

# **Trust in Government – the Relative Importance of Service Satisfaction, Political Factors and Demography**

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# Content

Preface.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Sammendrag.....	v
Introduction.....	7
Theoretical elaborations.....	8
Data and method.....	14
Empirical results.....	16
The dependent variable: trust in government institutions.....	16
Analysis and discussion.....	18
Conclusion.....	24
References.....	27
Appendix.....	31

## **Preface**

This paper is part of the research project «Administrative reforms and institutional change – effects and implication», financed by the research program «Public Sector in Change» under the Norwegian Research Council. It is written in connection to the research group «Administration and governance» at the Rokkan Centre. The data basis is placed at our disposal by the research program «Power and Democracy» and is based on a broad mass survey of the Norwegian citizens conducted in 2001.

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on trust in government, meaning the parliament, the cabinet, the civil service, local councils, political parties and politicians. Trust is measured in terms of specific support - as indicated by people's satisfaction with specific public services - and contrasted with more general support, determined by political culture and demographic factors. The data used in this analysis are taken from a broad mass survey of Norwegian citizens conducted in 2001. The main findings are first, that people's trust in government is of a general character: a high level of trust in one institution tends to extend to other institutions. Second, political-cultural variables have the strongest overall effect on variations in people's trust in government. Here, the single most important factor is general satisfaction with democracy. Third, citizens who are satisfied with specific public services generally have a higher level of trust in public institutions than citizens who are dissatisfied. Fourth, trust in government is also influenced by demographic factors, such as age, education and occupation.

## **Sammendrag**

Dette notatet fokuserer på tillit til offentlige myndigheter og grupperinger som Stortinget, regjeringen, offentlig forvaltning, kommunestyre, politiske partier og politikere. Variasjoner i tillit blir dels knyttet befolkningens tilfredshet med spesifiserte offentlige tjenester fra institusjoner innenfor helsevesenet, arbeidsmarkedsetaten og sosialkontoret; og dels til politisk kulturelle faktorer og demografiske kjennetegn. Datagrunnlaget er en survey gjennomført til et representativt utvalg av den norske befolkning mellom 18 og 85 år i 2001. Hovedfunnene er for det første at folks tillit til offentlige myndigheter er av en generell karakter. Hvis man har stor tillit til en institusjon så har man også stor tillit til andre institusjoner. For det andre har politisk-kulturelle faktorer generelt sterkest effekt på variasjoner i folks tillit til offentlige myndigheter. Den viktigste faktoren er folks generelle tilfredshet med hvordan demokratiet fungerer i Norge. For det tredje har folk som ut fra egne erfaringer er tilfreds med spesifikke offentlige tjenester, generelt større tillit til offentlige myndigheter enn de som er misfornøyde. For det fjerde er tillit til offentlige myndigheter også påvirket av demografiske faktorer som alder, utdanning og om man arbeider i offentlig sektor eller ikke.



# Introduction

Trust in government is a multi-faceted, rather ambiguous concept. It covers general and systemic factors, such as the legitimacy accorded to the political-administrative system, but also more specific experiences with the government and its services and the dynamic interaction between the two (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001). Public opinion about governmental institutions is quite inconsistent and ambivalent, and it is characterized more by cognitive complexity than by consistency (Forster and Snyder 1988, Hill 1992, Listhaug 1990, Rainey 1996). Citizens are often sceptical towards the public sector when asked in general and abstract terms, but relatively satisfied with more specific services. Generally speaking, they want more service delivery from the public sector (Bennett and Bennett 1990, Goodsell 1994, Huseby 1995, Ladd 1983, Lægreid 1997). Fredericksson (1997) describes this ambivalence as the «paradox of distance». While people trust government officials who are near at hand, they believe that government officials who are far away are lazy, incompetent and probably dishonest. This paradox may partly be a function of political rhetoric and the lambasting of political and administrative actors and institutions by the media, but also of citizens' general disengagement from political life. In view of this paradox, an elaboration of the distinction Easton (1965) made between diffuse and specific support for the political system seems appropriate to use when discussing trust.

The focus of this paper is on trust in government, taken broadly to mean democratic institutions that have strong linkages to the political process. Variations in trust are explained in terms of people's satisfaction with specific public services, i.e. specific support. This is contrasted with the relevance of political-cultural factors and demographic factors for trust — factors more associated with diffuse or general support.<sup>1</sup>

The main research questions covered in the paper are:

- Is people's trust in government of a general character or is it differentiated between political and administrative institutions and actors?
- What is the connection between people's satisfaction with public services and their trust in government? Does the mere fact of being a consumer of specific public services inspire trust or is trust linked more to how satisfied people are with those services? Does trust vary according to how universal or specific the public services are, i.e. how many people they cover?
- What is the significance of political-cultural and demographic factors for levels of trust and how much variation do they bring?
- What is the relative importance of these factors compared with performance-related factors and people's satisfaction with public services?

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<sup>1</sup> Demographic factors could, of course, also be connected to specific support. Our argument here is that certain demographic factors, e.g., education and gender, probably tend to influence general levels of trust rather than trust in specific services.

The data used in this analysis are taken from a broad mass survey, covering 2297 respondents, conducted under the auspices of the Norwegian Power and Democracy Study in 2001. Norway has a strong democratic tradition, scores high on per capita income and abundance of natural resources, has relatively strong collectivistic and egalitarian values, is consensus-oriented, and has a low level of internal conflict. It also has one of the most comprehensive and universal welfare states in the world. The regime's performance, support for democracy and the level of trust in public institutions are generally higher than in most other countries (Dalton 1999, Klingemann 1999, McAllister 1999, Norris 1999b). Surveys of political support for national government and parliament nearly always accord Norway a leading position (Listhaug and Wiberg 1995, Listhaug 1995 and 1998). Nevertheless, the pattern of confidence in political institutions is cyclical, and the level was lower at the end of the 1990s than in the early 1980s (Listhaug 2000). This special profile of Norway as a positive outlier makes it an interesting case for examining how trust in public institutions varies between different groups of citizens.

