

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERPERSONAL TRUST AND QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY IN 28 EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

The role of interpersonal trust between the members of a community has been long debated between scholars of social sciences (Shah et al., 2001). Cooperation and trust, both on the interpersonal and intergroup level are of vital importance to the achievement of the common goals of a society and thus, community building and in final analysis, functioning of democratic societies. The concept is closely related to the concept of social cohesion, which stems from trust and results in the improvement of the lives of the community as a whole. According to Almond and Verba (1963), interpersonal trust will lead to a sense of cooperation which in turn, would create a stable democracy. Attempts to explain political features of a society through their citizens' personal beliefs and attitudes are numerous and many authors (Almond & Verba, 1963; Putnam et al, 1993) ascribe to these individual level features the quality of democratic institutions. Interpersonal trust is one of the most important of such features, strongly correlated to support for democratic institutions and permissiveness for corruption. In fact, according to Popa (n.d.) interpersonal trust can be seen as a key prerequisite for the success of democratic institutions. In this paper are analyzed data from the 6th wave of the European Social Survey (ESS, www.europeansocialsurvey.org), which includes 28 European countries surveyed in 2012 and the Democracy Index 2012 Report from the Economist Intelligence Unit (www.eiu.com). The analysis is focused on the relationship between level of interpersonal trust in the 24 countries covered by ESS 6th wave and the overall score of quality of democracy from EIU as well as the five indicators of democracy (electoral process and pluralism, government functioning, political participation, political culture and civil liberties). The hypothesis is that there will be a statistically significant positive correlation between level of interpersonal trust and quality of democracy. The analysis supports the hypothesis, interpersonal trust is indeed correlated to overall quality of democracy, in line with findings from other research, as well as with four of the five indicators of democracy, electoral processes and pluralism excluded. The analysis also shows that the only country not falling in the expected pattern is the Russian Federation¹, excluding this country from the analysis will produce statistically significant correlations for all five indicators of democracy

Keywords: *Generalized trust, Interpersonal trust, democracy, electoral process and pluralism, political culture, civil liberties.*

¹ The Russian Federation is the only country of the 28 included in the analysis that is classified as an authoritarian regime by the EIU.

Introduction:

The role of relationships and social networks, reciprocity norms and interpersonal trust between members of a community has been a topic of debate between scholars of social sciences for a long time and is attracting every day more the attention of new researchers. The topic has been studied over a very wide range of social and human sciences, including but not limited to psychology, sociology, political sciences, anthropology, economics, etc.

On the other hand the concept was seen as closely related to trust in institutions, civic engagement and quality of democracy, as one of the main indicators (by many authors the only indicator) of social capital, economic development and also health and longevity.

Being a precondition for the cooperation of people, social trust is one essential characteristic of a well functioning democratic society. Where this precondition is met the community will be more cohesive and will need less imposed restrictive norms for community life to properly function. Societies with a high level of democracy development will show more social trust as opposed to those with a lower level of democracy in which individuals will show trust only to people in their close circle (i.e. neighbors, family and friends) (Osterberg-Kaufman, n.d.: 7).

Attempts to explain political features of a society through their citizens' personal beliefs and attitudes are numerous and many authors (Almond & Verba, 1963; Putnam et al, 1993) ascribe to these individual level features the quality of democratic institutions. Interpersonal trust is one of the most important of such features, strongly correlated to support for democratic institutions and permissiveness for corruption.

Social trusts being this important for the development of the community, many scholars have tried to answer the question where does it come from.

According to Delhey & Newton (2003), two main approaches can be identified in the long list of studies conducted on the topic:

- Individual level: according to this approach trust is a personality feature either learned in early childhood and which tends to change very little over time (Uslaner, 1999, 2000) or coming from adulthood experiences, the more successful you are in life the more you trust and vice versa (Putnam, 2000).
- Societal level: according to this second approach trust is a feature of the overall culture of a society - people trust more if they perceive that people around them are trustworthy - and can come from participation in voluntary organizations (Putnam, 2000) or informal daily networking (Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1993) as well as the overall quality of democracy in the respective country.

