
THE PROBLEM OF TRUST IN ROMANIAN POLITICS

Adela Mihaela Țăranu¹ and Andrei Țăranu^{2*}

¹*Spiru Haret University, 13 I. Ghica, Bucharest, Romania*

²*National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, 6 Povernei St., 010648, Bucharest, Romania*

(Received 27 March 2013)

Abstract

Recent theory argues that social trust is an important and central element in a complex and virtuous circle of social attitudes, behaviour, and institutions that act as the foundation for stable and effective democratic government. Trust is said to sustain a cooperative social climate, to facilitate collective behaviour, and to encourage a regard for the public interest. Trust between citizens makes it easier, less risky and more rewarding to participate in community and civic affairs, and helps to build the social institutions of civil society upon which peaceful and stable democracy rests. Democracy and good government may then reinforce the conditions in which social and political trust can flourish, enabling citizens to cooperate effectively in community and public affairs for their common good. On the contrary, when between the society and the government there is a cleavage of mistrust any kind of reforms seems to be impossible to be put in place. We try to discover that the reality is somewhere in between. There is no perfect social trust in any democracy and when political institutions are weakened the political parties try not to reinforce them but to keep them into their backyard.

Keywords: trust, social capital, democratic consolidation, civic culture

1. Introduction

Politics is a matter of feeling and trust, all the more so in a democratic regime. Any democracy should be based on citizen's confidence in the institutions they have themselves designed, at least theoretically, institutions that they periodically evaluate by voting. Then again the concept of trust is quite difficult to capture in quantitative studies and equally difficult to define inasmuch as it is rather a feeling than an explicit rational concept. The most well-known definition, in its broadest sense, seems to be the one introduced by Gambetta: "trust is the subjective probability that an individual X expects that B would perform an action that is beneficial for both of them" [1]. Another definition of trust could be the following one: a person (the one who trusts) agrees to rely on another person's action (the one who's being trusted). Hence the one who (by choice or forced by circumstances) trusts delegates control of

*Corresponding author, e-mail: ataranu@gmail.com

her own actions/agency to the one he/she trusts, and consequently he/she can't be sure of the trusted person's purposefulness [2].

Over the past decade, a great deal of attention has been paid in Social and Political science research to the issues of interpersonal trust. The concept has been regarded as a panacea for the myriad malfunctions developed lately by our modern democratic systems. Social trust should increase the efficiency of political and economical processes, strengthen the social contract and also consolidate a sense of community among citizens [3, 4].

Nevertheless trust is an efficient strategy for the desired outcomes (both private and social) so long as the others are worth the trust. Dishonesty turns trust into credulity and sooner or later it drives citizens into thinking the political institutions made use of them on the purpose of gaining legitimacy, and only in order to deceive them and deprive them of their liberties. For this reason the institutional cognitive theory argues that institutions should also 'learn' (undergo a learning process) in order that uninterrupted negotiation with the citizens can be conducted. It also argues that the institutions are not immutable as believed in the heyday of modernity [5].

The mechanism that links interpersonal trust and institutional success relates implicitly to a civic morality as well as to general honesty: "granting a contract is a matter of trust and completing it is a matter of respecting that trust" [6]. Civic morality means honesty – within the context of the common good – namely confidence in delegating and respect for the delegated trust, and also fully reciprocated trust. This trust relates to the civic sense of responsibility for the common good and, accordingly, requires allegiance to honest and responsible norms and behaviours. That is, citizens should be confident in the state and, implicitly, in its particular representatives while the latter should take citizens into their confidence. Such attitude has the potential of nurturing a sense of community among citizens, in order that their rights should be maximized in the public space rather than in the realm of the private, with the result of discouraging corruption and individual isolation. That requires the acceptance of social duties as a product of society as a whole, and also as a common obligation. The civic sense of responsibility, such as respecting the community norms and rules, enhances our desire to conform to social regulation even when inconvenient to some degree, and even if the related penalty is minor. These values and conducts are thus the premises for an honest and consistent with the civic sense type of behaviour [7]. Per se, they would spare the price and the effort of dissuasion and also of a constant pressure with due positive consequences, such as the reduction of the amount of resources required in order to ensure order and enforce the rule of law as well as to carry out the governmental policies and regulations.

2. Distrust and political culture

Yet the state disregards this strategy, and, yet furthermore, according to recent research, citizens' confidence in the state decreases while mistrust turns

out to be the main variable in the equation. The present paper aims at shading light on the severe impact of mistrust on political events by explaining how mistrust can become the explanatory variable in most cases of political takes. According to Russell J. Dalton [8], distrust in political leaders and their parties, as revealed in public opinion surveys, increases resistance to any public policies amending, even to the most benign ones. Moreover mistrust destabilizes the political establishment at the cost of encouraging the populist and/or radical parties. It also encourages the short term projects at the expense of those aiming at a sustainable development and also undermines the participatory political culture [9].

