

# Political Trust and Political Leadership Legitimacy: Implications on Voters' Behaviour

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## Abstract

This paper intends to reflect on the importance of political trust to voters' behaviour. Political trust has a strong link to the political leadership legitimacy. Voters voted political leaders because of their trust to them or to their party. In the context of this paper, political trust refers to the performance of political leaders. In essence, political leadership performance of their duties will have a substantive effect to the voters' decision on who to vote in an election. Political trust characterised the image of the political leaders as well as their party. Political trust is not easy to regain once broken. Voters will remember them. Adversaries will play the issue to gain support towards their party. Trustworthiness and reliability would normally result from good policy and programmes that the leader or party who lead the government initiate or implement. These programmes benefited the people and the country. Trust deficit in the realm of politics is in need of a serious repair. This work will speak of political trust and contextually relate it to political leadership. The performance of political leaders and government will be viewed from the economics, education, health, safety and religious points of views. These are some of the most important factors becoming the supporting pillars of political trust especially in the context of Malaysia. Their upright performance will gather voters' support and consequently, the opposite will direct to political decline.

**Keywords:** political trust, political legitimacy, political leadership, voters' behaviour

## 1. Introduction

Political trust is extremely important. It decides if the people would want to vote a particular political leaders or party to lead a particular country or constituency. It is therefore important for the leadership of a party to ensure that his party merits the vote of the people because the people trust his party to be in power. It is indeed a big task.

To gain political trust by the people, party's image is a critical factor. What is your image in the eyes of the people? In essence, when your voters look at you or your party, what do they see or rather how do they see you? 'You' here refers to the party as well as the leaders of the party. To a certain extent it refers to the members of the party.

What are the matters that the people look or judge in order to decide which party to vote? Are you reliable? If in the last election the people voted you in, will they do the same in the coming election or they see no merit anymore in you? A chain of questions would follow, one after the other. Answers to these matters would be some of the most important deciding factors for a particular candidate or party to win the election.

Trustworthiness and reliability would normally result from good policy and programmes that the leader or party who lead the government initiate or implement. These programmes benefited the people and the country. The people felt that in the election, the leadership and its party deserve to be given the opportunity to lead the country because they are trustworthy and the country will be in their good hands. Trustworthiness is vote-worthiness.

## 2. Methodology

This is a preliminary work for a bigger piece of research. Thus, it is based on an initial thematic literature review. This paper is descriptive in nature. It seeks to establish the role of political trust as the backbone of political leadership legitimacy. Without the trust of the people, it is difficult for political leaders to sustain their legitimate place. In modern democracy, political trust deficit is the order of the day when leaders missed their responsibilities. Therefore, leaders must perform their obligations in prospering the states. This work is proposing five core areas of responsibilities, namely, economy, education, health, safety and religion. At this stage, this work will conclude

that the political trust of the voters will give rise to political leadership legitimacy through performance of leadership duties and responsibilities leading to effective governance and the people's satisfaction.

### 3. Political Trust

The Secretary General of United Nations in his address to the General Assembly commenced his speech by saying that our world is suffering from a bad case of "Trust Deficit Disorder." He stressed that the world communities are losing faith in political establishments. He emphasised that every leader has the duty to advance the wellbeing of their people. Leaders have to respond to the needs and aspirations of the people (UN Secretary General, 2018).

Scholars have defined political trust as "a basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well the government is operating according to the people's normative expectations" (Hetherington, 1998). Another definition, "trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another" (Rosseau et. all, 1998).

Political trust must necessarily relate itself to the leadership performance. People could only view their leaders as effectively working or not working. This is where the study on leadership performance becomes central to the analysis of political leadership. The studies on various leadership types become a good starting point to understand further leadership performance (Knies et. all, 2016).

Political trust has been declining everywhere. This has to be corrected by political leaders and various other actors who share the sentiments that the declining level of trust is not healthy to democracy. Apart from research on the possible reasons for such decline, political leaders themselves must do self-introspection to look for themselves if they could be the causes or possible remedies to the declining degree of trust.

For decades, scholarly inquiry into political trust has been motivated by concerns about declining levels of public trust in politics. Political trust is considered a necessary precondition for democratic rule; a decline in trust is thought to fundamentally challenge the quality of representative democracy (van der Meer, 2017).