The study of interpersonal trust and factors that might influence it is of special importance to former socialist countries, since it is one of the main features influencing (or being influenced by) the level of democracy of a country and most countries of the former socialist block, especially the Western Balkans, are still in the process of transition after almost a quarter of century from the change in the political system.

Aim of study:

The aim of this article is to scrutinize the correlations between social trust and quality of democracy in 28 European countries as measured by the sixth wave of the European Social Survey (trust) and the Economic Intelligence Unit (democracy). Based on previous studies the hypothesis is that there will be a statistically significant positive correlation between level of interpersonal trust as measured by ESS 6th wave and quality of democracy as assessed by the EIU Democracy Index.

Research topics:

Trust is defined by Delhey & Newton (2003) as "...the belief that others will not, at worst, knowingly or willingly do you harm, and will, at best, act in your interests." It is important at this point to make a distinction between generalized trust (social trust) and within group trust. The former is the belief that someone you don't know will potentially act as stated above and is the topic of this article. The latter is trust in people in the close circles of an individual and does not produce a healthy community but would rather contribute to the atomization of the society in small groups which have big trust in each other and distrust outsiders. According to Almond and Verba (1963), social trust will lead to a sense of cooperation which in turn, would contribute to create a stable democracy.

Research question:

Are level of interpersonal trust and quality of democracy correlated?

Scientific methods:

Sources for data

This article is based on a secondary analysis of data from the 6th wave of the European Social Survey (www.europeansocialsurvey.com) which includes 28 European countries² surveyed in 2012 and the Democracy Index 2012 Report from the Economist Intelligence Unit (www.eiu.com). The choice of the countries to include in the analysis was not a theoretically guided one, they are all the countries which were surveyed in the 6th wave of the ESS and for which the EIU also had a score for the same year.

The reason for taking two separated measures for the data analysis is to have a better test on the supposed correlation. The ESS questionnaire actually includes questions which can give a sense of the quality of democracy from the perspective of the respondents in the study. Using the EIU instead of these questions as a measure for quality of democracy was a deliberate choice in order to have two different measures and thus test the hypothesis at more rigid conditions.

² Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Sweden, Slovenia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

Variables' operationalization

In the ESS questionnaire trust is measured through three questions, on a 0 – 10 Likert scaling³:

The Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index is based on five categories: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. The scoring is given through a mixed methodology, using experts' assessments and also empirical data from surveys where available, mainly World Values Survey. The scoring system is from 0 – 10, 0 being the lowest level and 10 the highest level of democracy. Based on the overall scores the countries are ranked in four categories⁴.

The data analysis was linear correlation between social trust and overall quality of democracy (all five categories combined) as well as linear correlation between social trust and each of the five categories which make up the construct.

Data analysis:

The analysis is focused on the relationship between level of interpersonal trust in the 28 European countries covered by ESS 6th wave and the overall score of quality of democracy from EIU in the same as well as the five indicators of democracy according to EIU.

The results of the correlation show an expected trend, which goes in line with previous research. The correlation of overall quality of democracy with social trust is quite strong and statistically significant ($r = 0.734$, $p < 0.01$).

With categories taken one by one something that catches the eye is that one of the most important indicators of democracy (electoral process and pluralism) has actually a weak and non significant correlation with social trust, while all other four indicators have better correlations and all statistically significant (Table 1: Correlations between social trust and quality of democracy (all five categories combined and each category separately).

As a closer look suggests (refer to Graphs 1 through 6), this comes only from one country, which is consistently an outlier in almost all correlations, the Russian Federation. Simply put, people in Russia tend to have a high social trust, although the level of democracy in the country is considered very low from the EIU. In fact, Russia is the only country with a score below 4 (which means an authoritarian regime) in the EIU scale which is included in this article.

