

15 Intensity of Trust in Institutions in India: The Emerging Paradox

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A dominant narrative in academic literature on trust and confidence of citizens in a country's core institutions is its linkages with measuring the success of democracy (Easton 1965; Miller 1974; Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975; Dalton 2004). A healthy representative democracy is said to contain, as an essential prerequisite, institutions that are trusted. Cultural theories of democracy have emphasized that a civic culture with high levels of institutional and interpersonal trust is vital for the stability of democratic systems and for "making democracy work" (Verba and Almond 1963; Putnam 1993; Inglehart 1997). Such trust is also seen as contributing to citizens' commitment to democratic values and the rejection of authoritarian appeals. They view institutional trust to be an extension of interpersonal trust that is embedded in society, learned early in life, and projected onto political institutions much later. These cultural theories have been challenged by the institutional theories of democracy that suggest that citizens' trust toward institutions be a rational response to institutional performance (Jackman and Miller 1996; Hetherington 1998; Mishler and Rose 2005), linked largely to economic issues, but also rooted in their perception on the reduction of corruption, the adherence to the rule of law, and civil liberties. Of late, some scholars have also argued that the decline in trust levels in Western democracies may not necessarily be a challenge. It could well be due to the greater political sophistication and cognitive mobilization of citizens (Norris 1999). Some have even viewed distrust and skepticism of institutions as a welcome development for democracy (Warren 1999; Hardin 1999; Bruno 2017; van der Meer 2017; Mishler and Rose 1997; Cleary and Stokes 2006). Warren (1999, 310), for instance, makes the argument that distrust is an important feature of the democratic process and that it offers a basis for "healthy suspicion of power upon which the vitality of democracy depends." The reports of the Global Barometer Survey in South Asia also endorse this perspective. In its reporting of the 2013 Survey, the Report stated that "the lukewarm trust in institutions... announce the arrival of a critical citizen... Citizens are not awed by institutions... (the) relationship is firmly within the domain of democratic questioning" (Shastri,

Palshikar, and Kumar 2017, 53).

Nonetheless, while most researchers continue to bolster the assumption that trust is necessary for the vibrancy of democracy, there is an increasing concern that rising distrust in political institutions in many democracies, as captured by public opinion surveys and as reflected in the rise of anti-establishment populist movements and leaders in many parts of the world, can have major consequences for the stability and quality of democracy. Dalton (2004, 157), for instance, in his influential study *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Societies* was of the opinion that “there are legitimate reasons to worry that such trends (of rising political distrust) may erode the vitality of democracy or eventually may undermine the democratic process itself.”

In the context of this dominant theoretical consensus among political scientists that views a high degree of citizens’ trust in political institutions as being conducive for democracy, the case of present-day India, when analyzed through the prism of the India component of the Global Barometer Survey in 2019 as compared with the trends in earlier rounds of the survey, makes for interesting reading. When the trends in citizen trust in institutions as evidenced from the survey are analyzed, two trends are patently visible. Firstly, the levels of trust in individual institutions have increased over time. Secondly, non-elected institutions tend to evoke greater trust as compared to elected institutions. While elected institutions do not enjoy as high levels of trust as non-elected institutions, the level of trust even in elected institutions has witnessed an increase. Indian citizens, as this chapter will show, indicate higher levels of confidence in their institutions over time. What however makes this high trust in institutions among Indians paradoxical is the parallel narrative by independent analysts highlighting how institutions such as the judiciary, the military, the police, the election commission, and the media have lost much of their independence in the present political context (Palshikar 2019; Ganguly 2020, Varma 2018; Misra 2018; Hasan 2018; Ahmad 2020; Mehta 2019a, 2019b). Recently, the annual Democracy Index by the Economist’s Intelligence Unit has now downgraded India to the position of a “flawed democracy” (The Economist 2020), Freedom House’s Freedom in the World report has downgraded India’s status from a “Free” country to “Partly Free” (Freedom House 2021) and Varieties of Democracy or V-Dem has labelled India as an “Electoral Autocracy” (V-Dem 2021). Put simply, is Indian citizens’ perception of the functioning of democratic institutions in the country at odds with critical journalistic, academic, and expert commentary on the state of Indian democracy?

