

Chapter 32

Building Trust in Politics: Causes of Widespread Disillusionment in Latin American Countries

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ABSTRACT

This chapter studies the process of trust building in politics by using large data set on political behaviour in Latin America. The results yielded by developed models indicate specific elements as the most influential on the popular trust in institutions. These observed determinants were enclosed in five macro classes: cohesion of society; economic factors; electoral transparency; efficiency of judicial organs; and crime diffusion. The analysis of the public support in governments and parliaments revealed that certain variables have a direct impact on the stability of the Latin American democracies, while other factors merely determine the likelihood of a government's reappointment.

INTRODUCTION

Citizens' attitude towards political elites has been thoroughly studied since the birth of the modern democracies. Nonetheless, dynamics of trust in political institutions remains a highly debated topic in many disciplines (e.g. marketing, linguistics, kinesics, etc.), aiming at aiding politicians develop their public image that the vast public perceives as credible. Given the complexity of the public opinion, issues other than candidates' persona need to be considered; acknowledged efficiency of institutions, well-intentioned actions, and overall perception of a democratic order are only some of the requisites of overall trust in politics.

Generally, trust is a factor that entails personal risk (Levi, 1998), which in the political context, relates to the institutional power that electors attribute to the candidates of their choosing. Simply put – it is an exchange between the politicians and the rest of the population: the latter express their trust via ballots,

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the former validate this trust by efficiently representing popular interests. When the second part of the exchange is not achieved, perception of distrust emerges, explicating a rather asymmetric nature of trust that is arduously obtained yet so swiftly lost. Once the disillusion diffuses within a society, the endeavor of trust-building reveals to be rather challenging (Easton, 1975). This interpretation suggests that low levels of trust in politics usually represent repercussions of deep-rooted disenchantment in politicians' actions.

Surveying about politics can be very generic as the political system encloses a medley of institutions with divergent functions – the most important ones being the parliament and the government that respectively embody the executive and legislative power. This study aims at questioning the effective popular distinguishing of government and parliament efforts.

Plummeting levels of trust can forebode nefarious consequences on the economic and social settings (Citrin, 1974, Heterington, 1998). Disillusionment in a political elite can entice constituents to vote for marginal candidates and parties, reducing governing potential of those elected. Officials with limited powers tend to face difficulties in terms of the implementation of reforms and policies, which leads only to greater popular mistrust. A common final ramification takes forms of popular protests and, in case of extended intervals of unrest, exponential escalation of violence. Political instability of this sort can have deleterious impact on fragile democracies, resulting in coup d'état and possible military rule. For this reason, governments facing crises of confidence tend to focus on short-term policies, which, however, can induce a reduction of long-term growth and stem the process of development. Moreover political uncertainty greatly affects the business environment through different mechanisms. First of all weak governments are highly inefficient, this deters companies from invest or expand production capacity. The lack of ability to ensure future stability discourages R&D spending and foreign direct investment, preventing economies to improve domestic competitiveness. Less trusted executives are often unable to ensure basic conditions for the free markets, in the medium term it leads to the rise of oligopolistic or monopolistic structure, which can further hinder market reforms. These problems have serious consequences for the international economic integration, resulting in difficulties in the supply chain management, reducing overall system flexibility and burying opportunities coming from external trade. In extreme cases when disappointment in politics leads to riots and mass protests, business conditions can be completely compromised. For all these reasons it must be concluded that distrust in politics is a major threat for businesses and a stable government is a key element for the countries development and growth.

Therefore, the focus of this study is recognizing which Latin American countries boast higher trust in politics and identifying the main trust-inducing aspects. To this end, the models elaborated in this study offer insightful results and identify some of the determinants of the popular trust in institutions. Specifically, the effects on trust of social capital, perception of economic performance, the institutional efficiency, the electoral system, crime rate and the media will be presented. Finally, in order to explain if the considered aspects affect political institutions as well as the government, the aforementioned models will emphasize both the government and the parliament.

BACKGROUND

Over the years, numerous studies have delivered conflicting results in their analysis of factors that determine trust in government. This issue has been widely debated since the 60's and 70's, when dissatisfaction and disillusion in governments' actions spread to the advanced industrial democracies. A 1975 report of the "Trilateral Commission" entitled "The crisis of democracies" states that the lack of

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