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3 Finland

A Country of High Political Trust and Weak Political Self-efficacy

*Maria Bäck, Thomas Karv
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Introduction

Finland has been described as a high-trusting society, characterised by well-functioning political institutions and a trusting population (Bäck & Kestilä, 2009; Listhaug & Ringdal, 2008; Salminen & Ikola-Norrbacka, 2010; Söderlund, 2019) with high support for democracy (Chapter 2). Thus, public authorities in Finland are perceived as both honest and trustworthy (Salminen & Ikola-Norrbacka, 2010, 654). Therefore, it is no surprise that since 1995, Finland has constantly been ranked as one of the least corrupt countries in the world, according to the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2021). Finland is, subsequently, together with the rest of the Nordic countries, often distinguished as a role model for its clean and honest government (Erlingsson & Kristinsson, 2020; Zook, 2009). High quality of government has been described as one of the success factors across the Nordic countries (Haveri, 2015), and it has contributed to fostering high levels of political trust (Salminen & Ikola-Norrback, 2010). Consequently, Finland has repeatedly been ranked among the most politically trusting countries in the world (Bäck & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2019).

However, a recent OECD report, *Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Finland* (2021), concludes that while Finland may boast with high trust figures, the level of internal political efficacy, henceforth political self-efficacy, of the Finns is, on average, lower in a European comparison. Political self-efficacy refers to *a citizen's subjective assessment of whether it is possible to understand and influence political processes* (Levy, 2013, 359). In addition to a modest level of political self-efficacy among the Finns in general, previous studies have shown that there are differences *between* social groups when it comes to political efficacy in Finland (Karv et al., 2022). One of the most notable of these differences is the gender gap: The Finnish National Election Study (FNES 2019) shows that one-fifth of men, but over one-quarter of women, strongly agree with the statement that “politics is sometimes so complicated that I do not understand what is going on”. Added to this, there is a significant educational gap: while only 7 percent of respondents having university degrees strongly agree with the statement, the corresponding share for those who have only completed comprehensive school is 40 percent. Instead, the differences between age groups are rather small. While 28 percent of the youngest

age group (18–24 years) and 23 percent of the oldest age group demonstrate low political efficacy, the share is a bit over or under 20 percent in other age groups. The same patterns have also been observed in previous election studies (e.g., Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2015). The story changes slightly when examining group-level differences in political trust. No other social background variables have had a substantial effect on political trust besides education, especially when other strong determinants of political trust, such as social capital, are controlled for (Bäck & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009).

The balance between political self-efficacy and political trust creates groups of citizens who deviate in their relationship with the political system. According to Sniderman (1981), individual citizens may be classified as either *supportive* or *committed citizens*. While the supportive citizens base their evaluation of the political system on informed citizenship, i.e., a balanced judgement and awareness of the shortcomings of it, the committed citizens display a rather uncritical loyalty to the government. In order to reach its full potential, trust in the democratic system should be based on constant evaluation of the accountability of the system (Norris, 2011). However, other combinations of political self-efficacy and political trust are possible. Well-informed citizens may withdraw their trust if they feel that the system is not acting according to their normative expectations. We will here call them *critical citizens*. Moreover, citizens may also feel that they have no political competence (i.e., their political self-efficacy is weak) and they do not trust the system itself. This group of citizens we call *alienated citizens*.

In this chapter, we set out to explore how political self-efficacy and political trust are related in the Finnish electorate. Since a low level of trust is neither good nor bad, we should delve deeper into its roots and explore to what extent the (high or low) trust levels are based on a critical evaluation of the system and an informed citizenship.

Political trust and political self-efficacy

Political trust is based on an evaluative judgement of a political object derived from normative expectations about the performance of the political object (Hetherington, 1998; Miller, 1974). A trust judgement, therefore, reflects an individual's assessment about the trustworthiness of someone or something and is, thus, relational but seldom unconditional (Levi & Stoker, 2000, 476). Hence, a citizen might express low levels of trust in the incumbent government, while expressing high levels of trust in one or a few of the Ministers. On a broader societal level, political trust has been described as a glue that keeps the political system together (van der Meer, 2010, 518) and as something vital for a well-functioning democracy (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Conversely, declining levels of political trust are considered a significant threat to the well-being of democracies, as low-trusting citizens are less likely to follow laws (Marien & Hooghe, 2011) and vote in elections (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007), contributing to a more unstable political community. Hence, political trust could even be perceived as a success criterion for democracies (Listhaug & Ringdal, 2008, 131).

