

# Paul Cairney: Politics & Public Policy

<https://paulcairney.wordpress.com>

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## Who can you trust during the coronavirus crisis?

By Paul Cairney and Adam Wellstead, based on this paper.

Trust is essential during a crisis. It is necessary for cooperation. Cooperation helps people coordinate action, to reduce the need for imposition. It helps reduce uncertainty in a complex world. It facilitates social order and cohesiveness. In a crisis, almost-instant choices about who to trust or distrust make a difference between life and death.

Put simply, we need to trust: *experts* to help us understand and address the problem, *governments* to coordinate policy and make choices about levels of coercion, and *each other* to cooperate to minimise infection.

Yet, there are three unresolved problems with understanding trust in relation to coronavirus policy.

### 1. What does trust really mean?

Trust is one of those words that could mean everything and nothing. We feel like we understand it intuitively, but would also struggle to define it well enough to explain how exactly it works. For example, in social science, there is *some* agreement on the need to describe individual motivation, social relationships, and some notion of the 'public good':

- the production of trust helps boost the possibility of cooperation, *partly by*
- reducing uncertainty (low information about a problem) and ambiguity (low agreement on how to understand it) when making choices, partly by
- helping you manage the risk of making yourself vulnerable when relying on others, *particularly when*
- people demonstrate *trustworthiness* by developing a reputation for competence, honesty, and/ or reliability, and
- you combine cognition and emotion to produce a *disposition to trust*, and
- social and political rules facilitate this process, from the formal and well-understood rules governing behaviour to the informal rules and norms shaping behaviour.

As such, trust describes your non-trivial belief in the reliability of other people, organisations, or processes. It facilitates the kinds of behaviour that are essential to an effective response to the coronavirus, in which we need to:

1. Make judgements about the accuracy of information underpinning our choices to change behaviour (such as from scientific agencies).
2. Assess the credibility of the people with whom we choose to cooperate or take advice (such as more or less trust in each country's leadership).
3. Measure the effectiveness of the governments or political systems to which we pledge our loyalty.

Crucially, in most cases, *people need to put their trust in actions or outcomes caused by people they do not know*, and the explanation for this kind of trust is very different to trusting people you know.

## 2. What does trust look like in policymaking?

Think of trust as a mechanism to boost cooperation and coalition formation, help reduce uncertainty, and minimise the 'transactions costs' of cooperation (for example, monitoring behaviour, or producing or enforcing contracts). However, uncertainty is remarkably high because the policy process is not easy to understand. We can *try* to understand the 'mechanisms' of trust, to boost cooperation, with reference to these statements about trustees and the trusted:

1. Individuals need to find ways to make choices about who to trust *and distrust*.
2. However, they must act within a complex policymaking environment in which they have minimal knowledge of what will happen and who will make it happen.
3. To respond effectively, people seek ways to cooperate with others systematically, such as by establishing formal and informal rules.

People seeking to make and influence policy must act despite uncertainty about the probability of success or risk of failure. In a crisis, it happens almost instantly. People generate beliefs about what they want to happen and how their reliance on others can help it happen. This calculation depends on:

- Another person or organisation's reputation for being *trustworthy*, allowing people the ability to increase certainty when they calculate the risk of engagement.
- The *psychology of trust* and *perceptions of another actor's motives*. To some extent, people gather information and use logic to determine someone's competence. However, they also use gut feeling or emotion to help them decide to depend on someone else. They may also trust a particular source if the cognitive load is low, such as because (a) the source is familiar (e.g. a well-known politician or a celebrity, or oft-used source), or (b) the information is not challenging to remember or accept.

If so, facilitators of trust include:

- People share the same characteristics, such as beliefs, norms, or expectations.
- Some people have reputations for being reliable, predictable, honest, competent, and/ or relatively selfless.
- Good experiences of previous behaviour, including repeated interactions that foster rewards and help predict future risk (with face to face contact often described as particularly helpful).
- People may trust people in a position of authority (or the organisation or office), such as an expert or policymaker (although perhaps the threat of rule enforcement is better understood as a *substitute* for trust, and in practice it is difficult to spot the difference).

*High levels of trust* are apparent when effective practices – built on reciprocity, emotional bonds, and/ or positive expectations – become the norms or formalised

and written down for all to see and agree. *High levels of distrust* indicate a need to deter the breach of agreements, by introducing expectations combined with sanctions for not behaving as expected.

### 3. Who should you trust?

These concepts do not explain fully why people trust particular people more than others, or help us determine who you *should* trust during a crisis.

Rather, first, they help us reflect on the ways in which people have been describing their own thought processes ([click here, and scroll to ‘Limiting the use of evidence’](#)), such as trusting an expert source because they: (a) have a particular scientific background, (b) have proven to be honest and reliable in the past, (c) represent a wider scientific profession/ community, (d) are part of a systematic policymaking machinery, (e) can be held to account for their actions, (f) are open about the limits to their knowledge, and/or (g) engage critically with information to challenge simplistic rushes to judgement. Overall, note how much trust relates to our minimal knowledge about their research skills, prompting us to rely on an assessment of their character or status to judge their behaviour. In most cases, this is an informal process in which people may not state (or really know) why they trust or distrust someone so readily.

Then, we can reflect on who we trust, and why, and *if we should change how we make such calculations during a crisis like the coronavirus*. Examples include:

- A strong identity with a left or right wing cause might prompt us only to trust people from one political party. This thought process may be efficient during elections and debates, but does it work so well during a crisis necessitating so high levels of cross-party cooperation?
- People may be inclined to ignore advice because they do not trust their government, but maybe (a) high empathy for their vulnerable neighbours, and (b) low certainty about the impact of their actions, should prompt them to trust in government advice unless they have a tangible reason not to (while low empathy helps explain actions such as hoarding).
- Government policy is based strongly on the extent to which policymakers *trust people to do the right thing*. Most debates in liberal democracies relate to the idea that (a) people *can be trusted*, so give advice and keep action voluntary, or *cannot be trusted*, so make them do the right thing, and that (b) citizens can trust their government. In other words, it must be a reciprocal relationship ([see the Tweets in Step 3](#)).

Finally, governments make policy based on limited knowledge and minimal control of the outcomes, and they often respond with trial-and-error strategies. The latter is fine if attention to policy is low and trust in government sufficiently high. However, in countries like the UK and US, each new choice prompts many people to question not only the *competence* of leaders but also their *motivation*. This is a worrying development for which everyone should take some responsibility.