



Trust and state intervention: Results from a Swedish survey on environmental policy support

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ABSTRACT

The role of trust in supporting environmental policy instruments (EPIs) has attracted increased interest in recent years. Various trust measures have often been conflated, making it unclear whether trust or distrust drives demand for EPIs. Here we investigate how trust in various actors (i.e., citizens in general, business actors, and political institutions) affects attitudes to *different kinds* of state intervention (i.e., push vs. pull instruments). We hypothesize that distrust, through a willingness to punish, generates demand for push policies, while trust, through a willingness to reward, generates demand for pull policies. Using survey responses from approximately 1800 Swedish college students, different trust measures were found to have different links to attitudes to state intervention: trust in public administration is a stable predictor of EPI support, whereas distrust in business actors generates stronger support for punishing instruments. We also found that preferences for push policies are associated with a willingness to punish, whereas preferences for pull policies are associated with a willingness to reward. We conclude that different trust measures should not be conflated when discussing whether trust explains attitudes to state environmental intervention.

1. Introduction

The global community is experiencing several immanent environmental threats (Rockstrom et al., 2009). However, faced with the large-scale collective action dilemma of environmental protection, we are unlikely to see actors voluntarily change their behavior and adopt more sustainable lifestyles, as the benefits are individual while the costs are collective (Dawes, 1980; Olson, 1965; Ostrom, 2000). The situation demands the introduction of a third actor, usually the state, to monitor and force actors into environmentally benevolent behavior (Mansbridge, 2014).

In the literature it is often assumed that for environmental policy instruments (EPIs) to be effective, or even implemented, popular support is crucial, so there is a fairly comprehensive literature on how to explain EPI support¹ (Drews and van den Bergh, 2015). One strand of this research has considered the role of trust in EPI support (Dresner et al., 2006; Fairbrother, 2016, 2017; Hammar and Jagers, 2006; Hammar et al., 2009; Harring, 2013, 2014, 2016; Harring and Jagers, 2013; Harring and Rönnerstrand, 2016; Jones et al., 2009; Kallbekken et al., 2013; Kallbekken and Sælen, 2011; Konisky et al., 2008; Lubell et al., 2006; Marquart-Pyatt, 2016; Zahran et al., 2006). Various forms of trust and of EPIs have been investigated. For example, studies have demonstrated that

trust in the institutions implementing the policies is important for the acceptance of CO₂ taxes (Hammar and Jagers, 2006). The basic argument is that people are more likely to support policies if they trust those implementing them. Other studies have considered trust in other citizens, arguing that people are unlikely to support various policies, such as taxes or subsidies, if they perceive others as untrustworthy, implying that they could potentially cheat by “gaming” these policies (Harring, 2016).

However, few comprehensive studies have examined the impact of various forms of trust on various forms of EPIs; this neglect is a problem, as EPIs can be distinguished in many ways, for example in terms of “push” versus “pull” policies (Steg et al., 2005). Push implies that the state punishes unsustainable behavior (e.g., by making it more expensive), whereas pull implies that the state encourages sustainable behavior (e.g., by making it cheaper). Based on more general research into the role of trust in attitudes to state intervention, we can assume that trust can have very different effects on the demand for different kinds of policies (Harring, 2016).

The literature on trust and the demand for state intervention contains two main streams of thought. One stream argues that trust is necessary for the acceptance of increased state intervention. To accept policies, individuals must both trust that public institutions can actually

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¹ In this article we use environmental policy support and environmental policy acceptance interchangeably, which is captured as an attitude of approval towards a certain policy (cf. Drews and van den Bergh, 2015; Stern, 2000)

manage the policies and implement them in a non-corrupt and efficient way, and trust that fellow citizens and/or business actors are actually complying with the policies. High levels of trust therefore explain the all-encompassing welfare states in the high-trusting Nordic countries (Daniele and Geys, 2015; Rothstein et al., 2012; Svallfors, 2013) as well as the support for environmental taxes in these countries (Harring, 2014).

Studies aligned with the other stream argue the complete opposite: It is distrust that generates demand for state intervention. If individuals do not trust others (e.g., other citizens in general or business actors) and hence perceive those others as polluting or in other ways generating negative externalities, they see a need for state intervention. It is sometimes argued that people have an inherent desire to punish free-riders or cheaters, demanding regulation even if the state implementing the regulation is corrupt and inefficient. This could explain over-regulated market economies in low-trusting countries (Aghion et al., 2010; Alesina and Angeletos, 2005; Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2009; Dimitrova-Grajzl et al., 2011; Pinotti, 2011; Pitlik and Kouba, 2015).

There are three areas where this article aims to contribute to the literature. First, some have argued that these two streams of the trust and state intervention literature are not really poles apart but to some extent can be discussed together (Harring and Lapuente, 2016). The different positions on (dis)trust and attitudes to state intervention can be explained by the fact that there are different kinds of state intervention, with distrust generating demand for one but not the other. It has been demonstrated that demand for punishing control and for command or regulatory instruments can be driven by low trust in others, while high trust is important in building support for rewarding or redistributing instruments (Harring, 2016; Harring and Lapuente, 2016).

