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Regional differences in political trust: Comparing the Vysocina and Usti Regions



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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the factors influencing the degree of trust in political institutions at three levels of government in the Czech Republic (national, regional and local) in two dissimilar regions in the time of economic crisis in 2009, the year when citizens of the Czech Republic experienced the negative impacts of growing unemployment and a substantial decline in real GDP. Two competitive theories - the cultural and the performance explanation - were used as a theoretical framework. The results show that there are significant differences among particular levels of government as well as regions. The influence of both institutional performance, including factors related to economic crisis, and cultural background were found. The influence of contextual factors was also confirmed.

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One of the keys for understanding of how democracy and a society in general work is finding the degree of trust in a society, both on the individual level, and on the institutional level. Interpersonal trust derives from the relationships among people and the norms and values that they share. This gives rise to the expectations individuals harbour towards others. Trust in people, groups of people and in social institutions smoothen interaction in society and cooperation among its members at different levels. Recently, attention in the social sciences has turned increasingly towards institutional trust in particular. This vertical trust is one of the basic components of social network and a keystone of the legitimacy of representative government. Therefore, the decline in trust in government (or political institutions in general) in many advanced countries has become a focus of growing interest. The existence of institutional trust is of central importance both for societies in democratic transition and for Western advanced societies, which are being made weaker by the public's growing dissatisfaction with how democracy works. Institutional trust connects the public with the institutions designed to represent them, increasing both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of democratic government. It is particularly important in emerging democratic regimes such as the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe where the previous regimes did not at all enjoy the public's trust (Campbell, 2004; Čermák and Stachová, 2010; Grosskopf, 2008; Lovell, 2001; Lühiste, 2006; Mishler and Rose, 1997, 2001; Newton and Norris, 2000; Ryšavý, 2001; Sapsford and Abbott, 2006).

In the following article, we will focus on the level of trust in political institutions at the time of economic crisis, not for the Czech Republic as a whole but in the context of two selected regions: the Usti Region and the Vysocina Region. These regions were deliberately selected due to the remarkable differences in their economic, social, and demographic profiles. These regions are discussed in more detail in Section 2. The article will describe and explain the factors influencing the degree/level of trust in political institutions at three levels of government in the Czech Republic: national, regional and local. More

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particularly, we will study trust in the Chamber of Deputies,¹ Regional Assemblies and Municipal Councils. [Mishler and Rose's \(2001\)](#) Lifetime Learning Model has been selected as the conceptual framework for analysing these factors because it connects both the cultural and the institutional approach to explaining institutional trust.

The goal of the analyses is to identify and describe differences in the level of trust in political institutions both between the two regions examined and between political institutions at different levels of government. We will try to discover to what extent any such differences are influenced by perceptions of the economic crisis among people living in both these regions.

1. Explanations for political trust

Literature in the field provides us with two basic approaches, cultural and institutional, to explaining the process whereby institutional trust or, in our case, trust in political institutions is formed. First, the cultural approach sees institutional trust as an exogenous category, the source of which should be sought outside institutions and thus outside the political system. Its historical roots are embedded in cultural and social traditions. Conversely, the institutional approach regards trust as an endogenous category that is built into the political system and relates directly to the performance of institutions and to how individuals assess this performance, regardless of their social status ([Campbell, 2004](#); [Denters et al., 2007](#); [Hudson, 2006](#); [Locke, 2001](#); [Mishler and Rose, 2001](#); [Newton and Norris, 2000](#)).

1.1. Cultural approach

The cultural approach assumes that trust in institutions is closely linked to interpersonal trust, which is something that individuals develop in the early stages of life as part of the socialization process, which they then project onto institutions, and which makes possible and legitimises the functioning of those institutions. It can be regarded as a generalised form of interpersonal trust, a specific form of trust in people in general ([Bartkowski, 2003](#); [Berger and Brehm, 1997](#); [Grootaert, 2001](#); [Levi, 1996](#); [Moore et al., 1985](#); [Putnam, 1993](#); [Stachová, 2005](#); [Uslaner, 2003](#); [Van der Meer, 2003](#)). The roots of this view lie in the theories of political culture, civil society, and social capital. [Almond and Verba \(1963\)](#) have already argued that the foundations of civic culture are built into the patterns of interpersonal ties in society. They pointed out that social trust and cooperation creates a sense of civic competence that empowers individuals to choose a government ([Mishler and Rose, 1997](#)). An important role in developing the political competence of citizens is played by volunteer associations, which bring together the needs of individuals and the needs of others, and thus represent a kind of link between the individual and politics. Through these associations, individuals are able to relate effectively and meaningfully to the political system ([Almond and Verba, 1963](#)). A substantial amount of current scholarship particularly highlights the importance of volunteer associations in the formation of trust. Association generates interpersonal trust and that carries over to the institutional level. Institutional trust is not received 'from above'; it is not the result of the character of institutions or the perception of how they work. On the contrary, it is shaped in the everyday structure of social traditions through the generation of social capital ([Campbell, 2004](#); [Dowley and Silver, 2003](#)). Membership in religious associations reveal the influence of religion, as people of faith who are in contact through a church have a higher-than-average level of trust ([Schoenfeld, 1978](#)). It should be noted that the factor of people's satisfaction with their own lives is very strongly linked to generalised trust. Satisfaction with life is thus also assumed to be associated with institutional trust ([Uslaner and Badescu, 2003](#)).

1.2. Institutional approach

The second interpretation, institutional approach, explains the formation of institutional trust within the context of the political economy and applies the principle of rational choice. Institutional trust is generated from the top down; it is a positive feedback springing from the perception of citizens and their experiences of how specific institutions perform. By this logic, individuals trust institutions insofar as their individual needs are satisfied. The government can therefore generate trust by satisfying people's needs ([Campbell, 2004](#)). Institutional trust is thus the result, not the cause of an institution's performance. In contrast to the cultural approach, here we find the opposite causal relationship between interpersonal and institutional trust. Trust in political and public institutions and satisfaction with the government influence the level of trust among people ([Dowley and Silver, 2003](#)). The reciprocal connection between interpersonal (generalised) and institutional trust has also been identified, for instance, by [Rothstein and Stolle \(2003\)](#). An important factor in the development of generalised social trust is the experience of fair and impartial political and public institutions. The quality of the services provided by the state or local government, a healthy relationship between politicians and citizens, equitable political and social institutions—all these can produce differences in institutional and political trust, which partly has to do with the level of generalised trust in society. Citizens who are not satisfied with their dishonest and irresponsible politicians and who have

¹ National-level analyses were originally calculated for trust in government, but this was replaced by trust in the Chamber of Deputies in our final models. The reason for that decision was simple: at the time of data collection, the caretaker government of PM Fischer was enjoying an exceptionally high level of trust (71%) across all socio-demographic groups and regions. Inclusion of this kind of anomaly in the analysis would not have served the desired purpose, namely to identify the determinants of trust in political institutions. Any determinants were difficult to identify in a situation when almost all trusted the government.

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