

| On Trust and Good Government: Swedish Trust in Policymakers & Fellow Citizens

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Keywords: Gross national happiness, GNH, needs-based testing, Nordic policy, social trust, trust tax, welfare states

Mots-clés: Bonheur national brut, BNB, tests fondés sur les besoins, politique des pays nordiques, confiance sociale, taxe de confiance, État providence

Increasingly, the field of political science assesses the dynamics of trust through the lens of national governance. This research paper assesses the degree to which social trust – both vertical (trust held in governing institutions) and horizontal (between citizens) – impacts governance. Using Sweden as a case study, I compare Swedish and American propensities to trust alongside the differences between the political structures of each state. In particular, this project considers the differences in approaches to welfare distribution. This paper finds that vertical trust has a slightly greater impact on horizontal trust than vice versa. Nevertheless, it finds that the two are closely interdependent and that consequently, significant increases (or decreases) in one of these directions of trust results in similar changes to the other. To that end, their relationship can be described as existing within upward or downward feedback loops; therefore the findings of this research imply that national governments interested in increasing social trust in either a vertical (toward themselves) or horizontal (among their citizens) direction would do well to not view these variations of trust as existing in silos. Efforts to increase either will have a positive impact on both, and relevant policy focusing on increasing trust should reflect as much.

Dans le domaine de la science politique, il est de plus en plus fréquent que les chercheurs évaluent la dynamique de la confiance sous l'angle de la gouvernance nationale. Cette analyse évalue le degré de l'impact de la confiance sociale sur la gouvernance, sous sa forme verticale (envers les institutions gouvernementales) et sa forme horizontale (entre citoyen.ne.s). La Suède sert d'étude de cas. Je compare les propensions suédoises et américaines à faire confiance et j'examinerai aussi les différentes structures politiques de ces deux États. En particulier, ce projet considère les différences dans chacune de leurs approches envers la distribution de l'aide sociale en particulier. Cette analyse conclut que la confiance verticale a un impact légèrement plus grand sur la confiance

horizontale que vice versa. Néanmoins, les deux sont intimement interdépendants. Par conséquent, une augmentation (ou une réduction) significative de la confiance dans un sens ou dans l'autre mène à des changements similaires dans son double. En somme, la relation entre ces deux facteurs peut être caractérisée comme existant dans une boucle de rétroaction, soit à la hausse ou à la baisse. Les conclusions de cette recherche sous-entendent que les gouvernements nationaux qui veulent augmenter le niveau de confiance sociale, soit verticale (envers le gouvernement) soit horizontale (envers les citoyen.ne.s), ne devraient pas considérer les deux formes de confiance comme existant en vase clos. Les efforts visant une augmentation de l'un ou de l'autre auront des impacts positifs sur les deux; les politiques pertinentes qui cherchent à augmenter la confiance devraient faire preuve de cela.

Introduction

In recent years, both academic literature and governmental institutions – be they national or international – have begun to assess the benefit of social trust. (Harring 2018, 1). This is a wise choice. Trust has been proven to correlate with happiness and health, happiness and health with higher productivity, and higher productivity with increased gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Bjørnskov 2006, 1). This is significant since countries are beginning to turn increasingly to happiness as a measure of success over GDP - with those same countries having received global praise for their handling of the COVID 19 pandemic (Economist 2020, *A Hard Task Ahead*). In this context, understanding the origins of social trust is a must for all policymakers and academics.

This paper will assess one high-trust state, Sweden, and compare it to a low-trust state, the United States (Rothstein & Eek 2009, 81; Kuwabara 2014, 344). It will do so to better understand the origins of high social trust, since it can be argued that such trust brings with it desirable benefits to governance as well as the general strengthening of a state, and that this may play a role in elevating a state's international profile (Covey 2008, 20). It will attempt to better understand the origins of Sweden's high social trust, distinguish trust in the people and institutions implementing policies from trust in fellow citizens, and end by prescribing how this trust might be replicated elsewhere.

