Book Review

"In Praise of Skepticism, Trust but Verify" by Pippa Norris, Oxford University Press, New York, N.Y. 2022, ISBN 9780197530115 (paperback), 82 ISBN 9780197530139 (epub), DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197530108.001.0001

For the most part literature claim trust has inevitably beneficial consequences, whether it's for society, for the economy, for building community, or for building political alliances and bonds. Pippa Norris, a comparative political scientist who has taught at Harvard for three decades, advocates in her new book the need to rethink our explanations about the evidence for making informed and accurate and reliable judgments about trustworthy relationships. She sets out the arguments and investigates a series of causes in the theory about what causes skeptical trust and then talks about how we can actually strengthen trust or skeptical trust, which she argues, is the most important aspect.

Skeptical trust versus Compliant trust

In Part I of the book *In Praise of Skepticism, Trust but Verify"*, compliant trust is set against skeptical trust. Pippa Norris argues that there is skeptical mistrust and skeptical trust. Both of these are positive. She describes the two faces of trust, as well as the general theory of "skeptical trust", illustrated by the fable about the frog and the scorpion. The frog wants to cross a pond. The scorpion comes along and says to the frog, "carry me on your back to get me to the other side". And the frog says, "well, why should I trust you?", whereupon the scorpion replies, "well, if I were to sting you, then, of course, we'd both die. We'd both drown". So the frog says "okay, that makes sense" so the scorpion hopped on board. They went across the pond halfway. The scorpion then suddenly stung the frog, and they both sank. The frog asked the scorpion: "why?", whereupon the scorpion says, "it's my nature". The gist: trust is good, but you need to reflect on the nature of the 'animal' and the environment or in Pippa Norris's words: skeptical trust, not compliant or blind trust.

Cognitive skills and the information environment

Normally, we think that trust is good, and so we go for skeptical trust where the performance is good and people are trusting, but critical citizens see skeptical mistrust

as equally positive. In a country where the government is corrupt, trust is compromised. In an autocracy where there are very limited rights and freedoms and very little form of accountability, one should not trust those actors. There can still be voluntary compliance with the law or going along with regulations, but it is ultimately unhealthy because it can fail, because it's not based on information, nor reliable knowledge.

One of the errors we make when we perceive trust or trustworthiness, according to the author, is to be too compliant. And the reasons why these errors occur are a result of two different factors, essentially the presence of individual cognitive skills to make complex decisions, particularly about subjects that you're not familiar with or where you have no experience with, and the information environment. Do people have access to all available sources of information? Can you have different ways to think about an issue? We live in an information-driven environment, where we have different sources of information at our disposal. Is the society around you open? Can you have different ways to think about an issue? Where you get both of those, this should result in more *skeptical* trust.

Trust induces voluntary compliance with authorities, hence "compliant trust". Compliant judgments we make reflect considerable trust in believing agents whereas the opposite, cynical trust, reflects minimal trust in agents despite potential positive performance in delivering public goods. From the perspective of ordinary citizens, trust is "Janus-faced" as the author puts it, and its consequences may be beneficial or harmful. The book aims to restore a more balanced understanding, acknowledging the risk of compliant trust in a world of "seductive demagogues playing on our insecurities, lying swindlers exploiting our greed and silver-tongued conspiracy theorists, manipulating our darkest fears".
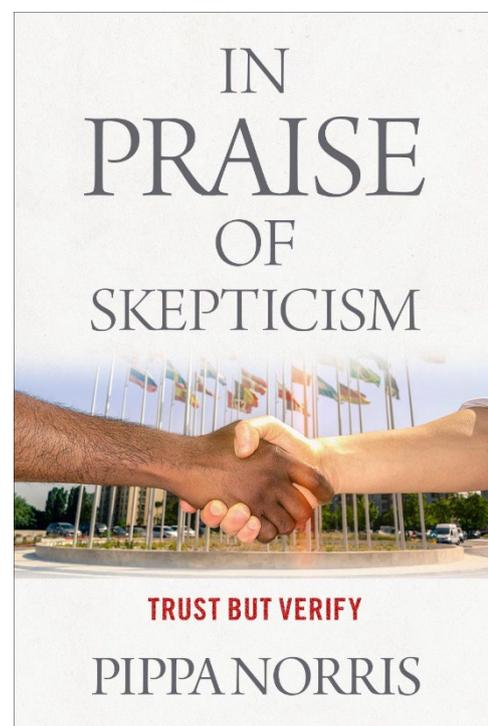
Competency, impartiality and accountability