Thus, the research hypothesis is supported by the findings: the correlation between overall quality of democracy and social trust is positive and statistically significant, the higher the levels of social trust in a country the higher the level of democracy.

³ (1) generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful? (2) do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair? and (3) most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?

⁴ Full democracies: scores 8 to 10; flawed democracies: score 6 to 7.9; hybrid regimes: scores 4 to 5.9 and authoritarian regimes: scores below 4.

Table 1: Correlations between social trust and quality of democracy (all five categories combined and each category separately)

Trust	Overall quality of democracy	Electoral process and pluralism	Government functioning	Political participation	Political culture	Civil liberties
Pearson cor	.734**	.365	.787**	.697**	.798**	.397*
Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.056	.000	.000	.000	.036
N	28	28	28	28	28	28

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

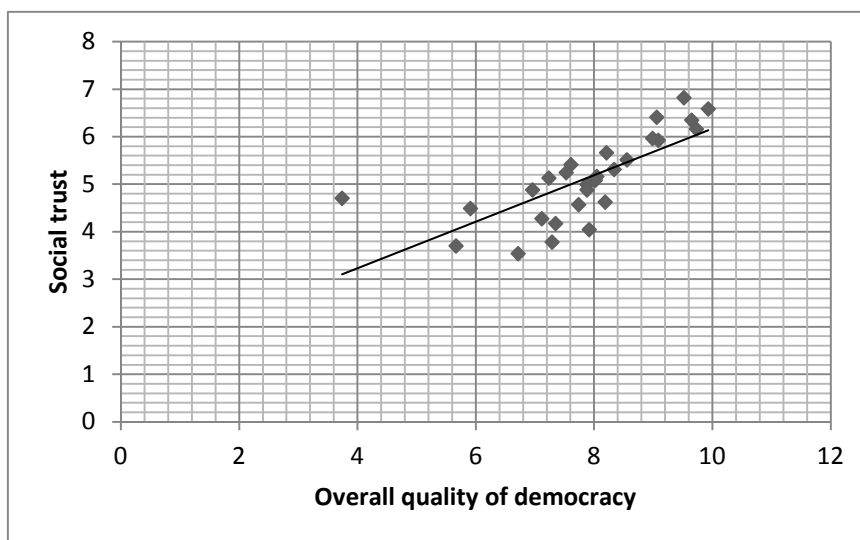
* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Findings:

The correlation between democracy and social trust is 0.734 ($p < .01$), which, as said above, supports the research hypothesis. In Graph 1 can easily be noticed the Russian Federation as an outlier which does not fall in the pattern of other countries (point furthest to the left of the chart area). Basically, people in Russia tend to trust more although according to the EIU scoring system (as well as other democracy indexes, i.e. Freedom House).

Excluding Russia from the analysis, the correlation becomes of course even stronger ($r = 0.854$; $p < 0.01$).

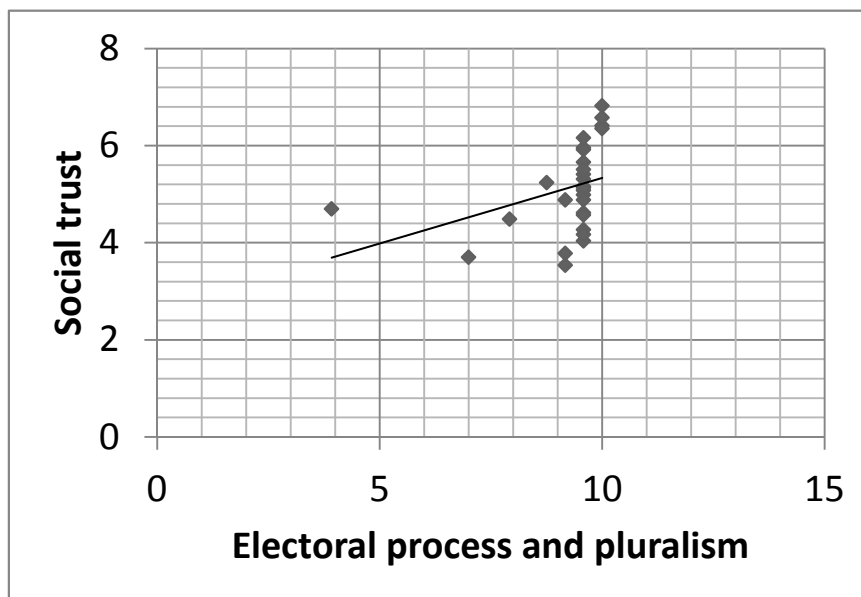
Graph. 1: Correlation between social trust and overall quality of democracy (all five categories combined)



