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Questions of trust: Are we looking at the problem the right way?

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Questions of trust: Are we looking at the problem the right way?

Adam B. Masters & Ryan Perry

Abstract

For a number of years now, public administration scholars and practitioners have been concerned with the declining trust in public institutions. Putnam (2000) mapped the decline in trust in America in his seminal work *Bowling Alone*. This was one of many problems, but this concern about declining trust has not abated – survey after survey pose questions to the public about their trust in various institutions. The context can often be telling, with some institutions well trusted in one setting, yet highly mistrusted in another setting. Both theoretical and empirical efforts have been turned to toward the problem of declining trust. But what if we are overlooking a crucial component of trust? This is the puzzle.

Public policy, such as the Robodebt debacle, is often built on a lack of government trust – the government and public sector agencies fundamentally did not trust welfare recipients. Three decades earlier, the Australian Taxation Office abandoned much of its non-trusting approach to enable taxpayers to self-assess their tax returns – an act of trust in the public that paid dividends in the long run. These diametrically opposed cases show that we simply do not know enough about the governments trust in people. So why are we only ever asking the public as to whether they trust institutions? Why not ask them how much do they think the government trusts them? And why are we not surveying government and the public sector about their trust in citizens or clients?

This paper reviews the literature on the trust relationship between governments and people before illustrating the limitations of current survey data. The paper will then turn to mounting an argument for a fresh research agenda backed by some case studies which illustrate the difference that can be made by a public institution, organisation or agency projecting trust, and being trusted in return. In essence, governments need new measures of trust.

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Acronyms

APSC	Australian Public Service Commission
ATO	Australian Taxation Office
EU	European Union
ICC	International Criminal Court
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPM	New Public Management
TAPS	Trust in the Australian Public Service survey
T1	Trust from society in the public sector
T2	Trust from the public sector in society
T3	Trust within the public sector
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization
WVS	World Values Survey

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Introduction

We need a better understanding of both trust and mistrust from a public administration perspective. Mistrust or declining trust in government and institutions is being blamed for everything from lowered tax revenues (Alm & Torgler, 2011; Batrancea et al., 2019; Frey & Torgler, 2007; Kirchler et al., 2008) to the attacks on the US Capitol in 2021 (Canon & Sherman, 2021; Reese & Chen, 2022; Starbird et al., 2023). For decades now, public administration scholars and practitioners have been concerned with the declining trust in public institutions. Putnam (2000) mapped the decline in trust in America in his seminal work *Bowling Alone.* Trust decline was one of many problems, and it has not abated – survey after survey pose questions to the public about their trust in various institutions (see Appendix 1). The context can often be telling, with some institutions well trusted in one setting, yet highly mistrusted in another setting (Van de Walle & Lahat, 2017). Both theoretical and empirical efforts have been turned to toward the problem of declining trust. But what if we are overlooking a crucial component of trust? This is the puzzle.

Trust is a two-way street – Vines demonstrates this with an economist's eye, if a party acts in a trustworthy manner, they are trusted by the other (1999). Why then aren't we asking whether institutions trust the public? Bouckaert (2012) goes one further, more than a decade ago he identified a trio of trust relationships involving the public sector: citizen and organisational trust in government and the public sector; government and public sector trust in citizens and organisations; and trust within government and the public sector. The latter seems a matter for governments and public sectors to work out among themselves. The first is well covered by surveys, but the second relationship involving government and public sector trust in citizens and organisations seems to have had little attention and is central to this paper.

Public policy – such as the Robo-debt debacle in Australia (Holmes, 2023b) – is often built on this lack of trust. In this instance, the Department of Human Services "treat[ed] the ATO [Australian Taxation Office] data as a trusted source and remove[d] the need for the department to be dependent on customer and business information" (Holmes, 2023b, p. 78). This implies strongly Services Australia (A) trusted tax office data; (B) did not trust welfare recipients; and (C) did not trust its own business information generated from interactions with the public. This in effect led to a policy setting which caused great harm. Ironically, three decades earlier, the ATO had abandoned much of its non-trusting approach to enable taxpayers to self-assess their tax returns – an act of trust in the public that paid trust dividends for the tax office in the long run (Lombard, 1992). Thus the 'trusted source' data provided to Services Australia had principally come from the public. These diametrically opposed approaches show that we simply do not know enough about the governments trust in people. So why are we only ever asking the public as to whether they trust institutions? Why not ask them how much do they think the government trusts them?

This paper reviews the literature on the trust relationship between governments and people before illustrating current limitations through an analysis of currently available survey data. Using the Australian results of the seventh wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) (Sheppard et al., 2018) we can infer from responses by participants employed in government how much trust they have in other people; various groups including people they have met for the first time; and their level of trust or confidence in a number of state institutions. These can then be compared to the trust approach held by respondents working for private corporations or non-profits. This gives us some insight into governments' level of trust in citizens, and how much it trusts itself. However, the two aforementioned case studies — which will be fleshed out below — show that far greater nuance is required to understand the two-way trust relationship between particular agencies and the public they serve. The paper then mounts an argument for a fresh research agenda focused on these important trust relationships. In essence, the government needs a new measure of trust.

Literature on trust

Trust has long been recognised as a cornerstone of all human interaction. This section will first explore the philosophical role trust has in the modern state, then theoretical approaches to trust embedded in public administration literature and travel through each of the various disciplinary perspectives before unpacking the literature on trust as a public value. The paper will then turn to the empirical research of recent decades on trust to demonstrate the relatively myopic approach we have been guilty of taking.

If we did not trust each other to some extent, we would find ourselves perpetually in a Hobbesian world — the state of nature — of one against many (Hobbes, 1651/1968, p. 186). It is our trust that secures contracts, and provides the foundations of government as we surrender some of our rights in a contractual sense for the state to administer them collectively on our behalf (Hobbes, 1651/1968, pp. 192, 196; Rousseau, 1762/1968, p. 102). Hobbes reminds us that the power is entrusted in the sovereign (i.e. government) is for "the procuration of the *safety of the people*" and their rights in bodily, legal, commercial and personal senses (Hobbes, 1651/1968, p. 376, emphasis in original). Building on Hobbes legacy, Locke tells us that this transfer of political power, whether tacitly or explicitly considered by the people, is on the trust it will be used for their benefit (Locke, 1690/1980, s. 171). As the administrative state has grown, trust has been delegated from the sovereign through various institutions and agencies of the state to deliver the public goods expected by society. Of course, such trust is often abused under any form of government, and it is up to the people to make judgement on whether this abuse has occurred or not (Locke, 1690/1980s. 240). Of course, less serious breaches of trust may be overwhelmed by other issues on the political agenda. This is where the regular surveying of public values and opinions provides another monitoring mechanism at institutional or even agency levels of government. These surveys are an important tool of state.