Political decisions have an impact on the quality of life on the citizens (Turska-kawa, 2013). Political offers during election campaigns must symbolise commitments of deliverable promises. They should produce well-meaning policies for trust to be given to it. Political loyalty is not necessarily placed with a particular party. Perhaps, party members will vote for their party or the party's candidates. However, today, the quality of the candidate is given a good attention to. A good quality candidate is most likely to be voted in. It is also understood that not all voters are party members and they do not owe any loyalty to a particular party. A good selection of candidate is important. However, this candidate must also be the person who would be able to deliver his campaign promises. Otherwise the chain of trust will be broken. This is the by-product of democratic maturity.

A committed representative will command the loyalty of his voters. The basis of this support is the candidate's commitment that he will abstain from indulging in self-interest in the performance of his duties. The voters' interest instead will be put forward. What is the basis of loyalty and commitment that glue the candidate to the voters? It is a sense of personal trust to the candidate (Parker and Parker, 1993).

In relation to political trust, generally the people would like to establish whether the candidate and the party contesting in the election merits or deserves their trust. If the people trust the candidate or the party, naturally they will become their choice of vote. Political leadership is another aspect being seriously considered by the voters before they decide on how they are going to vote.

Thus, the two main criteria, namely trust and leadership become the backbone of political acceptance which later be translated as the voters' behaviour. Voters will ultimately decide who or which party to vote for.

### 4. Political Trust and Legitimacy

Political trust has strong bearing towards political leadership legitimacy. It is regarded as an important indicator of political legitimacy. It therefore attracts a strong attention for research in understanding its causes and effects (Turper and Aarts, 2017). Political trust becomes the requisite for political leaders and political parties' survival. A good research on political trust may give a strong indicator on the stability of a particular political system. Political trust is said to be the pillar of a well-functioning society (Ervasti et. all, 2019). It may be towards political institution or political personalities. The symbiotic relationship between people and institution is a precondition for a democratic stability.

Political trust is an important indicator of political legitimacy. Hence, seemingly decreasing levels of political trust in Western democracies have stimulated a growing body of research on the causes and consequences of political trust. (Turper and Aarts, 2017).

Political trust is instrumental to the successful running of a democratic system. It enhances the legitimacy and effectiveness of democratic government (Mishler and Rose, 2001). If trust cannot be associated to an individual personality, similarly trust cannot be attached to the person to hold public office (Cole, 1973). Political trust also refers to citizen's feelings about their government. In the same time, it coincides with confidence, system support and legitimacy. On the negative side, it relates to cynicism, political disaffection and alienation (Citrin and Stoker, 2018).

Generally, if the trust rate is low, the general approval rating will also be low. Political trust cannot run away from government's performance. Citizens will evaluate their government's performance, and this forms the basis of their political trust. In China, economic performance has formed the strong basis for the Chinese Communist Party to gain legitimacy. Another element of political trust is political values. It is seen as the guiding principle for one's political authority. Violations of this fundamental principle will render the political trust in the decline (Chen, 2017).

Governmental performance should not fall below the people's expectations, or else the degree of support for political authorities may suffer the decline as a consequence. If the declining trends were to continue for an extended period of time, the decline of such political trust may grow further and destabilise the political institutions and the regime. Indeed, many accounts of declining political trust in the USA, Canada and other nations cite examples of poor government performance to explain the decline (Dalton, 2017).

Decline in trust reflects the government's poor performance (Catterberg and Moreno, 2005). Research on trust as far as its connection to public opinion and voting projects two findings. Firstly, is the general level of acceptance of the incumbent's public policy or reforms towards institutions. Secondly, is the trust level towards political actors in particular domains (Levi and Stoker, 2000).

The foundation of trust is to be trustworthy, act with integrity and competence, and with the citizens' interest paramount (Citrin and Stoker, 2018). Democratic government is said to beget trust; however, trust is a precondition for the existence of democratic governance. By implication, political legitimacy has a strong linkage between trust and good governance. Legitimacy is readily achieved if citizens trust in the government and their representatives. As such, political trust leads to good governance by contributing to the building of political legitimacy (Blind, 2006).