“The condition of having free and fair competitive elections, and satisfying related aspects of political freedom, is clearly the sine quo none of all definitions of democracy (EIU, 2012).” The pluralism of ideas and choices, as expressed by the system of political pluralism is at the cornerstone of democracy. Surprisingly the correlation between social trust and electoral process and pluralism is weak and not statistically significant ($r = 0.365$, $p = 0.056$). Again, Russia is in this case is presented as an outlier and its exclusion from the correlation would bring up a stronger and statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.557$, $p < 0.01$).

Nevertheless, it is important to notice that Russia is not the only country outside of the pattern in this case. A close look at the points in Graph. 2 will reveal that only four countries out of 28 are the ones contributing greatly to the strong correlation. Most of the countries actually are at almost the same level regarding the variable of electoral process and pluralism, while social trust gets higher as we move to the Northwest of Europe.

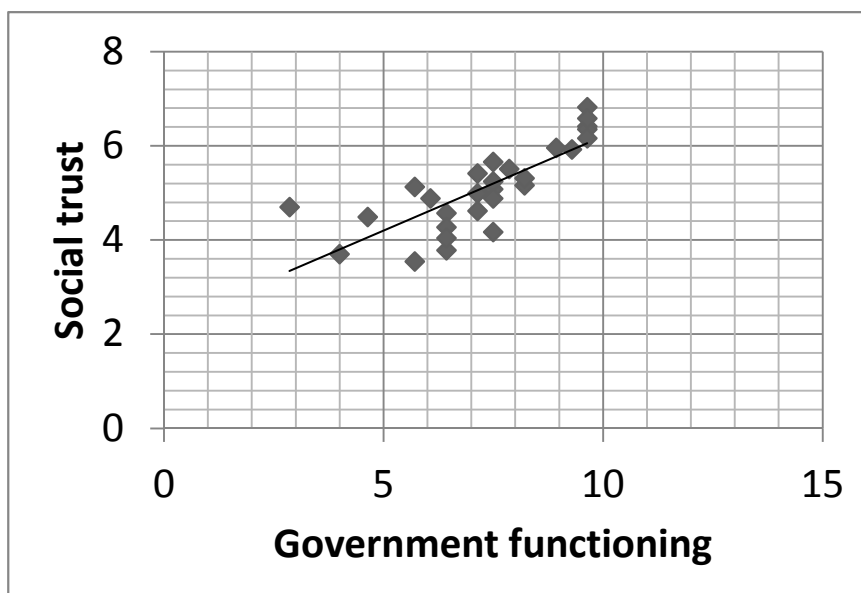
Graph. 2: Correlation between social trust and electoral process and pluralism



“Minimum quality of functioning of government is important to the quality of democracy of a country. If democratically-based decisions cannot or are not implemented then the concept of democracy is not very meaningful or it becomes an empty shell (EIU 2012).” Hence, in order for a democracy to be considered good functioning of the government is also very important. “...trust in authorities influences the perceptions of the trust-worthiness of others in general. (Rothstein & Eek, 2009).”

The correlation between functioning of the government and social trust is very strong ($r = 0.787$, $p < 0.01$). Again, Russia is presented as an outlier; the government is not very functional according to the EIU index.

