Trust

2022 — Gabriel Nahmias, Nuole Chen, Alisa Zomer, and Lily L. Tsai

This mini guide is intended as an introduction to all things related to "trust" —why it matters and how we measure it, including sample survey questions and measurement tools— for partners and researchers working in governance and international development.

"Democracy will break under the strain of apron strings. It can exist only on trust."[1]

-Mahatma Gandhi[1]

Table of Contents

About MIT GOV/LAB

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Governance Lab (MIT GOV/LAB) is an applied research group and ideas incubator that aims to improve democracy and governance by changing practice around corruption, government accountability, and citizen voice. www.mitgovlab.org.

Acknowledgements

This is a living document that will be undergoing revisions as we receive feedback.

Comments
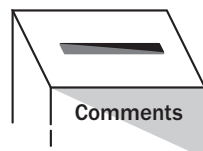
Preface
a thread of trust through MIT GOV/LAB work

Trust is a singular thread that runs through our work at MIT GOV/LAB. In our work with partners, and as part of our ethos of engaged scholarship,[2] trust is an essential ingredient in building sustainable practitioner-academic collaborations. Trust is also central to our research — a defining measure to better understand the relationship between people and their governments and a critical component for achieving citizen engagement and government accountability.

We know that more trust in government is related to higher levels of citizen cooperation and voluntary compliance. And, we know that more trust in government has positive spillovers to better institutions, increased tax compliance, and better public goods and services. To this end trust has been and remains a constant throughout our research and partnerships.

During the Ebola epidemic in Liberia (2014-2015), our research found citizen distrust in government and negative experiences during the outbreak[3] appeared to be a major reason why people did not use health services. Furthermore, people who expressed low trust in government were much less likely to take precautions against Ebola or to abide by government-mandated social distancing mechanisms designed to contain the spread of the virus.[4] To successfully combat Ebola, our research also showed that a door-to-door campaign of community of community volunteers, who had high trust in the communities and could "loan" their trustworthiness to the government, were able to spread valuable information and changed public practices during the epidemic.[5]

When the Covid-19 pandemic swept the world, we again saw the importance of trust in government in whether people followed public health mandates.[6] Based on lessons learned from our Ebola research,[7][8] we worked closely with partners in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya to understand how trust impacts compliance with social distancing, mask mandates, and later with vaccine uptake. Using experimental methods, we've measured how the messenger matters in whether or not people trust and follow health advice from various government authorities and civic leaders. In Sierra Leone, research conducted with the Institute for Governance Reform and government partners showed that people with higher levels of trust in government also had a higher willingness to vaccinate their children.[9] In Uganda, a study conducted with Makerere University School of Public Health showed that recommendations from the Ministry of Health garner more support than those from other leaders. Another study that we conducted in Nigeria with eHealth Africa showed that people in the same social networks — online or offline – possess similar levels of misinformation and similar levels of vaccine willingness.

Outside public health, trust is a thread on our work on community policing in Liberia.[10] One important lesson learned from this study is that police–community meetings can have an impact on changing citizens' perceptions of the police. In this case, Liberia's form of community policing is effective at improving community attitudes towards the police, mobilizing support for community watch forums, and reducing incidences of mob violence and support for vigilantism.

Emerging research at MIT GOV/LAB on bureaucracy also examines the role of trust in quality of service delivery and how people interact with local government in between major elections. In particular, we are interested in understanding how the capacity and intention of government workers, especially in the global south, impacts citizens' trust and willingness to engage with the government for improved services. For example, in the project with Makerere University, we found that people preferred going to a health center with well-intentioned staff and lower capacity than a center with not well-intentioned staff and high capacity for a vaccination. We think this line of investigation is critical to understanding and improving everyday interactions and trust between citizens and government.

This mini guide on trust seeks to capture the essentials of trust — what it is, why it matters, and how to measure it — with a focus on research and data from the global south. The aim of the guide is to be a resource to practitioners and engaged scholars working on the important issue of trust.

We hope you find it useful!

— the MIT GOV/LAB Team

Why does trust matter?

Our ability to function in society greatly depends on our ability to trust the people and institutions we interact with: to have faith in the expiration date on our milk carton, the accuracy of the bus schedule, the value of our currency, the intentions of police, the legitimacy of elections, the veracity of science.

Indeed, social science has repeatedly found evidence that **trust matters for all sorts of social goods:**

/ People who trust election outcomes are more likely to vote.[11]

/ People who trust scientists are more likely to believe in climate change.[12]

/ People who trust the police are more likely to report crimes.[13]

/ People who trust the government are more likely to comply with government programs, from paying taxes[14] to getting vaccinated,[15] is in part because they are more likely to support those government programs.[16]

Moreover, when people trust the government, they are more likely to trust each other,[17] because they know the government has got their back. And this general interpersonal trust also deeply matters.