This chapter will discuss in detail the important trust-related survey findings evidenced in the India Component of the Global Barometer Survey and seek to

explain this apparent paradox. It will also try to offer reasons as to why this may be so.

The Order of Trust in 2019

It may be useful to highlight the political context of 2019, the time around which the survey was conducted. This year saw an important national election. The survey was undertaken a few months after the elections, in which the ruling BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi was voted back to power. The questionnaire had a list of fourteen questions that sought to tap the levels of trust expressed by the respondents toward fourteen selected institutions. These institutions were carefully selected to cover a wide spectrum of important players in the political process.

The findings broadly indicate a reasonably high degree of trust in most of the institutions. While one does concede significant differences in the intensity of trust expressed toward the selected institutions, the trend more or less conforms to earlier studies. The military or the armed forces emerged as the most trusted institution. Close to nine of every ten respondents expressed strong or moderate trust in the armed forces (Table 15.1). Interestingly, the military was the only institution for which the distrust percentage was found to be in single digits. Next in the hierarchy of trust came the office of the Prime Minister¹ and the judiciary or the courts. Both institutions were found to be trusted by nearly four-fifths of the respondents. A little less than half strongly trusted them, and one-thirds moderately trusted them.

While television, an important and dominant source of news in the country, was also found to be trusted by four-fifths of the respondents, the intensity of trust in it was lower compared to the trust reposed by citizens in the prime minister and the courts. This is because the proportion of those trusting it moderately was greater than the proportion of those trusting it strongly. In the case of all the remaining institutions too—the election commission, the national government, the newspapers, the parliament, the police, the local government, civil service, NGOs, political parties and the internet—moderate trust was found to be greater than strong trust. In the hierarchy of trust, particularly when seen exclusively through the lens of “strong trust,” internet and political parties emerged as the least trusted of all, with only one of every six respondents having strong faith or confidence in them. Political parties in fact were the only institution for whom there was greater strong distrust than strong trust. In the case of all other institutions, deep distrust was lower than deep trust.

Table 15.1 Extent of Trust-distrust in Institutions in October 2019 (High-to-low Order Based on the "Strong Trust" Figures)

	Strong Trust	Some Trust	TOTAL TRUST	Some Distrust	Strong Distrust	TOTAL DISTRUST	No Response
Military	68	19	87	6	3	9	4
Prime Minister	47	31	78	9	9	18	4
Courts	46	33	79	11	5	16	5
Television	38	41	79	7	3	10	11
Election Commission	34	35	69	13	8	21	10
National Government	33	35	68	15	9	24	8
Newspapers	30	42	72	10	3	13	15
Parliament	30	35	65	15	9	24	11
Police	29	37	66	17	14	31	3
Local Govt	28	40	68	17	11	28	4
Civil Service/Govt Officials	26	39	65	18	10	28	7
NGOs	19	33	52	19	11	30	18
Political Parties	16	32	48	26	20	46	6
News on Internet	16	30	46	16	11	27	27

Note: Figures are percentages.

Source: Global Barometer Survey. Authors prepared.

Overall, if the data were to be analyzed in terms of net trust,² political parties emerged as the least trusted institution with a net trust of just two percentage points (Table 15.2). This conforms to the pattern of trust noticed in earlier studies also. News gleaned from the internet was the second most distrusted with a net trust of just nineteen percentage points. Non-governmental organizations were the third most distrusted institutions with a net trust of 22 percentage points. The police and the civil service found themselves at the bottom of the net trust hierarchy, although they fared much better in comparison with the bottom three. The three most trusted institutions in terms of net trust were the military (respondents were 78 percentage points more likely to trust it than distrust it), television (66 percentage points), and the courts (63 percentage points). Net trust in the prime minister and newspapers was close behind that of the judiciary. Falling somewhere in the middle of the net trust hierarchy were the election commission, the national government, the parliament, and the local government in urban and rural India. Net trust in all four was found to be somewhere in the middle, between 40 and 50 percentage points. It was thus neither too high nor too low.

