

21. Citizen trust in local government in the Nordic Countries during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines trust in local government among Nordic citizens after more than two years of pandemic and concomitant government interventions in citizens' daily lives. It has been widely assumed that citizens' pandemic experiences have jeopardised their trust in government and have most likely led to a decline in trust. Is this also the case in the Nordic countries? Or have the traditionally high levels of trust observed in the North – sometimes referred to as 'the Nordic gold' (Andreasson 2017) – survived the pandemic and even possibly been augmented? These are the core issues addressed in this chapter.

The analyses presented here go beyond many previous studies of trust by contextualising the issue of trust explicitly within the pandemic experiences of individual citizens and by focussing especially on trust in local institutions. In a comparative perspective, local government is of particular importance in the Nordic countries (Ladner et al. 2019). As demonstrated in previous chapters, the pandemic disrupted local government operations across the board and required adjustment and flexibility to keep a minimum of services running. Local government is the level of government where citizens are most likely to have had the closest encounters with public authorities and their handling of the pandemic. Therefore, charting citizen trust in local government is likely to yield the most reliable account of what citizens' experiences were like in their encounters with government institutions during the pandemic.

THEORIES OF TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

Trust in government has been a burgeoning field of research for many years. Trust is valued both as a quality of a morally sound society (Uslaner 2008)

and as a lubricant of social transactions (Putnam 1993, 2001). The connections between high levels of citizen trust in government and, for example, low levels of corruption (Rothstein and Uslaner 2005) or citizen compliance with government regulations are well documented (Micheletti and Verhaegen 2023), as is support for democratic decision-making processes and political leadership (Christensen and Læg Reid 2020; 2023). Trust in government, however, may not always be a benign force. Some findings have suggested that high levels of trust in government may also reduce citizens' awareness of risks and make them less receptive to preventive measures (Wollebæk et al. 2022). Trust in government is therefore not necessarily and always 'a good thing' that there cannot be too much of (Witoszek and Joly 2023, Micheletti and Verhaegen 2023).

In contrast to the impacts of trust, the antecedents to citizen trust are less well known. What does it take to build trust, or to reduce it? Research so far points to cultural factors that distinguish high- from low-trust societies as well as psychological factors at the individual level (variations in levels of so-called interpersonal trust or an inner conviction that other people are trustworthy). Over the long term, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) claim, trust may be painstakingly built through virtuous governance characterised by integrity, reliability, transparency, and good public services (OECD 2022). A study from Iceland, for example, charted the development of political trust in the wake of the economic meltdown that followed the financial crisis of 2008, which hit Iceland particularly hard. The study found an increasing connection over the years between satisfaction with economic policy and trust (Vilhjeldsdóttir and Kristinsson 2018). However, is trust likely to be affected by a singular event such as the occurrence of a particular disaster (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic)? If it is affected, in what ways is trust affected – does it decline, or is it enhanced? Can government behaviour, such as the handling of the pandemic, affect trust one way or the other? Debate remains on this issue, as is evident from our review below of research on COVID-19 handling and trust.

For the purposes of this chapter, the measurement of citizen trust draws on the *Guidelines on Measuring Trust* published by the OECD (OECD 2017). The *Guidelines* summarise directions and findings in this field of research and have thus been an aid to research on trust in government in many countries. The *Guidelines* define trust as

A person's belief that another person or institution will act consistently with their expectations of positive behaviour. (OECD 2017:42)

Trust implies a relationship of risk and dependency – a belief that a person or an institution on which one depends will act benignly and predictably in

ways that corresponds with one's moral values (Hardin 2004). The pandemic certainly exposed all citizens repeatedly to situations of high risk – not only risks of COVID-19 contagion and illness but also of stress and disruptions that resulted directly from government interventions to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hard to imagine situations more appropriate for testing the resilience of citizen trust in government.

FINDINGS ON CITIZEN TRUST AND COVID-19 THUS FAR

Research on relationships between trust in government and the COVID-19 pandemic can be largely divided into two strands. The first strand takes an interest in how the pandemic or aspects of the pandemic have affected levels of trust in government and discusses implications of changes in levels of trust. The second strand focuses on the implications of trust for individual behaviour, especially whether trust matters for citizen compliance with government recommendations or preventive behaviour towards risks of contagion.

An example of the first strand is a large-scale Eurofound study comparing levels of trust in European Union member countries before and after the outbreak of the pandemic. The findings of the study demonstrated a decline in trust in most countries, although the relative levels of trust across countries largely reflected pre-pandemic patterns (Eurofound 2022).

