

People Trust Gov. and Follow Policies

We believe that people follow the government policies because they trust government. During the COVID-19 days, Japanese people were asked to stay at home, wear masks, get vaccinated and so on. These are not mandated but just encouraged. The choices are up to people.

So, what makes people comply with these requirements? You may think that one of the determinants is people's trust in government, and yes, it is true. Peer pressure too might work, but we suppose that trust in government matters.

That is why we are seeking for the determinants of trust in government next. The literature of political trust shows that what moves political trust are (1) evaluation of the government performance in the short run and (2) social capital in the long run.

Information?

The evaluation of the government may be related to the information offered by the government. But the information has less been examined in the political trust literature because there is no relationship between people's information level and political trust level. Highly informed people show both political trust and distrust while lower informed people too.

Furthermore, more information might make things worse. Well-known institutions or figures often earn public distrust. In the United States, Congress is the least trusted institution among three branches while the Supreme Court is the highest. That is, people tend to trust in something which they know little about. I guess people's levels of trust in the panel of experts on COVID-19 was higher at the beginning.

Reverse Causality? People Followed Policies and Trust Gov.

Now let's look at political trust from another perspective. It's not so simple. Again, we believe that people wear masks, for example, following the government policies because they trust the government. But what if this causality is reverse? That is, is it possible to say that people trust the government because they happened to follow the government policies? Can we say that people trust the government because they wear masks?

Let me introduce the sacrifice-based theory by Hetherington. According to him, political trust matters when government policies require people to make sacrifices. When government programs reluctantly ask people for perceived sacrifices, those who feel sacrificed need to trust government to support such policies. Beneficiaries do not need to trust government because they are not

asked to pay the cost. This leads us to another hypothesis. People have to trust government when they make a sacrificed choice which follows a government policy.

I conducted a survey, two years ago, asking residents around Tokyo metropolitan area whether they temporarily evacuated after the Fukushima nuclear accidents in March 2011 and what to extent they currently favor the former prime ministers. In March 2011, residents in Tokyo metropolitan area faced with two choices. Some people left the area to avoid alleged radioactive contamination and others stayed where they were. The choice was up to them because the area was not under evacuation orders. People did not need to evacuate if they followed then government policy. I hypothesized and found that those who stayed where they were in March 2011, following the government policy, still showed more favorable attitudes toward former PMs from DPJ (then government) compared to those from LDP than those who temporarily left Tokyo area. That is, those who happened to follow the government policy still show more favorable attitudes toward then government.

This result is not technically robust. The causal relationship is still unclear. If this is true, however, those who wear masks, got vaccinated, and keep social distancing, might keep stronger support for the current government than those not.