This paper employs the use of several key terms. The first is *social trust*. *Social trust* refers to the informal institutions in a society, which are established belief systems or the behaviour of other citizens (Rothstein & Eek 2009, 83). The second group of terms is *particularized* and *generalized* trust. *Particularized* trust refers to trust toward a known

individual, whereas *generalized* trust refers to trust toward individuals (or systems) not personally known (Bjørnskov 2006, 2).¹

The third and perhaps most important terms used in this paper are *horizontal* and *vertical* trust. For the purposes of this paper, the definitions are inspired by their use by Rothstein and Eek (2009, 81) as well as by Mohseni and Lindström (2008, 28). The use of these terms in this paper compares top-down trust to peer-to-peer trust. Specifically, *horizontal* trust refers to the degree of trust held in fellow citizens whereas *vertical* trust refers to the degree of trust citizens hold in any and all individuals in public service who create, enforce or administer the law. The definition of vertical trust in this paper is purposefully vague, so as to broadly encompass all those involved in the governance of a state or nation. Under this definition, all those who hold power, from elected officials to law enforcement to *street-level* bureaucrats are included (Kumlin and Rothstein 2005, 349).

Literature review

Before undertaking an analysis, it is important to first contextualize the research topic through analysis of relevant literature as well as any external events which may affect the quantity of this literature. The following section will consider literature surrounding Swedish trust in the people and institutions implementing policy vis à vis fellow citizens.

Literature related to social trust is plentiful. Literature related to Scandinavian social trust – particularly Swedish social trust – is no exception (Bergg & Öhrvall 2018, 146; Bjørnskov 2006, 1; Delhey & Newtown, 2005, 1; Haring 2018,1; Kumlin & Rothstein 2005, 339). While literature regarding trust has existed for the better part of a century – notably in the field of sociology – the emergence of the role of trust within the field of political science and international relations is more recent (Hardin, 2002, xix; Brørnskov 2021, 1). Relevant literature began to emerge in 1993 with Robert Putnam’s popularization of the term *social capital* (Brørnskov 2021, 1).

Roughly a decade later, literature began to distinguish between social networks and social trust itself (Brørnskov 2021, 1). Following this distinction and into the late 2000s, topical literature and real-world politics began to intersect as at least one state – Bhutan – began to seriously and publicly pursue policy grounded in *gross national happiness* (GNH). (GNH Centre Bhutan). In 2008, Bhutan enshrined into law its national constitution which committed the state to the pursuit of GNH (GNH Centre Bhutan). Following the creation of this constitution, Bhutan and the United Nations collaborated to promote GNH with the successful adoption of

¹ For the purposes of this paper, all further references toward trust should be assumed references toward generalized trust, unless otherwise indicated.

Resolution 65/309, which invited member states to pursue policy development rooted in increasing well-being (and by extension, social capital). (UN Resolution 65/309 2011). The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network published the first *World Happiness Report* in 2012 – it contained 68 mentions of *trust* (World Happiness Report 2012, full document). This context is important, as it appears that in the decade following these events, there has been a notable increase in literature exploring the relationship between state policy and social capital. Importantly, recent relevant literature makes clear the fluidity and reciprocity between vertical and horizontal forms of generalized trust: that is to say, academics continue to debate whether vertical trust primarily impacts horizontal trust (Daniele & Geys 2015, 1; Rothstein & Eek 2009, 81, Levi & Stoker 2000, 501) or if horizontal trust has a greater impact on vertical trust (Uslaner 2003, 171). Some argue that this relationship is reciprocal; both impact each other in a positive – or negative – feedback loop (Mohseni & Lindström 2008, 33).

A variety of themes have been identified in this literature. Institutional quality was deemed especially important to the creation of generalized trust, particularly in building trust with immigrant populations (Nannestad et al. 2014, 544). Literature on trust also calls on its academic roots in sociology, exploring the age at which lasting trust (or lasting distrust) develops most (Bergh & Öhrvall 2018, 1146). Classroom diversity has been linked to greater social trust among immigrant populations in the long term (Loxbo 2019, 182); however, one Swedish study discovered the inverse to be true for native-born Swedes (Loxbo 2019, 182). Still, this demonstrates a challenge identified throughout the literature: trust is highly subjective to each state, or more specifically to each culture (Hardin 2002, xx; Kuwabara 2014, 344). Literature highlights how cultures grounded in a distrusting past – notably post-Communist states – continue to rank among the least trusting of states today (Paldam 2000, 7).

Literature also calls attention to the role of the rule of law (Knack & Zak 2003, 91). Some argue that the rule of law is conducive to increasing generalized trust (Knack & Zak 2003, 91) while others present data that indicates the opposite (Bergh & Öhrvall 2018, 1152). With regard to policy support, academics highlight how both generalized trust and distrust – particularly that directed toward private, non-state organizations, including polluters – can be linked to support for certain types of policies (Pitlik & Kouba 2015, 355; Harring 2018, 1). Aside from these rare mentions of private interests (Harring 2018, 1), literature on the subject generally fails to address the role of private interests and corporations, regardless of any impact the action of private actors may (or may not) have on increasing or decreasing generalized trust. In other words, this is an area where literature is generally lacking and is therefore one area academics could explore more profoundly in future analyses.

