In Praise of Skepticism: Trust but Verify

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SPEAKER:
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Abstract

The concept of trustworthiness can be understood to involve an informal social contract where principals authorise others to act on their behalf in the expectation that the agent will fulfil their responsibilities, despite conditions of risk and uncertainty. When evaluating the trustworthiness of political institutions, public judgments are expected to reflect the quality of government procedures, especially the principles of competency, impartiality and integrity. The most extensive body of cross-national empirical research about these issues has focused largely on established liberal democracies, such as Nordic states, characterised by freedom of the press and media pluralism, as well as affluent post-industrial European societies with highly educated populations. This study theorizes that the accuracy of any public judgments of the trustworthiness of government procedures are likely to be mediated by the information environment in open and closed societies, as well as by the cognitive skills of citizens. To understand these issues, Part I summarises the theoretical argument. To identify the drivers of trust, data is drawn from around 80 societies around the globe included in Wave 7 of the European Values Survey/World Values Survey (2017-21).

Part II examines individual-level data to analyse how far confidence in political institutions is strengthened by subjective perceptions about the quality of governance. For a more rigorous test, Part III compares objective performance indicators to see how far independent measures of the quality of government by monitoring agencies predict public judgments of the trustworthiness of core political institutions in each country -- and how far such relationships are condition by the type of information society, as well as by societal levels of education.

Part IV highlights the key findings and considers their broader implications for understanding the conditions for trust and trustworthiness.

Speaker Bio

Professor Pippa Norris is a comparative political scientist who has taught at Harvard for three decades. She is the Paul F McGuire Lecturer in Comparative Politics at the John F Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and Founding Director of the Electoral Integrity Project, Director of the Global Party Survey, Co-Director of the TrustGov Project and on the Executive of the World Values Survey.

Her research compares public opinion and elections, political institutions and cultures, gender politics, and political communications in many countries worldwide. She is ranked the 2nd most cited political scientist worldwide, according to Google scholar. Major career honors include, amongst others, the Skytte prize, IPSA's Karl Deutsch award, fellowship of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, APSA's Charles Merriam award and the Samuel Eldersfeld lifetime achievement award, and the PSA's Sir Isaiah Berlin award, as well as several book awards and honorary doctorates. Publications in 2019 include books on Electoral Integrity in America for OUP and Cultural Backlash for CUP. New books are in press on In Praise of Skepticism: Trust but Verify (for OUP, 2022) and on Authoritarian Culture.