Trust research has evolved and often taken an economic perspective – one which has in very many ways captured thinking and decision making (cf. Gambetta, 1988a); or a political science approach to inject a democratic view (Norris, 2011); not forgetting the philosophical nature of public trust described above – all of these can fall under the broad umbrella of public administration. What is trust? There are volumes dedicated to understanding trust (e.g. Braithwaite & Levi, 1998; Gambetta, 1988b) and at least one journal dedicated to the concept (c.f. *Journal of Trust* Research). Hardin provides a rough model of trust through a rational lense:

> First, you trust someone if you have adequate reason to believe it will be in that person's interest to be trustworthy in the relevant way at the relevant time [Hardin 1991a]. One's trust turns not on one's own interests but on the interests of the trusted. It is encapsulated in one's judgment of those interests (Hardin, 1992, pp. 152–153).

If we paraphrase Hardin against Bouckaert's (2012) government trust of the people - the rational description would follow thus: *The government trusts the public if the government has adequate reason to believe that it will be in the public's interest to be trustworthy in the relevant way at the relevant time. The government's trust turns not on its own interests but on the interests of the people*. This gives us an idealised model of presumptive trust - the government default should be to trust the people. However, the 'relevant way at the relevant time' presents a gap for distrust to exist. The relevant way could be viewed through a securitised lense, with less trust in the public or society shown by police when they investigate a crime or repress a riot. The "interests of the people" also provides a gap for government distrust of the people to emerge. Which people? Peel (1998) found the managerialist policies of New Public Management (NPM) popularised in the 1980s and 1990s created distrust that cascaded from central government agencies to those delivering services then into severely disadvantaged communities. His research found community members were well aware the government distrusted them, and in turn, they distrusted the government.

What else? (Dietz, 2011) tells us "[w]e trust based on an assessment of the other party's trustworthiness" and that it is a "[w]illingness to render ourselves vulnerable" (p. 215). This works well for an individual trusting another individual - but how does it apply to an organisation or institution required to trust a client base or particular population of citizens? One would think on the surface of it a government department would not readily render itself vulnerable. However, departments do this on a regular basis. The case study below shows that the tax office, in trusting society left itself and consequentially the state somewhat more vulnerable to fraud. However, a burdensome rules-based approach to tax collection could diminish trust both ways.[1] The literature on organisational trust tends to focus on the internal dynamics of an organisations – the trust between employees, employees trust in management and vice-versa. McEvily and Tortoriello (2011) gather an impressive number of measures in the macro-review of the literature on measuring organisational trust. Most measures are inward looking, or at best, measures of trust between organisations. There is nothing reflecting an organisation's trust in their client base.

Dietz (2011) does provide a framework to understand why organisations are trusted. Organisational trustworthiness has six components: (1) leaders conduct & decisions; (2) strategy, (3) culture,
(4) systems & processes, (5) external governance, and (6) public reputation (p. 217). In thinking about whether organisations project trust, some of these components could be linked to what is not being asked:

[1] In 2024, the Federal Court ruled the ATO could not write-off small debts that were uneconomic to collect, triggering letters to collect decades old debts. While strictly lawful, it was compared to Robodebt described in this paper (Khadem, 2024).

- Are leaders asking how much they and their organisations trust the public? (1)
- Is building trustworthiness part of the overall strategy and culture? (2 & 3)
- Do the systems and processes project trust? (4)

Trust has elsewhere been described as “the essential glue that holds democratic governance and market economics together” (Cooper & Yoder, 2002, 2005 cited in Huberts et al., 2008, p. 249). This description is familiar territory for many scholars who have explored the dynamics of democracy and trust (Norris, 2011), or share the philosophical views government power is entrusted to protect both people and property (Hobbes, 1651/1968; Locke, 1690/1980; Rousseau, 1762/1968). However, if we are to believe in the continual slide in trust of democratic institutions (see Putnam, 2000, esp. Chap. 8), one wonders why there is any semblance of democracy left. The lack of trust in governments and the public sector is far from a new phenomenon –(Dickenson, 2013) challenges the yearning for a return to a ‘golden age of trust’ by exposing the lack of trust in many of the colonial era political institutions of Australia. Some of her work shows the distrust between appointed and elected public officials, as well as a distrust by officials and elite members of society in the emergent democratic institutions.

Building trust is not easy. Game theory experiments show that if people believe they will have to interact in the future they will be more likely to cooperate (Good, 1988, p. 35). This holds true for the interactions between society and government. However, any member of society knows they have to interact and may deal with the government on a personal level. Whereas the government agency staff also knows while they must continue to deal with the individual, but do not have the same psychological motivation to display trust. In fact, the amount of information required for an individual to provide to even start an interaction with government sets the disparate terms of power and is an act of mistrust from the outset. Society, according to the game theory model, should be more invested in trust. Except the government doesn’t always demonstrate the level of reciprocated trust. Thus the public mistrust grows incrementally and the government, busy with transactional encounters, continues to be mystified at any mistrust. All sides are working with incomplete information. But the individual has no choice but to ‘cooperate’. In effect, this theory frames the manner in which an agency dealing transactionally with individuals – such as emergency welfare – is less invested in building a trust relationship than those with a long-term relationship like tax authorities, with whom all members of society generally have a lifetime of association with.