## **Theoretical elaborations**

Easton's (1965) concepts of support for the political system seem pretty close to what many authors define as trust in government. While there is no consensus that these are completely equivalent concepts, they seem similar enough to use here as a point of departure for our theoretical discussion. Levels of diffuse or general support for a political system, which form a central dimension of trust, seem to consist of a number of interrelated elements (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001). First of all, people can have more general ideological reasons for supporting or trusting the government, i.e. they favour a large public sector and it therefore seems natural to support its central institutions and actors. A more generalized version of this political argument is that people believe in common or collective interests and aims (March and Olsen 1989). There are also reasons to believe that people in this category will be over-represented among those who actively participate in political-administrative processes.<sup>2</sup>

Support for, or trust in the government may also, however, be based on structural legitimacy, meaning long-term positive experience with the structure (formal structure, rules and roles) and working of government. Trust in the professional competence of the civil service may also be related to this factor. Legitimacy connected with how particular political and administrative leaders act over a period of time may also build up a high level of diffuse support or trust. Macro-factors, like economic performance and levels of unemployment, may also influence structural legitimacy or have a more general significance for diffuse support (Miller and Listhaug 1999).

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<sup>2</sup> People engaged in politics may, of course, try to decrease the public sector or make it work differently. But those who score high on diffuse support probably have a higher level of awareness of the implications of political processes and are therefore more inclined to engage in them.

Easton's (1965) concept of specific support seems to encompass two main elements: process and output, whereby the latter seems to be the most focused. The process part concerns how decision-making processes are organized, i.e. how they are structured in terms of participants, the approach to problems and solutions, which rules are followed, how competent government employees are, the participation of affected actors and parties, etc. Process-based specific trust or support can be high even when output are unfavourable for the actors, simply because the process is seen as appropriate. Output-related elements concern the classical «who gets what» in politics. This means that people's support for or trust in government depends on what they gain, regardless of the process leading to the result. This mode of thinking is very typical of the New Public Management movement, which argues that governments should be much more output-oriented, meaning more efficient (Christensen and Læg Reid 2001).<sup>3</sup> According to this mode of thinking, «doing things the right way» is old-fashioned and undesirable; instead, governments should «do the right things».

If we combine diffuse and specific support, the government accrues the highest level of trust when levels of both diffuse and specific support are high and when these factors reinforce one another. High diffuse support but low specific support may indicate that the general level of legitimacy and trust in the political-administrative system is so strong that even dissatisfaction with bad performance — as expressed in low levels of specific support — does not threaten this basis. This may indicate that the slack in the system — the gap between available resources and demands — is high (Cyert and March 1963). A low score for diffuse support but a high one for specific support may mean that many people are sceptical towards the governmental system as such, for real or imaginary reasons, but their specific interaction with government is on the whole not negative (Goodsell 1994, Kjellberg et al. 1980). Low scores for both kinds of support and mutual reinforcement of the two factors indicate that the government is experiencing a legitimacy crisis. A decline in general or diffuse support for political institutions is more troublesome for the legitimacy of the political system than dissatisfaction with specific actors or services (Listhaug 2000).

Trust in government seems to have both institutional and personal aspects.<sup>4</sup> People may trust both the system as such and individual actors they encounter or observe. This may include both central political leaders and actors in the administration and public service sector. Another possible combination is trust in the political-democratic system as such but distrust in current leaders or other political actors. This distrust may be based both on myths or symbols, for example «distrust fashions» furthered by the mass media, or else on first-hand negative experiences with

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<sup>3</sup> In the new modernization program of the current Norwegian government it is argued that consumers of public services do not need to know how services are organized and produced, i.e. it is the output that matters. The government is also supposing that the output will be better both in qualitative and quantitative terms.

<sup>4</sup> Added to this is the question of inter-personal, social or generalized trust and the relations between this kind of trust and trust in government (Kumlim and Rothstein 2002, Newton 1999, Rothstein 2001, Rothstein and Stolle 2002).

government representatives. A third possibility is that people may trust certain political and administrative leaders because of their achievements or personal charisma but not the institutional features of the political-administrative system. The fourth combination is distrust in both the system as such and in specific government representatives. If we relate these elements to the distinction between diffuse and specific support, it is probable that individual elements of trust will be more related to specific support while institutional elements are linked to diffuse support.

A further variable is time. Trust in government may be based on experiences over a long period of time, on the current situation or on expectations of the government in future (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001:19). The higher the level of trust inspired by the current government, the more likely it is that a person will express specific support and trust, while long-term experience points more in the direction of diffuse support and trust.

People's satisfaction with public services as related to trust can be seen in a broader or narrower performance perspective (Bouckaert and Van der Walle 2001). The broad performance perspective presupposes that certain modern public reforms imply better quality of public services and hence high levels of public satisfaction and trust in government. Such an assumption of course throws up many questions, which can be debated and elaborated, both theoretically and empirically: some reform measures will affect some public services, others will not, and service quality improvements may have other origins than reforms. Quality improvements for some people may imply disadvantages for others, and quality improvements may in any case be primarily connected to political symbols and hype. People may react to purely symbolic quality improvements, while real quality improvements may be seen by some as of little significance compared with other aspects of a service, either because access to a service is limited or simply because of a lack of responsiveness. A further possibility is that people have other reasons for trusting government than satisfaction with public services.

In this paper we concentrate on a narrower performance perspective, addressing the connection between experience of and satisfaction with public services and trust in government (the performance hypothesis), and the importance of satisfaction for trust compared with political and demographic factors. Micro-factors, such as how individual citizens assess the performance of specific public services based on their own experience, are seen in relation to their integration and involvement in the political-democratic system and to their social position.

Satisfaction with public services may span a large number of different elements, of both a process and output nature (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001: 25,29). People may be satisfied with the existence of a particular service or the availability of certain services that meet their needs. At the same time, they may also be satisfied with information concerning services, the accessibility and friendliness of the service providers they meet, the competence of service personnel, the fairness, effectiveness and efficiency of the services, or other factors. They may, however, be more

preoccupied with the output of services than with features of the process. Friendliness, accessibility and competence mean very little for some people if they don't get what they want, while others will accept an unsatisfactory output if they see the process as appropriate. The situation regarding service delivery and satisfaction is, of course, further complicated by the fact that people's needs and perceptions of what services should provide vary (Aberbach and Rockman 2000). Some will be satisfied with little, while others will be dissatisfied with quite a lot.

