶ However, neither results helps policy makers on what actions to take to improve trust.

The 2017 publication, “OECD Guidelines on Measuring Trust” has an ambitious but much needed objective.

“With some notable exceptions, the measurement of trust does not have a long tradition, particularly within official statistics, and official measures that exist are not always collected in a regular and internationally comparable manner. These Guidelines aim at contributing to filling this gap. Their main objective is to support data producers in their own initiatives to measuring trust.”¹⁷

The OECD is expanding the number of single country surveys it conducts, and these tend to be more detailed in nature and more conducive to providing policy prescriptions. OECD recently issued it’s new report, Building Trust to Reinforce Democracy, which surveys drivers of trusts across OECD nations that update these perspectives.¹⁸

Even publications with long tenures like the Pew Trust in Government report and the Gallup Trust in Government poll lack detailed information to make them helpful to policy makers. By contrast, the OECD provides actionable insights based on their Trust in Government Framework. Detailed questions are focused on each of OECD’s sectors of Values and Competence, while additional questions –added by the government in question—are designed to inform policy choices. Research could help expand on this knowledge base,

In addition to OECD, other groups have made recommendations for methods to improve measured public trust in government. For example, the World Bank Based states that,

“Trust in government and citizen engagement form a mutually reinforcing, interdependent dynamic in the policy arena that is affected by common attributes and affects development outcomes and effectiveness. . . Citizen engagement, which enhances transparency and accountability, helps to build legitimacy and trust in government. Open, equitable, and inclusive policy making is most often promoted as a means of improving democratic performance and efficient and effective administration.”¹⁹

¹⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2021/05/17/public-trust-in-government-1958-2021/>

¹⁶ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/5392/trust-government.aspx>

¹⁷ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/governance/oecd-guidelines-on-measuring-trust_9789264278219-en#page1

¹⁸ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/b407f99c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/b407f99c-en>

¹⁹ <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/33346/Building-Trust-in-Government-through-Citizen->

An emphasis on civic engagement could result in greater trust in government, consistent with the OECD framework.

Conclusion

While trust in government has declined and Covid-19 has placed additional stresses on that trust, research can be done to address how to reverse the decline. A focus on Competence and Values, as suggested by OECD, and use of new country level data, should serve as a guide to improving trust.