Table 15.2 Net Trust in Institutions

	Net Trust (trust minus distrust) in percentage points
Military	+78
Television	+66
Courts	+63
Prime Minister	+60
Newspapers	+59
Election Commission	+48
National Government	+44
Parliament	+41
Local Government	+40
Civil Service	+37
Police	+35
NGOs	+22
News on Internet	+19
Political Parties	+2

Source: Global Barometer Survey. Authors prepared.

Longitudinal Analysis (2004, 2013, and 2019)

Since the India component of the Global Barometer Survey series had asked the same "trust in institutions" questions in the previous rounds of the study (in 2004 and 2013), a longitudinal analysis of responses is undertaken. The analysis found not much change at the top and the bottom of the trust ladder. The military continued to be the most trusted institution during all three rounds (Tables 15.3 & 15.4). Similarly, just as they were least trusted in 2019, political parties were also at the bottom of the trust hierarchy in 2004 and 2013. What is also particularly significant is that there was hardly any institution that did not witness a rise in trust levels over this period of time spanning a decade and a half. A comparison of responses in 2004, 2013, and 2019 suggests that nearly all institutions in 2019 saw people's confidence and trust in them going up compared to the past and this was true in the case of both methods of calculating trust, net trust, and net of high trust. Moreover, in the case of most institutions about which questions of trust had been asked in all three rounds, the rise in people's trust in them has been steadily increasing. This is however not true for the national government and the local government, both of which saw a fall in trust levels in 2013.

The increase in net trust in the police during the period under study was to the tune of 31 percentage points, a rise that is greater than the rise recorded for any other institution (Table 15.3). In other words, despite being among the least trusted institutions, the police at the same time also made the most impressive gains. The other institutions that recorded a significant rise in trust were the courts, the prime minister, the national government, and the military.

Table 15.3 Net Trust in Institutions over the Years

	2004	2013	2019	What's the trend?	Rise in net trust between 2013 and 2019
Military	+60	+68	+78	Rise	+10
Courts	+37	+47	+63	Rise	+16
Prime Minister	NA	+46	+60	Rise	+14
Election Commission	+39	NA	+48	Rise	
National Government	+48	+27	+44	Fall-Rise	+17
Parliament	+23	+33	+41	Rise	+8
Local Government	+40	+27	+40	Fall-Rise	+13
Civil Service/Govt Officials	+12	+28	+37	Rise	+9
Police	-2	+4	+35	Rise	+31
Political Parties	-7	-12	+2	Fall-Rise	+14

Note: Net trust here is trust minus distrust.

Source: Global Barometer Survey. Authors prepared.

Table 15.4 Order of Institutions (2004, 2013 & 2019) Based on Net of Trust-distrust Shown in Table 15.3

2004	2013	2019
MILITARY	MILITARY	MILITARY
NATIONAL GOVT	COURTS	COURTS
LOCAL GOVT	PRIME MINISTER	PRIME MINISTER
ELECTION COMMISSION	PARLIAMENT	ELECTION COMMISSION
COURTS	CIVIL SERVICE	NATIONAL GOVT
PARLIAMENT	NATIONAL GOVT	PARLIAMENT
CIVIL SERVICE	LOCAL GOVT	LOCAL GOVT
POLICE	POLICE	CIVIL SERVICE
POLITICAL PARTIES	POLITICAL PARTIES	POLICE
		POLITICAL PARTIES

Source: Authors prepared.