So, perhaps trust is better displayed through the actions of citizens rather than their responses to opinion polls or values surveys. O’Neill (2002) asks if the public is mistrusting institutions of government, why do they still engage on a regular basis with schools, universities, police, health services, etc.? In a similar vein, Dietz (2011) describes some of this public engagement as trust without a transaction, giving the example of passengers trusting a train driver without having met them (p. 216). Dietz’s example is apt for many interactions between governments and society. Does this then negate the two-way nature of the trust relationship? Dietz scenario is interesting as the passengers are required to trust the public servant - the train driver. But trust is not considered in the other direction. In this simplified model the train driver has no obvious desire to be trusted by passengers, and the passengers have no invested interest in being trusted by the driver. Both O'Neill and Dietz's work follow Luhmann's argument that "Anyone who does not trust at all [...] would be paralysed. Without a minimum of generalised trust, they could not even leave the house, for fear of being run over, mugged or killed by their untrustworthy fellow citizens" (quoted in Kroeger, 2019, p. 115). However, many interactions are more complex, for example the interactions between impersonal bureaucracies and welfare recipients and have far more consequence than a simple train ride. While an interesting angle, both O'Neill and Dietz remain focused on the how much the public trusts institutions without flipping the question on its head – how much does the public sector trust society?

Finally, we also need to consider distrust. Distrust is measured in the World Values Survey (WVS) when asking respondents about their level of trust in various institutions (see Appendix). This is not simply the absence of trust, distrust draws on existing information to create generalisations and "form firm negative expectations" (Kroeger, 2019, p. 117). Distrust itself can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with individuals distrusting the public services who distrust them. This raises a broader question, not answered herein - is it a loss of trust that western public services and governments are suffering from? or the growth of distrust? - these are not the same things. A loss of trust is moving from a socially positive position to a neutral position. Society or parts of society moving on to distrust enters into negative territory.

Empirical Research

Empirical research on trust and the public sector (comprising administration; executive politicians and legislative politicians) tends to lean in a single direction – how much does society trust the government and public sector. The aforementioned work of Putnam (2000) and Norris (2011) are two leading examples of empirical trust-related research. This is problematic as trust generally is a two-way relationship. This paper is principally a call for methodological development – to broaden the data we gather on trust to enable better analysis in the future. It builds on the theoretical foundation of public trust laid out by Bouckaert (2012) that there are three clusters of trust defined as "[trust] from society in the public sector (T1), [trust] from the public sector in society (T2) and [trust] within the public sector (T3)" (p. 91). These are described further in Table 1. Bouckaert takes a far more expansive view on the public sector. It includes executive and legislative arms of government and administrators (2012, p. 95). His model for society includes "citizen/customers and organisations" (p. 94). This inclusive perspective has the potential to deepen our understanding of the three trust relationships. This section explores some of the key data and how it has been applied to T2.

Table 1 Trust relationships in public administration

Relationship	Description
T1	*Trust from society in the public sector* – Society including citizens, private and not-for-profit organisations and any other people (e.g. non-citizens) or organisations (e.g. outlawed entities) subjected to the decisions and actions of the public sector.
T2	*Trust from the public sector in society* – the public sector including all levels of government, public agencies, appointed or elected public officials and organisations to whom state decision making and action taking powers have been outsourced (e.g. a privatised prison).
T3	*Trust within the public sector* – the complex trust relationship between the entities described in T2 with each other.

Note: Adapted from Bouckaert, 2012.

Table 1 provides a quick reference to the trust relationships, and further adapts Boukckaert's use of citizen/customer, a term that has been somewhat in vogue but can be limiting. Thomas (2012) outlines principles for public officials at three stages of dealing with people – as citizens; as customers and as partners. These three terms do not quite capture the extent of whom a public sector deals with. A foreign refugee does not fall under any of these descriptors – they are not citizens, nor are they customers and they are certainly not treated as equal partners. Yet a foreign refugee has a direct interest in trusting a government or public sector, and being trusted in return. More broadly, the growth of multiculturalism in many nations has resulted in large non-citizen populations who are subject to government trust as well as comprising political blocs which have value to those seeking public office, especially as people move from non-citizen to citizen, this is nothing new in machine or identity politics. Going a step further, outlawed organisations such as mafias in Italy, or outlaw motorcycle gangs are often built on their members or institutional distrust in the state (Barker, 2015; Gambetta, 1988a, 1993, 2011; Lauchs et al., 2015; Paoli, 2003). It is for these reasons the paper will continue to refer to *society* to capture all individuals and entities who are not strictly citizens, customers or partners of the state in control of the bureaucratic system.

Staying momentarily with Thomas' (2012) work, his operationalisation of trustworthiness is relatively limited and follows Bouckaert's T1 model in that when working with the public as citizens, 'decision making with public involvement, leaders should behave in a trustworthy and transparent manner' (p. 218). This is a worthy ideal, however, behaving in a trustworthy manner may inspire trust from the public, yet it fails to propose the leaders should trust the public in return (Bouckaert's T2 model of trust). It is T2 – trust from the public sector in society that is difficult to empirically explore.

Trust from the public sector in society (T2) is covered in a number of interesting ways. As Bouckaert (2012) points out "the public sector expects to be trusted but does not necessarily trust its citizens or other public sector agents" (p. 91). Peel (1988) interviewed welfare recipients, practitioners and managers to uncover cascading levels of mistrust going in all directions (T1, T2 and T3). More recently, public administration scholars have taken a creative turn with the data available from the WVS and similar large-scale attempts to measure trust, among other things.

Möllering (2019) points to the important fact that most of the survey questions on trust are a reflection on the respondent as trustor, and only the *perceived* trustworthiness of the trustee (other people, groups, institutions). By reversing the question — does the government trust the public — this problem remains of only knowing what trust perceptions are. However, we are then in a position to compare perceptions from both sides of the trust relationship. Now would seem a good time to outline what questions of trust are put to citizens on a regular basis. With slight variations, Table 2 captures the main questions on trust asked in the major transnational public opinion surveys. Variations on these questions are often replicated in national surveys such as the ANUPoll (McAllister et al., 2012) and the American National Electoral Studies (2023). Questions in bold refer to data gathered directly about various executive government institutions. These are the main instruments to gather data on public trust in the executive. Other questions gather data on elected officials, the legislature, the judiciary, civil society organisations (including political parties), influential corporations and transnational organisations.