Political trust is affected by the social surroundings of individuals and the experienced quality of local life (Fitzgerald & Wolak, 2016; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005; Wolak, 2018). According to Reeves and Gimpel (2012, 509), citizens use the observations they make in their everyday lives to shape their opinions. Studies have also shown that citizens are prone to use cognitive shortcuts, e.g., heuristics, when asked to make trust judgements (Anderson, 1998; Rudolph, 2017). At the national level, the levels of political trust are, thus, expected to increase when the future is seemingly getting brighter. For instance, at the macro level, better economic performance and well-functioning political institutions have repeatedly been shown to have a positive effect on political trust (Fagerland Kroknes et al., 2015; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Rahn & Rudolph, 2005; Weinschenk & Helpap, 2015).

Broadly speaking, political efficacy can be conceptualised as a norm, a disposition or a behaviour: whether citizens *should be able* to influence politics, whether they feel that *they are able* to do so or *whether they actually do* influence it (Abramson, 1972). Here, however, the attitudinal component is crucial: how a citizen feels about his or her own possibilities to have a say in a society. From this perspective, political efficacy is first and foremost a disposition and can be further divided into *internal*, *external* and *collective* efficacy. Internal efficacy is based on the evaluation of a citizen's own abilities while external efficacy is linked to the evaluation responsiveness of the political system to the needs of the citizens and collective efficacy refers to the evaluated ability of a group to pursue its goals. In this chapter, we focus on the internal efficacy or *political self-efficacy*, while still acknowledging that internal and external efficacy are empirically connected (e.g., Balch, 1974; Craig, 1979). Strong external efficacy, i.e., a belief in the responsiveness of the political system, also enables the development of stronger political self-efficacy. In turn, strong internal efficacy enables the critical outlook to the political system (Coleman & Davis, 1976).

While the concepts of external political efficacy and political trust are hardly separable – they both evaluate the extent to which the political system responds to the normative expectations of the public (see, however, e.g., Craig et al., 1990) – the relationship between political trust and political self-efficacy is less evident and its impact is likely to be more indirect. Political self-efficacy is both theoretically and empirically strongly related to several key measurements of political competence: political knowledge, educational attainment, and especially political interest, which is necessary to acquire information about politics (Craig & Maggiotto, 1982). Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that some of the impact of political socialisation on political trust is likely to be channelled through political self-efficacy. The intervening effect of political self-efficacy on political trust is likely to be related to alienation from the political system. Since the political system, at its simplest, refers to the strength of the relationship between the citizen and the state, this bond is severely weakened if the citizen has no skills or knowledge to neither understand what the state does, nor to affect its decisions (e.g., Finifter, 1970).

Descriptive trends

As mentioned, Finland is widely perceived as a high-trusting society. This assessment is confirmed after scrutinising country-level survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS), collected across Europe in 2018.¹ The ESS-data show that regardless of the political object (parliament, legal system, police, politicians, political parties, European Parliament or United Nations), the level of trust is considerably higher in Finland than in Europe on average. However, this is also the case for the other four Nordic countries (Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden). Hence, the well-established image of the Nordic countries as highly politically trusting societies still seems to hold (see, e.g., Linstead & Ringdal, 2008).

We now continue by showing how political trust in Finland has developed over time and how it differs between various political objects. Political trust is usually measured with survey items asking the respondent to either rate the trustworthiness of various political objects on a scale (i.e., how much do you trust?) or by a binary assessment (i.e., do you trust?) (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Hence, depending on whether one uses an 11-point scale (0–10) or a binary assessment (Yes/No), the trust assessment might somewhat differ.

Since 2011, the FNES has included an array of survey questions asking the respondents to rate the trustworthiness of various political objects on a scale from zero to ten, where zero indicates no trust at all and ten indicates complete trust. This makes it possible to compare the average levels of trust during three periods: 2011, 2015 and 2019. Based on the data from 2019, the President is the most trusted, followed by the police and the universities and research institutions. At the other end of the spectrum, the European Union (EU) is the least trusted, with politicians and major corporations completing the bottom three. In general, there do not seem to be any larger fluctuations in the levels of trust over time, and the trust evaluations could, therefore, be considered relatively stable in Finland. Still, in relation to both the Government and the Parliament, the trend is negative in terms of trust evaluations (see Figure 3.1).