Those who are more trusting tend to be more *willing to engage with civil society*.[18] They are often *healthier.*[19] [20] They are *richer.*[21] They are *happier.*[22]

A healthy skepticism can also allow citizens to be vigilant defenders of democracy.[24]

However, like all virtues, trust has a flip side. When people are too trusting, they also make themselves susceptible to being taken advantage of, whether by their own governments or by fellow citizens. Too much trust in strong leaders, for example, can also enable authoritarianism,[23] after all, even salt can look like sugar.

But what is trust and how can we measure it?
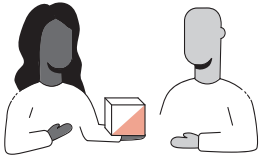
What is trust?

Trust is the amount of belief that the *"truster"* has that the *"trustee"* will do the desired behavior under certain conditions.[25]

This definition involves four components:

1. The desired **behavior** which is expected to happen.
2. The **trustee**, some actor, who is anticipated to do the behavior.
3. The **context** in which the trustee conducts the behavior.
4. The **truster** who has some degree of belief that the trustee will actually conduct the behavior.

This definition includes **three** aspects worth deconstructing as they affect how we measure trust.

01 Trust is not absolute.

We often treat trust as if it is a thing you either have or do not have. But trust rarely exists in this clean binary. Trust exists as an expectation, an internal probability of someone else's behavior. When we measure trust, we have to consider whether we care about distinguishing between the degrees of trust and, if we do, our answer options should be a scale.

02 Trust is a belief.

You don't do trust, you feel trust and that feeling informs whether or not you take trusting actions. Someone who gains trust from others can be described as trustworthy. Directly measuring trust lends itself well to self-reported survey questions, our primary tool for measuring people's attitudes.

However, scholars often prefer behavioral measures to self-reporting, since what people say they would feel under those circumstances is often different from how they will actually feel when the situation arises. As a result, trust is sometimes measured indirectly through behavioral games[26] in which participants exhibit trusting behavior. Trusting behavior is not a direct measure of trust, but rather an implication of trust. For example, if you let your friend borrow your phone, it may be because you trust them to take care of it. It may also be because you got a new phone and do not care about your old one. The "trusting behavior" would

look the same, but the underlying trust— the thing we actually care about — would be different. A full trust statement includes a truster, a trustee, an act, and a context. However, trust statements — such as "I trust you" or "She is trusting" — rarely specify all the components. For example, previous section, we spoke of "trust in the government" (leaving off the act and the context) or general "interpersonal trust" (including only the truster). Indeed, we are rarely interested in measuring any single case of trust. Instead, a more general measure of trust can better reflect that people inherently hold more abstract and underlying beliefs when it comes to trust.[27]

03 Trust is specific.

When we rely on that ambiguity, however, it can create measurement error. This is because if a component of trust is left out of a survey question, it is up to the respondent to imagine it. This means that different people will be evaluating different conditions when describing their level of trust. You might trust your friend with a secret, but not trust them to pick you up at the airport on time. A person might trust the government to defend the country during times of war, but not to spend tax dollars efficiently. Depending on which scenario they imagine, respondents will respond to the question differently.[28]

Therefore, when the research is interested in a specific trustee, behavior, or context, it is often better to be specific. Moreover, when attempting to measure generalized trust, it can be preferable to create an index (such as by taking the average) of trust questions across many specific situations. Though researchers should be careful with this strategy because leaving off important circumstances or failing to weigh different trust relatiships appropriately[29] can lead to poor measures of a respondents "overall" trust.

A final consideration is that since trust is *context-specific*, the same trust measure might imply substantially different levels of generalized trust due to *differences across geographies or cultures.* For example, in some societies, it is common for strangers to take part in small talk, while in others that would be a cultural taboo.
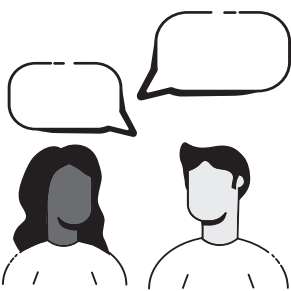
As a result, if you ask, **"Would you trust a stranger who engages you in conversation?"** in different communities, variation in responses might indicate differences in social norms rather than base trust.

Relatedly, trust in others might be contingent on trust in the institutions charged with enforcing related social norms. For example, I might trust people enough to leave my cell phone unattended, but only because I trust the criminal justice system to capture and punish thieves.

Trust in a Global South context:

Intentions vs. Capacity?

At **MIT GOV/LAB**, many of our research collaborations are conducted with partners in low- or middle-income countries where government capacity is low. Our research seeks to better understand dimensions of trust between citizens and government as key in improving governance outcomes and service delivery. One way to understand this trust is to break down the government's trustworthiness into two dimensions: intention and capacity.[30]

In under-resourced settings, citizens' trust or lack thereof in government could depend on how they think about government intention versus competency. That is, do citizens think government officials have good intentions to better serve people and is poor performance really an issue of resource capacity? Or, do people think officials have poor intentions and morally don't want to do the right thing? In global south contexts, resource capacity can be a major challenge, so disentangling the different reasons people trust or don't trust is important to understanding the root issue. In this sense, resource capacity and development context can provide important background to determine what might promote or impede trust.