The most recent literature on social trust considers its impact during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating how high trust in culture can itself be counterproductive to the creation of pandemic restrictions (or lack thereof) (Nygren 2021, 8).

Research methods

This research paper will seek to answer the question, which aspect of Swedish trust matters more: trust in the people and institutions implementing policies, or trust in fellow citizens? In other words, it will assess the relative impact of Swedish vertical and horizontal trust. The hypothesis of this paper is that both vertical social trust and horizontal social trust would play nearly equally important roles in impacting the successful governance of the state. It will begin by assessing vertical trust in each state and will then consider the origins and impact of high vertical trust. The same process will be repeated with regard to horizontal trust. The relative impact of the two will then be compared. The paper will then consider the potential benefit of interdisciplinary cross-analysis to the replication of trust elsewhere.

Findings & discussion

Assessing Swedish vertical trust

Before assessing Swedish vertical trust, it is important to first explore Swedish social trust in a more global context. As indicated by the 2014 *World Values Survey* (WVS), Swedish vertical trust is incredibly high (WVS 2014). For context, Sweden will be compared to another state in the Global North, the United States.

When asked how much confidence they had in their government, nearly twice as many Swedes indicated they had either “quite a lot” or “a great deal” of confidence in their national governments (59.9 percent) than Americans (32.6 percent). Similarly, Swedes held nearly four times as much confidence in political parties (42.2 percent compared to 12.5 percent) and three times as much confidence in Swedish Parliament compared to American Congress (59.3 percent compared to 20.4 percent). However, confidence in the civil service was similar (50.6 percent in Sweden compared to 45.1 percent in the United States) and confidence in the police was higher in the United States (68.3 percent in the United States compared to 51.3 percent in Sweden).^{2 3}

Having established that Swedish vertical trust is *considerably* higher than the American vertical trust, it is crucial to consider why. Several factors are at play. The first, and perhaps most noteworthy, is the Swedish welfare state (Kumlin 2005, 349). The universal welfare state and subsequent lack of needs-based testing all but eliminates both the potential for

² Responses to the answers “quite a lot” and “a great deal” have been combined throughout the paper to facilitate comparison.

³ Although the most recent WVS report for Sweden has not yet been released, the 2017 WVS for the United States indicates that vertical trust has decreased only slightly overall, except for trust in Congress, which decreased from 20.4 percent to 14.8 percent.

bureaucratic prejudice and for citizens looking to “game” welfare benefits, resulting in unjust welfare distribution (Kumlin 2005, 349). Sweden’s strong governance, high GDP per capita and overall income equality also contribute to high levels of vertical trust (Delhey & Newton 2005, 311). Circumstantial factors, such as the presence of a constitutional monarchy and a strong history of democracy also support Swedish vertical trust. (Bjørnskov 2007, 8; Paldam & Svendsen 2000, 7; Uslaner 2003, 171).

Equally important to determining the origins of vertical trust is considering the impact of this trust. Substantial evidence points to vertical trust having an impact on horizontal trust (Daniele & Geys 2015, 1; Levi & Stoker 2000, 501). Importantly, this relationship has proven to be true in both high-trust and low-trust societies (Rothstein and Eek 2009, 81). Greater vertical trust also correlates closely with better self-assessed health (although causality here is unclear)(Mohseni & Lindstrøm 2008, 28). Stronger vertical trust is also proven to result in stronger support for environmental policy (Harring 2018, 3). That is not to say that distrust and policy support are mutually exclusive, however. As pointed out by Harring, distrust still often correlates with support for punitive policy measures (Harring 2018, 3). Vertical trust, however, typically results in greater support for less punitive regulatory policy (Pitlik & Kouba 2015, 355). That said, stronger vertical trust logically results in a stronger support for policymakers to create and implement the policies they see most fit, meaning that it is likely in the best interest of policymakers for there to be stronger vertical trust.

