

(Dis)Trusting People and Political Institutions in Armenia

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Abstract

Armenian society is characterized by low levels of generalized social trust: only about one-fourth of the Armenian population is inclined to trust people. This number has not changed over the past decade. The army, the church and the banks are currently the three most trusted institutions in Armenia; the parliament, the courts and the police are the three least trusted. Armenians who trust other people and institutions are more likely to vote and less likely to emigrate.

Generalized Social Trust: 13 Years of Stagnation in Armenia

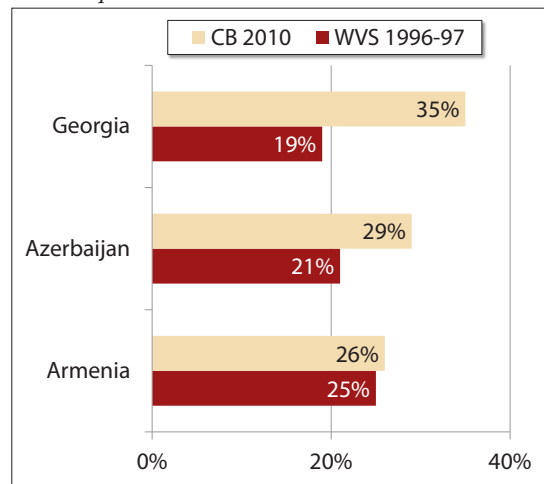
Generalized social trust (a predisposition to trust people even if one does not know them in person) is a manifestation of social capital (Putnam 2000). It is a resource that helps societies' economic development (Fukuyama 1996), democratic consolidation (Diamond 1999) and good governance in some areas, such as reduced corruption (Uslaner 2009). Post-communist societies have been known to suffer from low levels of social trust (Howard 2003): the situation that remains true for Armenia today.

Generalized social trust is commonly measured through surveys, asking respondents whether they think most people can be trusted. World Values Survey (WVS) implemented in Armenia in 1997 included such a question, so did the Caucasus Barometer (CB) 2010 survey.¹ Both are nationwide representative surveys covering the South Caucasus.² Comparing the data from the so called "third wave" of WVS and the most recent CB makes it possible to analyze trends of social trust in Armenia, while placing the country in a regional context.

About one quarter of the Armenian population is of the opinion that, in general, people can be trusted (Figure 1)³. That percentage has not changed over the past 13 years, unlike in Azerbaijan and Georgia, where levels of social trust were lower than in Armenia in 1996–1997, but have improved since then. Judging by these data, generalized social trust is fairly low in the South Caucasus, but growing in Azerbaijan and Georgia (the

later registering a particularly stark increase) while stagnant in Armenia for the past decade.

Figure 1: Generalized Social Trust in South Caucasus: "Most People Can Be Trusted"



Trust in Institutions

Armenians are not keen on trusting strangers. A society, however, does not consist of people only; our daily life is structured through various institutions. Trust in public institutions is of interest to social scientists. Some studies show that it correlates with economic growth and civic participation (Raiser et al. 2001).

Shifting from a broader picture of generalized social trust to a more specific focus on current Armenian institutions, to what extent are various Armenian institutions trusted by the public? How do political institutions (legislative, judicial, executive and local self-government bodies) fare in comparison with other institutions?

CB 2010 contains data on trust towards 16 political, social, economic and international institutions. Survey respondents were asked to rate each institution on a scale from 1 to 5 (fully trust). Judging by the mean scores (Figure 2), the army, the church and the banks are the three most trusted institutions in Armenia; the parliament, the courts and the police are the least trust-

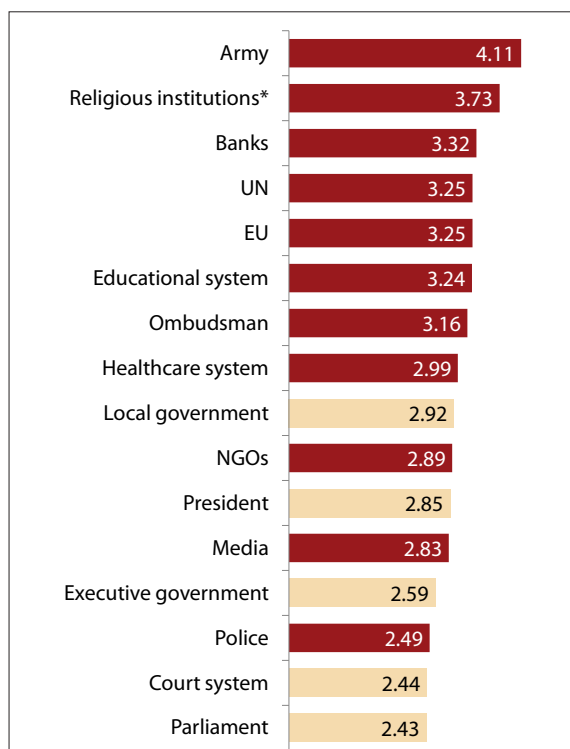
1 The wording of the question is similar: *Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful ("can't be too careful" in CB 2010) in dealing with people?* The coding of responses differs. For comparison, CB data was recorded: 1 to 5 scores = "need to be careful" and 6 to 10 scores = "most people can be trusted".