Making Sense of the Paradox

A Macro Picture of Trust

In order to make sense of the paradox of rising trust, a comprehensive index of trust in eleven institutions³ was created drawings from the findings of the survey done in 2013 and 2019. Only those institutions were chosen for constructing the index which were included in both rounds of the study to permit comparability. The trust index that was constructed was based on a summated score of responses given by the interviewees to the questions regarding each of the eleven institutions.⁴

When doing this exercise, it was found that not only was trust in institutions at an aggregate or overall level high in both rounds of the survey, it also registered a significant increase of nine percentage points between the two rounds (Table 15.5). Whereas a little over half the respondents were found to have "high trust" in institutions in 2013, the proportion of those having "high trust" went up to three-fifths in 2019. This rise in "high trust" was found to have come at the expense of a drop in "moderate trust" and "low trust" as well as the proportion of those who had been non-committal. There was also a fairly sharp four percentage point fall in the share of respondents who did not express an opinion on any of the eleven questions. It could be argued therefore that the already high trust in institutions recorded in 2013 increased even further in 2019, and only a tiny fraction of the population distrusted institutions with great intensity.

Table 15.5 Trust Index (From Questions on Eleven Institutions Asked in Both 2013 and 2019)

	2013	2019
Non-committal	5	1
Low Trust	8	5
Moderate Trust	35	33
High Trust	52	61

Items used: military, television, courts, prime minister, newspapers, national government, parliament, local government, civil service, police, political parties
Source: Global Barometer Survey. Authors prepared.

High Institutional Trust Does Not Necessarily Foster a Democratic Sentiment

The India component of the Global Barometer Surveys found that higher trust in institutions does not necessarily make people more favorable to the idea of democracy. A comparative analysis of the 2013 and 2019 data shows that predisposition toward an authoritarian government has gone up not only among those with low trust in institutions but even among those with moderate and high trust in institutions. In 2013, respondents with high trust in institutions were 3.6 times more likely to prefer democracy over authoritarianism when given a choice between the two. This likelihood reduced to 2.3 times in 2019 (Table 15.6). Among those with moderate trust in institutions, the drop in the probability to choose democracy over authoritarianism has fallen from five times to 1.6 times. Responses to another question asked in the survey that sought views on dictatorship yielded similar results. When respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the proposition that “we should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things,” more than half of those with high trust in institutions and a little less than half of those with moderate trust in institutions agreed with the proposition. Both these figures of agreement were lower in 2013 (Table 15.7). Thus, an already high predisposition toward a dictatorship or autocracy among those with moderate and high trust in institutions seems to have increased even further, and this suggests that trust in institutions may not necessarily be an endorsement of democracy as it exists.

Table 15.6 Proclivity for Authoritarian Government by Trust in Institutions (2013 vs. 2019)

	2013				2019			
	Democracy always preferable	In some situations authoritarian govt preferable	Does not matter	NR	Democracy always preferable	In some situations authoritarian govt preferable	Does not matter	NR
Low Trust	19	3	14	64	23	9	11	57
Moderate Trust	45	9	18	28	35	21	13	31
High Trust	54	15	16	15	52	22	11	15
Non Committal	15	2	9	74	4	2	10	84
Overall	46	11	16	27	44	21	11	24

Source: Global Barometer Survey. Authors prepared.

Table 15.7 Proclivity toward Dictatorship by Trust in Institutions (2013 vs. 2019)

	Would you disapprove or approve of the statement “We should get rid of parliament and elections and have a strong leader decide things”?							
	2013				2019			
	Strongly agree	Some what agree	Some what disagree	Strongly disagree	Strongly agree	Some what agree	Some what disagree	Strongly disagree
Low Trust	7	10	7	11	11	18	15	14
Moderate Trust	14	22	17	22	15	30	16	18
High Trust	20	26	17	23	25	28	14	22
Non Committal	4	7	6	2	4	6	4	2
Overall	16	22	16	21	21	28	14	20

Note: Figures of no response to the question have not been shown in the table.

Source: Global Barometer Survey. Authors prepared.