One major factor determining the influence that service satisfaction has on levels of trust in government is the growing importance of people's role as consumers or customers relative to their role as citizens, implying that levels of trust will be increasingly related to specific rather than diffuse support (Rose and Pettersen 2000). The reform wave instigated by the New Public Management movement seeks to further such a development, and one important component of the reform program of the Norwegian government was that all public bodies should have a Service Charter by the end of 2001 (Stene 2001). Some see the weakening of people's participation in the election channel, either through declining membership in political parties or decreasing voter turnout, as a sign of this stronger consumer and customer orientation (Christensen and Læg Reid 2002). There are, of course, other reasons for such a development and it can be seen as a more long-term trend not related to NPM. The apparent growing importance of the consumer has been defined by some as a kind of neo-liberal crusade, emphasizing individual self-interest in dealings with government, while others see it as an enhancement of democracy, producing more direct connections between citizens and government (Self 2000).

If one presupposes that satisfaction with government services is trust enhancing — implying that the consumer role is important and performance is of significance for trust — one can ask whether people will react equally to all public services. What are the most important variables for characterizing services and differentiating them for users? One central variable could be how universal the services are, meaning how many people they potentially cover. Public services range from those that are collective or universal, like education in most countries, which is potentially consumed by everyone, to those that are more selective and individual and target more specific groups of clients. One expectation might be that the more controlling, selective and individualized a service, the more dissatisfied the user is likely to be. The users of such services, like social benefits, are likely to encounter more bureaucratic arbitrariness and more social stigma and will probably have access to fewer social and political resources (Kumlin and Rothstein 2002, Rothstein 2001, Rothstein and Stolle 2002). According to this mode of thinking, people with the least experience of services, particularly the most selective ones, are likely to be the most trusting, while the least trusting are likely to be those with experience of many selective benefits. Another possibility is that trust varies according to their specific experience of services. These expectations, which are tested in the analysis, can, however, be modified in different ways. Selective public

services may mean that people become both better acquainted with government and obtain services they really need, creating both more satisfaction and more trust.

A variation of this discussion is whether some services have a greater impact than others and are therefore more significant for creating satisfaction and trust (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001: 30). This argument is not easy to support, because the impact of services varies according to people's needs and expectations and it is therefore difficult to arrive at a consensus on how services should be ranked in terms of importance. Moreover, there will probably be a lot of cultural variety between countries concerning this matter. For some people in some countries problems with receiving mail or with the tax authorities may be of greater significance than problems gaining access to social or employment services.

Another related variable may be who is responsible for the provision of public services and at what level. A locally based service could, for example, create more satisfaction and trust, because consumers get to know the service organization and the service provider better than a service that is more distant in various senses (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001:13). However, local provision and use of services is in itself no guarantee of good treatment and relationships. On the contrary, one might even expect the opposite effect on satisfaction and trust, because proximity can create stigma in a local community characterized by transparency, as a classical study in Norway about social services shows (Løchen and Martinsen 1962). Moreover, the question arises whether people really know who is responsible for the various public services in a public sector that is complex and where responsibility for different services is shared between the central, regional and local levels and changes over time. This is another aspect that varies considerably from one country to another, owing to different cultural traditions. A plausible expectation is that most services are consumed locally and that people can tell whether they are public services or not. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to make predictions about satisfaction and trust based on the organizational level and institutional responsibility of services.

We would like to discuss two alternative sets of explanations for understanding trust in government – political-cultural factors and demographic variables. In addition to people's experience with public services, their trust in public institutions may also be influenced, on the one hand, by political beliefs and party preferences and, on the other hand, by social position or demographic features (Huseby 1995). The assumption is that people who are satisfied with how a democracy works will have greater confidence and trust in governmental institutions than those who are less satisfied with regime performance or who are less positively disposed towards democratic principles. Political-cultural factors are primarily connected to diffuse support or general trust. The main argument is that people who over a certain period of time are interested in or participate in political processes will have more trust in government than those who are disengaged. This is because engagement can further both knowledge about the political-administrative system and the norms and values that integrate people in the system (March and Olsen 1989). A counter-argument might be,

of course, that participation in the political process produces frustration, or that participation is motivated primarily by a wish to change the system. Nevertheless, overall one can expect engagement further trust in government.

Involvement in political processes may mean different things, and one can ask whether certain types of engagement are more important than others for trust. One expectation might be that a generally positive attitude towards politics and democracy would be particularly important for trust and also as a basis for other forms of political engagement. Active forms of participation in politics will probably also lead to more trust than more passive forms, i.e. membership and participation in political parties or other forms of active participation would be more important than simply being interested in politics and following politics in media. Parties are key institutions in political systems, and we would expect citizens who are members of parties to have greater trust in governmental institutions than those with no party affiliation. Since the political Left has a long tradition of support for the public sector and a strong state, one would also expect people at the left end of the political spectrum to trust government more than those on the Right (Lægreid 1993: 96, 112). Previous studies have shown that party preferences have a major influence on an individual's evaluation of various aspects of the public sector in Norway (Martinussen 1988, Miller and Listhaug 1990, Huseby 1995). A person's position on the Left-Right ideological dimension has proved to be a consistent and important factor in understanding attitudes towards public sector institutions (Aardal and Valen 1989, Baldersheim et al. 1990). In addition, the general tendency is for those who vote for winning parties to show a higher level of political support and confidence than those who vote for the losers (Listhaug 1998, Norris 1999a). At the time our survey was conducted the Labour Party had just formed a minority government to replace a Centre coalition minority government.