Trust has a few other related properties worth noting, though these *do not necessarily influence our ability to measure it*.
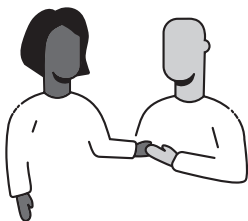
/ **Trust is inherently about a relationship.[31] It is not something you can do alone.**

The truster exists in relation to the trustee, the act, and the context. Even when we describe a person as trusting, they are trusting in relation to the world they live in. A difficulty for researchers is that who the trustee actually is can be ambiguous. When we say "**the government**" who do we mean? The *president? The police? The person who issues you a drivers license?*

/ **We can expect bad outcomes. The definition adopted above specifies trust as relating to a desired outcome.**

This is generally how people understand the concept, especially when the trustee or the act is unspecified. However, occasionally people will use trust to mean any expected outcome rather than a desired expected outcome. As **Jack Sparrow** said, *"a dishonest man you can always trust to be dishonest."* When narrowing in on questions related to specific topics it is important to recognize that respondents' assessment of the goodness of the act and their expectation of the act are not always tightly linked.

/ Trust can exist without being codified.

It often comes from an explicit promise, but it can also arise from established norms and traditions. You may trust someone because they have signed a contract on the dotted line, or you might trust them because being "a good neighbor" is a valued societal norm. Trust can exist whenever there is an expectation, regardless of where that expectation comes from.

/ There can be many reasons for distrust.

It is often assumed that trust is in reference to a commitment or promise. A voter might distrust a politician because they think the politician is lying or insincere. However, the voter might also distrust because, while the voter thinks the politician believes they will follow through, the voter also thinks the politician is incompetent and unable to achieve their promises regardless of their efforts.

When it comes to trust, perceptions of ability (or lack thereof) are just as valid as perceptions of honesty. If you are interested in perceptions of honesty, it is therefore advisable, whenever possible, to use a question that focuses on that attitude directly rather than to rely on a measure of trust which could be influenced by perceptions of capacity. And vice versa. This is particularly important because, for outcomes like compliance, trust in the benevolence of leaders is more important than confidence in capacity.[32]
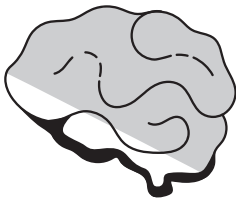
/ Trust is a part of everything (but some things are particularly important).

To function in the world, we have to decide who we can rely on and believe. As a result, trust is a part of every decision we make. Because of trust's ubiquity, general social trust is often important to capture. This is that baseline, our pre-existing expectation of how much we can trust under any undefined circumstance. That general social trust is fundamentally shaped by institutions: the media, the police, the government, academics, and our church among others. These institutions create and enforce norms which define spaces and the behavior of those within them.

Therefore, the amount we trust these institutions is also important for particular related behaviors. Finally, as increased attention has been paid to misinformation, trust in the credibility of sources has been identified essential. For example, whether people are willing to get the Covid-19 vaccine is in part dependent on the credibility of source of the information.[33]

How do we measure trust?

Scholars use **five** major strategies to measure trust:

01 General Measures
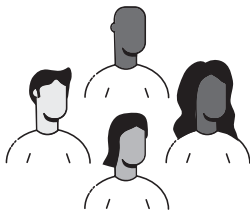
Participants are asked to broadly evaluate their trust in a typical actor, such as a group, institution, or "most people."

Pros: These questions can be briefer than more specific questions. Participants will tend to, imprecisely, estimate their average trust across circumstances they actually encounter, weighted by what they value. This therefore gets to their "baseline" level of trust across contexts and trustees. Moreover, in practice, these measures of trust have been correlated with important social behaviors. Indeed, much of the findings that began this section used these generalized measures.

Cons: As mentioned before, the major downside with this approach is that it forces the respondent to imagine the context, behavior, and even the trustee, and this increases measurement error. Moreover, it runs the risk of "cheap talk" in which individuals say they would trust (and even believe that they would), but they would not in a real-life scenario.

02 Hypothetical Behavior
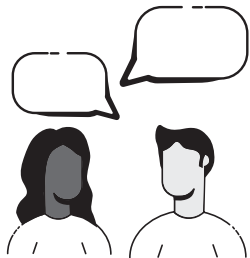
Use very detailed situations and evaluate trust under that circumstance (example below).

Pros: With this approach, respondents have a more consistent understanding of the situation and researchers have a better grasp of what is actually being measured. If a researcher, in fact, cares about a specific scenario, this is the preferred strategy.

Cons: If the researcher is seeking a more generalized measure of trust, then they must ask about several different specific situations and aggregate across these measures. While an effective strategy, this can be quite time-consuming given the number of questions involved. Furthermore, it does not help with the cheap-talk problem—people are still just answering hypotheticals. This does not even need to be "social desirability bias." People can simply have trouble genuinely imagining how they would feel under circumstances they have only rarely encountered.