Second, different forms of trust are often conflated. Some studies have been criticized for not distinguishing between horizontal trust (e.g., generalized trust in other citizens) and vertical trust (e.g., trust in political institutions) (Pitlik and Kouba, 2015). Moreover, measures of general trust are used to capture attitudes toward regulating business actors. This can be problematic because perceptions of citizens in general are distinct from perceptions of business actors, and overlooking this fact can create problems of validity (Pitlik and Kouba, 2015). Punishing one's peers (i.e., citizens in general) and punishing others (i.e., business actors) simply differ from each other.

Third, many articles on trust and government regulation use cross-national datasets (such as the World Values Survey or International Social Survey Programme), which of course have advantages as they capture and allow control of country-specific effects. However, such datasets also have disadvantages, since cross-national survey questions are often imprecise and there are language effects, as it is difficult to formulate precise translations (Axelsson and Dahlberg, 2017; Pérez, 2011). By using a new dataset, this paper is intended to improve discussion of the relationship between trust and attitudes to environmental state intervention by using better calibrated measures of both trust and attitudes to various policy measures.

These arguments are further developed in the next section, followed by a discussion of the material and methods of the study. The results section then discusses the results of various regression models. Finally, we conclude that the discussion of trust and attitudes to EPIs would benefit from not conflating different kinds of trust and being more precise when discussing state intervention, as this can come in many forms.

2. Trust and state intervention

Does trust increase public support for state intervention? To answer that question, we have to define what kind of *trust* we have in mind and what is meant by *public support for state intervention*. Can the conflicting findings in the literature on the effects of trust and mistrust on demand for government intervention be explained by the conflation of different

kinds of trust and by the fact that different aspects of state intervention have been in focus in different investigations?

Several studies have demonstrated that people demand more regulation in corrupt societies (Aghion et al., 2010). This is explained by an eagerness to punish those who do not help provide collective goods but instead appropriate them, for example, by polluting and overusing natural resources. Another body of research argues that trust is important for the acceptance of state intervention. It is important to trust not only the agencies implementing policies, but also other actors, as several types of state intervention, such as taxes or subsidy schemes, are based on individuals' willingness to collaborate. People have to pay their taxes and not claim subsidies to which they are not entitled for these schemes to function. If people perceive others as cheating, this reduces their willingness to pay taxes and increases their willingness to try to cheat and lie in order to receive public benefits (Rothstein, 2001; Scholz and Lubell, 1998).

Why these scholars end up in such different positions as to the effect of trust on attitudes to state intervention is partly because they focus on *different forms* of state intervention (Harring and Lapuente, 2016). Whereas distrust seems to drive a willingness to punish rule breakers with harsh regulation, trust seems to be more important for the acceptance of rewarding policies. The demand for regulation is driven by mistrust and by norms of punishment in society, while rewarding policies, such as subsidies, require high levels of trust. We can understand the differences by studying free-riding risks. Actors can of course abuse both regulation and other policies, such as subsidies. However, if people abuse regulation that can generate demand for more regulation or stricter rules, while a situation in which people abuse subsidies is unlikely to generate demand for more subsidies (Harring, 2016).

The effects of trust on attitudes to state intervention may largely be driven by the kind of state intervention one has in mind. Whereas low-trusting people perceive others as incurable cheaters and are more eager to *push* them into environmentally friendly behavior, high-trusting people perceive others as potential cooperators who need to be *pulled* into acting in the collective interest.

Then there is the question of how to measure or define trust (Hardin, 2002; Newton, 2007; Uslaner, 2002; Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994). Trust in this article is understood as an agent's perception about the trustworthiness of other agents (citizens in general and business actors). Recent articles have criticized certain influential studies for conflating political trust with generalized trust, or at least for not including both kinds of trust in the same models (Pitlik and Kouba, 2015). Pitlik and Kouba (2015) concluded that it is important to take account of both concepts, since "both horizontal trust among citizens as well as vertical trust relations between citizens and government actors matter for preference formation" (p. 359). Even though the two concepts are correlated and related, they are clearly distinct (Newton, 2007), and excluding one of them can generate biased models.

Furthermore, other forms of trust are also conflated in the literature. Previous studies often use questions about *trust in other citizens* in general to explain attitudes to the regulation of *business actors*. As Pitlik and Kouba (2015) have argued, "the notion that confidence in major companies may also be an important intervening factor is neglected in the literature" (p. 356). Different kinds of trust, i.e., institutional trust (trust in political institutions), generalized trust, and trust in business actors, are often correlated. One could of course argue that generalized trust is a broader concept covering all, or at least many, actors in society; however, explaining attitudes to the regulation of *business actors* with reference to trust in *average citizens* can generate problems of validity. Whether people perceive business actors, for good or bad reasons, as wealthy elites who gained their wealth illicitly and are therefore untrustworthy, or as entrepreneurs important for the economy and generally trustworthy, differs from whether people trust the average citizen (Di Tella and MacCulloch, 2009; Pitlik and Kouba, 2015).

Pitlik and Kouba (2015) actually tried to test the different effects of institutional trust, generalized trust, and trust in business actors using

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