At best, empirical research can use some of the available data from the questions outlined in Table 2 to illustrate more of what we don't and cannot know, than what we do and can know about governments' trust of society. A research question "How much does the government trust the public?" is a reasonable one from a variety of perspectives – philosophically it can give insight into the nature of the human condition. Politically it would allow us to better understand the differences between democracies — not to mention the difference between democracy and other governance systems. Finally, from a public policy and administration point of view, better data and understanding can point to adjustments in governance and/or organisational culture to redress the erosion of trust.

Table 2 Trust questions in major surveys

Question theme	Barometers / Surveys: Afro Barometer	Americas Barometer	Asian Barometer	Euro Barometer	World Values Survey
Trust in others [a]	✓	✓	✓		✓
Trust in government [b]			✓		
Trust in groups (e.g. how much do you trust your…	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Relatives	✓		✓		✓
Neighbours	✓		✓		✓
Community	✓	✓			
Other people you know	✓		✓		✓
People you have just met	✓	✓	✓		✓
Fellow citizens	✓			✓	
People from other countries	✓			✓	✓
Trust/confidence in institutions: [c]					
President / Prime Minister	✓	✓	✓		
Parliament / Congress	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Elections / Electoral commission	✓	✓	✓		✓
National government	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Local government / Council	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Civil service	✓		✓		✓
Religious leaders	✓				
Political parties	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Military / Armed forces	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Police	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Courts	✓	✓	✓		✓
Justice system		✓		✓	
Civil society organisations [c]	✓		✓		✓
Media	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Corporations	✓				✓
Revenue office	✓				
International government organisations [c]			✓	✓	✓

Note. Author compiled from relevant surveys(Afro Barometer, 2022; Americas Barometer, 2021; Asian Barometer, 2018–2022; European Union, 2023; World Values Survey, 2018). See the Appendix for more details of the WVS questions of trust and confidence.
[a] Most people can be trusted, or you have to be careful dealing with other people.
[b] You can generally trust the people who run our government to do what is right.
[c] Some clustering has been incorporated into the table – e.g. the WVS variously lists the EU, UN, IMF, ICC, NATO, WHO, WTO – these are clustered as International Government Organisations.

In practice the WVS does allude to T2 Trust by the public sector. Data such as responses to the statements ‘The public servants don’t care’, ‘people like me have no say’; or ‘government is run by big interest[s]’ (Bouckaert, 2012, p. 103) provide a shaky empirical proxy. Perceptions of care; lack of voice; and views on influential elements do not properly align to the definitive positions those surveyed take on which institutions they trust. At best, these questions provide a quasi-measurement of T2 trust. In this, Bouckaert seems to be overstating the connection between T1 and perceptions of T2 (p. 103). Essentially, the data to properly understand what is going on in respect of T2 is mostly absent. Bouckaert concedes "[r]esearch of how T2 and T1 have been interacting, how their spread has evolved and how this has affected improvement [in the public sector] is lacking" (p. 107). He further notes "…it is empirically unclear how T1 evolved, T2 probably increased and T3 probably decreased…" (Bouckaert, 2012, p. 111). This lack of clarity denies public administrators the ability to properly self-reflect and make informed judgements about the changes required to improve the trust relationship.

The lack of empirical research Bouckaert points to does not mean there is no research whatsoever. There exists a small but growing literature on public official's trust in the public more generally. This can be categorised into empirical work taking a macro-, meso- or micro-level approach. Table 3 provides a shorthand description of these levels. "Micro refers to the individual carriers of rules and the systems they organise, and macro consists of the population structure of systems of meso. Micro structure is between the elements of the meso, and macro structure is between meso elements" (Dopfer et al., 2004, p. 263).

Table 3 Descriptions of analytical levels and potential application

Level of Analysis	Description	Potential application
Macro-level	Inter-societal comparisons	Why are officials in country A more trusting than Country B officials?
Meso-level	Intra-societal comparisons	What makes a police officer more trusting than a tax collector? What can tax office A learn from tax office B?
Micro-level	Intra-organisational comparisons	Are street police more trusting of society than detectives?

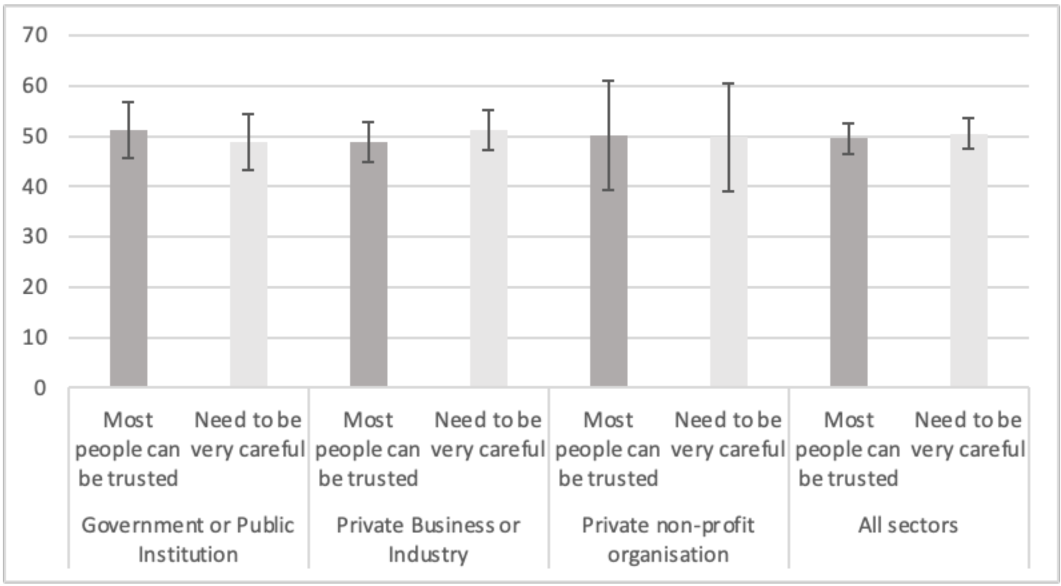
Social survey data can enable macro-level analysis. These surveys ask respondents about which sector people work in – government, business or not-for-profits.[2] Van de Walle and Lahat (2017) used data from the 2012 European Social Survey to compare trust along public/non-public sectoral lines in 13 countries and showed distinct macro-level variations dependent on the social welfare regime of the country. They found that public officials are more trusting than non-public officials. In their study Van de Walle and Lahat (2017) also identified some key variables (income, minority group status and age of public officials), which helped explain variations in levels of trust at the individual level. However, this does not give us insight at a more meso- or micro-level – whether particular agencies that are not trusted, trust the public.