A third set of variables potentially related to trust is demographic variables (Rose 1999). Previous studies have revealed a complex relationship between social backgrounds and trust in government institutions, and demographic variables are not seen as major determinants of trust in politicians (Bennett and Bennett 1990, Listhaug 1998, Rose and Pettersen 2000: 34—35). The rationale for investigating the relationship between individual demographic factors and trust in government is that the results can be used to predict long-term trends in confidence. These are variables that may also be related to diffuse support and general trust, whether they are knowledge- or value-based. One such variable often mentioned is education, and the expectation is that the higher people's level of education, the more they will trust government (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001:12).<sup>5</sup> The reason for this is the cognitive factor, meaning that these people know quite a lot about the political-administrative system, can distinguish its various components and understand how public services are organized and function, something that supposedly furthers trust. Counter-arguments are that knowledge

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<sup>5</sup> A variable closely connected to education is income, but we will not use this variable since it is a more complex than education and more difficult to use as an attitude predictor.

produces a more critical attitude towards government or that normative attitudes are more important than the cognitive aspect produced by a higher level of education.

Three other demographic variables may be more closely connected with general attitudes towards government. One of these is gender, for some studies have shown that women support the public sector more than men (Lægreid 1993: 96, 115). The reason for this seems to be that women's core career basis, some decades after entering the labour market on a broad basis, is the public sector. Women have become more dependent, both directly and indirectly, upon the public sector for their employment: directly, in that there is a relatively greater proportion of women employed in the public sector than in the private sector, and indirectly, in that public bodies have taken over part of women's traditional care responsibilities. On the other hand, growth in public expenditure has resulted in a higher tax burden for men, something that may have induced a more negative attitude to public sector institutions (Huseby 1995). One can therefore presuppose that women will trust the government more than men.

Another variable, related to the first one, is whether people are currently employed by the public sector. Some argue that it is possible to identify a «public sector class», which is generally more positively disposed towards public sector institutions than those who work in the private sector (Lafferty and Knutsen 1984, Lafferty 1988, Rose and Pettersen 2000). Others say it remains unclear whether the division between the public and private sectors has become established as a dominant and permanent line of conflict in Norwegian political life (Valen et al. 1990). Nevertheless, we would expect trust in public sector institutions to be higher for people employed in the public sector than for those in the private sector (Dunleavy 1989, Lægreid 1993: 113).

A third demographic variable is age. Generally, one would expect trust in government to increase with age; older people tend to be more collectively oriented, and whereas today's younger generation has experienced a public sector that is either decreasing or blending in elements from the private sector, older people have experienced the build-up of the welfare state and will therefore tend to have more trust in government.

## **Data and method**

The data set used in this paper was obtained from a mail survey sent to a representative sample of Norwegian citizens between the ages of 18 and 84. 5000 persons received the questionnaire and the response rate was 46 percent. The respondents are representative for the population between the ages of 18 and 75 in terms of gender and age, but there is some overrepresentation of people with higher education (NSD 2002).

The dependent variable in this study is trust in government. It is based on a direct question about trust in various political and administrative actors and

institutions.<sup>6</sup> For each of these categories the respondents were asked to evaluate their level of trust on a scale from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (a very high level of trust). We use trust in six different actors and institutions: the parliament (the Storting), the cabinet, the civil service (in general), local councils (municipal level), political parties (in general) and politicians (in general). There is also a general trust variable, constructed as an additive index based on the six single variables.

The first group of independent variables consists of factors relating to experience of and satisfaction with public services. This group consists of three variables, encompassing different numbers of respondents according to how universal the services are. The first is experience of and satisfaction with public medical treatment for the respondent or someone in his/her immediate family during the previous year.<sup>7</sup> This group embraced 991 respondents, of a total of 2252, who rated the medical service on a scale of 0 to 10 (very satisfied). Traditionally in Norway general practitioners were divided into public and private. In 2001, however (before the survey), Norway switched to a family doctor system, whereby each patient is registered with one specific doctor, normally the one they already had. Although, formally speaking, general practitioners are now private, they are in reality public. The reasons for this are many: as family doctors they are part of a mandatory public health program (they receive their patients through the health authorities), they all receive financial support from the government, there are restrictions on where they can establish a medical practice, they are obliged to provide certain community health services (such as mother/child care or school health programs), etc. Specialists, who traditionally have operated the selection and channelling mechanism between general practitioners and hospitals, are partly private, with some or little public support, and they are over-represented in the big cities. Public hospitals (which represent the lion's share of all hospitals) have during the last decades been run by the county political authorities, but in 2002 they were taken over by the central government and they are now organized as companies at the regional level.

The second variable concerns respondents' satisfaction with the public employment service and encompasses 288 respondents who had had contact with this service during the previous two years (the small share reflecting a low unemployment rate). The efforts of the Labour Market Administration are primarily focused on three sets of activities: allocation of money to unemployed people, training of unemployed people and placement of unemployed people in a job in the public or private sector. This organization is traditionally run by a central state agency with regional (dissolved in 2002) and local branches.

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<sup>6</sup> The question was: «Below are the names of various institutions, such as the police, the cabinet, the civil service etc. How much trust do you have in each of these institutions?» In addition to the six institutions examined in this paper, the list of institutions also included the police, the courts, the EU and the UN.

<sup>7</sup> We do not include respondents who said they had been treated by a combination of public and private providers, normally in Norway «public» primary medical care (general practitioners), private specialists, and possibly also public hospitals.

The third variable concerns satisfaction with public social services and consists of 165 respondents who had had contact with social services units over the previous two years. Public social services are run by the local authorities (municipalities) in Norway and are responsible for various kinds of support, such as providing housing, food and clothing benefits. Traditionally this has been a service heavily influenced by a locally elected board, something that has increased stigmatisation among these users, but it is now more a local, professional bureaucracy. Satisfaction with employment and social services is rated on a scale from 1 to 5 (very satisfied).

For the regression analysis we add three dichotomous variables connected to service satisfaction and whether respondents have any experience with the three types of services or not (1=have experience, 0=have not experience). When we first present the main results, these variables are covered by giving the average score for trust in each category of service experience.