## **5. Aspects of Political Leadership Performance**

Theories and concepts on leadership performance are being continuously debated. To the voters, they want to see performance in practical terms. How did their chosen candidates perform? Are they up to the expectations? To these voters, if the elected representatives performed well, generally they stand a chance in the coming round of election, either as an individual or as a party. If they failed miserably, it is expected that the party leadership will not seek to renominate them. Or else, the voters will decide to eliminate them in the election.

In Malaysia and perhaps many parts of the world, the following aspects of performance will be closely scrutinised by the voters. It is because they are very close to them. These subject matters are affecting them nearly on a daily basis, if not to them, at least to their close ones.

Political trust relates to the citizens assessment towards the government and its institutions, policy and political leaders honour of promise. In essence it is about political leaders' performance of what is right for the people even under minimum scrutiny (Blind, 2006). Political trust may be associated to political system and its organisation as well as the incumbent political leaders. The yardstick of the measurement is credible policy making (Blind, 2006). Leaders performance of their jobs will reflect their ability to do public good and serve the community.

### *5.1 Economy*

Voters are very concerned with the economic health of the country. Take Malaysia as an illustration. In Malaysia it means many things. A strong economy is important to the business community, investors and industrialists. It means profit to them. To the general citizens, it means they will enjoy many assistants and incentives from the government.

The government's perceived inability of managing the economy and fiscal challenges is a symbol of trust deficit. People tend to trust the government who can bring about economic growth, job opportunities and educational access (Blind, 2006).

These days, people are connected to the source of information online. People are more aware of their countries' economic status and surrounding. The positive effect is they are more knowledgeable. The negative effect is they also know when the economy is bad. When a political institution is often connected to news about economic

downturn or recession, it may lose its citizens' trust (Brosius et. all, 2019). This is because economy is one of the core competencies.

The British prime minister, Harold Wilson in 1968 said that all political history shows that the standing of the government and its ability to hold the confidence of the electorate at a general election depends on the success of its economic policy (Hibbs Jr, et all, 1982).

Economic wellbeing is very significant to the citizens and voters. The level of economic health to the country will equally help to determine the overall health of other sectors of developments and institutions. If the economy of the country is good, it will naturally give a feel-good effect to the people. Whether people are economically satisfied or not economically satisfied will influence their support for a market economy and democracy (Hayo & Seifert, 2002).

Contextually, economy refers to the economic standing of Malaysia and also the economic programmes carried out by the government in order to bring wellness to the country and its people. Economic wellness is in effect the catalyst of the other sectors of the government to be equally in good condition. Without a sufficient amount of fund, other sectors could not be expected to function as they should be. Funds could only be available from a good economy.

### *5.2 Education*

A good education system is the necessary ingredients for national growth in many sectors. Education is the prerequisite for a country's success. Good political leaders will strategise with educationists in order to come up with the right education system and programmes suitable for every age and needs. A strategic education system is not only suitable for the current age but also relevant for future purposes.

A strong educational system that provides a broad spectrum of skill developments will become an essential part of economic prosperity (Hulten, 2017). Education is self-empowerment that helps to strengthen the seekers of knowledge in any given situation. Education helps to progress the economy. In the context of higher learning institutions, Malaysia Research Universities are key enablers of Malaysia's national innovation ecosystem and knowledge economy. These universities also promote economic growth, competitiveness of local industries, and improve socioeconomic wellbeing of the Rakyat (people) (Akademi Sains Malaysia, 2020).

Political leaders need to have a strong conviction towards education. The citizens' belief in a country's education system will earn the political leaders support. In Malaysia, education is not only important, but it is also a sensitive issue. The people of Malaysia hold education very closely to their hearts. Education is capable to create a political trust deficit and detrimental to political leaders if they do not take care of educational matters seriously. Education can be regarded as a hundred percent parental concern in Malaysia.

### *5.3 Health*

Many governments in the world are struggling to provide the best healthcare to their people. Some 100 million people worldwide impoverished by catastrophic healthcare expenses (United Nations Secretary-General, 2019). Lack of quality healthcare can result in a poor quality of life and lower life expectancy (Best Healthcare in the World, 2020).