2 WVS was done in Georgia in 1996 and 2008 (not included in this analysis) and in Azerbaijan in 1997.

3 For comparison: at the time of the survey Norway was the most trusting country where 65% thought most people could be trusted; Brazil was doing worst with 0.03% of people agreeing with the statement. Ranked from most to least trusting countries, Armenia was 27th out of 54.

ed.⁴ Local government generates most trust, compared to other institutions in charge of governing the society (colored beige in Figure 2), followed by the executive branch (the president in particular), the court system and the parliament. If we consider the mean value of 2.5 as the middle point of the scale, we can see that the local government bodies, the president and the executive score above 2.5, meaning that people tend to trust rather than mistrust these institutions. The parliament and the court system, on the contrary, are below the middle point: most people expressed mistrust in these institutions.

Figure 2: Trust in Public Institutions



* to which the respondent belongs

The Armenian public is not inclined to trust its elected representatives (except the president) and its judges. Both those in charge of creating the legal framework of the country and those in charge of interpreting and upholding it lack credibility in the eyes of the average

4 High levels of trust in the army and religious organizations, and low levels of trust in the parliament are not something unique for Armenia. WVS aggregated data for 1981 to 2008 shows a similar worldwide pattern. Judging by expressed confidence in institutions, religious institutions are at the top of the list, followed by the education system and the armed forces, while the parliament is at the bottom. The profound lack of trust in the Armenian court system, however, is something that sets Armenia apart.

Armenian. Considering that every election since Armenian independence has raised concerns (see for example OSCE 2008), and that corruption is often named as a serious problem plaguing the Armenian judicial sector (GRECO 2010), lack of public trust is hardly surprising.

Further statistical analysis of the CB 2010 data for Armenia shows that social trust and trust in institutions are inter-related:⁵ those who trust people also tend to trust the public institutions listed in Figure 2. However, it would be an oversimplification to conceptualize trust as an “either-or” situation. The Armenian public displays something like a pattern of trust in some institutions rather than others. Factor analysis⁶ of trust in 16 institutions suggests that there are three groups of people: those who tend to trust the “establishment” (the three branches of the government, the local government and the police), those who trust “neutral” institutions (the healthcare system, banks and the education system) and those who trust “western” institutions (Ombudsman, EU and UN).

Trust, Voting and Emigration

Armenians place little trust in other people or political institutions. Does lack of trust influence the major political and social choices people make? This section explores relationships between trust, likelihood of voting (an important political action), and propensity to emigrate (an important social action) based on CB 2010 data.

Respondents with a trusting attitude are also those likely to participate in elections.⁷ The strongest link is in the case of trust towards the government and the president, the weakest link is in the case of trust towards the EU. See Annex A for the correlation tables.

It makes sense to assume that trust or mistrust influences one’s predisposition to vote; it seems less logical to assume that a decision to vote if an election is held tomorrow influences how much the person trusts the government. This line of argumentation is not a proof of causality, but the survey data and common logic combined suggest that trust influences the predisposition to vote. Those who trust the government are particularly easy to mobilize, while those trusting international institutions are also likely to vote, but this connection is weaker. Most importantly, those who do not trust other people, or institutions, are less likely to vote. Lack of trust results in political apathy.

5 See Annex A for the correlation tables.

6 Principle component analysis with Varimax rotation; 3 factors with Eigenvalues >1 explain 60% of the variance. See Annex B for factor loadings table.

7 *If presidential elections were held next Sunday, would you participate in the elections or not?* The responses ranged from 1 (certainly not) to 4 (certainly participate).

The respondents were asked whether they would leave the country forever to live somewhere else if they had a chance to do so.⁸ Answers to this question are not related to social trust, or to trust in banks and international institutions, but they are related to trust in all other social and political institutions in Armenia. This relationship is strongest for trust in the executive and the local government. Those who trust the government are less likely to emigrate. The direction of causality between trust and propensity to emigrate is more difficult to decide. While it is plausible to assume that disappointment leads to distrust and a wish to leave the country, it could also be the case that those who have, for whatever reason, decided that Armenia is not the right country for them, are justifying their decision by a negative attitude towards its institutions.⁹

Conclusion

While Armenia is neither the least trusting country in the World, nor uniquely skeptical about its parliament,

it is not rich in terms of trust either. Judged by survey data, social trust is low in Armenia and has remained stagnant for the past 13 years. Political institutions are trusted less than social, economic and international institutions.

Low levels of trust are not an isolated problem of poor social capital. They translate into an unwillingness among people to participate in basic political activities such as voting, and are linked with a propensity to emigrate. The average Armenian of today is unable to trust someone or something beyond his or her personal circle of connections, is uninterested in political participation and remains unwilling to commit to his or her country, at least by remaining there, to say nothing of making it a better place.

About the author

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8 Yes = 1, No = 0

9 A typical Armenian nihilist expression can be translated as “this country is no country, this state is no state”