Skeptical judgments are the antithesis of blind faith. As the author explains, skeptics are critical thinkers making strenuous efforts to avoid herd mentalities. But, do ordinary people have the capacity for skeptical thinking? Can people make informed and accurate and reliable judgments about trustworthy relationships? The argument is made that there are many common errors, just like we underestimate, or overestimate, all sorts of risks, about whether vaccines are going to prevent the Covid pandemic or whether cigarettes lead to cancer or climate change is raising heat indexes around the world. Judgment errors are made if we simply rely on our feelings or gut instincts or motivated reasoning where we work backward.

Skeptics judge trustworthiness by searching for reliable information on how people behaved in the past and how agencies worked. The author looks for three things in particular. Competency, so can agents deliver, do they have the capacity, the skills, and the knowledge? Integrity means honesty and impartiality, so agents will act on behalf of the principals, not on their interests. The third is accountability, as individuals may fail, so there is a need for guardrails protecting against bad actors and mechanisms of oversight, like elections providing accountability against actors who are corrupt or are self-interested and not acting in the public good. All this leads to a minimalization of risks and a maximization of benefits by delegation through skepticism, not blind faith.

On the one side there is well-known cynical trust: can we trust politicians, can we trust a lawyer, a doctor, or the government? The opposite, however, compliant trust, is underestimated in literature, something the author claims to be equally worrisome. Compliant trust is very common around the world and is essentially where you're trusting a stranger or you're trusting an actor or an agency or an institution when they're untrustworthy when you trust those who are going to do you harm, like trusting

strongmen leaders who promise they will represent you when in fact they are being corrupt or incompetent, or they act in ways which are against your interests.

The book concludes that the risks of *compliant* trust are very common, particularly in many authoritarian regimes, yet very much underestimated. The societal risks are enormous, as backsliding in democracy shows. Whether our judgments of trustworthiness reflect the true and accurate stet of the world is the central concern of the book.

What causes trust?

Why did the frog decide to trust the scorpion? Part II of the book goes on to tackle a series of alternative explanations. Building upon the conceptual and theoretical framework outlined in the introductory chapters, it describes what causes trust, compares trends in trust worldwide, and the role of competency, integrity, and impartiality and examines alternative explanations of trust relationships, tests core theoretical propositions against empirical evidence and presents key findings for different arguments.

Chapter 4 (of Part II) lays out the groundwork by painting the big picture of cross-national and time-series patterns of trust compared across diverse cultures and societies worldwide during the last forty years. The book then tests empirical evidence for the core theory seeking to explain trust relationships in politics, including indicators of government delivery and accountability (Chapter 5 of Part II), and the quality of democratic governance (Chapter 6 of Part II). The conclusion of the book, leading to Praise of Skepticism, is in Part III.

Competency, Integrity and Impartiality

In Part II of the book (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), Pippa Norris describes the things that lead to trustworthiness, next to competency, can agents deliver, do they have the capacity, skills, and knowledge, as well as integrity, honesty, and impartiality, meaning that they will act on behalf of the principals, not on their own interests. But individuals might still fail, so there is a need for collective accountability, or what she calls, "guardrails", protecting against bad actors.

An extensive body of empirical studies in multiple societies has sought to compare public trust against the government's record of competency when delivering public goods and services. "Competency" in that respect, means the ability to do something efficiently and well. When evaluating the work of national governance institutions, judgments of trustworthiness are expected to reflect the quality of how these agencies work, especially the principles of impartiality and integrity. Accountability mechanisms are designed to deter abuses of power by elected politicians, ministers, and departments of state, so that they serve the public interest.

According to the author, citizens are widely believed to have more confidence in governments that have established a positive reputation for delivering national prosperity, social welfare, and peace, such as by improving the economy, schools, and healthcare. In principle, any lessons about the importance of government competency for trust should also provide broader insights into alternative types of principal-agent relationships beyond politics, such as trust in friends and strangers, in civil society organizations like the news media, environmental movement, and multinational companies, as well as in the agencies of global governance like the United Nations and the World Health Organization.