The second set of independent variables, the political-cultural ones, consists of five variables (see appendix). The first focuses on how satisfied people are with the functioning of democracy in Norway, on a scale from 1 to 4 (very satisfied).<sup>8</sup> The second variable covers a question about how important politics is in the life of the respondent, rated on a scale from 0 to 10 (very important). The third measures the respondents' general interest in politics, on a scale from 1 to 4 (very interested). The fourth covers membership of political parties (1=member, 0=not a member). The fifth covers the Left-Right dimension in politics, asking the respondents to place themselves on this dimension, ranging from 0 to 10 (far Left).

The third set of independent variables covers the demographic ones, four altogether. The first concerns the educational level attained by the respondents, ranging from 1 (elementary school) to 10 (higher college or university education of five years or more). The second variable is gender (men=1, women=2). The third variable is whether the respondents work in the public sector or not (not in the public sector=1, in the public sector=2). The fourth variable is age (high values = high age).

## **Empirical results**

### **The dependent variable: trust in government institutions**

The first question we would like to cover is whether people's trust in government is of a general character or where they differentiate among various political and administrative actors and institutions. Table 1 shows that respondents do not tend to differentiate their trust very much, even though there are some differences between political and administrative institutions, the core governmental institutions, and political parties and politicians.

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<sup>8</sup> Here we use the standard question used in the Eurobarometer and the World Value Survey: «Are you generally very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy functions in Norway» (Norris 1999a).

*Table 1* Trust in government. Average score. N=2252

Parliament	Cabinet	Civil service	Local council	Political parties	Politicians	Overall trust index
5.21	4.93	5.02	4.94	4.11	3.80	4.61

This supports the general finding that trust in general institutions is normally higher than in specific actors like politicians (Norris 1999a). There has been a general decline in party identification and party membership in Norway over the past years, and the political parties have, to a greater or lesser degree, declined as socially integrated movements (Listhaug 2000, Strøm and Svåsand 1997). In addition, media targeting of individual politicians has increased.

Our main finding seems to be rather paradoxical. How is it that people trust certain central political institutions more than the central actors in them? One reason for this could be that the political and administrative institutions have built up their trust over a long period of time, are path-dependent and less vulnerable to social change processes, while political parties and politicians encounter greater problems in dealing with modernization and change processes. The modern mass media have probably enhanced this trend, because it is easier to criticize individual parties and politicians than to focus, for example, on the parliament as a whole or the civil service in general.

The next question is whether trust in government indicates some kind of cumulative pattern, as many studies have shown (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001:12), or whether there are certain clusters of trust, or else a very differentiated trust pattern. Table 2 shows quite clearly a cumulative pattern concerning trust, i.e. if people trust one of the governmental or political institutions or actors they normally trust the others as well; or if they distrust one they also distrust the others. Thus, there is a cluster of trust relationships that encompasses the main political institutions and actors (Listhaug 1998). There seems not to be a clear distinction between regime institutions and political actors, as claimed by Norris (1999a). Government seems to be approached as one amorphous concept, and citizens have difficulty distinguishing one institution or set of actors from another (Bouckaert and Van de Walle 2001, Dinsdal and Marson 1999).

*Table 2.* Correlation between different measures of trust in government. Pearson's R.

	Parliament	Cabinet	Civil service	Local council	Political parties
Cabinet	.80				
Civil service	.66	.64			
Local political board	.59	.61	.55		
Political parties	.72	.68	.56	.59	
Politicians	.69	.67	.61	.58	.79

\* All scores are significant on .000 level.

There is, however, some variation in this picture. Trust in parliament and cabinet have the highest inter-correlation score together with trust in political parties and politicians, and these four trust measures intercorrelate strongly. We find the lowest relative scores between trust in local councils and other trust factors, indicating that attitudes to the lowest level of the system are somewhat different, although scores are still on a highly significant level.

## Analysis and discussion

The next questions on which we focus are: a) whether there are differences in the average trust score across the various institutions for citizens with experiences of different public services, and b) how the score on each independent variable correlates with trust variables. We first examine the bivariate relations between each set of variables and trust in different government institutions and then do a multivariate analysis of the relative importance of the various independent variables on the trust in government index.

*Experience and satisfaction.* Table 3 shows the average trust scores for respondents with experience of the three different categories of public service. The table shows differences in levels of trust between people with experience of different types of service.

*Table 3* Average score on trust in three public service experience groups

	Parliament	Cabinet	Civil service	Local council	Political parties	Politicians	Trust index
Health service	5.29	4.99	5.11	5.07	4.16	3.81	4.68
Employment service	4.91	4.64	4.63	4.48	3.87	3.47	4.31
Social services	4.60	4.29	4.40	4.41	3.54	3.21	4.03

N=991 for health services, 288 for employment services and 165 for social services.

The scores for the health service are highest, while the other two services, encompassing a much smaller number of respondents, show lower scores on trust. It, therefore, seems plausible to conclude that the more selective a public service is, the lower the trust in government on the part of those who experience it.<sup>9</sup> This fits in with studies showing that experience with selective, means-tested welfare programs tends to reduce trust in governmental institutions as well as interpersonal trust (Kumlin and Rothstein 2002). Experience with universal programs and services, on the other hand, tends to enhance trust.

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<sup>9</sup> An alternative way to analyze this is to look at the correlation between the experience and trust variables. This reveals that people with experience of the health service show a weak and not significant positive correlation with trust, while the other two service groups show a negative correlation with trust (between -.05 and -.08 on a .01 or .05-level of significance), meaning that experience of these two services is connected with lack of trust.

But are there differences in trust within each service experience group, according to whether the respondents are satisfied with the services or not? Will people who are satisfied score consistently higher on trust than people who are less satisfied? Table 4 seems to show that this is the case for all three service groups. We find that respondents who are the most satisfied with the public services they use are also the ones who consistently trust the government the most.

*Table 4* Correlations between service satisfaction and trust in different service experience groups. Pearson's R

	Parliament	Cabinet	Civil service	Local council	Political parties	Politicians	Trust index
Health service	.16***	.15***	.14***	.12***	.13***	.18***	.17***
Employment service	.14*	.13*	.18**	.17**	.14*	.20**	.18**
Social services	.18*	.13	.21**	.23**	.13	.15*	.21**

N=991 for health service, 288 for employment service and 165 for social services.