There is certainly a somewhat paradoxical ideological dimension of the general distrust in politics, and all the more so of that in the state: it draws various ideological groups towards the possibility of social experimentation and towards an odd interpretation of democracy. Thus both the conservatives and the libertarians endorse a limitation of the state's extended social programs for the disadvantaged groups while the street movements such as 'indignados' and 'occupy' tend to become mass phenomena all around Europe and North America. And thus, paradoxically, political mistrust proves fertile ground for a conceptual and action-oriented effervescence with noticeable positive end results: ("the tension between public support for democracy and concern for political practices of those in office leads to pressures for constitutional and institutional reforms") [10].

But in spite of this ideological and action-oriented effervescence, political mistrust is based on the citizens' belief that politics is a space for corruption and blackmail, whose interest is adversarial to their own, and a mechanism that can not contain itself with vote gaining. General obsession with political corruption, heavily promoted by the media and made use of by politicians themselves in their electoral campaign, generates collective distress and deepens mistrust. The fight against corruption thus becomes one of the most alluring subjects among voters' preferences throughout Europe, but also in East. Nevertheless this issue always ends in a total fiasco.

David Easton explains how it is precisely this type of seduction that reassures citizens' confidence in the system and how they lose confidence only in the incumbents [11]. Though enunciated by one of the most important political theoreticians, such perspective seems, nevertheless, to refer to a past generation – the one newly introduced to democracy after the World War II. Over the past years, overlapping with the economic crisis, society didn't only react to specific leaders but to the political apparatus of democracy as a whole, mainly among EU member states. The emergence and strengthening of the populist parties – anti-establishment par excellence – is symptomatic for citizens' lack of confidence in present democracies. Political parties such as SYRIZA or Golden Dawn in Greece, the Five Star Movement in Italy or the True Finns – almost invisible four years ago on the political spectrum and turned today into a real menace for the political establishment unveils how a considerable part of the population expect a reset and reform of the discredited political system.

Levi and Stoker pinpoints three approaches for conceptualizing and measuring the level of trust [12].

1. The first approach refers to the ideally political model, broadly speaking, that people identify both from a moral perspective and one that regards the politicians' institutional activity (the way they perform and fulfil their duties).
2. The second approach aims at explaining the representative dimension of a politician in the eyes of the electorate as well as their image as efficient workers in the service of their voters. This approach is essentially a pragmatic one, conceived to meet the profile of a certain voter who elected a specific candidate and therefore fulfilled her duty. That is to say that it stands for the answer to the voter's question: "What have you done for me lately?"
3. The third approach leaves the concept of trust 'undefined' and 'to the interpretation of the potential voter'. We should consider such undertake especially when dealing with large groups of voters (a city or district) where measurements upon voter's trust regarding various issues bring about constant and recurrent results. This approach is likely to be found in The Public Opinion Barometer (national or European).

It's rather evident that neither of these approaches can span by itself the entire analytical spectrum concerning political and social trust. Nevertheless each of them applies quiet well to a certain segment of a particular social group: the first one addresses heterogeneous groups, which are discernable through an ethical accepted pattern, the second addresses the homogenous groups – such as the electoral college – while the third one is rather addressed to a heterogeneous ensemble of social groups. Still, as Russell Dalton [8] or Uslaner [13] have shown, the three approaches can be combined, especially the third with the second or the first or with the third, that is that the group defined as the largest but without a clear cultural or ideological profile with respect to other characteristics (especially ideological).

3. Quantitative trends

According to a quantitative research undertaken in Romania over the past decade, Romanian citizens' lack of confidence in the political structures and in the democratic institutions is alarming. Mirel Palada shows in his research that the widespread feeling among citizens that Romania is going the wrong direction has been constantly shifting over the period 1995 to 2012 [M. Palada, *Sondaj de Opinie National, SocioPol*, February 2012]. It is noticeable though that more than 50% of the citizens experienced this feeling at some point, this tendency being rather on the increase.