Regime and Personality Effect

What could be possibly causing trust in institutions and democratic sentiment to vary at the same time? We believe that the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi could be an external explanatory factor. Modi has repeatedly and consciously attempted to portray himself as a strong and decisive leader. He has also been displaying traits of authoritarianism. It is therefore quite possible that most respondents, a large number of whom were Modi and BJP supporters, showed both proclivities—support for dictatorship and high trust in institutions—at the same time. Since Modi has an authoritarian streak, it is quite likely that his many supporters, favor less democracy/favor an authoritarian government, even as they show a high trust in “democratic” institutions that are functioning under his regime.

In fact, a greater attachment of the people to the regime of Narendra Modi compared to the previous Manmohan Singh government does help explain the unexpectedly high level of trust in institutions in 2019. The SDI 2019 survey found 25 percent or one in every four respondents to be “very satisfied” with the work done by the Central government as opposed to 8 percent or less than one in every ten who were “very dissatisfied” (Table 15.8). In other words, complete satisfaction with the Narendra Modi-led BJP-NDA government’s performance was three times greater than complete dissatisfaction. When compared with the 2013 SDI survey that had asked the same question to respondents with respect to the then Manmohan Singh-led Congress-UPA government, the 2019 data represents a complete reversal of the pattern. Back in 2013, voters had been nearly thrice as likely to be utterly dissatisfied with the Singh government’s performance as they

were fully satisfied, 20 percent to 8 percent. Considering that both rounds of the survey also found satisfaction with the Central government to have a clear linear relationship with trust levels in institutions—the greater the satisfaction, the more the trust (Table 15.9), these vastly differing satisfaction levels assume significance in understanding as to why there was higher trust in institutions in 2019.

Table 15.8 Satisfaction Levels with the Central Government (2013 vs. 2019)

	Manmohan Govt (last year of second term) 2013	Modi Government (first year of second term) 2019
Very Satisfied with Central Govt	8	25
Somewhat Satisfied with Central Govt	38	42
Somewhat Dissatisfied with Central Govt	16	16
Very Dissatisfied with Central Govt	20	8

Note: The rest of the respondents did not respond to/answer the question.
Source: Global Barometer Survey. Authors prepared.

Table 15.9 Trust in Institutions by Satisfaction with Central Government (2013 vs. 2019)

	2013			2019		
	Low Trust	Moderate Trust	High Trust	Low Trust	Moderate Trust	High Trust
Very Satisfied with Central Government	4	26	69	2	21	77
Somewhat Satisfied with Central Government	6	29	63	4	31	65
Somewhat Dissatisfied with Central Government	7	34	56	4	41	54
Very Dissatisfied with Central Government	7	52	38	14	54	32

Source: Global Barometer Survey. Authors prepared.

To put it in simpler terms, the fact that there were far more people satisfied with the ruling government's performance in 2019 than in 2013 was bound to have resulted in an increase in the proportion of those trusting institutions since the survey data clearly suggests that a greater satisfaction with the government's performance leads to greater institutional trust. In addition to this, what is also significant is that the effect of satisfaction on trust seems to have been far greater in 2019 than in 2013. Those fully satisfied with the Modi government in 2019 showed greater "high trust" in institutions than those fully satisfied with the Singh government in 2013 (77-69 percent); similarly, those fully dissatisfied with the Modi government showed greater "low trust" than those fully dissatisfied with the Singh government (14-7 percent; Table 15.9). This basically indicates that the regime

effect in 2019 was stronger than it was in 2013 and that the perception about government in 2019 determined people's responses to the trust questions more than it did in 2013. The higher than before trust in institutions could be because people viewed their functioning through the prism of the Modi/his government and thus did not want to rate them poorly.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, two very clear trends are evident. In the first place, citizens tend to bestow the greatest trust on non-elected Indians as compared to elected institutions. Secondly, over time, the level of trust in institutions has registered a steady rise.