\*\*\*: Significant on .000 level; \*\*: Significant on .01-level; \*: Significant on .05-level

If we look at the overall trust index, there seems to be little difference between the services in this respect, so the overall pattern for all services is the most important one to stress. The correlation between service satisfaction and trust also varies little between the different political institutions and actors within each service experience group and is generally significant.

*Political-cultural variables.* Table 5 concerns the second set of independent variables, the political-cultural variables and their correlation with trust. The table shows that, as one would expect, trust in government generally increases according to the level of satisfaction with democracy, importance of politics in life, interest in politics, membership of political parties and affiliation with the left end of the political spectrum.

Table 5 Correlation between political-cultural variables and trust in government. Pearson's R.

	Parliament	Cabinet	Civil service	Local council	Political parties	Politicians	Trust index
Satisfaction with democracy	.42***	.44***	.37***	.29***	.33***	.36***	.44***
Importance of Politics	.14***	.12***	.11***	.11***	.22***	.19***	.17***
Political interest	.18***	.11***	.10***	.09***	.18***	.17***	.17***
Member of Political party	.11***	.09***	.06**	.17***	.15***	.15***	.14***
Position on Left-Right dimension	.10***	.18***	.14***	.06**	.06**	.10***	.13***

\*\*\*: Significant on .000-level; \*\*: Significant on .01-level

There are, however, marked differences concerning the strength of these correlations. Satisfaction with democracy is by far the more important one for trust, while party membership and position on the Left-Right dimension are the least important ones. This indicates that opinion of general regime performance is relatively more important than political involvement, engagement and political ideology. There is also some variation in trust scores within the various independent variables. Satisfaction with democracy correlates strongest with trust in parliament and the cabinet, which form the backbone of Norway's relatively centralized democracy. The importance of politics in a person's life and his interest in politics correlates most with trust in political parties and politicians, something that seems natural with such a broad measure. While membership of political parties, of course, correlates strongly with trust in political parties and politicians, the strongest correlation of all is with trust in the local political board, something that may reflect Norwegian bipartisanship and consensus among the parties at the local level.<sup>10</sup> For position on the Left-Right dimension, the correlation with trust in the cabinet is strongest, something that may reflect either more long-term trust in the cabinet as an institution or else more short-term trust in the current cabinet, which was a Labour minority government during the survey conducted in 2001.

With regard to satisfaction with democracy — the variable showing the strongest correlation with the trust variables — one can ask whether it is possible to distinguish the variables theoretically and empirically. Kaase (1999) stresses that these are indicators of the same, while Miller and Listhaug (1999) take satisfaction with democracy as an indicator of the extent to which citizens support political institutions or democratic principles. While these concepts are obviously close, it is also possible to

<sup>10</sup> The dominant political model at the local level has been and still is proportional representation in all political bodies, while a new model of local parliamentarianism, using a «winner takes all»-system to elect the local «cabinet» and greater political polarity, has had problems gaining acceptance, except in some of the largest cities.

differentiate between them. Norris (1999a) and Klingemann (1999) regard satisfaction with democracy as an indicator of citizens' evaluation of regime performance, which may or may not be interpreted as satisfaction with the incumbent government. Another difference is that trust may imply more commitment and potential willingness to let institutions and actors act on one's behalf or have autonomy in doing so. Satisfaction is a narrower term, even if it concerns democracy, and it is not obvious that satisfaction always leads to trust. A third argument is that satisfaction with democracy, as it is posed in this survey, relates more to the current working of democracy, while trust may be based on a broader and more long-term perspective.

*Demographic factors.* The third set of independent variables encompasses the four demographic factors. Table 6 reports the correlations between these variables and the trust scores. Overall, all the independent variables show correlations as expected. Trust in government is relatively highest among people with higher education, among those who work in the public sector and among women, and it increases with age. There are, however, differences between the demographic variables, with the level of education and occupational sector showing the strongest correlation, while the correlations are weaker for the other two variables and in some instances not significant.

*Table 6* Correlations between demographic variables and trust scores. Pearson's R. N=2252

	Parliament	Cabinet	Civil service	Local council	Political parties	Politicians	Trust index
Education	.11***	.10***	.12***	-.01	.04	.04	.10***
Public/private sector employment	.08***	.09***	.14***	.06***	.07***	.11***	.11***
Gender	.01	.03	.08***	.05*	.04	.07**	.04*
Age	.07**	.03	.04*	.12***	.05*	.07**	.05*

\*\*\*: Significant on .000-level; \*\*: Significant on .01 level; \*Significant on .05-level.

Generally, demographic variables correlate strongest with trust in the civil service, something that probably can be explained both by cognitive and value-related factors. There is also variation in trust scores within the various independent variables. Educational level has a significant effect on trust in parliament, the cabinet and the civil service but not on trust in local councils, political parties and politicians. Employment in the public sector produces significant correlations with trust in all six institutions but is strongest with regard to trust in the civil service. This is hardly surprising, given that many of the respondents employed in the public sector work in the civil service. Gender produces significant variations in trust in the civil service in accordance with our assumptions. Age has the strongest and most significant effect on trust in local councils, which may reflect the importance of experience over a long period of time with a political institution close to the respondents.

*Multivariate analysis.* We now turn to the question of the relative explanatory power of the different independent variables for variations in trust in government by focusing on the additive trust index based on the six single variables.<sup>11</sup> The analysis is done in four steps. In the first we look at the population and then go on to focus on respondents with experience of each of the three categories of service.