The chart from Figure 1 shows that mistrust reached its peaks amid periods of high economic crisis, doubled in Romania by the political crisis which lasted from 1997 to 2000 and from 2009 to 2012 respectively. While the declines coincides with the very period after the elections and, in 2012, with the

shift of power in Parliament, a few months before elections. Nevertheless even amid economic growth (2002-2008) the decline was slight, followed by relative peak moments. In general, these relative peak moments overlap political crises and/or media scandals. That is, for instance, that the political crisis from 2006-2007 that led to the splitting of the ADA (the Justice and Truth Alliance, in office at the time) as well as the withdraw of the Democratic Party from the government, both coincide on the chart with an increase of distrust, although there is a general ongoing increase of trust among citizens. Conversely, both the general elections and the alliance of the two main political parties (PSD and PDL) caused a sudden fall of distrust as soon as the economic crisis made its presence felt.

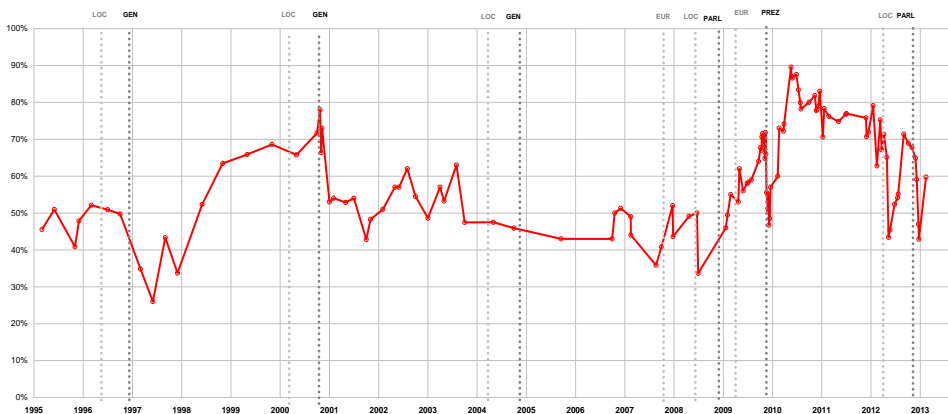


Figure 1. Romania is going in the wrong direction (%) - evolution between 1995 and 2013. Source: The Barometer of Public Opinion (1995-2006); CURS-CSOP (2000), CCSB poll (2007-2013) [<http://turambarr.blogspot.ro/2012/05/directia-romaniei-revenire-remarcabila.html>].

Corroborating this trends with Levi and Stoker's third approach, a latent scepticism among Romanians can be observed, scepticism enhanced and boosted by the political establishment's practices. An IRES survey from 2010 measured such scepticism among Romanian citizens by enquiring upon and revealing their fundamental distrust in almost everyone but their intimates [IRES, Barometrul Increderei Romanilor, March 2010]. Thus 88% trust their family and only 41% trust their acquaintances. They display a visible distrust in all the rest (neighbours 46%, people of other religious beliefs 49 % and people they only met once 75%). Mistrust in the private sphere permeates in other social spheres, particularly those involving the exercise of political power (distrust in prefects 66%, ministers 76% and MP 82%) which again leads to a deep distrust in the state's political institutions – that is the governmental agencies, credited with the least trust 13%, alongside ministries 16%. Public Administration Institutions are in a similar situation given that the County Council scores 26 % and the City Hall 27% on the distrust scale.

4. Democracy and trust

Distrust in the political institutions of the state and of the community puts participatory democracy in a potential state of decay and generates a growing disdain for the democratic state in general. The institutional cognitive theory [5] analyses trust in the political system by means of the social and political actors' experience, evaluation and expectations they build for performance indicators and activities of institutions. Members of the political class are identified with the political institutions (often subject to a personalisation process) by undergoing a process of habituation and of political acculturation. As Almond and Verba have shown [14], we assimilate the democratic model of society by means of a political culture followed by the consolidation and enhancement of the political institutions. There is a strong moral dimension of cultural analysis, based on the desire to capture the social dynamic by way of explaining that mutual trust or distrust among citizens as well as between citizens and their institutions is due to historical facts. Accordingly, the acceptance or rejection of the democratic values depends on trusting the others even previously to associational involvement.

As mentioned above, the Romanian society experiences a major deficit of trust in the political institutions as well as of mutual trust among citizens this leading to a deficit of democracy or rather a severe democratic immaturity. While, twenty years ago, it was believed that humanity was entering the third wave of a democratic process, today, according to Samuel P. Huntington, we are witnessing a rather reversed process, that is, a growing appeal for authoritarianism and/or for a diluted practice of democracy [15]. In 1991, Samuel P. Huntington argued that humanity experienced three waves of democracy that together have increased the number of states that went from authoritarianism to democracy. Yet these waves – the first two being noticeable at the time – went from flux to reflux, thus generating a *corsi e ricorsi* movement. This proved the reversibility of the democratic process in the absence of popular support, as stated by the aforementioned institutional cognitive theory.