03 Reported Behavior
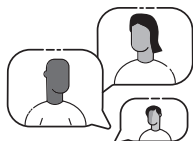
A respondent is asked about specific situations that have already happened to them.

Pros: Since this asks people to recount their actual behavior and feelings, it is less susceptible to cheap talk. (Though it may still fall victim to social desirability bias.)

Cons: It may be hard for researchers to pinpoint a specific scenario to study since people's experiences and situations vary. Getting everyone to recount the same behavior, trustee, truster, and context can therefore be a challenge. As a result, this method is viable only with very common experiences.

04 Behavioral Games
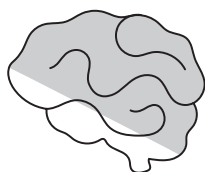
A situation -- "game" -- is created by the researcher which simulates an opportunity to exhibit (or not) trusting behavior.

Example: The classic trust game, described in detail below, involves two people. One participant is given $10. They can give as much of that $10 to the second person as they want, and it will be tripled (e.g. if the first person gives $10, they will have $0 and the second person will have $30). The second person can give back as much of the total money as they want to the first person. They would both be better off if the first person transfers the full $10 to the second person and then second person gave back anything more than $10. However, they have to trust the second person to do that. The outcome measure -- representing trust -- is how much the first person transfers in that first step.

Pros: This overcomes the problem of cheap-talk since you are looking at observed behavior in real-time. And, depending on the stakes of the game, can reduce social desirability bias.

Cons: Since trust is an attitude, not a behavior, this is only a measure of "trusting behavior." Moreover, in practice, these games have only a weak correlation with most direct measures, which indicates either that they are measuring different underlying characteristics or that one of the measures has significant bias.[34] Whether behavioral measures or direct measures are more valid is hotly contested. This is in part because these games are abstractions of real world circumstances. It can be quite difficult to simulate a government in the laboratory!

05 Forced Choice

Most components of the trust statement (act, context, or trustee) are described but one component is varied and respondents are asked to indicate which alternative they trust more. Commonly, the trustee is the varied component.
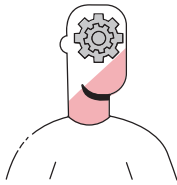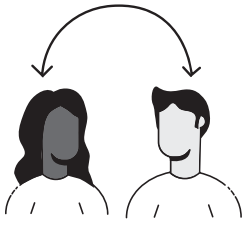
Pros: This allows for an evaluation of relative trust: how much more or less an actor is trusted compared to another actor. This can be particularly useful when choosing between actors to implement a program or deliver a message.

Cons: A person might distrust all of the options or trust all of the options. Forced choices do not allow for an evaluation of absolute trust.

Social desirability bias:

What it is and why it matters?

In real life and in research, there is social or peer pressure to act or respond in a way that others find acceptable. That is when you are talking about or trying to measure a potentially sensitive topic, people might say what they think you want to hear, rather than responding with what they actually believe. This can create a bias where people feel uncomfortable sharing opinions or behaving against the norm or popularly held beliefs. For example, if you ask: "Do you vote?" "Do you brush your teeth? or "Do you trust the public health department to provide safe vaccines?" they may say "yes" because they think you want to hear yes, because doing those things are considered to be the right things to do, when in reality, their true answer is "no." Minimizing social desitability bias in measuring trust requires careful consideration of the local context and social norms.

Examples of How to Measure Trust

✶ *notes an MIT GOV/LAB study measure*

MIT**GOV**/**LAB**

General Social Trust

Intro: One of the earliest measures, the "most people" question is very commonly used, allowing comparison across surveys and context.

Q: "Some people say that most people can be trusted. Others say you can't be too careful in your dealings with people.
How do you feel about it?"

(1) Can trust
(2) Can't be too careful
(3) Depends
(4) Don't know

Pros:

Directly measures trust.

Short, easy to implement.

Cons:

Uses a binary measure, does not allow for variation in degree of trust.

The participant must conceptualize the circumstances and the acts.

Increasing measurement error.

Susceptible to cheap-talk.

MIT**GOV**/**LAB**

Three-Item Misanthropy Scale
(Social Trust)

Intro: The three-item misanthropy adds to the "most people" question by asking about respondents' expectations of "helpfulness" and "fairness." Aggregating across these three measures is one of the direct measures that most closely correlates with overall behavioral games.

Q:

1. **"Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?"**

    (1) Can trust
    (2) Can't be too careful
    (3) Depends
    (4) Don't know

2. **"Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are just looking out for themselves?"**

    (1) Helpful
    (2) Look out for self
    (3) Depends
    (4) Don't know

3. **"Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance or would they try to be fair?**

    (1) Fair
    (2) Take advantage
    (3) Depends
    (4) Don't know

Pros:

Aggregating across three different questions reduces measurement error.

Correlates well with behavioral measures.

It directly measures trust rather than trusting behavior.

Relatively short and easy to implement.

Cons:

Uses a binary measure, does not allow for variation in degree of trust.