Studies of individual countries have in contrast claimed to identify either a stable level of trust in the case of Norway, attributed to competent political leadership (Christensen and Læg Reid 2020), or an augmentation of trust in the case of Sweden owing to a 'rally-around-the-flag effect' of shared crisis perception among the public (Esaiaßon et al. 2021). The 'rally-around-the-flag' effect also appeared in Germany according to an early study (Dietz et al. 2023); the authors attributed the effect mostly to a fear factor (fear of infection) rather than direct exposure to contagion or levels of infection in the environment. A comparative study of the development of trust in the early stage of the pandemic (spring 2020) in Denmark and Sweden found high but declining levels of trust in both countries; however, trust levels appeared to be lower and dropped faster in the latter case (Nielsen and Lindvall 2021).

Some scholars have argued that 'the government' is a composite body comprising a multitude of institutions, some of which citizens may trust and others which they may not, and that studies of trust should distinguish accordingly. An American study of government COVID-19 performance found that expert agencies were trusted more than political actors, who were also rated below international expert organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO; Robinson et al. 2021). A recent OECD report on trust in government revealed that citizens generally trusted local government and the civil services

more than the national government (OECD 2022); this was the case also in all Nordic countries except Finland, where the national government was rated highest. A British study found that 42% of people in the United Kingdom trusted local government – a notably higher share than for national government (35%; Dann 2022).

An early contribution to the second strand of research was the large, cross-country study conducted by Han et al. (2021), who observed that a higher level of trust in government regarding COVID-19 control was significantly associated with higher compliance with measures such as frequent handwashing, avoiding crowded spaces, and social isolation/quarantine. Similar observations were made by Pagliaro et al. (2021), who also found that trust in *science* in particular predicted pro-social behaviour across countries. A longitudinal study of Norway during the pandemic demonstrated that political trust along with anxiety and social norms were drivers of compliance with recommended social distancing. The impact of political trust diminished over time, however. Interestingly, general interpersonal trust led to reduced compliance (Wollebæk et al. 2022). The anxiety factor was not significant in a Danish study, however (Jørgensen et al. 2021). The importance of trust could also be demonstrated by Lindholt et al.'s (2021:1) negative findings, which demonstrated that 'lack of vaccine acceptance is associated with lack of trust in authorities and scientists, conspiratorial thinking and a lack of concern about COVID-19'.

In summary, findings on citizen trust in government during the pandemic suggest the following:

1. The overall effect of the pandemic on citizen trust seems uncertain; some findings point to a decline in trust, other studies indicate a rise in trust (the so-called rally-around-the-flag effect).
2. However, more detailed and in-depth studies suggest that trust in government may be institution-specific – it varies across government institutions, and in some countries local government is trusted more than the national government.
3. Trust may also be context-specific and may vary according to local contexts and the life situations and coping capacities of individuals.
4. Trust may be affected by citizen perceptions of government performance.
5. Trust may be a two-edged sword; it may both stimulate and undermine citizen compliance with pandemic regulations and recommendations.

The ensuing sections of the chapter address the first four of these issues: to what extent was trust in government overall in the Nordic countries affected by the pandemic? To what extent was trust in government institution-specific, and how does it vary in particular with citizens' experience of local government

operations? How does trust vary with citizens' coping capacities? How does it vary with local government pandemic performance?

DATA AND INDICATORS OF CITIZEN TRUST

The data for this chapter come from the surveys of citizens presented in the introductory chapter. The pandemic-trust nexus is covered in three different ways. First, the nexus is inherent in the wording of the main indicator (see below). Second, the nexus is analysed against a series of pandemic contexts that presumably impact the indicator of trust. Third, trust is related to respondents' personal characteristics and individual coping capacities.

The actual wording of the core indicator is

Q.: Based on your experiences during the pandemic, how much do you trust public authorities (list of institutions, cf. below)? By trust we mean your belief in their ability to deliver the public services citizens need.

The respondents were requested to indicate their level of trust on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'absolutely no trust' and 10 means 'complete trust'. The risk dimension of trust is inherent in the second part of the statement '... your belief in their (local government's) ability to deliver the public services needed by citizens'. How much belief in local agencies did citizens have after their experiences during two years of pandemic?

The pandemic contexts were chosen to highlight a diversity of respondents' 'experiences during the pandemic', such as variations according to country and municipal context. As pointed out in Chapter 3, the five countries operated different pandemic control regimes, with more decentralisation of regulatory powers in Finland and Norway than in the other three countries. Is this reflected in levels of citizen trust?