Joshua Kurlantzick comes to validate this approach when claiming that we are nowadays experiencing the reflux of the third wave [16]. Huntington explains that the process of supporting democracy is fundamentally conditioned by citizens' trust in the new democratic institutions and that the political elite plays a fundamental part in building and consolidating democracy and also that when relying on people's credulity (manipulation), both the elite and the democracy fail. "The obstacles involved in the consolidation process could also lead to other political recurrences in countries where there are no favourable conditions for supporting democracy". However the first and the second democratic waves were followed by other major ones where most regime changes in the world went forward from democracy to authoritarianism, and not just backward to the originally abandoned sin.

If the third democratic wave slows down or closes its circle, what factors could cause a reversed third wave? Along with other determining factors of the transitions from democracy to authoritarianism there are also:

1. The inconsistency of democratic values amid elites and people in general;
2. Severe economical hardships that fuelled social conflict and enhanced the popularity of measures that only an authoritative government could resort to;
3. Social and political polarization commonly generated by left-wing governments while practicing a radical promotion of major social and economic reforms;
4. The conservatory group and middle class' decision to prevent populist and left-wing movements from competing for power;
5. The wakening of the principles of law and order due to terrorist or insurgent actions;
6. A foreign undemocratic power's interference or subjection; The interference of or subjection by a foreign undemocratic power or its subjection;
7. The reversed effect of the snowball that is due to the collapse or overthrow of other countries' democratic systems;

The transitions from democracy to authoritarianism, excepting those influenced by outside players, were mostly caused by the ruling governments or their entourage [15].

Certainly not all the aforementioned factors are possible within Europe, nevertheless the first four are seems to be on the verge of occurring. A BERD report from 2011 shows that, compared with 2006, there are 10% fewer citizens throughout Central and Eastern Europe who still believe in democracy, reaching a peak of 58% in Estonia (a decrease from 71%) and a dip of 40 % (a drop-off from 62 %) in Latvia while Romania finds itself in between with 48% of citizens (a drop-off from 59 %) having a steady confidence in democracy [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Crisis and Transition: The People's Perspective*, transition Report 2011]. These figures were soon to be confirmed by the political tendencies when the political tensions increased dangerously throughout ECE and within the EU as well. Democratic elections ceased to be thaumaturgical means of soothing the society, contrariwise, they either produced ambiguous legitimacies and dubious alliances (the case of Slovakia where before-term elections brought SMER to office (Directia – Social Democratia), whose leader was accused and eventually found guilty of corruption in the Gorilla case), power shifts in Lithuania, Czech Republic (followed by political scandals of corruption and institutional deadlocks) and Romania. In the case of Romania, political tensions from 2012 led to the fall of two governments and the attempt to remove the President, all these creating confusion amid voters and even greater distrust in democracy and its institutions. The backlash of these events was a sudden distrust in the EU among Romanian Citizens) falling from 83 % in 2007 to 56% in 2012.

The process of growing distrust in democracy throughout ECE developed amid a crisis that induced a turn in mentality within these member-states – at least for a part of the population, and particularly for the recipients of the new democracies: “The ones who were enjoying greater liberties became the advocates of lesser democracy and market when they confronted the crisis” [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Crisis and Transition: The People’s Perspective*]. These being said, the second factor on Huntington’s list is thus confirmed, challenging his own initial assumption that the process of democratization relies on the middle class, on the strength of its crave for freedom and autonomy. However Joshua Kurlanzick attempts to prove that this myth was ruined by the economic crisis: “in different countries middle classes tended to disregard the specific norms of democratic culture, such as voting and not violent protests for changing leaders. From Bolivia to Spain and from Philippines to Czech Republic middle classes used street protests or appealed to justice in order to remove the elected leaders.” [16]

This mixture of economic crisis and fundamental distrust in the institutions of our present democracy, as well as the political establishment’s perpetual accusation of corruption depicts the darkest nightmare of the representative democracy. Freedom House report from 2013 regarding the state of world freedom indicates that the democracy’s ‘marching forward’ stopped somewhere around 2000 followed by a period of stagnation so that, in 2012, it was recorded that: “in the last seven years there was a peak negative score of global decline”. Many states in the vicinity of Romania, such as Ukraine or Hungary, registered a deficit of freedom and democracy that has been growing considerably over the past two years and that not only amid economic crisis, but also as a consequence of authoritative governments’ rise to power and also of their gaining legitimacy by resorting to nationalism and autarchy, to limiting freedom of speech, freedom of the press and also by judicially or institutionally obstructing their opponents [FHR2013, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/article/hungary-and-ukraine-forefront-democratic-decline-central-and-eastern-europe>].