Assessing Swedish horizontal trust

Similar to Swedish vertical trust, Swedish horizontal trust is also substantially higher than American horizontal trust. When asked if most people can be trusted or if one need be very careful in dealing with others, 60.1 percent of Swedes answered that people can be trusted, compared to only 34.8 percent of Americans. Swedes also responded that they were over twice as likely to trust those of another religion, over three times as likely to trust those of another nationality and over four times as likely to trust their neighbours (WVS 2014, summary of data). Social trust is clearly much higher in Sweden than in the United States.

There are several reasons Swedes trust one another more than Americans trust one another. Swedes have very low inequality thanks to an effective welfare state, which as previously mentioned, is key to supporting horizontal trust (Kumlin & Rothstein 2005, 339; Knack & Zak 2003, 91). Additionally, as highlighted earlier, strong vertical trust results in strong horizontal trust no matter the environment - and Sweden has incredibly strong vertical trust (Daniele & Geys 2015, 1; Levi & Stoker 2000, 501; Rothstein and Eek 2009, 81).

Beyond this, however, results are either debated or circumstantial. Knack and Zak argue a strong the rule of law is to thank; while Bergh & Öhrvall disagree (Knack & Zak 2003, 91; Bergh & Öhrvall 2018, 1152). Some factors explaining Swedish horizontal trust are circumstantial;

however, ethnic homogeneity appears to play a role in horizontal trust (Delhey & Newton 2005, 311; Loxbo 2018, 182). That said, further research indicates that regardless of cultural circumstances, institutions matter more than culture (Nannestad et al. 2014, 544). This is particularly noteworthy for low-trust states that may worry that culture is the primary determinant in building trust. In general, universal welfare states build far stronger horizontal trust than need-testing states (Kumlin & Rothstein 2005, 352).

Having determined the primary factors contributing to Swedish horizontal trust, it is key to consider what impact this trust has. On top of contributing to overall greater social capital, horizontal trust results in greater support for the welfare state (Daniele & Geys 2015, 1). Trust has also proven to be particularly crucial to conducting economic transactions (Bergh 2018, 1146). Additionally, although the degree to which horizontal trust impacts vertical trust is arguably not as strong as the degree to which vertical trust impacts horizontal trust, its presence is still undeniable (Mohseni & Lindström, 2008, 33; Uslaner 2003, 171).

Comparing vertical & horizontal trust

Prior to this analysis, the stated hypothesis of this paper was that both vertical social trust and horizontal social trust would play nearly equally important roles in impacting the successful governance of the state. As presented in the literature review, literature on the subject remains generally divided. Relevant literature tends to agree that vertical trust has a greater propensity to influence horizontal trust and that by extension, vertical distrust results in horizontal distrust more than horizontal distrust would result in vertical trust. To that end, the relevant literature can be said to support the claim that vertical trust is the most impactful of the two, albeit slightly.

Having completed this analysis, it is reasonable to conclude that this assertion is true. There appear to be, both logically and empirically, a higher number of important examples in which vertical trust impacts horizontal trust. What is more, the clear reciprocity between the two undeniably indicates a feedback loop whereby horizontal trust builds vertical trust, and vice versa. By contrast, distrust in either would feed into distrust in both. To that end, it appears the hypothesis does not matter as much as initially speculated. While it is true that investment in strengthening vertical trust through good governance and strong social policies grounded in the universal welfare state may result in a more efficient 'return on investment', it is clear that the feedback loop is such that investment in either appears both logical and worth pursuing.

That being said, the goal of this analysis was not only to establish which flavour of trust has a greater impact, but specifically to determine how the Swedish propensity to trust and pursuit of well-being might be replicated abroad. As such, it is crucial to critically analyze which (non-circumstantial) causes of both vertical and horizontal trust can and should be applied to other contexts.

The 'speed of trust': replicating Swedish success

While this research has so far touched upon several ways in which strong social trust, both vertical and horizontal, can be fostered abroad, this analysis stands to benefit considerably from perspectives and approaches outside of the traditional auspices of political science literature, especially due to the inherently human nature of political science and subsequent room for interdisciplinary analysis with other social sciences in academia. Specifically, there exists within the realm of commerce studies extensive literature on trust building within businesses and organizations. A curious intersection emerges here due to the fact that literature on interactions and trust in the world of commerce date back significantly further than those in the realm of political science – notably to the publication of Dale Carnegie's world famous *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, published in 1936 (Carnegie 1936, title referenced). Much of this commerce-based literature is centred in and written by Americans, which is both particularly ironic given the United States' comparatively low propensity to trust, as well as perhaps indicative of the subsequent American desire to build trust.