Beyond dimensions of helpfulness and fairness, the participant must still conceptualize the circumstances and the acts.

Susceptible to cheap-talk.

/ *Source: General Social Survey*

MIT**GOV**/**LAB**

Intergroup Trust

Q: "I'd like to ask you how much you trust people from various groups. Could you tell me for each whether you trust people from this group completely, somewhat, not very much or not at all?"

Variation: Then repeat this question for different groups, e.g.: *"Your family", "Your neighborhood", "People you know personally", "People you meet for the first time", "People of another religion", "People of another nationality"*

(1) Trust completely
(2) Trust somewhat
(3) Do not trust very much
(4) Do not trust at all

Pros:

It is more specific in defining the actor that is being trusted.

It directly measures trust.

Short, easy to implement.

Can aggregate across groups to create a measure of "generalized trust".

Allows for variation in the strength of trust without requiring the respondent to think probabilistically.

Cons:

The participant must conceptualize the circumstances and the acts, increasing measurement error.

Susceptible to cheap-talk.

/ *Source: World Values Survey 7*

General Institutions I

Q: "How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?"

Variation: Repeated for a series of institutions of interest. Should be varied to context of interest (this is South Africa).

A. The president; B. Parliament; C. Independent Electoral Commission or IEC; D. Your local government council; E. The ruling party; F. Opposition political parties; G. The police; H. The South African National Defence Force; I. Courts of law; J. The South African Revenue Service; K. Traditional leaders; L. Religious leaders; M. The Public Protector; N. Government broadcasting service like; SABC TV and radio; O. Independent broadcasting services like ETV; Radio 702 and community radio stations; P. The Department of Health

1 = Not at all
2 = Just a little
3 = Somewhat
4 = A lot
-9 = Don't know
-10 = Haven't heard

Pros:

It is more specific in defining the actor that is being trusted.

It directly measures trust.

Short, easy to implement.

Can aggregate across groups to create a measure of "institutional trust".

Allows for variation in the strength of trust without requiring the respondent to think probabilistically.
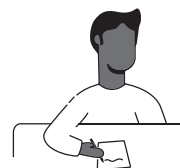
Is specific to context.

Includes option to say "haven't heard" to allow for people unfamiliar with the institution.

Cons:

The participant must conceptualize the circumstances and the acts, increasing measurement error.

Susceptible to cheap-talk and social desirability bias.

/ *Source: Afrobarometer South Africa Wave 5*

General Institutions II

Q: "To what extent do you trust each of the following to do what is right?"

Variation: Repeated for a series of institutions of interest. E.g: The World Bank Group, UN, ___'s Central Bank, Bilateral organizations, Regional development banks, The International Monetary Fund, Domestic private sector, Domestic civil society, International civil society, International private sector, The national/federal government, International media & its web presence, Faith-based institutions, Domestic media & its web presence, Web-based media

5 - point scale:

1 - "To no degree at all"
5 - "To a very significant degree"

Pros:

It is more specific in defining the actor that is being trusted.

It directly measures trust.

Can aggregate across groups to create a measure of "institutional trust".

Allows for variation in the strength of trust without requiring the respondent to think probabilistically.

Cons:

People are often unfamiliar with the existence or role of different institutions (particularly international ones). The institutions should be tailored to those familiar to participants. If not, participants will do their "best" to answer the questions, resulting in misleading answers. (This example comes from a survey of "opinion leaders.")

The participant must conceptualize the circumstances and the acts, increasing measurement error.

Susceptible to cheap-talk.

/ Source: World Bank 2019 Country Survey of Opinion Leaders

Specific Institution

Q: "Please indicate whether you tend to trust or not to trust academic institutions."

Variation: The actor can be changed, e.g. "WHO" or "scientific evidence" rather than academic institutions.

(1) Trust it a great deal

(2) Tend to trust it

(3) Tend to distrust it

(4) Distrust it greatly

(5) Do not read: Not sure or don't know

(6) Do not read: Refused

Pros:

It is more specific in defining the actor that is being trusted.

It directly measures trust.

Short, easy to implement.

Can aggregate across groups to create a measure of "institutional trust" or a subgroup to create a measure of "trust in experts".

Allows for variation in the strength of trust without requiring the respondent to think probabilistically.

Cons:

The participant must conceptualize the circumstances and the acts, increasing measurement error.

Susceptible to cheap-talk.

Specific Institution — Information

Q: "In general, how much trust and confidence do you have in the [mass media — such as newspapers, TV, and radio —] when it comes to reporting the news fully, accurately, and fairly?"

Variation: Information sources can be changed. For example, "mass media" can be changed to "information you see on Facebook."

(1) A great deal
(2) A moderate amount
(3) Not much
(4) Not at all
(5) Do not read: Not sure or don't know
(6) Do not read: Refused

Pros:

It is more specific in defining the actor that is being trusted.

It directly measures trust.

Short, easy to implement.

Allows for variation in the strength of trust without requiring the respondent to think probabilistically.