Furthermore, municipal contexts were differentiated into a series of service-providing agencies to gauge citizens' experiences with the different municipal domains on which citizens are more or less dependent according to their situations (kindergartens, schools, care for the elderly, etc.). In some domains, municipal operations could carry on almost as usual (e.g., waste collection), whereas other operations were seriously disrupted by the pandemic (e.g., schools, care for the elderly, health services) and could therefore engender more strain on citizen trust. Additionally, respondents were invited to indicate their trust in 'the political leaders of the municipality', presumably the group with overall responsibility for municipal service operations.

The local context was also covered by asking respondents to assess the pandemic performance of municipalities on the assumption that performance matters for citizen trust. Establishing a relationship between citizens' assess-

ment of performance and trust is tricky. However, relating the assessment to concrete, local experiences is a way of overcoming the problem (Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003).

Finally, levels of trust were analysed against individuals' pandemic exposure and indicators of their coping capacities and challenges, such as housing space, caring burdens, and so on.

FINDINGS

Table 21.1 presents findings on citizen trust in elected *local leaders and local services*. First, overall levels of trust are quite high; no bodies scored below the scale's midpoint value of 5. The total overall mean is 6.62, and the median value is 7.0. There are, however, significant variations both across countries and across local bodies. The lowest total score is recorded for Sweden and the highest for Iceland, although Norway and Finland are not far behind Iceland.

In terms of municipal capacity for future service delivery, people seemed to trust waste collection capacity most highly, while the capacity for services for the elderly was least trusted; this is a pattern that probably reflects people's experiences during the pandemic, when elderly individuals in care homes often were cut off from contact with their families or exposed to other disruptions. Interestingly in light of the analysis of COVID-19-related death tolls in Chapter 2, Swedish municipalities received the lowest score in terms of trust in their services for the elderly.

Functionally, local elected leaders may be compared to governments at the national level. Local leaders are consistently less trusted than the professional bodies on the list, which corresponds to patterns observed in other studies (e.g., Robinson et al. 2021).

*Table 21.1 Citizens' trust in local leaders and services. * Representative population surveys. Mean scores. (N = 4930–5384). Scale from 0 to 100 (0 = 'absolutely no trust' and 100 = 'complete trust')*

-	NO	SE	DK	FI	IS	Total	ANOVA
Schools	69	62	65	70	72	67	***
Kindergartens	69	61	65	70	74	67	***
Care for the elderly	68	57	64	65	72	64	***
Health services	71	63	65	69	72	68	***
Waste collection and treatment	75	69	68	75	72	72	***

-	NO	SE	DK	FI	IS	Total	ANOVA
Elected leaders of the municipality	63	53	60	63	57	60	***
Total	69	61	65	69	70	66	-

Note: *Item wording: 'Based on your own experiences during the pandemic, how much trust do you have in the following authorities or organisations? By trust we mean your confidence in their ability to deliver the public services that citizens need.'

The follow-up question on trust was 'How context-specific is trust in local government?' Does it reflect experiences, living conditions, and life situations that were presumably affected by the pandemic? The most basic of issues in this regard is probably whether the pandemic experience as such matters for trust. Are those who were severely and extensively affected by the pandemic more or less trusting than those who were less affected? Does trust reflect more or less stressful living conditions, such as being responsible for children during the pandemic, living in small flats versus larger houses, or having access to more or less outdoor space? Finally, do citizens' observations on the performance of governance matter, as claimed by the OECD as well as in country studies (e.g., Wollebæk et al. 2022)? During the pandemic citizens were able to observe local government performance at close range and over an extended period, which presumably yields more reliable data than studies where citizens have been asked to express their views in more abstract terms (Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003).

Table 21.2 largely confirms that trust in local government is context-specific, which was expected based on previous research. Pandemic exposure is positively related to trust: more exposure yields more trust. It is difficult to determine whether this is a rally-around-the-flag effect or an experience-based reflection of having been well served by local institutions during the pandemic. Given the way the question on trust is formulated, the latter interpretation seems more probable. There is nevertheless no support for the assumption that the pandemic led to widespread erosion of trust in government (e.g., Eurofund 2022).

The positive relations between trust and residence type (smaller versus larger), education, and age correspond to patterns found in other studies mentioned above. While there is no strong relationship with having children in the household, having relatives in care homes, which are typically a local responsibility, produced a negative relationship whereby people trusted local government *less* if they had relatives in care homes during the pandemic. This corresponds with the low trust in services for the elderly found in Table 21.1.