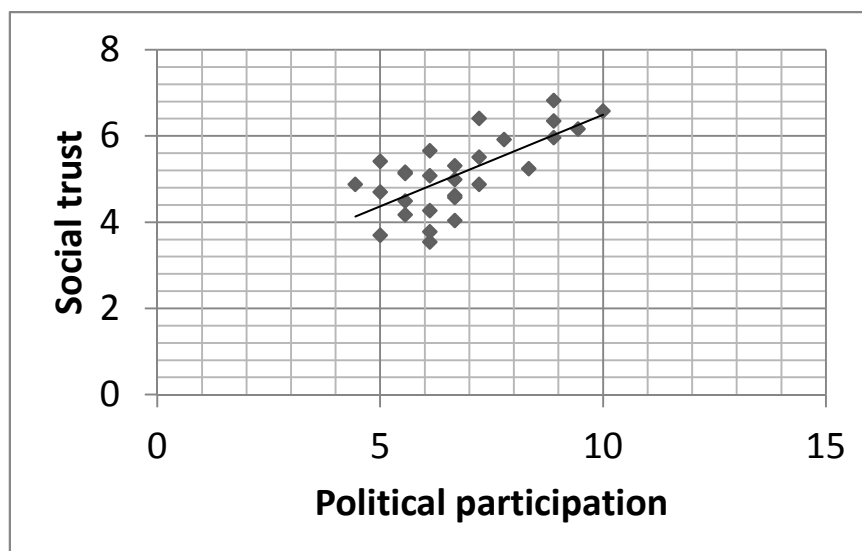
Graph. 3: Correlation between social trust and government functioning



“[Political] participation is a necessary component, as apathy and abstention are enemies of democracy. In a democracy, government is only one element in a social fabric of many and varied institutions, political organizations, and associations. A healthy democracy requires the active, freely chosen participation of citizens in public life (EIU, 2012).” Lack of participation of the citizens in the public life is maybe one of the most dangerous enemies of democracy. The governments will tend to become more and more autocratic if this very important element is weak. As emphasized by Putnam (2000) voluntary engagement of citizens in organizations or political parties and their interest on public life is a key element to social capital and quality of democracy, by trusting others they participate and by participating they learn how to trust. Indeed, the participation of the citizens has a very good correlation with quality of democracy ($r = 0.697$, $p < 0.01$).

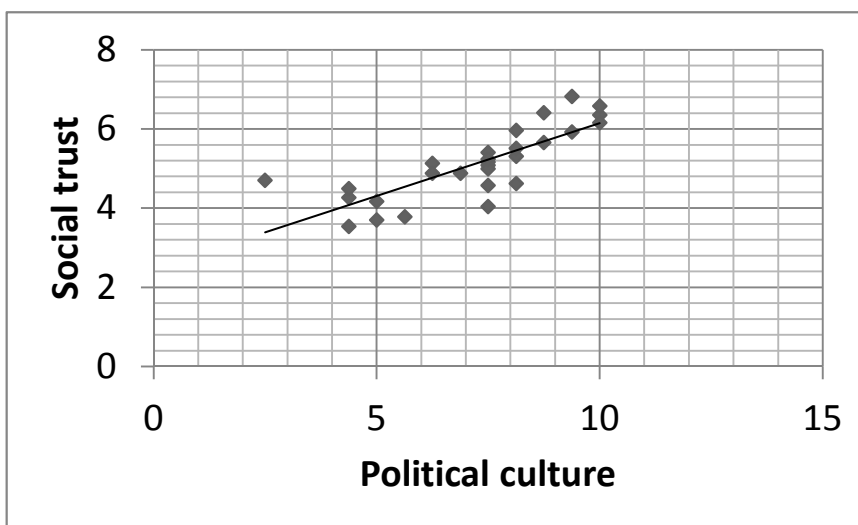
What is more interesting about this element of democracy is that on this there are no outliers, all countries fall into the same pattern.