Trustworthiness

The book distinguishes between trust as a quality of the individual and trustworthiness as a feature of dyadic[1] relationships. "Trustworthiness," is defined as an informal social contract where principals[2] authorize agents[3] to act on their behalf in the expectation that the agent will fulfill their responsibilities with competency, integrity, and impartiality despite conditions of risk and uncertainty. When evaluating the trustworthiness of political institutions, public judgments are expected to reflect the quality of government procedures, especially the principles of competency, impartiality, and integrity.

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[1] A dyad is composed of two people who relate to each other (e.g., romantic partners, two friends, parent-child, or patient-therapist dyads). Interactions between the dyad's members and/or their characteristics (e.g., personality traits) are called dyadic.

[2] The arguments Pippa Norris makes are based on the rational choice theory: trustworthiness is what we need to focus on, not trust. Trust is about the individual and a predisposition. Trustworthiness is about a relationship. It's not about me and you. It's about us. She argues that it's a delegated relationship, it's about principals and agents, which is a rational choice. Classic assumption principles expect. In other words, they believe or they have certain confidence in agents, those who are acting on their behalf.

[3]

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The extensive literature on trust conceptualizes trust as something that is essentially benevolent and good, it facilitates social cooperation, it enables working together to overcome problems of collective goods, to lubricate markets, if people trust brand goods, then that's thought to help economics and economic growth to strengthen political legitimacy and so on. The author takes a more skeptical view of trustworthiness arguing that we need to rethink our explanations about the evidence that trust inevitably has beneficial consequences.

Theoretical framework, research design, and evidence.

Next to Pippa Norris' theoretical framework, she sets out the research design (in Chapter 3 of Part I) and the evidence (in Chapter 4 of Part I), which she takes from around the world, using the European Value Study (EVS) and the World Value Survey (WVS)[4], a global research project that explores people's values and beliefs, their stability or changes over time and their impact on social and political development covering 115 diverse societies and regimes around the world.

Furthermore the author uses data from the Varieties of Democracy project, and the World Bank Institute[5], predicting that citizens will be more trusting of political institutions where regimes score highly, according to standard indicators of good governance. By contrast, public dissatisfaction is predicted to be evident in states where governments routinely perform poorly according to procedural criteria, exemplified by repressive regimes which employ rigid coercion and govern by arbitrary rule, and where there is evidence of corruption. Are elections clean and fair? Is the judiciary independent of partisan influence? What is the level of transparency of parliaments holding the government accountable for its actions?

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[4] two large-scale, cross-national and repeated cross-sectional survey research programs, with fieldwork conducted among over 650,000 respondents spanning four decades from 1981 until 2021.
[5] https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp; https://www.v-dem.net/en/; Worldwide Governance Indicators https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/

Trust is multidimensional and multidisciplinary

The approach of the author is an interdisciplinary one: Many scholars have focused on one dimension of trust, such as sociologists studying interpersonal trust in friends, families, and neighbors within local communities, others focus on trust in international relations like the United Nations and related international organizations, or political scientists analyzing trust in political institutions, such as the US Congress or the European Commission. The book offers in Chapter 4 of Part I ("Comparing Trends in Trust Worldwide") a more comprehensive cross-disciplinary approach to understanding interpersonal or generalized social trust, as well as confidence in political institutions in the nation-state, and trust in the agencies of global governance. Trust relationships are studied in a diverse range of local communities, nation-states, and types of regimes around the world, raising analytical challenges, like most longitudinal survey data monitor trends in Western societies. As an answer to the research challenge, the book adopts a global comparative framework and integrates many methods and analytical tools providing more reliable and robust insights including macro-level indicators of performance and representative surveys of the general public in many diverse states around the world.

Political science and international relations focus more on institutions, agencies of the nation-state, and civil society. Do we trust parties, do we trust parliaments or elected leaders? There is trust in international communities, global governance and comparative politics, and international relations. Has trust in the European Union strengthened? Or has it declined? What's the trust that we have between different governments between the United States and China or the United States and Russia, and between different peoples? How far do Germans trust the French or the English or other groups?