There is also a proximity relationship in Table 21.2 that consists of a negative relationship between municipal size and trust, which indicates that people

Table 21.2 Citizen trust in local government (mean of all items in Table 21.1) according to pandemic experiences/situations. Correlation coefficients (Pearson's r). N 5535–5280. Details on data and sources in Appendix

Variables	Pearson's r
Pandemic exposure low-high	.048**
Municipal size (population)	-.069**
Residence type small-large	.064**
Education low-high	.054**
Gender M-F	.002
Age young-old(er)	.069**
Children at home no-yes	.011
Next of kin in care home no-yes	-.29*
Local govt. COVID-19 performance low-high rating	.216**

Note: Levels of significance: * .05 level; ** .01 level.

A table that shows citizen trust in local government (mean of all items in Table 21.1) according to pandemic experiences/situations. Correlation coefficients (Pearson's r).

in small municipalities trust their local government more than those in larger municipalities do. Several interpretations are possible: smaller municipalities mean easier-to-understand local issues and therefore less estrangement of citizens, more personalised politics or leadership in small municipalities, or better adaptation of policies to local preferences, as suggested by decentralisation theory (Oates 1972). These are not mutually exclusive interpretations, but they suggest that small municipality size may hold certain advantages in terms of crisis management under certain conditions.

The most striking connection in Table 21.2 is the relationship between citizens' assessment of local COVID-19 *performance* and their trust in local institutions. Those who rate local performance highly reported more trust than those who rated performance poorly. This connection may bring some comfort to local government in that performance matters; this should stimulate local government to perform even better, especially in care for the elderly.

Closer analysis of the details of local performance reveals that participants rated three aspects of performance particularly highly (table not reproduced here): vaccination, adapting COVID-19 measures to local circumstances, and how well elected leaders explained the measures taken locally. Somewhat surprisingly, the municipalities also earned fairly high approval rates for protecting the elderly in care homes. The majority of respondents did not feel that guidelines on visits were too restrictive. Perhaps citizens weighed the protec-

tive effect of measures against their exclusionary effect and accepted the latter cost to obtain the former benefit. Other measures divided citizens into almost equal camps of for and against, such as the stringency of controls on travelling into and out of municipalities.

TRUST IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

Three issues are addressed in this section. First, how high are levels of trust in local government under pandemic conditions in comparison with trust in national governments? Second, how do levels of trust in government before the pandemic compare with levels of trust after two years of pandemic crisis? Third, what are the levels of trust in the Nordic countries compared to those of other countries before and late into the COVID-19 crisis?

Respondents were queried about their levels of trust in various national-level institutions, including the national government, with the same wording of the item as that used for probing trust in local government. Here the analysis is limited to trust in ‘the national government’ in general. Similarly, respondents were queried about their general trust in ‘your own municipality’. Did citizens under pandemic conditions put more trust in the national government to uphold vital services, was trust higher in their own municipality, or was trust undifferentiated? Previous research suggests that local trust in some countries could be higher than national trust. The issue is addressed in Table 21.3, rows 1 and 2.

Table 21.3 Comparison of a) trust in local versus national government, b) development of trust over time (OECD data)

-	Trust in:	NO	SE	DK	FI	IS	Tot
1	POLY 2022 Own municipality ¹ ; scale 0–100	66	58	62	66	59	62
2	POLY 2022 National gov ¹ ; scale 0–100	64	57	60	65	55	61
3	OECD 2019 National gov ² ; scale pct yes	60	51	63	64	52	47 ³
4	OECD 2022 National gov ² ; scale pct yes	64	69	64	78	52	50 ³

Notes: ¹ Polygov Q 2022: ‘Based on your own experiences during the pandemic, how much trust do you have in the following authorities or organisations? [list of institutions] By trust we mean your confidence in their ability to deliver the public services that citizens need.’ Scale 0–100.

² OECD Q 2019 and 2022: ‘In this country, do you have confidence in ... national government?’ Score = pct of respondents answering ‘yes’. Source: OECD (2023), Trust

in government (indicator). doi: 10.1787/1de9675e-en (Accessed on 17 October 2023). See also Nguyen et al. 2022.

³ 2019 – mean value of all OECD countries; 2022 – mean value for 24 OECD countries.

Levels of trust are higher for local than for national governments, although only marginally so. The clearest margin is found for Iceland, although even here it is a difference of just four points in favour of local government. The overall conclusion from this finding is that citizens have remained approximately equally confident in national and local governments, that is, citizens have not discriminated noticeably one way or the other.

Furthermore, comparisons by country reveal the highest levels of trust in Finland and Norway regarding trust in local and national government; such a pattern corresponds to the more extensive regulatory powers allocated to Norwegian and Finnish municipalities compared to the other three countries. Decentralisation of regulatory decisions may yield more trust than more centralised systems do.