Measuring political self-efficacy is not straightforward, and while several attempts have been made to find commonly accepted measures (see, e.g., Craig et al., 1990; Morrell, 2003), there is little consensus in the field, especially when reviewing data and surveys from different countries. Some scholars have utilised a variety of “efficacy scales” (e.g., Niemi et al., 1991; Sapiro & Conover, 1997), whereas others have relied on single-item solutions (Bennet, 1997; Michelson, 2000). An in-depth discussion on these measurement problems is, however, beyond the scope of this chapter. Unlike with political trust, the level of political self-efficacy in Finland is broadly in line with the rest of Europe (ESS 2018).² However, looking at political self-efficacy from a Nordic perspective, Finland appears to deviate. According to the data from the ESS 2018, the mean value for political self-efficacy in Finland was 2.2 (on a five-point scale), being clearly lower than in the other Nordic countries (Denmark 2.7, Iceland 2.8, Norway 2.7 and Sweden 2.6). Given that the level of political trust in Finland is in line with the other Nordic countries and above the European average, the discrepancy regarding political self-efficacy is quite striking.

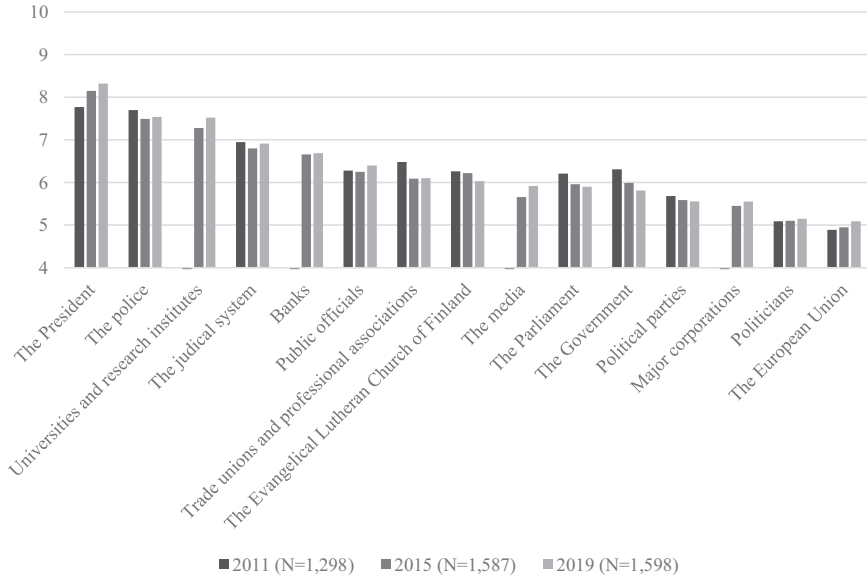


Figure 3.1 Trust in Political Institutions in Finland, 2011–2019 (FNES).

In order to measure the development of political self-efficacy in Finland over time, we use an item related to subjective evaluation of the respondents' political understanding. It is derived from a battery of statements (*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?*) and the statement is as follows: *"Sometimes politics seems so complicated that I cannot quite understand what is going on"*. The survey item is considered a standard item for measuring political self-efficacy (see, e.g., Niemi et al., 1991). Disagreement with the statement is coded as reflecting a more "efficacious" answer, on a four-point scale ranging from 0–3 and the survey item has been included repeatedly by the FNES since 2003. The results show that the level of political self-efficacy has actually increased in Finland for each survey during this period (see Figure 3.2).

This overview shows that political trust is comparatively high in Finland and has remained quite stable over time. On the other hand, even if political self-efficacy in Finland has slightly increased for each FNES survey since 2003, it is still comparatively lower in Finland in relation to political trust. Hence, Finland could still be considered a highly politically trusting society but simultaneously as a society with a comparatively low level of political self-efficacy. Following this, we now continue with some explanatory analyses.

Explanatory analyses

In order to examine the relationship between political self-efficacy and political trust, we use the FNES 2019. Political trust, which constitutes the