*Table 7* Summary of regression equation by experience with public services, political variables and demographic factors affecting trust in government. Standardized Beta coefficients. Linear regressions

	Population as a whole	People with experience of the health service	People with experience of the employment service	People with experience of the social services
<i>Experience and satisfaction:</i>				
Experience of health service	.01	-	-	-
Experience of employment service	-.02	-	-	-
Experiences of social services	-.04	-.12***	-	-
Satisfaction of health service	-	-	.13*	-
Satisfaction of employment service	-	-	-	.16*
Satisfaction of social services	-	-	-	-
<i>Political factors:</i>				
Satisfaction with democracy	.41***	.40***	.46***	.50***
Importance of politics	.09***	.11**	.04	.23*
Political interest	.03	.07	.23**	.11
Member of political party	.09***	.12***	.03	-.05
Position on Left-Right dimension	.09***	.09**	.08	.07
<i>Demographic factors:</i>				
Level of education	.04*	.01	-.06	.12
Gender	.02	.01	-.02	.01
Age	.06**	.05	-.03	.12
Occupational sector	.06**	.06	.06	.12
Multiple R	.498	.512	.585	.605
R2	.248	.263	.343	.366
Adjusted R	.243	.254	.316	.315
F statistics	54,830	31,151	13,039	7,160
Significance of F	.000	.000	.000	.000
N=	(2,252)	(991)	(288)	(165)

\*\*\*: Significant on .000-level; \*\*: Significant on .01-level; \*: Significant on .05-level; -: Not included in the analysis.

<sup>11</sup> The reason for this is the strong intercorrelation between trust in the six institutions (Table 2) and the relatively strong similarities between trust in each institution and the different independent variables (Tables 4-6).

The multivariate analyses confirm the strong effect of political variables revealed in the bivariate analyses (Table 7). After controlling for experience of and satisfaction with public services and for demographic factors, political-cultural factors emerge as the strongest predictors of variation in the respondents' trust in public sector institutions. The single most important variable is people's satisfaction with how democracy works in Norway, which can be seen as an indicator of general regime performance as well as of support for political institutions or democratic principles. This finding is consistent through all the various steps of analysis, meaning that it is most important for both the population as a whole and for citizens with experience of the health service, employment service and social services. The significant effects of the importance of politics, respondents' membership of political parties and their position on the Left-Right dimension of politics also strengthen the importance of political-cultural factors. This indicates that citizens' political involvement, their political beliefs and ideological aspects all have a strong effect on their trust in public-sector institutions. People who are satisfied with how democracy works in Norway, who report that politics is important in their lives, who are members of political parties and who are on the Left end of the political spectrum generally have a higher level of trust in public-sector institutions than citizens who are less involved or interested in politics.

A second finding in the multivariate analysis is that satisfaction with public sector services, for those with experience of them, generally enhances citizens' trust in public sector institutions, as expected from the performance hypothesis. Performance seems not, though, to be the main criterion for trust. The effect of these variables is not as strong as satisfaction with democracy but is generally on a par with the other political-cultural variables. The analysis also reveals that there are no significant differences in levels of trust between people with and without experience of the health service, the employment service and the social services, meaning that the relatively weak bivariate correlation disappears in the regression (jf. footnote 8). The important question is whether citizens with experience of these institutions are satisfied or not with the treatment they got.

Since satisfaction with democracy is both such a debatable and dominant variable in the regression, we also did a regression analysis excluding this variable, reported as Table 7b of the appendix. The main difference between the two regressions is that in the latter the experience and satisfaction variables score higher. Any experience at all with the employment and social services now shows a weak negative significant correlation, in line with the bivariate scores, while satisfaction with the three different services is, relatively speaking, more significant for trust.

A third finding is that the effect of demographic factors is weakened when we control for satisfaction and political variables. This is especially the case for gender, which has no significant effect on variation in citizens' trust in public institutions. Thus, trust in government institutions seems to be unrelated to gender (Lægneid 1993). Employment sector, however, seems to produce a significant effect. People employed in the public sector have a generally higher level of trust in public sector institutions

than other citizens. Among the population as a whole, both education and age seem to have a weak but significant effect.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have shown first, that people's trust in government is of a general nature, with some differentiating features. Variations in trust between the different institutions are relatively small, but trust is highest in the parliament and lowest in politicians, while there is a strong intercorrelation between trust in the different institutions. People with a high level of trust in one institution also tend to trust the other institutions, while distrust in one is related to distrust in others. In other words, trust in government shows a cumulative pattern, and trust relations are more supplementary than alternative.

Second, there is a connection between people's satisfaction with public services and their trust in government. This finding is in accordance with broad Norwegian studies of trust in local government (Rose and Pettersen 2000). People who are satisfied with the treatment they receive from the public health service and from the employment and social services generally have a higher level of trust in public institutions than citizens who are not satisfied with their treatment. The finding that people with experience of the employment or social services have less trust in government than people without such experience is, however, not significant when we control for other factors. This implies that positive or negative experiences with different public services are more important for variations in trust than whether one has any experience at all. Simply being a consumer of specific public services is less important for people's level of trust in governmental institutions than their degree of satisfaction with them. We also find some support for the assumption that experience of and satisfaction with universal benefits generally enhances the level of trust more than experience of and satisfaction with selective benefits. Institutions' function and performance have an effect on people's trust in them.

Third, trust in governmental institutions also varies significantly with political-cultural factors. Citizens who are integrated, involved and engaged in the political system generally have a significantly higher level of trust in most governmental institutions than people who are less integrated, involved and engaged. Outsiders and people who are politically distant, in an ideological sense, from public institutions have less trust in those institutions. The same is true for political-cultural factors, when institutions and citizens are loosely integrated.

Fourth, for the population as a whole social position and demographic factors have an influence on levels of trust in governmental institutions. People employed in the public sector generally have more trust in government than people without such affiliation, and people with higher education have generally have more trust than less-educated people. This effect is, however, not significant for people with experience of

the three specific public sector services. Age also has an effect, whereby older people generally have more trust in governmental institutions than younger people.

Fifth, and most important, the political-cultural variables have the strongest overall effect on variation in people's trust in government. This indicates that integration, involvement and engagement in the political system and the political-administrative culture is more important for trust in governmental institutions than those institutions' function and their performance and also more important than social or demographic factors. The strong effect of general satisfaction with democracy indicates that passive political integration and satisfaction may be as important for trust as more active political participation, such as party membership. Variation in trust levels can be explained more by political factors than by social factors. An alternative regression, removing the dominant political-cultural variable —satisfaction with democracy — shows that this main picture can be modified more in the direction of the increasing importance of satisfaction variables.