[2] For example "Are you working for the government or public institution, for private business or industry, or for a private non-profit organisation?" is asked in Wave 7 of the WVS (Q.284).

Analytical limitations on existing data

With existing data, we can replicate macro-level analysis in an Australian context. A snapshot from the latest Australian Values Survey[3] (Figure 1) is perhaps inconsistent with that found by Van de Walle and Lahat (2017). Survey respondents identifying themselves as employed in "government or [a] public institution" when asked "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful" in dealing with people?" responded that "most people can be trusted" (51.1%). As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of 'Most people can be trusted' versus 'Need to be very careful' responses was highly consistent across all three employment sectors, with all groups hovering near the 50% mark for the sample as a whole.

Figure 1 Weighted Percentage of Trust Responses by Employment Sector



Note: Bars represent the weighted percentage of respondents within each employment sector (and for all sectors combined) who selected "Most people can be trusted" versus "Need to be very careful." All estimates were calculated using the survey's GREG weights via the Complex Samples procedure. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Data is derived from World Values Survey 2018 wave Q.57(Sheppard et al., 2018).

The substantial overlap of the 95% confidence intervals for all groups indicates no statistically significant bivariate difference in generalised trust between workers in the public, private, or non-profit sectors. This lack of a simple, unadjusted relationship (as shown in Figure 1) aligns with the non-significant findings for employment sector in the subsequent logistic regression models (see Table 4), both before and after adjusting for demographic controls.

[3] The national collection of WVS data for Australia.

Table 4 Binomial generalised linear models predicting generalised trust (1 = “most people can be trusted”; 0 = “you need to be very careful”)

Predictor	Model 0 *Intercept only* B (SE)	Model 1 *+ Sector* B (SE)	Model 2 *+ Demographics* B (SE)
Intercept	0.00 (0.05)	-0.01 (0.11)	-2.83 (0.38)***
Employment sector (ref = public)			
Private	-	0.00 (0.12)	0.11 (0.13)
Non-profit	-	0.13 (0.21)	0.30 (0.22)
Sex (ref = male)			
Female			-0.01 (0.11)
Age	-	-	0.01 (0.00)***
Education level	-	-	0.17 (0.04)***
Household income	-	-	0.18 (0.03)***
City/town population	-	-	0.06 (0.02)*

Model fit

	Model 0	Model 1	Model 2
−2 Log-likelihood	2036.57	2036.12	1941.28
AIC	2038.57	2042.12	1957.28
Omnibus LR χ^2 (df)	0.00 (0)	0.45 (2)	95.29 (7)
Omnibus LR *p*	1.00	.80	< .001
Type III χ^2 for sector (df)	-	0.45 (2)	1.94 (2)
Type III *p* for sector	-	.80	.38
Included cases (unweighted)	1,004	1,004	1,004

Note. Unstandardised logit coefficients (B) reported; standard errors in parentheses. Models estimated with binomial distribution and logit link using survey weights (weighted N = 1,486 respondents). Higher scores on education, income and city size indicate higher educational attainment, higher household income band and larger place of residence, respectively. The dependent variable is a binary indicator of generalised trust (1 = “most people can be trusted”, 0 = “you need to be very careful”).
† p < .10. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

As shown in Table 4, an intercept-only model (Model 0) indicates no significant difference in the baseline number of respondents who think “most people can be trusted” versus “you need to be very careful in dealing with people” (overall, roughly half of employed respondents chose each option). Adding employment sector (public, private, non-profit) in Model 1 did not meaningfully improve model fit over the intercept-only baseline (likelihood-ratio $\chi^2(2) = 0.45$, p = .80), and sector was not a significant predictor in the Type III tests (Wald $\chi^2(2) = 0.45$, p = .80). The sector coefficients were very close to zero (e.g., Bs = 0.00-0.30, all ps > .50), indicating essentially no difference in overall trust between public-, private-, and non-profit-sector workers.

In Model 2, adding age, sex, education, household income, and city size substantially improved fit relative to the intercept-only model (likelihood-ratio $\chi^2(7) = 95.29$, $p < .001$). Higher trust was significantly associated with older age ($B = 0.01$, $p < .001$), higher education level ($B = 0.17$, $p < .001$), higher household income ($B = 0.18$, $p < .001$), and living in more populous places ($B = 0.06$, $p = .011$). However, even in this fully adjusted model, employment sector remained a non-significant predictor of trust (Type III Wald $\chi^2(2) = 1.94$, $p = .38$). The non-significant coefficients for private ($B = 0.11$) and non-profit ($B = 0.30$) sectors suggest that apparent sectoral differences in generalised trust are fully accounted for by individual-level composition rather than by an additional public-sector-wide sense of trust.

Overall, the set of controls in Model 2 is designed to capture the major demographic and socioeconomic pathways through which individuals select into employment sectors and develop generalised trust, without over-fitting the model or modelling attitudes (such as ideology) that may themselves be downstream of trust.

Building on existing data

What seems missing is a body of solid meso-level research and data, which would allow us to determine the trust different types of bureaucrats or different agencies within a polity have toward the society they serve. The snapshot from the WVS (figure 1) represents as fine-grained as we can get with existing data. This is not due to a lack of self-reflection by governments. For example, the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) not only monitors the public trust in the federal government through regular surveys (Australian Public Service Commission, 2019–2022, 2025b), they also conduct an annual census of employees with questions about internal relationships in workgroups, between employees and their supervisors, and perceptions of the senior leadership (Australian Public Service Commission, 2022a, 2025a). This aligns with a core value for the APS of being ethical – which is described as "The APS demonstrates leadership, *is trustworthy*, and acts with integrity, in all that it does" (Australian Public Service Commission, 2022b, emphasis added). However, the APSC census does not pose questions about the trust relationship between public servants, government institutions and society more broadly.