To further gauge potential *changes* brought about by pandemic impacts on citizen trust, data from two OECD surveys on trust have been added to Table 21.3 in rows 3 and 4 covering trust in national governments in 2019 (before the pandemic) and trust in 2022 (around two years into the pandemic and the same year as the POLYGOV survey).

In two countries, Finland and Sweden, levels of trust increased substantially from 2019 to 2022. In Norway trust increased marginally, while it stayed the same in Iceland and Denmark. It should also be noted that there was only a marginal change in the total mean across OECD countries combined. As such, if there were ‘rally-around-the-flag’ effects in the Nordic countries, these seem to have been limited to the two East-Nordic cousins.

The figures also demonstrate that levels of trust in the Nordic countries were higher than the OECD mean both before and after the pandemic; this was especially true in 2022, or late in the pandemic. Thus, the ‘Nordic Gold’ seems to have been preserved and even augmented in some cases (caveat: the total mean for 2022 covers only around half of the OECD members).

CONCLUSIONS

Citizen trust in public institutions has remained at a high level in all the Nordic countries and is above average for OECD countries, although levels are somewhat lower in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries. It is hard to determine whether the Swedish case should be attributed to Sweden’s unique approach to pandemic management or to pre-pandemic levels of trust, which were lower in Sweden than in the other countries.

Trust in specific local government institutions has also remained at high levels. The country contrasts are significant but not striking. Nevertheless, Finland and Norway obtained higher trust scores than the other three countries, which fits with the expectation that (some) decentralisation of decision-making imbues government with more legitimacy. The analysis of trust in ‘elected local leaders’ (the embodiment of the local ‘government’) yields the same pattern. Trust patterns align somewhat differently across countries with regard to service agencies. Overall, however, local service providers are also trusted, though trust is reduced regarding care for the elderly, especially in Sweden and Iceland.

Several of the contextual factors at the local level also make a difference to trust, including municipal size and municipal performance. Smaller municipal size is marginally but significantly better in terms of trust, while performance makes a substantial difference. Good performance is not only a question of technical-bureaucratic excellence (e.g., carrying out vaccination programmes) but also of leadership, or the ability to present and explain crisis management measures to the public. It is performance in this latter domain that brings the highest rewards in terms of trust.

At the individual level, life situations and coping capacities also matter for trust. Being broadly exposed to aspects of the pandemic is not accompanied by an erosion of trust but rather the opposite. It seems that it is the pressures of everyday circumstances that may stress trust, such as cramped living conditions or the worries of caring duties. A broad array of individual life situations is affected by local government operations (public transport, opening hours of schools and kindergartens, quality of care homes, etc.). The quality of local governance may thus be key to overall citizen trust in government.

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APPENDIX 1: OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS OF VARIABLES

Table 21.A1.1 Variables in Table 21.2

Variables	Operational definitions
Pandemic exposure to... (list of statements)	Mean of number of yes-responses reported by respondents: *Had the COVID-19 illness. *Been admitted to hospital. *Been quarantined or isolated. *Taken the COVID-19 vaccine. *Been prevented from visiting elderly relatives in care homes. *Had to reduce other contact with friends and relatives. *Feared for consequences of being sick with COVID-19.* Had to stay home from work or school in periods or had children who had to stay away from school or kindergarten. *Planned medical treatment was postponed because of the pandemic. *Cancelled planned vacation or trip abroad. *Been requested to work from home. *Been furloughed. *Lost my job. *Had to close own business. *Received compensation for closedown of business. *Received public benefit pay.
Municipal size (population)	Logarithmic transformation of population numbers; Nordregio
Residence type, dichotomous	Studio, flat, semi-detached, detached house
Education, lowest to highest	Highest level reported by respondents
Gender M-F	Male - Female
Age young-old(er)	Number of years reported by respondents
Children at home no-yes	None - more children, reported by respondents

Variables	Operational definitions
Next of kin in care home no-yes	Yes-no reported by respondents
Local govt. COVID-19 performance, low-high rating	Mean of respondent ratings on scale 1-5; list of statements: *The municipality has done a good job adapting pandemic measures to the changing local circumstances. *The elected leaders of the municipality have done a good job explaining preventive measures taken in this municipality. *Guidelines on visits to care homes have been too restrictive. *The municipality has done a good job protecting the elderly in care homes against COVID-19. *More stringent controls should have been imposed on travelling in and out of the municipality. *Vaccination measures have functioned well in my municipality.