Chapter 81

Public Trust in Government, Trust in E–Government, and Use of E–Government

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ABSTRACT

The author of this article examines aspects of trust in government generally, and its relationship to trust in e-government. Trust in government has been seen to have positive effects across a number of factors, including economic performance, social cohesion, and the sum of welfare. A specification of different levels of trust in government is outlined. What is the relationship between trust in government and trust in e-government? While there seems to be a relationship between the use of technology and e-government and trust and comfort in its use, recent studies have questioned a simple link between use of e-government and trust in government, and trust in e-government and trust in government generally. Somewhat conflicted findings across studies, however, suggests further research is needed.

INTRODUCTION

As in most transactions, the use of cyber technology involves large elements of trust. This however is not a face-to-face trust of much human interaction, but a trust in abstract institutions and technology which may not be greatly understood, and at best, of humans-at-a-distance. For example,

paying by credit card for online purchases involves a host of trust relationships: the financial institution providing the credit card; the organization facilitating the exchange; the security of systems and software used and provided by various companies; the trust in an unknown human (or perhaps automaton) at the end of the exchange who may or may not supply the good or service on receipt

of funds, or use personal information for nefarious ends. The supply of personal information to social network cites similarly involves a large degree of trust that information will not be misused or traded or diffused through poor security, or released to hostile governments. These relationships are nestled within broader trust relationships regarding the effectiveness of commercial, contract and privacy laws.

E-government involves many of these trust relationships, and perhaps several more besides. It demands trust in the technology itself, as well as the organizations and institutions of government. Trust in government itself involves multiple aspects and is a considerable research topic in itself, to which we now turn.

Leading researchers in Trust and Trust in government include Marc J Hetherington, Vanderbilt University, USA, Robert Putnam, Harvard University, USA. Leading researchers in E-government, and trust in e-government include France Bélanger, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, USA, Lemuria D. Carter, Mississippi State University, USA, Robin Gauld, University of Otago, New Zealand, Shaun Goldfinch, Nottingham University Business School, UK, Forrest Morgeson, and David Van Amburg, American Customer Satisfaction Index, USA.

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Trust has received considerable attention across the social science literature, with higher levels of trust seen to be associated with better economic performance, social cohesion and avoidance of anomie, more effective government, and a greater sum or welfare. Trust is by no means a new notion in the social sciences and humanities - at least outside neoclassical economics with its strangely persistent assumptions of asocial 'economic man' - but perhaps it gained more recent attention in North America associated with the social capital research programmes of the 1980s and 1990s

encouraged by writers such as political scientist Robert Putnam (1941-), and with a considerable body of work by sociologists, geographers, anthropologists and psychologists, and writings on the subject by the populariser Francis Fukuyama.

What is trust? It can be used rather loosely to mean a number of somewhat different relationships, so it is worth defining. Trust to some extent is based on the notion of what one might expect (or be confident) another actor will deliver and how they will behave, and a belief the actor will not systematically exploit one's weaknesses. Within this broad definition given above we can see trust having various elements. Trust can be seen as 'particularised trust', which is the trust an individual has in others of like religion, race, or associational group – i.e. people who are known and/or are of one's own kind. 'Generalised trust' is that trust an individual has that other agents can be trusted, even if they are unknown (Theiss-Moore and Hibbing 2005). This is particularly important for much online-trading, particularly such as e-bay or similar. The two are not of necessity linked – indeed an 'in-group' may share strong bonds, exhibit mutually supportive and selfless behaviour and high levels of trust towards other members of the in-group – but have low levels of trust, offer little support and be actively hostile to members of the out-group and the population at large.

Another type of trust is 'trust in government'. In terms of government actions or behaviour, trust in government can encompass whether one expects a government will act more-or-less in one's and/or the public's interest; and/or more-or-less legally, legitimately and ethically; as well as perform its jobs adequately. A supporting belief is that this responsiveness continues even without constant scrutiny. As such, trust in government can be an indicator of a citizenship's overall attitudes towards its political system.

Trust in government can be a nebulous and contested notion. Some question the notion of trust in an abstract and impersonal government, and ask whether it is a notion better attached to

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