Cons:

Susceptible to cheap-talk.

Hypothetical Behavior
Lost Wallet

Q: "The next questions deal with future events. Please imagine a probability scale running from 0 to 100%. 0% means that the event will not occur, 100% means that the event will certainly occur. Imagine losing your wallet (with identity card) containing, among other things, 200 Swiss Francs [context]. On a scale from 0 to 100%, how probable is it that the wallet will be returned to you including its content [behavior], if it is found by _____[trustee]?

Variation: Respondents answer this question for a series of categories: "a relative," "one of your friends," "neighbor," "a stranger, that you don't know," "someone who speaks the same language as you," "someone of the same ethnicity"

The situation can be tailored to the context and act of interest.

Numeric between 0 and 100: with 0 mean complete distrust and 100 indicating complete trust

Pros:
Highly conceptually valid due to inclusion of specific behavior and trustee.

Uses a scale measure, allowing for variation in the degree of trust.

Directly measures trust.

A generalized trust measure can be constructed by aggregating across variations.

Cons:
The sequence in which the categories are asked can influence responses. (I.e. I adjust the baseline comparison by which question is asked first.) This can be addressed by randomizing the order of questions. However, the flip side of that is that while the aggregation of the questions will be less biased, it will be harder to compare between individual questions across respondents.

Given the length of the question and the number of variations involved this can often be too long to be included in a survey.

The question can only accurately speak to trust under the specific conditions referenced.

Susceptible to cheap-talk.

Familiarity with probabilities and accurately estimating them is also context specific.

/ *Source: Bauer, P. C. 2014. "Conceptualizing and Measuring Trust and Trustworthiness."*

Agreement

Q: "The [TRUSTEE] recommend [ACTION]. Do you agree or disagree with this recommendation?"

Variation: You can use any desired trustee, e.g. "Ministry of Health," "traditional leaders", or "religious leaders"

You can use any desired action, e.g. "taking the COVID-19 vaccine" or "maintain a distance of 2 meters between people outside of the same household."

(1) Strongly agree
(2) Somewhat agree
(3) Somewhat disagree
(4) Strongly disagree
(5) Don't know
(6) Refused

Pros:

Highly conceptually valid due to inclusion of specific behavior and trustee.

Allows for variation in the strength of trust without requiring the respondent to think probabilistically.

A generalized trust measure can be constructed by aggregating across variations.

Cons:

This question indirectly measures trust (how varying the actor/context affects agreement).

Agreeing with an actor is indicative of, but not the same as, trusting that actor.

The question can only accurately speak to trust under the specific conditions referenced.

Susceptible to cheap-talk.

Use of Government Services

Q: "Let's pretend that there is a government [vaccination center] near your home that gives [COVID-19 vaccines] to people in your area. Recently, your friend went to the center to get [a vaccine] and told you that the center was [well-resourced/under-resourced] and the government staff [genuinely cared about/did not care about] the well-being of each person at the center. Would you go to this [center] to get [vaccinated]?"

Variation: The location "vaccination center" can be changed to other locations. "Covid-19 vaccines" and "a vaccine" can be changed to other services.

There are four conditions for this question:

(1) Well-resourced / genuinely cared about
(2) Under-resourced / genuinely cared about
(3) Well-resourced / did not care about
(4) Under-resourced / did not care about

Respondents are randomized into each of these conditions.

Answer Options: (1) Yes, I would go to this [center] to [get vaccinated]. (0) No, I would not go to this [center] to [get vaccinated].
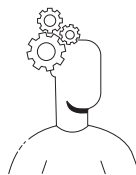
Pros:

It is more specific in defining the actor that is being trusted.

It is specific in showing the intention and capacity of the actor.

Cons:

Measures the attitude of trust indirectly by asking about trusting behavior.

Reported Behavior
Trusting Behavior

Reported behavior measures ask whether respondents have engaged in "trusting behavior" in the past. The exact trusting behaviors used should be made context specific; ask "what acts would signify trust in the community in question?" That might differ depending on the population being surveyed.

Q: "How often do you lend money to your friends?"

"How often do you lend personal possessions to your friends (e.g., CDs, clothes, bicycle, etc.)?"

"How often do you intentionally leave your rooming group's hallway door unlocked (when nobody is home)?"

(1) Never
(2) Infrequently
(3) Sometimes
(4) Often
(5) Very often

Pros:

Reduces the likelihood of "cheap talk".

Can be aggregated to create a generalized measure.

Cons:

Measures the attitude of trust indirectly by asking about trusting behavior.

Requires asking about multiple situations to create a consistent measure, which can take significant space on surveys.

/ *Source: Glaeser, E. L., D. I. Laibson, J. A. Scheinkman, and C. L. Soutter. 2000. "Measuring Trust." Quarterly Journal of Economics.*

Reported Behavior

Compliance

A common outcome of trusting someone, especially an authority, is compliance with a directive. Like trusting behaviors, the more people comply with an authority, the more likely they are to trust that authority. The exact act of compliance should be extremely context specific and clearly linked to a an act of compliance requested by an authority.