Some steps have been taken toward developing meso-level data. For example, the OECD *Survey on Drivers of Trust* in 2024 introduced a question on reciprocal trust for their survey in Chile. The question was "On a scale of 0 to 10, to what extent would you say the Chilean government can trust citizens to provide accurate information when applying for benefits or paying taxes?" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024b, p. 10). If the question spreads to other waves and countries involved in the *Survey on Drivers of Trust*, some interesting macro-level comparisons become possible. However, the question remains one of public perception – that the government can trust society, not the government's position on trust. The results from this question already show that Chilean society perceive themselves as more trustworthy than their government (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2024a, p. 41). While the question focuses on perceptions it cannot quite get to the heart of whether the government trusts the people. For now, the data show that Chilean society expects to be trusted by their government.

The APSC has recently added a question to the Trust in Australian Public Services survey regarding respondents' perceptions of how much the government trusts them. The APSC asks "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement.'I feel that Australian public services trust me" (Australian Public Service Commission, 2019–2022;

2024, waves 39-41; 2025b), with responses of strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree and strongly disagree available to answer. Earlier waves had a slight variation on the question with “To the best of your knowledge, […]” preceding the question, and a seven point scale (waves 36 & 37). These are steps in the right direction toward a better understanding of T2.

Important work has also been conducted at the micro-level, however none draws from large scale survey work. Peel’s (1998) examination of Australian welfare relied on interviews. Davidovitz and Cohen (2021) compared the experiences of Israeli teachers and social workers to identify categories of clients that inspire trust or distrust in street level bureaucrats. Both groups tend to work for a long-time with clients (students; clients in need of state support), a factor which requires expansion to capture trust categories for street-level bureaucrats who deal with one-off encounters like police and firefighters (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2021, p. 1536). Liu et al. (2021) used their own survey to determine age as a factor influencing the trust Chinese officials had in society. Paradoxically, the authors noted the strong authoritarian orientation of Chinese officials engendered greater trust in citizens as they believed the citizens were both dependent on and obedient to the state – markers of trustworthiness in the China context (Liu, et al., 2021, p. 11). The need for nuanced understandings of trust by different bureaucrats and officials in society is amplified in circumstances where citizens take a role in policy co-design such as urban planning – even in high-trust environments like Sweden, officials trust in society can vary (Åström, 2020). The Swedish study also demonstrated trust in citizens is affected by how much the planners trust politicians (Aström, 2020, p. 20). What becomes clear from this work is that research into T2 trust relationships at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels tend to require their own data gathering, which can be limited by resource constraints on research.

Case studies

We now turn to a pair of Australian case studies which illustrate the importance of projecting trust. The first case study illustrates where trust has been projected, the second has mistrust as a central feature. The danger here would be to mistake these cases as generalisable guides to a better approach. Both incorporate contextual features which may make them unique snapshots from history – exemplars at best. However, a careful unpacking of each may provide pointers to a new research agenda.

Case study 1 – projecting trust - Self Assessment and the Australian Taxation Office

More than three decades ago, the Australia Taxation Office (ATO) embarked on a radical change in the way it collected income tax from taxpayers. Income tax had been introduced by the national government in 1914 as a measure to pay for Australia’s commitments to the First World War (Krever & Mellor, 2015, p. 369). The general approach taken for almost 80 years was an adversarial one between government and taxpayer. The system was designed in such a way that once an annual tax return was submitted, it had to be checked/audited by an ATO employee before a notice of assessment could be issued.[4] These either resulted in a refund of excess tax to the taxpayer, or notification that tax was owing. As the taxpayer base grew and the complexities of the tax system evolved assessment times became measured in months, even for relatively straightforward tax returns.

As part of the shift in the 1980s and 1990s toward NPM – where the government adopted a governance role, steering the ship of state, rather than rowing (Rhodes, 1996) – it became clear efficiencies were to be found in the tax system. The potential efficiences required a change in the ATO's corporate cultural attitude to one where taxpayers, in the main, could be trusted to complete the paperwork, calculate their return or debt, and let the government know. Random audits remained part of the system to discourage any 'creative' accounting by taxpayers.

From a trust perspective, the introduction of self-assessment was huge. It sent a message to all individual taxpayers (changes to the corporate tax regime came later) that the government trusted them (Lombard, 1992; Wanna, 2023). Not only were people trusted to complete the paperwork, but tax returns and debt notices arrived in a timely fashion. These changes had a lasting affect as well. A former tax Commissioner recently noted that even though their core business was to take money from people, they were trusted. This Commissioner underscored that self-assessment and trust in taxpayers (both individuals or corporations) is now an enduring part of the organisational culture (Jordan, 2024). The same cannot be said of the Australian social security system – a system designed to give people in need money.

Case study 2 – projecting mistrust - Robodebt

Robodebt has been the most significant public sector scandal for the Australian government in decades. Robodebt is the shorthand name given to a welfare scheme designed to automate the identification of potential debts and recover overpayments from recipients. At the heart of the scheme was a data-matching exercise which compared tax records from recipients and employers with welfare payment records. A flawed basis for calculating the debt meant the system generated debt notifications where none lawfully existed. The scheme had many factors which compounded the scandal – there was no legal basis for the debts; warnings from experienced staff were ignored (a lack of T3 – trust within the public sector); when legal flaws were pointed out by respected experts and judicial officers they were ignored; recipients of debt notifications were not provided access to appeal mechanisms (things as simple as a telephone number were missing from the debt letters); debt notifications were issued to old addresses; debts were recovered through garnishing tax returns or directly from bank accounts; some of the most vulnerable caught up in the scheme suffered mental and physical harm with some people committing suicide. These issues were highlighted in academic papers (Braithwaite, 2020; Carney, 2019; Graycar & Masters, 2022; Park & Humphry, 2019; Whiteford, 2021), senate inquiries (Senate, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c) and a Royal Commission (Holmes, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c).