According to the author, all of those are important, yet very often tend to get very fragmented in the field. So people take one area and they only focus on that without thinking of the broader ramifications. Pippa Norris' thesis is that each of these is related, there is a common concept and most of the work which has been done in the previous decades argued that trust is essentially benevolent and good, and so it's thought to facilitate social cooperation, the way that we can work together to overcome problems of collective goods, to lubricate markets. If we don't have

contracts, then if companies trust each other, if people trust brand goods, that's thought to help economics and economic growth to strengthen political legitimacy.

Measurements of trust and evidence

In Chapter 3 of Part I data is described what evidence would allow the general theory of skeptical trust to be tested empirically. This chapter describes the data used to operationalize the book's typology and analyze how far trust relationships are based on informed calculations, evidence, and logical reasoning, and the conditions most conducive to skeptical judgments. The book sets out the arguments and then investigates a series of causes in the theory about what causes skeptical trust and then talks about how we can strengthen trust or skeptical trust, which the author argues is the most important aspect.

In Norris' study to measure trust, she uses survey item counts experiments.[6] to test whether responses to survey questions measuring public trust can themselves be trusted, especially when fielded in closed societies and repressive states limiting free speech. What these "survey item counts" do in the World Value Surveys to avoid response bias is that they split the sample into two, asking a direct question, for example, "how much do you trust your leader, your head of state", and then asking an indirect question, to prevent response bias.

Conclusion

Pippa Norris convincingly shows that our common understanding of trust needs to be challenged normatively by introducing cynicism and credulity, allowing a focus on a healthy dose of skepticism, through which risks are minimized and benefits are maximized. She shows that information sources and the task environment are not equally available in all societies. She conducts a detailed study on those elements that influence the level of trust in open or closed societies. Complacency is the antithesis of censuring and controlling alternative information, especially in closed societies where trust is high but performance is low. Freedom of the press, government accountability, transparency, and other objective indices influence levels of trust in agents. She shows that theories predict that citizens will be more trusting of political

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[6] The item count technique is a survey methodology that is designed to elicit respondents' truthful answers to sensitive questions such as racial prejudice, corruption or sexuality. The method is also known as the list experiment or the unmatched count technique and is an alternative to the commonly used randomized response method.

institutions where regimes score highly, according to standard indicators of good governance. By contrast, public dissatisfaction is evident in states where governments routinely perform poorly.

Two minor points of criticism which should not detract from the glowing character of the book is that there are quite a few repetitions in the book which somewhat undermine the important view of what the core of the book is and which sometimes distract from the author's convincing arguments and secondly, the not always logical arrangement of the "chapters". In chapter 3, a key part of the book where the evidence of the book's study is described, the author mentions at the start ("Evidence", p. 52) that "sections" are dealing with alternative techniques and methods commonly used in previous research to understand trust ("Section I"), the research design using survey evidence to not only operationalize the typology of trust relationships but also to test the impact agency reputation and accountability guardrails on trust decision ("Section II") and the dependent variables, six dimensions of trust and their components ("Section III") as well as the reliability of the survey data – like response biases and question phrasing, item order, and self-censorship on sensitive questions ("Section IV") and a summary on how the research design used in the book differs from many previous studies ("Section V"). However, the numbered "Sections" are nowhere to be found (except for Section I ("Alternative Methods for Understanding Trust"), Section II ("Reliability Checks"), and Section III ("Conclusions"). Rather (unnumbered) subparagraphs appear with "Experimental Designs" (p. 53-56), "The Comparative Framework" (p. 56-57), "The Information Environment" (p. 57-61), "Type of Regimes" (p. 62-63), "Measuring Trust" (p. 64), "Social Trust" (p. 64-65), "Institutional Confidence"(p. 65-71), "Operationalizing the Concept of Skeptical Judgments of Trustworthiness" (p. 71-76), "Comparative Framework and Case Selection" (p. 76-82).

All in all, an excellent contribution to scholarly research on the foundations of trust and a rich addition to the ever-growing body of knowledge on the importance of trust in our society, for which we can thank Pippa Norris.

Severin de Wit, December 2022