The latest round of the India component of the Global Barometer survey was conducted in the autumn of 2019. In this round, it was found that people's overall trust in institutions exceeded their overall distrust. This pattern was noticed with respect to all institutions about which trust levels were sought. A comparison with the data from the 2013 round suggests that there is not a single institution that has not seen people's confidence in it increase in the last six years. This needs to be explained keeping in mind an important political context. The latest round of the survey was held a few months after the BJP, under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, was returned to power.

The National Election Study 2019 Survey shows that there was a visible pro-incumbency sentiment and support for the leadership of the prime minister. This factor could have had a clear impact in terms of the display of trust in institutions. It is important to highlight that the levels of satisfaction with the incumbent BJP government (2014-2019) led by Narendra Modi were much higher than the satisfaction with the previous Manmohan Singh-led government (2004-2014). When the 2013 survey was undertaken, the Manmohan Singh government was toward the end of its second term and anti-incumbency sentiment had clearly set in. Since the survey also finds trust in institutions to be correlated with government satisfaction, greater institutional trust in 2019 is thus only to be expected. People's higher trust in institutions thus seems to be to a large extent a function of their endorsement of the ruling party and the government.

Elections also produce an expectation overload and its impact remains for a few months after the government comes to power. In the Report on the 2013 round of the study, the South Asia study reported that democratic institutions "are prone to generate a high level of expectations" toward the political establishment (Shastri, Palshikar, and Kumar 2017, 55). This factor could have contributed to the rise in levels of trust across institutions.

The higher trust in non-elected institutions as compared to elected ones also merit attention. In the Report on the 2013 study in South Asia, it was underscored that this trend could well be on account of the insulated manner in which non-elected institutions function. This "often evokes trust that often borders on respect, admiration and even a bewilderment that flows from limited information about their functioning and working style." When it comes to elected institutions, "their working and scrutiny is much more in the public domain and thus evoked both greater criticism and cynicism" (Shastri, Palshikar, and Kumar 2017).

The conduct of the 2019 survey just as the excitement of an election was settling down could have impacted the rise in the levels of trust in institutions. The demonstration of higher levels of trust in non-elected institutions could well be a perception which flows from watching the working of institutions from a distance. As citizens are much more "connected" with elected institutions, a critical approach to the same is clearly apparent.

Notes

1. The role of Prime Minister Modi in ensuring the victory of his party (BJP) in the 2019 elections may have been a key factor to explain the high levels of trust in the Prime Minister in 2019. It was evident that in the National Election Study 2019, it was reported that one thirds of those who voted for the BJP would have changed their party preference if Modi were not the Prime Ministerial candidate of the BJP (Shastri 2019)
2. Net trusted calculated as the difference between the total proportion of trust (strong and moderate combined) and the proportion of distrust (strong and moderate combined).
3. Military, courts, parliament, prime minister, national government, local government, political parties, police, civil service, television, and newspapers.
4. The answer categories of "strongly trust" in 2019 and "great deal of trust" in 2013 were assigned a score of 4. The answers "somewhat trust" in 2019 and "quite a lot of trust" in 2013 were assigned a score of 3. The responses "somewhat distrust" in 2019 and "not much trust" in 2013 were given a score of 2 and the answer category of "strongly distrust" in 2019 and "no trust at all" in 2013 was assigned a score of 1. A non-response to a question in both rounds was assigned a score of 0. The scores of all 11 questions were summed up. The resulting summated scores for each respondent ranged from 0 to 44. The summated scores were distributed across four newly created categories that indicated different degrees of trust. Respondents with summated scores ranging from 30 to 44 were categorized as having "high trust." Those with summated

scores that ranged from 15 to 29 were categorized as having "moderate trust." Finally, respondents with summated scores ranging from 1 to 14 were labeled as having "low trust." Those with summated scores that totaled 0 were deemed as being "non-committal," that is these are respondents who did not answer any of the eleven questions related to trust in institutions.

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