In the context of this work, health refers to the activities of the government in ensuring the best healthcare is given to the people. Several factors determine the level of healthcare quality in each country. These include the care process, access, administrative efficiency, equity, and healthcare outcomes (Best Healthcare in the World, 2020). "But making universal health coverage a reality by 2030 depends first and foremost on bold national leadership" (United Nations Secretary-General, 2019). The political leaders of each country must commit to this initiative. A poor-quality healthcare may not only lead to a lower life expectancy but also to a shorter political life.

### *5.4 Safety*

The safety score for countries equally weighs each of the three factors: war and peace, personal security, and natural disaster risk (Getzoff, 2019). Personal security is a core element for the well-being of individuals, and includes the risks of people being physically assaulted or falling victim to other types of crime (OECD Better Life Index).

Safety must not only appears in the form of policy. Safety must be felt by the people. The psychological presence of safeness is deeply internalised by the people, allowing them to walk alone at any time not because they are brave but because they know that it is safe – no harm, danger or threat will follow them. They sleep well at night because they know the authority is not sleeping and is watching after their security.

The people is also confident with the degree of national security in terms of its strategic defence militarily and

other enforcement authorities. The national security policy is implemented well so much so the people can live their lives happily without any worry that external threats are imminent at their door steps. All the above measures and implications come into picture because the political leaders set their priority well on matters of national security and people's safety.

In this relation, safety refers to the safety-related programmes and measures taken by the government to ensure the country and the people are safe and feel safe. All forms of harm should be avoided.

### 5.5 Religion

Islamic faith requires that Muslims be successful in this world and the hereafter. Islam regards development and progress as act of worship (ibadah). In Malaysia, there are many symbols of Islamic developments across many sectors. Firstly, in the context of administration of Islamic affairs in Malaysia. There are departments in charge of matters related to Islamic affairs called the Development of Islamic Affairs Department (JAKIM), Department of Islamic Judiciary, Department of Waqf, Tabung Haji (Pilgrimage Management Board), and Islamic Understanding Institute (IKIM), to name some.

Secondly, in relation to the economic development sector, there is the Islamic Banking and Finance System, Islamic Insurance and Islamic Investment systems. Further, in the field of education, there exist a number of Islamic higher learning Institutions such as the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and the Islamic Sciences University of Malaysia (USIM). For the secondary schools education, there are many National Islamic Religious Secondary schools (SMKA) in nearly every districts in the country with more to be developed.

Islam has its own approaches to achieving Sustainable Development. The approaches comprise two tasks; implementation of an Islamic economic system and the revitalisation of the traditional resource management institutions of Islam (Marsuki, 2009). It must also be understood that it is not necessarily that the developments or programmes to be labelled 'Islamic' in order to render them Islamic. Islam is not about 'sugar coating.' If the developments and programmes are in line or in conformity with the principles of Islam, regardless of the name, they are Islamic. Islam values the contents instead of mere formalities and names. In Islam there is a concept of *barakah* (may be translated as, though not the exact, flooding blessing from God). Obedience to the precepts of Islam calls for *barakah*.

## 6. Conclusion

In essence, political trust relates to the citizens' support for political institutions such as government and parliament. However, the knowledge about its consequences has remained remarkably scarce (van der Meer, 2017). Institutional performance plays a significant role in enhancing trust. Effective public policy such as economic policies that promises a better future for the country will help to increase political trust (Mishler and Rose, 2001). Interestingly observed, trust has its own domain. Trust could be given or withheld (Citrin and Stoker, 2018).

In his introductory chapter to the book *Building Trust in Government: Innovations in Governance Reform in Asia*, G.S. Cheema made reference to the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, that building trust in government is at the core of the world's quest for peace and well-being. Ultimately it depends on people's confidence in their governments. Political trust reflects the high expectations of the people towards their government, the type of government they should have and the behaviour of their political leaders. Once damaged, the curative works naturally slow and difficult. Effective policies and implementation mechanisms, committed and inspiring political leaders, economic growth and economic opportunities, and provision and delivery of services would inspire trust and confidence in the government. Good governance and effective public administration also contribute to the body of trust (Cheema, 2010).

Cause of trust deficit is dissatisfaction with policy, direction of the government and performance of the government as well as political leaders. The government's failure in listening to the nerve of the people and paying attention to them will result in trust deficit. The people might leave the political leaders and their parties altogether as a result of distrust. Political legitimacy will be destroyed. Voter's behaviour may indicate a change of support from the incumbents to new political leaders.

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