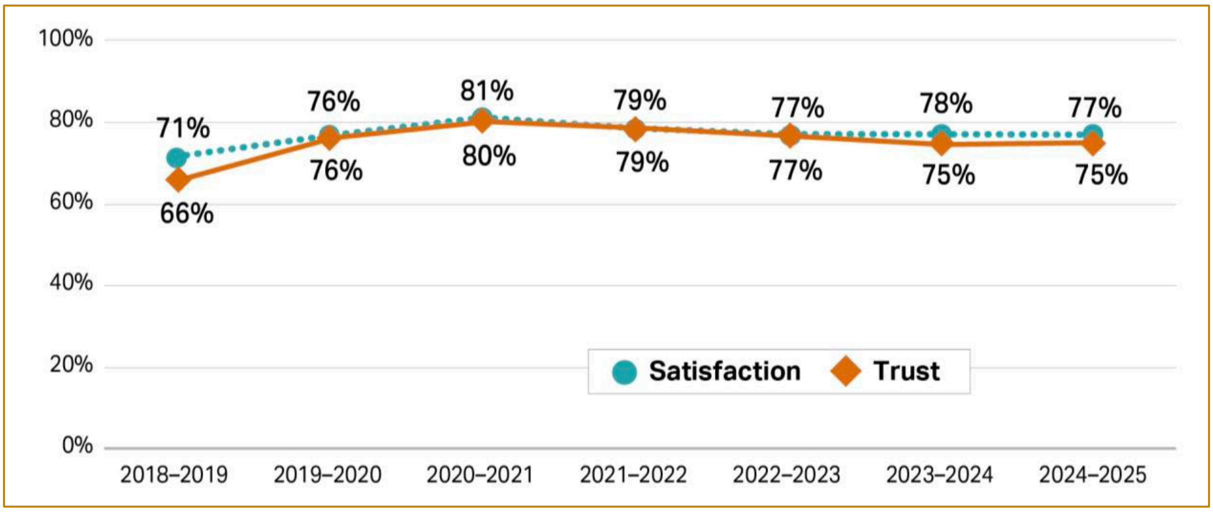
[4] One of the authors worked in the ATO 1989-1991, and has experience as a taxpayer of the system before and after the changes described herein.

Robodebt also projected a message about trust to the public, that recipients of welfare were not trusted. The information provided to the ATO was misused to calculate debts and bureaucractic hurdles were placed before anyone wishing to challenge their 'debt'.

What are we doing now?

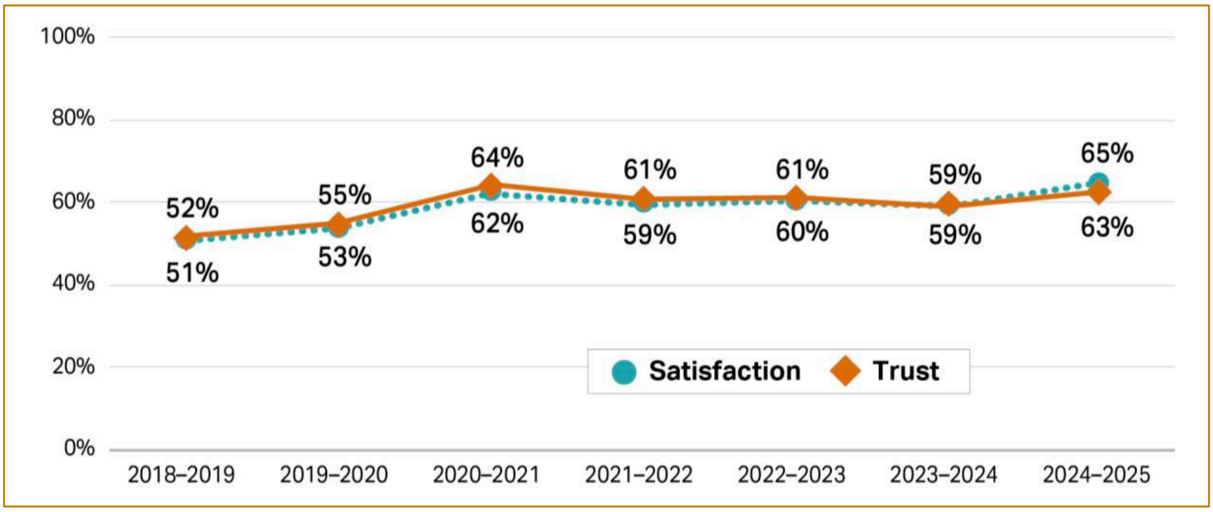
Right now we ask a lot of questions about trust, but they are mostly one way. The two case studies provide a snapshot of two large agencies in the Australian government. The data on trust the public have in these agencies (T1) shows a clear disparity between the two. In 2025, the ATO was trusted by 75% of people. (figure 2) Whereas Services Australia (Centrelink) who were at the forefront of the Robodebt scandal was only trusted by 63% of people (figure 3).

Figure 2 Trust and Satisfaction in the Australian Taxation Office - Historical Performance



Note. Figure 2 from Australian Public Service Commission, 2025b, p. 17. Reproduced under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0

Figure 3 Trust and Satisfaction in the Services Australia (Centrelink) - Historical Performance



Note. Figure 3 from Australian Public Service Commission, 2025b, p. 19. Reproduced under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0

The APSC survey showed trust in Australian public services was 62% of all people surveyed, which included those who had not engaged with the public service (Australian Public Service Commission, 2025b, p. 4). Again, this survey reflects attempts by one level of government to gauge how much the public trusts them (T1). The survey at best will garner vague insights into whether the agency in question is trusting of the public (T2). At present it seems the best indicators we have about projecting trust arises from the case studies like those above or anecdotes.

Recalling the data from the WVS from 2018 that analysed how trusting public officials are in general, a contrast emerges (Figure 1 and Table 4). Approximately half (51.1%) of respondents employed by Australian governments or public institutions believed most people can be trusted. We cannot determine the nuance of which level of government (local, state/territory, national) or which agency these respondents to the World Values Survey worked. Our macro-level null finding is illustrative, as it masks the apparent realities at the meso-level. We know from the case studies that the ATO is built on a T2-trust (trust in public) culture, while the Robodebt scandal was built on a T2-mistrust culture. The fact that the macro-data fails to detect this demonstrates its inadequacy for this type of analysis and strengthens the call for a new, agency-level (meso) research agenda.