With regard to the positive feedback loop previously mentioned, such "spirals" have already been well established in commerce literature, particularly within the realm of customer service (Friend et al. 2010, 458). Another commerce-grounded theory of trust is based in what Stephen Covey refers to as the *trust tax* (Covey 2008, 17). The theory argues that in the world of business, trust is the so-called hidden variable that amplifies strategy and execution, bringing about even greater results (Covey 2008, 20). Policymakers and political scientist academics alike may stand to learn something. If a state is interested in fostering stronger vertical trust (due to the pre-established 'trickle down' effect it has on horizontal trust) then it likely has the goal of increasing trust in arms of the state such as its bureaucracy. If the same logic presented by Covey can be applied to bureaucracy, there may be untold optimization benefits. In other words, if citizens actually began to trust bureaucracies, the *trust dividend* presented by Covey would result in greater bureaucratic efficiency. Perhaps another dividend would emerge from any improved sense of national unity due to improved vertical and horizontal trust. Admittedly, this is not flawless logic. Covey is clearly referring to particularized trust more than he is generalized trust. Nevertheless, the notion that vertical trust may result in more efficient bureaucracies is a notion that policymakers should consider in greater depth.

Interdisciplinary cross-analysis aside, the question of how trust can be replicated elsewhere must be answered. Regardless of where a state may stand on the chicken-and-the-egg debate on whether horizontal or vertical trust impacts the other more, it is within states' powers to begin by engaging in vertical trust by focusing on three primary struggles: tackling income inequality, demonstrably practicing good governance and maintaining a sufficiently high GDP per capita (Knack & Zak 2003, 91; Delhey & Newton 2005, 311). While this

strengthening of vertical trust should be enough to indirectly foster horizontal trust, it is worth noting that there are also mechanisms for a state to engage in direct fostering of horizontal trust. In particular, there are always opportunities for states to increase interpersonal understanding, considered key to horizontal trust by Knack and Zak, through education (2003, 91). This is a particularly important step to undertake both due to the demonstrated tendency of native-born children to have less horizontal trust and due to the fact that trust established before the age of 30 tends to remain with a citizen throughout their life (Loxbo 2019, 182; Bergh & Öhrvall 2018, 1146).

Finally, it is key to ask, why bother? Why should states engage in time-consuming, idealistic, constructivist-sounding trust-building? The COVID-19 pandemic supplies the answers. Two of the most noteworthy – if not only – states in the world which have prioritized *global national happiness*, and by extension trust (Bhutan and New Zealand) have global leaders on pandemic response and crisis management.

In 2019, the Government of New Zealand announced it would be prioritizing happiness and well-being in what became its first ever “well-being” budget (Ellsmoor 2019). As previously mentioned, the Government of Bhutan adopted happiness and well-being, both grounded and interconnected with trust, in its founding constitution as a democracy. New Zealand’s famous COVID-19 response and management allowed the country to continue virtually as if no pandemic were occurring - leading to the landslide re-election of the Ardern government in what became the state’s first ever majority under a system of proportional representation (Economist 2020, *A Hard Task Ahead*). In April 2021, the Government of Bhutan succeeded in inoculating a staggering 85 percent of its population with COVID-19 vaccines in a mere seven days (Economist 2021, Bhutan). These are incredible successes, neither of which should be overlooked.

This analysis indicates the potential benefits that high-trust states which prioritize well-being and happiness are able to bring about, especially during times of crisis and when paired with good governance that succeeds in crisis response.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear from this analysis that Sweden’s high degree of vertical and horizontal social trust is not an exclusive phenomenon, but rather in large part thanks to strong institutions and conscious policy decisions grounded in income equality and good governance. It is also clear that while vertical trust appears to have a greater impact on horizontal trust than vice versa, both forms of trust build off of one another in either a positive or negative spiral. Lastly, it is evident that although this approach of political science research has emerged somewhat recently in the field of political science academia, the conversation has long been

ongoing in other fields like sociology and commerce. Policymakers and academics alike would stand to benefit from interdisciplinary analyses.

Although the volume of literature on this topic has been steadily increasing over the last twenty years (and the last ten years in particular), more research can and should be completed to establish the reciprocal dynamic more clearly between vertical and horizontal trust. Moreover, certain comparative analyses can be completed with the aim of comparing certain variables while holding others constant. An avenue for future research would be to compare otherwise similar states, such as Sweden and Finland, that allow for the isolation of variables like the alleged role of constitutional monarchies in the degree of vertical trust in their citizens.

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