Q: "After a government intervention to reduce the spread of the Ebola epidemic in Liberia:

/ **Use hand sanitizer daily?"**
/ **Break curfew in past two weeks?"**
/ **Violate ban on public gatherings past two weeks?"**

(1) Yes
(2) No

Pros:

Reduces the likelihood of "cheap talk".

Can be aggregated to create a generalized measure.

Often directly linked to desired outcome.

Cons:

Measures the attitude of trust indirectly. Compliance might indicate other aspects of the environment (such as fear of punishment) rather than trust.

Very circumstance specific. (E.g. people may turn to the government during an epidemic, while generally distrusting it.)

* / *Source: Lily L. Tsai, Benjamin S. Morse, Robert A. Blair. 2020. "Building Credibility and Cooperation in Low-Trust Settings: Persuasion and Source Accountability in Liberia During the 2014–2015 Ebola Crisis." Comparative Political Studies.*

MIT**GOV**/LAB

Behavioral Games

Classical Trust Games
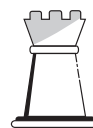
A common outcome of trusting someone, especially an authority, is compliance with a directive. Like trusting behaviors, the more people comply with an authority, the more likely they are to trust that authority. The exact act of compliance should be extremely context specific and clearly linked to a an act of compliance requested by an authority.

Game:

Two participants are randomly paired. One participant is given a set amount of money (this can be varied). The first participant is told that they may give some amount of money to the paired partner, and the partner will receive three times what is offered. The second participant then decides whether to send some money back.

For example, participant A is given $10. If participant A sends participant B $10 dollars, participant B will receive $30. Participant B can then choose to send anything from $0 to $30 dollars back. If they send more than $10 back, participant A is better off for having trusted participant B. However, participant B could send nothing back.

Outcome:

How much participant A sends. Sending more indicates more trust.

Pros:

Removes the opportunity for "cheap talk".

High internal validity: you know what people would do in the situation that is set up in the game.

Cons:

Measures the attitude of trust indirectly .

Low external validity: you do not know what people would do in other situations. For example, rarely do we know nothing about the individuals we deal with, as is the case in the game.

This is not a scenario that ever actually occurs in the real world and may have difficulty translating.

The types of monetary transactions commonly used in behavioral games may generalize poorly to more common non-monetary occasions of trust.

/ *Source: Berg, J., J. Dickhaut, and K. McCabe. 1995. Trust, Reciprocity, and Social History. Games and Economic Behavior.*

Forced Choice

Q: "Which three sources of information do you trust the most?

Variation: The number of sources (actors) can be varied.

Family members
Friends/peers
Health worker
Phone (messages and calls)
Radio
Television
Church/Mosque
Community member/village health team member
Local leader
Social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter)
Internet; Other (Specify)
 Don't Know
Refused

Pros:

Allows for assessment of relative trust. This is useful when trying to assess the most trusted option, rather than how much each option is trusted.

Cons:

The absolute levels are unclear. Individuals could completely trust or completely distrust all sources of information. They could completely trust one source of information, but only trust the other two a little, but they would all be equivalent, etc.

Susceptible to cheap-talk.