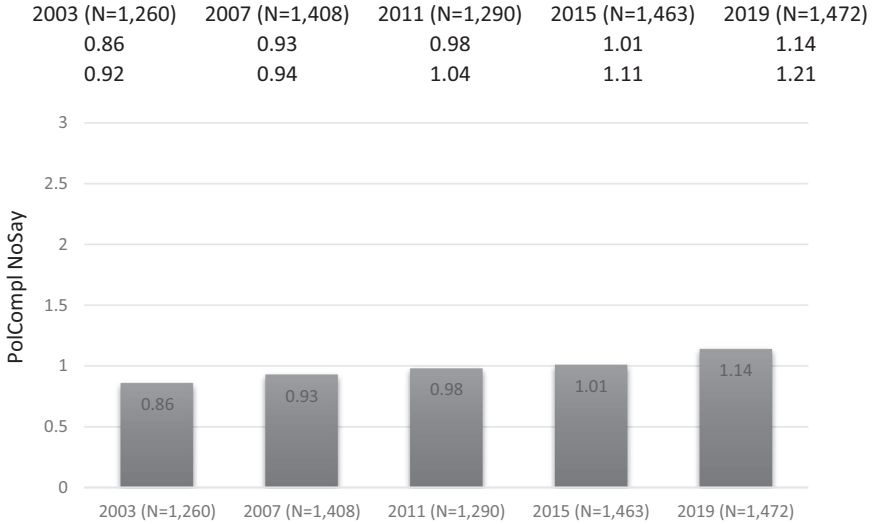


Figure 3.2 Political self-efficacy in Finland, 2003–2019 (FNES).

dependent variable in our linear (OLS) regression analysis, is measured with an index consisting of five survey questions measuring trust in the president, political parties, the parliament, the government and politicians (Cronbach's alpha 0.876). The index, as the separate questions it consists of, is measured on an 11-point scale, where 0 indicates the lowest trust and 10 indicates the highest trust.

The regression analysis is run in three steps. The first step includes only the main independent variable of interest, namely, *political self-efficacy*. To measure political self-efficacy, we employ the same single survey item used for the longitudinal overview in the previous section, i.e., *Sometimes politics seems so complicated that I cannot really understand what is going on*. Answers are given on an ordinal scale (completely agree, agree, disagree, completely disagree). Hence, those who agree with the statement have lower political self-efficacy than those who disagree.

The second step includes basic control variables related to social background, namely, *gender* and *age*, which, according to previous studies, have not proven to be strong predictors of political trust (Bäck et al., 2016, 381), and *education*. Some studies have shown a positive effect of education on political trust (e.g., Ugur-Cinar et al., 2020; Marien & Hooghe, 2011), but there are also studies that indicate the opposite. It is also possible that the capacity to be more critical of the political system increases with higher education (Listhaug, 1995), in line with the ideas of “the critical citizen”.

The third model includes a number of variables that the ample literature and previous empirical studies have shown to explain variations in political trust. *Social trust* is measured with the commonly used 11-point scale reading *Generally speaking, do you think that most people can be trusted, or can you never be too*

careful? (0= “can’t be too careful”, 10= “most people can be trusted”) and we expect the regression coefficients to be positive: higher social trust leads to higher political trust. Attachment to the political system can be measured in a variety of ways, and citizens who feel that they are highly attached to the political system are expected to display higher political trust. We measure *political interest* with the question *How interested are you in politics?* The variable is dummy-coded to represent those who are interested (“very interested” or “interested to some extent”) and those who are not interested (“not very interested” or “not interested at all”). For *party identification*, we use a question reading *Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?* (yes/no).

The political trust of citizens is also affected by their evaluations of how the political system is performing. Especially, evaluations of the state of the economy and how satisfied the citizens are with how the government is dealing with economic fluctuations have been deemed relevant for the formation of political trust (Banducci et al., 1999; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Bäck et al., 2016). Thus, we include variables that measure the respondents’ *evaluations of the state of economy*, *evaluations of the competence of the MPs* and *how satisfied they were with the previous government*. Further, to measure evaluations of the state of economy, we use the question *In your opinion, how has the state of economy in Finland changed over the past twelve months?* In the regression, we compare positive evaluations (“has gotten much or somewhat better”) and negative evaluations (“has gotten much or somewhat worse”) with the reference category, consisting of those who indicated that they felt that the state of the economy has stayed the same. Moreover, we explore the role of evaluations of the competence of the MPs with the question *What do you think about the following statement? Finnish Members of Parliament are competent.* Those who “agree” or “somewhat agree” with the statement are coded as having a positive evaluation of the competence of the MPs, whereas those who “disagree” or “somewhat disagree” provide a negative evaluation. Finally, we evaluate the respondents’ satisfaction with the previous government with the survey question: *How good or bad a job do you think the Government led by Prime Minister Sipilä did over the past four years?* We compare those who were satisfied (very good job/good job) and those who were dissatisfied (bad job/very bad job) with the reference category of respondents who were neutral (neither a good nor a bad job).

Turning to the results of the regression analysis, we find that political efficacy, on its own (Model 1), only has a very small effect on political trust and that the effect is not significant for those who are the most efficacious. Also, as expected, adding the social background variables gender, age and education does not readily improve the model (Model 2), increasing the explained variance to just over 8 percent.