Returning to the main picture, it would appear that variation in people's trust in government institutions can be traced to a somewhat larger degree to factors affecting diffuse support for the political system (such as political-cultural variables) than to factors affecting specific support (such as performance or satisfaction with specific benefits). Long-term general identities seem to be more important than short-term specific experiences. This should be seen in the context of the Norwegian public sector, which has a relatively high level of performance. If citizens take good performance more or less for granted, performance might not serve as the main criterion for judgement of or trust in government institutions (Bouckaert and van de Walle 2001). In a high-context culture like Norway, people are more likely to rely on an intuitive understanding of how democracy works and less likely to be influenced by individual experience than in low-context, individualistic societies (Bennett 1990; Christensen, Læg Reid and Wise 2001). What is more, if people tend to see government as an amorphous entity, it is difficult to trace trust back to individual experience of specific services. If citizens do not make a clear distinction between the different institutions, as indicated in Tables 1 and 2, it becomes difficult to determine the effect of specific government services (Bouckaert and van de Valle 2001). The argument is compounded by the complexity of causality. Our assumption is that satisfaction and political engagement leads to trust, but it could also be that more trusting attitudes lead to a better perception of service delivery, and to higher political participation and involvement, a conundrum that cannot be easily be solved by using survey data (Huseby 2000).

Bearing this in mind, the narrow criterion of performance, as expressed through satisfaction with specific public services does, nonetheless, have an impact on people's overall trust in public sector institutions, but this effect is significantly weaker than the effect of political-cultural factors, particularly satisfaction with democracy. Regime performance and generally positive attitudes towards how democracy works within the national setting seem to further trust in government, but so does engagement. This

analysis indicates that political institutions' ability to integrate citizens in political life is relatively more important for understanding variations in trust in government institutions than either the public sector's ability to solve problems and to satisfy people's needs or the differences between democratic groups in society. Citizens' general level of involvement, identity and belief in politics and democracy enhances their trust in parliament, the cabinet, the civil service, local councils, political parties and politicians.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that trust is a multi-dimensional concept and there is no one-factor explanation for variations in people's trust in governmental institutions. One implication of this analysis is that the causal relations are contested, complex and multi-faceted. Citizens' trust in government institutions seems to be a complex mix of general images, ideology and stereotypes, the actual performance of specific public services, and demographic variables. To gain a better understanding of the variation in citizens' trust in government one needs to take a more comparative approach, focusing on changes over time, between different institutions and between different countries.

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## Appendix

### ***Frequency of political-cultural and demographic variables.***

*Are you generally very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy functions in Norway?*

	Percent
Very satisfied	4
Fairly satisfied	70
Not very satisfied	23
Not satisfied at all	4
N=100%	(2168)
System missing	(111)

*How important would you say that politics is in your life?*

	Percent
Not important at all (0)	5
1	5
2	10
3	13
4	13
5	24
6	11
7	10
8	7
9	2
Very important (10)	2
N= 100%	(2211)
System missing	(86)

*Generally, how interested are you in politics?*

	Percent
Very interested	10
Relatively interested	49
Not particularly interested	38
Not interested at all	4
N=100%	(2281)
System missing	(16)

*Are you a member of a political party?*

	Percent
Yes	10
No	90
N=100%	(2297)

*In politics one talks of the «Left » and the «Right ».  
Where would you generally place yourself?*

	Percent
Far to the right	2
1	4
2	11
3	14
4	10
5	26
6	11
7	11
8	7
9	3
Far to the left (10)	1
N=100%	(2200)
System missing	(97)

*What level of education did you attain?*

	Percent
Grammar school or less	5
Continuation school	7
9- or 10 years elementary school	4
Middle school	4
Basic education at vocational school	13
High school	9
Vocational education on an advanced level	18
University or college education, less than 1 year	3
University or college education, 1—2 years	10
University or college education, 3—4 years	17
University or college education, 5 years or more	11
N=100%	(2261)
System missing	(36)

*Are you male or female?*

	Percent
Female	51
Male	49
N=100%	(2297)

*What is your age?*

	Percent
Under 30 years	19
30—39 years	21
40—49 years	22
50—59 years	19
60 years and over	20
N=100%	(2297)

*Do you work for the public sector at the local, regional or central level?*

	Percent
No	64
Yes	32
N=100%	(2297)

*Table 7b* Summary of regression equation by experience with public services, political variables and demographic factors affecting trust in government. Standardized Beta coefficients. Linear regressions

	Population as a whole	People with experience of health service	People with experiences of employment service	People with experiences of social services
<i>Experience and satisfaction:</i>				
Experience of health service	.01	-	-	-
Experience of employment service	-.05*	-	-	-
Experiences of social services	-.07**	-	-	-
Satisfaction of health service	-	.16***	-	-
Satisfaction of employment service	-	-	.20***	-
Satisfaction of social services	-	-	-	.21*
<i>Political factors:</i>				
Satisfaction with democracy	-	-	-	-
Importance of politics	.10***	.13**	.13	.22*
Political interest	.03	.07	.20*	.07
Member of political party	.10***	.12**	.07	.00
Position on Left-Right dimension	.12***	.10**	.09	.03
<i>Demographic factors:</i>				
Level of education	.05*	.02	-.06	.13
Gender	.02	.01	.03	.06
Age	.07**	.04	-.01	.12
Occupational sector	.07**	.06	.05	.07
Multiple R	.283	.339	.386	.357
R2	.080	.115	.150	.127
Adjusted R	.075	.106	.121	.069
F statistics	16,481	9,9592	10,417	2,175
Significance of F	.000	.000	.000	.027
N=	(2252)	(991)	(288)	(165)

\*\*\*: Significant on .000-level; \*\*: Significant on .01-level; \*: Significant on .05-level; -: Not included in the analysis.

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