Political Disengagement and Trust in Europe

Introduction

There’s concern across Europe that the general public is becoming less and less engaged with politics and that fewer people trust politicians and governments. But to what extent is this actually the case? Do patterns of engagement and trust differ across countries? And what about between different generations?

We’ve analysed data from all six waves of the European Social Survey (a cross-national survey that is conducted every two years across Europe) between 2002 and 2012 to try and answer these questions. What immediately became clear is that, since 2002, trust in politicians and governments has indeed declined across Europe. In 2010, in the immediate wake of the global recession, levels of trust in parliaments and politicians reached their lowest points, before recovering slightly in 2012.

We found that patterns of disengagement and mistrust do differ across countries. For example, in Spain, a country hit hard by the global recession, levels of trust in the country’s parliament and politicians has declined dramatically. No surprise here, except that interest in politics has actually increased - telling us that mistrust and disengagement don’t always go hand in hand. Conversely, in Germany, levels of trust in parliaments and politicians increased slightly between 2002 and 2012, and interest in politics remained largely unchanged over this time.

Levels of trust in European institutions declined between 2002 and 2012, but these levels do differ across countries. For example, while levels of trust in parliaments and politicians and citizens remained largely unchanged in Denmark, levels of trust in parliaments and politicians declined sharply in Italy and Greece, while levels of trust in the European Parliament increased sharply in France and Belgium.

The Eurobarometer surveys also show that Europeans have become more likely to think that their voice does not count in the EU. For example, in 2004, 50% of respondents across the EU indicated they trusted the EU, while in autumn 2013 this figure was only 31%. Similar trends are evident for levels of trust in national parliaments and governments.

While this briefing can only scratch the surface of why there is political disengagement and mistrust of politicians across Europe, and how this issue can be addressed, we hope it provides food for thought when considering the democratic future of Europe.

More information

Please contact Michael Colborne, Senior Researcher at NatCen Social Research. Email: Michael.Colborne@natcen.ac.uk Phone: 0207 549 7135

Trust and engagement

There is a link between trust and political participation. In 2012, countries that reported the highest levels of trust in politicians, like Sweden, tended to have higher rates of participation in political and social activities (e.g., signing a petition, joining a protest or political party, etc.). However, this isn’t universal – participation also clearly seems to be related to political, social and economic circumstances within a country, and Spain again comes up as an example. Spanish respondents reported some of the highest rates of political and social participation in 2012 but as noted overleaf, people in Spain aren’t particularly trusting of politicians and politics.

It’s important to note that types of political participation – for example, signing a petition, taking part in a protest or joining a political party – can also differ considerably across countries. For example, while 32% of respondents in the UK in 2012 reported signing a petition recently, only 10% of Poles reported they had done so. In addition, contacting politicians directly is more common in Scandinavian countries (e.g., 18% in Finland) than in former Eastern Bloc countries (e.g., 5% in Bulgaria).

2002 to 2012…

45.6% of respondents were ‘very interested’ or ‘quite interested’ in politics in 2002 – this increased slightly to 46.8% in 2012.

Boycotts – 17.4% in 2002, 15.8% in 2012.

Signed petition – 25.8% to 20.9% in 2012.

Contact politician – 14.7% in 2002 to 11.7% in 2012.

Worn/displayed badge/sticker – 7.7% to 6.5% in 2012.

Trust in national governments and parliaments and in the European Union

A closer look at the data shows that there are some common characteristics between countries with more disengaged and less trusting populations. Mistrust of governments and politicians is higher in countries that have faced recent economic and social turmoil (e.g., Cyprus) as well as former Eastern Bloc countries (e.g., Poland) with only a few decades of modern democracy under their belts. What’s more, political participation tends to be lower in these same countries. On the other hand, countries that have a longer history of a more stable democracy and with a larger role for the state in the provision of welfare (e.g., Scandinavian countries) tend to trust politicians more and participate more in political and social activities. Altogether these differences between countries mean that efforts to help (re)gain trust in politicians and governments have to take a country’s unique political culture and economic, social and political history into account if they are to be successful. In short, what works in a country like Sweden won’t necessarily work in Slovakia and vice versa.

What’s more, young people may not be as disengaged and mistrusting as we might think. We should be wary of misinterpreting the way younger generations act on their social and political convictions as ‘disengagement’. The way in which they engage in politics may just be different from older generations. Furthermore, given that some of the lowest levels of trust were reported by unemployed, lower-educated and lowest-earning respondents, between the ages of 25 and 49 years old, giving youth the opportunities they need to succeed may be the best ticket to maintaining and increasing trust.

Trust in institutions in Europe

Over the six waves of the European Social Survey (2002–2012), trust in politicians and political and social institutions has generally declined. In 2010, in the immediate wake of the global recession, levels of trust in parliaments, legal systems and politicians reached their lowest points. Levels of trust increased slightly in 2012.