Notes and References

1. Gandhi, Mahatma. 1947. The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Vol 97. 224.
2. MIT GOV/LAB's Engaged Scholarship Model.
3. Morse, B. K. A. Grépin, R. A. Blair, L. L. Tsai. 2016. Patterns of demand for non-Ebola health services during and after the Ebola outbreak: panel survey evidence from Monrovia, Liberia," BMJ Global Health.
4. Blair, R. A., Morse, B. S., & Tsai, L. L. 2017 Public health and public trust: Survey evidence from the Ebola Virus Disease epidemic in Liberia. Social Science & Medicine 172, 89-97
5. Tsai, L. L., Morse, B. S., & Blair, R. A. 2020. Building Credibility and Cooperation in Low-Trust Settings: Persuasion and Source Accountability in Liberia During the 2014–2015 Ebola Crisis. Comparative Political Studies.
6. COVID-19 National Preparedness Collaborators. 2022. "Pandemic preparedness and COVID-19: an exploratory analysis of infection and fatality rates, and contextual factors associated with preparedness in 177 countries, from Jan 1, 2020, to Sept 30, 2021". The Lancet, 399(10334): 1489-1512.
7. Tsai, L. L. & B. Morse. 2019. Why Citizen Trust in Government Matters— Especially When Crises Strike. Scholars Strategy Network, Research Brief.
8. Lee, B. 2002. The 2014 Ebola Outbreak Shows Why Open, Honest Communication Is Vital For Containing COVID-19 Coronavirus. Forbes.
9. Sullivan, W. & R. Cordova-Ponce. 2021. Trust as a Prerequisite for Compliance: Assessing Trust in Sierra Leone During Covid-19. MIT GOV/LAB.
10. Morse, B. & L. L. Tsai. 2020. Building Trust and Improving Police Effectiveness. Evidence in Governance and Politics, Research Brief.
11. Carreras, Miguel, and Yasemin Irepoglu. 2013. "Trust in Elections, Vote Buying, and Turnout in Latin America." Electoral Studies 32(4): 609–19.
12. Hmielowski, Jay D. et al. 2014. "An Attack on Science? Media Use, Trust in Scientists, and Perceptions of Global Warming." Public Understanding of Science 23(7): 866–83.
13. Kruger, Daniel J. et al. 2016. "Perceptions of Procedural Justice Mediate the Relationship Between Local Violent Crime Density and Crime Reporting Intentions." Journal of Community Psychology 44(6): 807–12.
14. Jimenez, Peggy, and Govind S. Iyer. 2016. "Tax Compliance in a Social Setting: The Influence of Social Norms, Trust in Government, and Perceived Fairness on Taxpayer Compliance." Advances in Accounting 34: 17–26.
15. Miyachi, Takashi, Morihito Takita, Yuki Senoo, and Kana Yamamoto. 2020. "Lower Trust in National Government Links to No History of Vaccination." The Lancet 395(10217): 31–32.
16. Chanley, Virginia, Thomas Rudolph, and Windy Rahn. 2000. "The Origins and Consequences of Public Trust in Government: A Time Series Analysis*." Public Opinion Quarterly 64(3): 239–56.
17. Levi, Margaret. 2003. "A State of Trust." In Trust and Governance, eds. Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi. Russell Sage Foundation.
18. Brehm, John, and Wendy Rahn. 1997. "Individual-Level Evidence for the Causes and Consequences of Social Capital." American Journal of Political Science 41(3): 999–1023.
19. Miething, Alexander, Jan Mewes, and Giuseppe N. Giordano. 2020. "Trust, Happiness and Mortality: Findings from a Prospective US Population-Based Survey." Social Science & Medicine 252: 112809.
20. Schneider, Iris K., Elly A. Konijn, Francesca Righetti, and Caryl E. Rusbult. 2011. "A Healthy Dose of Trust: The Relationship between Interpersonal Trust and Health." Personal Relationships 18(4): 668–76.
21. Dincer, Oguzhan C., and Eric M. Uslaner. 2010. "Trust and Growth." Public Choice 142(1–2): 59–67.
22. Kuroki, Masanori. 2011. "Does Social Trust Increase Individual Happiness in Japan?" The Japanese Economic Review.
23. Pernia, Ronald. 2021. "Authoritarian values and institutional trust: Theoretical considerations and evidence from the Philippines." Asian Journal of Comparative Politics.
24. Plane, Dennis L. 2015. "In Government We Distrust: Citizen Skepticism and Democracy in the United States." The Forum.
25. This definition is paraphrased from Bauer & Freitag's "Measuring Trust." Much of this discussion of trust in this section is derived from their excellent review of the literature.
26. Bauer, Paul, and Markus Freitag. 2018. "Measuring Trust." In The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust, ed. Eric Uslaner. , 15–36.
27. Behavioral games are constructed situations administered by researchers to recreate decision making in a controlled way with stable rules. Games are for more accurate estimation of how different conditions affect behavior than is often possible in a real life situation.

MIT**GOV**/LAB

28. The amount that decisions are driven by this "underlying" tendency to trust or the specifics of the circumstances is still debated by social scientists.

29. A common measure of trust refers to "most people" as the trustee, effectively leaving the actor undefined. When respondents imagined this hypothetical trustee, some thought of acquaintances and family while others thought of strangers. As a result their answers were unsurprisingly quite different!

30. Sturgis, Patrick, and Patten Smith. 2010. "Assessing the Validity of Generalized Trust Questions: What Kind of Trust Are We Measuring?" International Journal of Public Opinion Research 22(1): 74–92.

31. We can probably all agree that someone who distrusts their spouse is less trusting than someone who distrusts a stranger. How we incorporate the different weight that we place on these circumstances into the way we aggregate measures can be tricky.

32. Levi, Margaret and Laura Stoker. 2000. "Political Trust and Trustworthiness." Annual Review of Political Science.

33. Levi, Margaret. 2003. "A State of Trust." In Trust and Governance, eds. Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi. Russell Sage Foundation.

34. Tyler, Tom. 2003. "Trust and Democratic Governance." In Trust and Governance. eds. Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi. Russell Sage Foundation.

35. Gehrau V, Fujarski S, Lorenz H, Schieb C, Blöbaum B. 2021. "The Impact of Health Information Exposure and Source Credibility on COVID-19 Vaccination Intention in Germany." International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health.

36. Bauer, Paul, and Markus Freitag. 2018. "Measuring Trust." In The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust, ed. Eric Uslaner, 15–36

Trust

"I'm dishonest, and a dishonest man you can always trust to be dishonest. Honestly, it's the honest ones you want to watch out for, because you can never predict when they're going to do something incredibly stupid."

- Jack Sparrow, *The Pirates of the Caribbean*

MIT**GOV**/LAB