Other forms of data could be garnered from websites and textual analysis. However, inclusion of far stronger evidence on trust in the public (not by the public) would give policy makers and implementers a key performance indicator to work toward with measurable outcomes.

Conclusion - what could we be asking?

The data gathered over decades about which institutions are trusted would seem to be the logical place to start. Reframing the questions and putting them to both public officials (elected and appointed) and the public could provide a rich set of actionable data:

To the public:

- How much do you think/feel the government trusts you?
- Which institution do you think trusts you the most?
- How much does the government trust other people?
- Who do you think the government mistrusts the most?

To elected officials:

- Do you trust your political opponents to do the right thing by the electorate?
- Do you trust voters to get it right?
- Do you trust upper levels of government?
- Do you trust appointed officials / public service to be impartial?

To appointed officials:

- Do you trust other public officials to do the right thing by the public / society?
- Do you think the public is generally honest in their dealings with your agency?
- Do you think the public is generally honest in the dealings with you in your official capacity?
- Do you think the public is generally honest in the dealings with other arms of executive government?

By asking these or similar questions, we can build a much more nuanced picture of trust within a society. Instilling new questions into instruments such as the WVS is not an easy task. It is more likely they could be incorporated in a smaller survey like TAPS as a pilot to test their validity as well as their utility in delivering better outcomes. Framing the questions in a similar manner to those already posed to the public (to measure T1) has the added advantage of having base-line data in most societies where tests can be made. For example, we know from the APSC survey 75% and 63% of people trust the ATO and Services Australia (Centrelink) respectively. By surveying the staff, we can determine whether there is correlation with how much the staff trust the public. It could then point toward whether front-line staff need additional training, or if the problem is further up the chain in the manner Peel (1998) found. Alternately, distrust of the public may be linked to systemic issues or policy settings like Robodebt (Holmes, 2023b). It would be far more economical to obtain these answers early through survey work, that too late through a Royal Commission.

What has not been directly addressed here is Bouckaert's T3 (trust within the public sector). Trust patterns within an organisation are well covered in the business management literature on organisational trust. Future research into organisational trust will require incorporation into the overall picture of public trust– but only once we have good data on public services' trust in society.

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Appendix – WVS questions of trust and confidence

Table A1 *World Values Survey Questions About Trust*

Questions \ Waves	1 1981	2 1990	3 1995-1996	4 1999-2002	5 2005-2006	6 2010-2012	7 2017-2021
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?	Scale 1. Trust completely; 2. Trust somewhat; 3. Do not trust very much; 4. Do not trust at all						
• Your family					V125	V102	Q58
• Your neighbourhood					V126	V103	Q59
• People you know personally					V127	V104	Q60
• People you meet for the first time					V128	V105	Q61
• People of another religion					V129	V106	Q62
• People of another nationality					V130	V107	Q63
Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?							
• Most people can be trusted	V208.1	V94.1	V27.1	V25.1	V23.1	V24.1	
• Need to be very careful	V208.2	V94.2	V27.2	V25.2	V23.2	V24.2	
I see myself as someone who is....[generally trusting]						V160b	
How much do you trust the government in [Washington]* to do what is right? Do you trust it almost always, most of the time, only some of the time, or almost never?							
• Almost always		V289.1					
• Most of the time		V289.2					
• Sometimes		V289.3					
• Almost never		V289.4					
How much trust do you think young people have in older people in [Britain] today? (scale of 1-10)	V209						
How much trust do you think older people have in the young in [Britain] today? (scale of 1-10)	V210						

Table A2 *World Values Survey Questions – Confidence in Institutions*

Waves / Questions	1 1981	2 1990	3 1995-1996	4 1999-2002	5 2005-2006	6 2010-2012	7 2017-2021
Waves 1, 2: Please look at this card and tell me, for each item listed, how much confidence you have in them, is it a great deal, quite a lot, not very much or none at all?			**Waves 3-7:** I am going to name a number of organisations. For each one, could you tell me how much confidence you have in them: is it a great deal of confidence, quite a lot of confidence, not very much confidence or none at all?				
Scale 1. A great deal; 2. Quite a lot; 3. Do not trust very much; 4. Do not trust at all							
• The [churches]	V538	V272	V135	V147	V131	V108	Q64
• The armed forces	V539	V273	V136	V148	V132	V109	Q65
• The education system [b]	V540	V274					
• The legal system [b]	V541	V275	V137				
• The political system [b]		V285					
• The press	V542	V276	V138	V149	V133	V110	Q66
• Television		V283	V139	V150	V134	V111	Q67
• Trade/labour unions [a]	V543	V277	V140	V151	V135	V112	Q68
• The police	V544	V278	V141	V152	V136	V113	Q69
• The courts [b]					V137	V114	Q70
• The government [in your capital city]			V142	V153	V138	V115	Q71
• Political parties [b]			V143	V154	V139	V116	Q72
• Parliament	V545	V279	V144	V155	V140	V117	Q73
• The civil service	V546	V280	V145	V156	V141	V118	Q74
• Universities [b]						V119	Q75
• Elections							Q76
• Major companies	V547	V281	V146	V157	v142	v120	Q77
• The social security system		V282					
• Banks						v121	Q78
• The green / ecology movement / Environmental organisations			V147	V158	v143	v122	Q79
• Women's organisations/movement [a]			V148	V159	v144	v123	Q80
• Charitable or humanitarian organisations					v145	v124	Q81
• The [European Community/Union] [a]		V283	V149	V160	v146	v125	Q82

• The United Nations		V150	V162	v147	v126	Q83
• The International Monetary Fund (IMF)						Q84
• International Criminal Court						Q85
• North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)	V284		V161			Q86
• The World Bank						Q87
• The World Health Organisation						Q88
• The World Trade Organisation						Q89

Note. Sources: (Haerpfer et al., 2022; Inglehart et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f)

[a] The WVS questionnaires use synonymous descriptions in different waves. For example, trade unions and labour unions. Where this has occurred, they have been melded with a "/".

[b] Where questions could be synonymous, yet imprecise, separate questions are listed. For example, the legal system is not the same as the courts, the education system is not the same as universities.