Needless to say, the Romanian democratic system does not appear to be in such a deplorable shape as the neighbouring countries, despite the political turmoil in 2012. Still, if one revisits the line number three in the Huntington’s list, social and political polarization, caused by left wing governments who try a radical pace of major social and economical reforms, some may notice that Romanian society is now highly polarized on the issues of structural reforms advanced by political parties. Left-right cleavage, a little bit outdated cleavage in the political analysis, goes on to yields effects on the criteria of supporting or not political reforms (changing the Constitution), economics (privatization of state companies) or social (health law amendment). All political parties support these reforms, the only difference being the manner and tempo of the reforms. But while the opposition reacts severely to any attempt by the government to further economic reforms, when they are in power they try to implement the very original shape of the former powers. Moreover, political power, of any party, be it left-wing or right-wing, tries to co-opt other independent institutions (the

Church, the Army, Justice, or European and international institutions) to support economic reforms. Yet these institutions become also objects of public mistrust. Such a pattern transforms itself in a vicious circle. In a system based on distrust democracy can only be a facade imitation.

Eurostat data for 2013 shows that in Romania the only institutions that enjoyed a increasing confidence, as a result of recent local elections, are those of local public administration [http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/waste/reporting/reporting_2013]. Otherwise, between April 2012 and November 2012 all public institutions, as well as European and International ones, collapsed in public confidence (Table 1).

Table 1. Confidence in public institutions.

	I would rather trust	I would rather not trust	N.A.
Political Parties (%)			
Spring	15	81	4
Fall	9	85	6
Government (%)			
Spring	27	67	6
Fall	20	74	6
Parliaments (%)			
Spring	16	76	8
Fall	13	79	8
European Union (%)			
Spring	48	43	9
Fall	45	40	15
United Nations (%)			
Spring	41	42	17
Fall	40	37	23
Local and regional authorities (%)			
Spring	33	59	8
Fall	39	52	9

Source: <http://civitaspolitics.org/2013/01/08/costurile-interne-ale-crizei-politice-omasuratoare/>

5. Conclusions

Social trust is probably the most intricate factor in the analysis of a political regime and may stand for a barometer for support of a specific regime. When this barometer indicates constantly a low level of political trust, but also intra-societal low confidence, we can say that the regime has failed and should review its policies and rebuild its elites in short time. And if this is a democratic regime, it will undoubtedly have to revise its shared values, in order to return back to the society as a source of legitimacy.

References

- [1] D.G. Diego, *Can We trust?*, in *Trust: making and breaking cooperative relations*, D.G. Diego (ed.), Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988, 213.
- [2] B. Walter, *Interpersonal Trust – Attempt of a Definition*, Scientific report, Technische Universität München, München, 2010.
- [3] F. Fukuyama, *Trust, The social virtues and the creation of prosperity*, Free Press Paperbacks, New York, 1995.
- [4] R. Putnam, R. Leonardi and R. Nannetti, *Cum functioneaza democratia?* Polirom, Iasi, 2001.
- [5] P.J. DiMaggio and W. Powell, *American Sociological Review*, **48** (1983) 147.
- [6] I. Bohnet, B.S. Frey and S. Huck, *American Political Science Review*, **95**(1) (2001) 131.
- [7] M. Orviska and J. Hudson, *European Journal of Political Economy*, **19** (2002) 83.
- [8] R.J. Dalton, *International Review in Sociology*, **15** (2005) 133.
- [9] A. Bulai, *Eur. J. Sci. Theol.*, **8 (suppl.1)** (2012) 113.
- [10] P. Norris, *Critical Citizens. Global Support for Democratic Governance*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, 96.
- [11] D. Easton, *Framework for Political Analysis*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1965, 143.
- [12] M. Levi and L. Stoker, *Annual Review of Political Science*, **3** (2000) 475.
- [13] E.M. Uslander, *Political Parties and Social Capital, Political Parties or Social Capital*, in *Handbook of Political Parties*, R.S. Katz & W. Crotty (eds.), Sage Publications, London, 2004.
- [14] S. Verba and G. Almond, *Cultura Civica: Atitudini politicesi democratice in cinci natiuni*, DuStyle, Bucuresti, 1996, 42, 60.
- [15] S. Huntington, *Journal of Democracy*, **2**(2) (1991) 12.
- [16] J. Kurlantzick, *Democracy in Retreat, The revolt of the middle class and the world wide decline of the representative government*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2013.