

TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND WELL-BEING: A STATE OF THE ART

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This essay explores the aspects and implications of the relationship between trust in institution and well-being. The issue concerns the researchers engaged in the study of social transformations. Especially the American, but also European and Australian political scientists signaled a decline of trust in institutions. Some consider this as being totally benign, framing it in the whole "secular trend" in attitudes towards authority. Others are concerned by the social implications, mainly because of the potential decreasing of the authorities efficiency due to the lack of mass support. In this paper we adopt the neo-utilitarian point of view, assessing the reciprocal effects of trust on the overall appreciation of well-being, i.e. life satisfaction and happiness. Some theoretical models for the relationship were presented, together with several findings from the literature and the estimated social policy implications.

Trust: definition, related terms, sources

The exact meaning of '*trust*' remains disputable and cross-culturally variable (Goodin 2000), but the concept is used generally with reference to one's expectations or beliefs that others will behave in a predictable manner, a manner not devoted entirely to self-interest (Thomas 1998). A first distinction made is between trust in individuals and trust in institutions or organizations, named also confidence (Earle 2001), but the two are frequently interchangeable used (Lofstedt and Rosa 2001; Brooks and Cheng 2001). When the institutions are of political nature, the term "political trust" is utilized.

Confidence in institutions has two main characteristics: a *fiduciary* relationship, that is a relationship in which an individual places trust in another to act in his or her capacity, without receiving a similar trust from the agent, and *mutual* trust, appearing where bureaucrats have the opportunity to develop relationships with their clients. These are always traits of the political process, where to the trust in institution as a whole is added the trust in political leaders of this institutions. But there are also significant differences, political trust being always conditional, not like trust in family, friends, even neighbors (Brooks and Cheng 2001).

Indicators of trust are usually grouped in a manner described, for example, by Papadakis (1999):

1. institutions of government (parliament, federal government, political parties and public service);
2. traditional established order and patterns of authority (armed forces, churches and police);
3. organizations often associated with challenges to an established order and government institutions (ecology movement, women's movement and trade unions);
4. channels for disputation (television, press and legal system);
5. international organizations (United Nations, European Union, and major companies).

The exact psychological nature of trust is a matter of dispute. Several authors maintained that a trust is typically a cognitive process, a sort of discrimination between the trustworthy and the distrusted or simply unknown person or institution. Thus, it "is nothing more or less than the considerations a rational actor applies in deciding to place a bet"