Graph. 4: Correlation between social trust and political participation



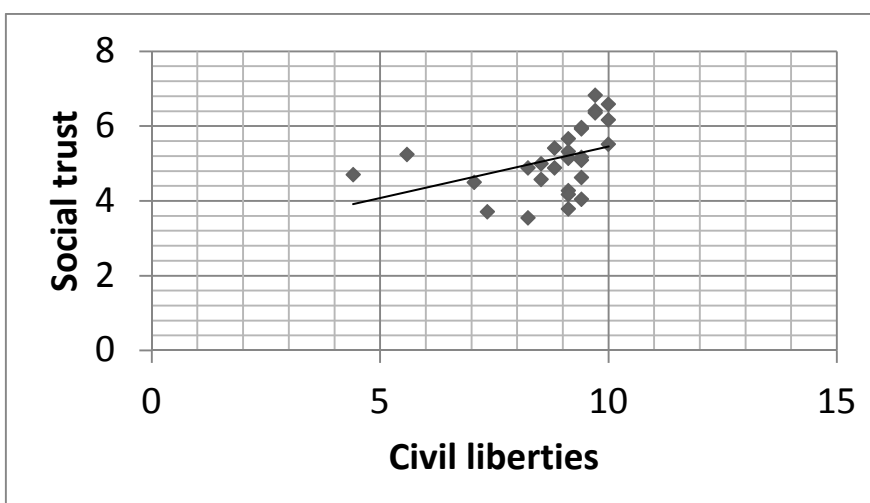
On the other hand, “A democratic political culture is crucial for the legitimacy, smooth functioning and ultimately the sustainability of democracy. A culture of passivity and apathy, an obedient and docile citizenry, are not consistent with democracy. A successful democratic political culture implies that the losing parties and their supporters accept the judgment of the voters, and allow for the peaceful transfer of power.” Along the same lines as political participation, political culture is also very important and is strongly correlated to social trust ($r = 0.798$, $p < 0.01$). Excluding the outlier (Russian Federation), the correlation would become even stronger ($r = 0.861$, $p < 0.01$).

Graph 5: Correlation between social trust and political culture



And to conclude “...the principle of the protection of basic human rights. Basic human rights include the freedom of speech, expression and the press; freedom of religion; freedom of assembly and association; and the right to due judicial process. Democracies are systems in which citizens freely make political decisions by majority rule; but rule by the majority is not necessarily democratic and must be combined with guarantees of individual human rights and the rights of minorities. (EIU, 2012)”. Civil liberties are also strongly correlated to social trust ($r = 0.397$, $p < 0.05$) with two countries falling outside of the pattern (Russia and Israel). Although these countries lack civil liberties, social trust in both of them is fairly high (with Israel ranked better at both civil liberties and social trust than Russia).

Graph. 6: Correlation between social trust and civil liberties



The findings suggest once more, in line with most previous research that democracy is correlated to social trust. However, this does not explain if the causation is unidirectional or bidirectional and neither on which side if unidirectional. In other words, does quality of democracy in a country affect social trust or vice versa? According to a study conducted by

Rothstein & Eek (2009), using as participants students from Sweden and Romania (the former has a very high social trust and the latter low) trust tends to fall when people perceive that the authority is corrupted or corruptible. These findings suggest that the causation government – trust is possible but does not exclude of course that the contrary might also be true.

Conclusions:

Overall quality of democracy is positively correlated to social trust regardless of the type of democracy; but the correlation is stronger if the authoritarian regime is excluded from the analysis.

Electoral process and pluralism correlation with social trust is not statistically significant unless the authoritarian regime is excluded from the analysis.

Democratic functioning, political culture, political participation and civil liberties are all positively correlated to social trust; correlations become stronger when the authoritarian regime is excluded from the analysis.

Recommendations:

What remains unclear and subject to further investigation is if the weak correlation is a feature unique to the Russian Federation or if it is shared by other authoritarian regimes. Other research suggests that the pattern is similar in other countries considered authoritarian (i.e. China, Turkey, Azerbaijan, etc) but data from the ESS used in this article only include Russia in this typology.

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