

TRUST IN GOVERNMENT: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Trust may be viewed differently within a different context. In the context of government as the sole provider for several services, trust can be linked with the role played by the actors i.e. the civil servant and the institutions (Walker and Hill, 2014). In recent decades, the declination of the citizens' trust towards the current government is visible. The Edelman Trust Barometer 2016 report stated that the drop in trust towards the government among the informed public category was by 11 per cent from the previous year's survey, which was 45 per cent. The trust deficit reduces the legitimacy of government in tackling complex and wicked social problems caused by growing inequality, economic crises and changing demographics. The effect of distrust can be damaging for the government because it will result in the citizens becoming cynical. Eventually prolonged distrust will result in the citizens to urge the government for a better administration or program. The citizens may expect for honesty, reliability, has integrity and definitely, being trustful. However, these expectations may vary across the different level of government. This conceptual paper, therefore, is designed to provide further understanding on various perspectives of trust in the government.

Keywords: Trust; Government

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Introduction

In the eye of the public, trust seems to be varied across sectors and level of government. Occasionally, the public felt no other choice but to trust the government, whereby creating feelings of dependency and resentment. Subsequently, private businesses deemed trustworthy largely because they had provided good customer service (Parker *et. al.*, 2008). Competition between private businesses will increase customer services and hence lowering the cost, providing better and fast service to the customer. Public have different aspects of trust for the government as some will be more interested in personal service, while others will care about decision making (Parker *et. al.*, 2008). Based on their everyday life, not all people have the same expectations from the government. Much of their experience with the government will shape their trust.

Trust can be defined as a psychological state which includes the positive expectations of others, irrespective of the ability to monitor them (Aitken, 2012; Bhakta, 2010; Bhattacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998; Blind, 2007; Didier, Henninger, & El Akremi, 2012; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Moreover, Parker *et. al.* (2008) defined trust as ‘firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability or strength of someone or something’. Trust is when the people regard others that have qualities such as consistent, competent, honest, fair, responsible, helpful, and benevolent (Clark & Payne, 1997; Lewicki, McAllister, & Bies, 1998; Mayer *et al.*, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust will be created when an individual is able to rely on some event, process, individual, group or system. Therefore trust needs an object of evaluation to the area of interest (Clark & Payne, 1997).

Trust also as an one’s belief and expectation about the likelihood of having a desirable action performed by the trustee (Bhattacharya *et. al.*, 1998; Das & Teng, 1998; Whitener *et. al.*, 1998; Makorere, 2012; McAllister, 1995; Rousseau *et. al.*, 1998). Expectation narrows on an individual or group that the word, promise, verbal, written statement can be relied on (Bhattacharya, Devinney, & Pillutla, 1998). Usually it is a positive expectation regarding person or other particular matter (Rousseau *et al.*, 1998). Furthermore, some have narrowly defined trust in terms of one’s assessment of other goodwill and reliability (Clark & Payne, 1997; Das & Teng, 1998). This can be explained by the assessment on trustee’s friendly, cooperation, helpfulness, attitude, consistently etc. In the sense of government, public reliance generally depends on the words and promises (either verbal or written statement). They tend to relate their trust with the government’s current performance, service delivery, etc. Not only that, the government’s acts upon its goodwill and reliability may help to enhance the trust among the public. The inclusiveness in any policy formulation and implementation is expected by the public, as it represents the government’s willingness to cooperate and consider any input from the community more seriously (Walker & Hills, 2014).

Forms of Trust in the Government

The definitions of trust from various scholars cast it as something that is complex and abstract. It connotes that trust is depending on individual perspectives, particularly when it comes to the government. The essence of understanding trust may be seen in its forms. Blind (2007) mentioned that there are two main forms of trust; political trust and individual political trust. Political trust refers to citizen's judgement towards politician and its system that they are responsive and able to act unattended without constant supervision. Blind (2007) specify it as an interest-based calculation since the citizen will evaluate the government's actions on the national policy agenda. It will greatly influence the citizen's evaluation on public service delivery and overall performance of the government.

The latter category refers to citizen's perspective towards individual political leaders. Citizen may like or dislike certain political leaders and it renders level of trust in the government. Blind (2007) stated that public trust relies on several personality aspects of their political leaders such as sincerity, truthfulness, appearances, speeches and behaviour.

Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) points out that institutional trust consists of generalized and particularized trust. Generalized trust means that majority or most people in the community can be trusted. In order to generalized trust, it has to be relatively stable and not depending on individual's or group characteristics. In contrast, particularized trust is limited to close knit group like family members, relatives and close friends only.

Parker et al. (2008) differentiate trust into cognitive trust and affective trust. Cognitive trust is an individual's confidence on service providers based on their competency and reliability. If they could demonstrate these characteristics, they could simply be trusted by others. Furthermore, it is gained through experiences of services received, word of mouth as well as reputation of the service provider. Findings from a study conducted by Seimuskane and Vorslave in 2013 revealed that good performance leads to positive interaction, and vice versa. Meanwhile, affective trust is understood as individual's emotional reaction while interacting with a service provider. This kind of trust is highly influenced by emotional experiences (Parker et. al., 2008). It arises from feelings and intuitions. Affective trust can be explained as individual's trust on service provider's care and bonding to the customers.

In a nutshell, the forms of trust in the government have been viewed differently by different scholars. However, Blind (2007) and Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) shared a similar perspective on the forms. These scholars viewed the forms in the aspect of a group of community, whilst for Parker and his colleagues (2008) saw the forms of trust in the sense of a person's feelings towards the services retrieved. Therefore, the forms of trust are possible to be derived from the community's acceptance or a person's emotion. Figure 1.1 manifests the summary on the forms of trust in the government:

Scholars	Forms of Trust
Blind (2007)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political trust – judgment towards political institutions. • Individual political trust – perspective towards political leaders.
Hakhverdian & Mayne (2012)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutional trust – a majority’s trust in a community. • Particularized trust – limited to a close knit group e.g. family.
Parker et. al. (2008)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive trust – confidence based on competency & reliability. • Affective trust – based on emotional reaction; feelings & intuitions.

Table 1.0: Summary on the Forms of Trust in the Government.

Facets of Trust and the Implications on the Government

Trust is constituted through several facets. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) has developed an integrative model of trust in an organization. The facets include:

- **Ability**
 It reflects skills, competencies and characteristics that enable a person to exert influence within some specific domain. Trust is created when he/she is able to perform his/her duty in accordance to the skills and competencies that he/she possesses. However, if a person tends to act or perform in a way that is not his/her skills and competencies, he/she might not be trusted in that sense.
- **Benevolence**
 This is a way that a person reacts in a goodwill towards the others, without any profit making motive. It can be seen through a relationship between an individual and another, for instance, a manager and an employee. Here, trust is gained from positive orientation from the trustee to the trustor.
- **Integrity**
 This facet regards the adherence of trustee on certain principles or regulations, by which those principles or regulations are also adhered and accepted by the trustor. Integrity is combination of honesty and dependability. When a person has an integrity, he/she is said as being ethical (Goestch & Davis, 2013).

If a government is seen as an organization (that is very huge and complex, by which it manages a nation), these three facets might be expected by the public. Fricker, Kulzi III and Combs (2014) stated that ability is crucial as it shows the competency of government to provide desired public services. As for benevolence, the public believed that the government acts with goodwill and kindness, while for integrity, it is related with the public’s perception that “*the government adheres to and supports ethical and socially beneficial principles of governance, including fairness, justice, democracy, etc.*” (Fricker, Kulzy III, & Combs, 2014). In the same study, these researchers found that these facets were viewed differently (in

terms of its importance) in different African countries, with an additional facet, which is the reputation of a government. In other study, most residents in Lincoln felt confidence/trust (i.e. benevolence and integrity) specifically on their City Government in its participatory public budgeting, as they perceived that their government was acting neutrally and provided them with an opportunity to voice out and being treated with respect (PytlikZillig, Tomkins, Herian, & Hoppe, 2012). Therefore, the public's trust and confidence are being built when a government concerns seriously on these facets.

In another study by Romano (2003), it explains on the different dimensions of trust which are:

- **Symmetrical**
It refers to the distinction between favorable and unfavorable assessments of influence. It is a belief that a trustor can have either a positive or a negative attitude about influence in a given situation. Here, a trustor's sentiment of trust includes a good or bad influence. It can happen simultaneously, for an instance, a person may be confident for the services provided by a government. But, at the same time, he/she may not be satisfied on the government's budget handling. This facet can be reflected in a study conducted by Prof Dr Bridget Welsh, a Professor of Political Sciences at Ipek University, Turkey. She explained that until June 2015, the Malaysians are more passive in the political activities compared to Indonesia and the Phillipines. Here, only 37 per cent Malaysians thought that they have any impacts on politics and they felt that they did not have much say in it. However, in the same study, the Malaysians were having a relatively high trust for the armed forces and the nation's parliamentary system (i.e. the legislative and executive) (Saiful Bahri, 2015). Therefore, there is a need to differentiate between trust and distrust, as it is possibly to occur concurrently.
- **Incremental**
It is when trust clarifies distinctions between various degree of trust and distrust. The degree of trust can varies based on the perceived significance of influence in a given situation. For example, positive assessments of influence (i.e., trust) may range from perceiving influence as having a slightly favorable to a very favorable impact on outcomes, and negative assessments of influence may range from perceiving influence as having a slightly to very unfavorable impact. However, uncertain influence will lead to a neutral attitude.
- **Conditional**
It is about trust pertains to the intensity of a trustor's feelings about influence in a given situation, whereby the trustor may feel, think, and intend things to varying degrees (e.g., strongly expect, somewhat feel, slightly intend). The degree of trust (and distrust) depends on the extent to which a trustor is adamant in one's judgments about the quality and significance of influence in a given situation. For example, a trustor who perceives very positive influence in a given situation might be placed at the "complete trust" end of the trust/distrust continuum. However, if the trustor is not very confident about the accuracy of such a judgment (i.e., the judgment is weak), then the trustor's attitude would likely be somewhat less than "complete trust." The conditional nature of trust is such that one's perceptions of influence are qualified by their relative strength to

constitute an assessment of influence that maximizes one's sense of control in a given situation. In 2016 Edelman Trust Barometer study, it showed that the educated group's trust the Malaysian government was declining from 46 per cent in 2015 to 34 per cent (Tan, 2016). This group comprises of those who earn a tertiary education and they can possibly be a trustor based on their level of education compared to general public (i.e. all walks of society excluding them). The declination was due to allegations of corruption and the mismanagement of state government related companies (Tan, 2016).

From these facets of trust, it can be seen that trust is dynamic in nature, based on the studies conducted by different researchers. Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) have provided the essence of trust i.e. what can be seen in trust and how these facets are being integrated. On the other hand, Romano (2003) analyzed the facets of trust in terms of its strengths or levels. Despite of these differences, the dynamism of trust will be endured with the emergence of the public's perception towards the government throughout the time (Walker & Hills, 2014).

Trust in Malaysia: Matters Arise

Trust issues in Malaysia have been severed with several incident involving politician and government civil servants in Malaysia. In the recent case, Malaysia Anti-Corruption Council (SPRM) confiscated RM52 million worth of money and luxury items belonged to two top-ranked civil officers in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. It was the biggest value of corruption seized in 40 years (Taucan, 2016). With regards to the case, the local contractors and the Sabahans were disappointed and congratulated SPRM for revealing the issue. One of the contractors expressed his frustration since the misconduct had jeopardized other Bumiputra contractors' livings and reflected the non-transparency of the government agencies in tendering the federal government's projects (Awani, 2016).



Figure 1.0: Graphical Information for the Sabah Case

(Source: Utusan Malaysia, 2016)

In politics, Chief Minister of Penang, Mr. Lim Guan Eng had faced two misuse of power allegations, in which he had been charged for his involvement in the purchase of a lucrative bungalow below the market price in Jalan Pinhorn, Penang and receiving a sum of money for approving a public housing project in the west of Penang for Magnificent Emblem Sdn. Bhd. This case will be presented in the Penang High Court on 6 December 2016 (Alias, 2016).

Conclusion

Trust is important to the government. The government needs trust from the public to ensure continuous public support and secure its legitimacy in administering the country. Trust can be viewed in several forms, by which each form of trust creates the basis for understanding it in different ways. Moreover, trust also contains diverse facets that can show the expectation of the public and these facets are flexible; they revolve in accordance to the change of the public's perception towards the government. By looking at these forms and facets, trust in government can be conceptualized and create an opportunity for further research.

As for the issues discussed, it suggests that trust is crucial to create a healthy surroundings for politics and government services. In short, trust is more than forming a sense of inclusiveness in formulating and implementing the government's policies, but, it also reflects the conduct and ethics of those who serve on behalf of the government. People's view on the

credibility of the government might change when the matters regarding any inappropriate conduct of its men has widely published.

All and all, creating and preserving the public's trust are the challenges that will be faced by any government at all level. By understanding the concept of trust, literally, it provides a picture on the hopes of the public towards the government that they vote for.

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