While political self-efficacy turns out to be a rather weak, albeit significant, predictor of political trust in the final regression model (Model 3), we further explored its marginal effect on political trust in Finland. This control exercise revealed that the level of political trust is highest among those respondents who agree or somewhat agree with the statement that politics is sometimes complicated, i.e., respondents with lower political self-efficacy. Conversely, those who are the most efficacious and completely

Table 3.1 Block model regression analysis (OLS) for factors associated with political trust (FNES 2019)

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 3</i>
Political self-efficacy (ref. “completely agree”)			
<i>Somewhat agree</i>	0.427 (0.154)**	0.302 (0.151)*	-0.090 (0.150)
<i>Somewhat disagree</i>	0.570 (0.165)***	0.443 (0.165)**	0.137 (0.168)
<i>Completely disagree</i>	0.077 (0.238)	-0.167 (0.236)	-0.664 (0.208)***
Gender (ref. “female”)		-0.129 (0.117)	-0.182 (0.108)
Age		0.021 (0.003)***	0.009 (0.003)**
Education (ref. “Primary or lower secondary”)			
<i>Short vocational/college level</i>		0.608 (0.152)***	0.486 (0.140)***
<i>Upper secondary</i>		0.933 (0.210)***	0.390 (0.206)
<i>University of applied sciences degree</i>		1.060 (0.230)***	0.283 (0.211)
<i>University degree</i>		0.957 (0.208)***	0.453 (0.194)*
Social trust (scale 0–10)			0.230 (0.024)***
Political interest (ref. “not interested”)			0.378 (0.145)**
Party identification (ref. “do not feel close to any party”)			0.521 (0.110)***
Evaluation of Finnish MPs (ref. “not competent”)			1.002 (0.118)***
Satisfaction with previous government (ref. “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied”)			
<i>Very or somewhat satisfied</i>			0.250 (0.147)
<i>Very or somewhat dissatisfied</i>			-0.273 (0.137)*
Evaluation of the economy (ref. “no change”)			
<i>Economy has improved</i>			0.303 (0.129)*
<i>Economy has worsened</i>			-0.154 (0.137)
Constant	5.977 (0.121)***	4.458 (0.253)***	2.947 (0.312)***
Adj. R ²	0.015	0.082	0.417

Notes: Unstandardized regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$. All data have been weighted.

disagree with the statement demonstrate much lower political trust than those who have low political self-efficacy. The regression coefficient is significant only for those who completely disagree, indicating that the most efficacious respondents are, in fact, the least trusting. On the one hand, this supports, at least to some extent, the idea of the “critical citizens” whose informed scepticism has translated into lower political trust. On the other hand, it also indicates that there might be some amount of blind faith among those who feel that politics is complicated (low efficacy) but who still demonstrate a fairly high level of political trust.

The final model of the regression analysis also reveals that the variables with the strongest effect on political trust are social trust, party identification and positive evaluations of the MPs' competence. Adding these variables and indicators of evaluations of the economy and the performance of the government, the model explains 41.7 percent of the variation of political trust in Finland. While satisfaction with the previous government and evaluations of the economy have a modest impact, evaluations of the competence of the MPs turn out to be a very strong predictor of trust. Respondents who are interested in politics are also significantly more trusting than those who are not.

Conclusions

This chapter has studied the political trust of the Finnish citizens around the Parliamentary elections of 2019, with a special focus on the role of political self-efficacy. While political trust is high in Finland, both in international comparisons and when evaluating the level of political trust over time, the level of political self-efficacy among the Finns is weaker. Since the citizens' level of political attachment has previously been found to explain the degree of political trust, we wanted to explore how political self-efficacy and political trust are related in the Finnish electorate.

The results show that while we initially might have leaned towards expecting the relationship to be the other way around, with higher political self-efficacy being connected to higher political trust, the results, instead, support the idea of the critical citizen: the higher the political self-efficacy, the lower the political trust. This is, however, not necessarily bad news for democracy. On the contrary, it might be considered more worrying if political trust is independent of how well citizens understand the political system and its processes. It could be argued that in an ideal democracy, political trust is based on informed and critical citizenship and informed scepticism, not on blind faith and ignorance. Thus, an ideal democracy would, perhaps, consist of only supportive and critical citizens. Clearly, it would be beneficial for democracy to have representatives whose trustworthiness is based on the support of politically self-efficacious citizens who constantly and critically evaluate the political system. In a similar vein, a democracy should have a certain amount of informed distrust, which is the essence for its renewal. Based on the analysis, it seems that in Finland, the critical citizens dominate over the supportive ones, which partly explains the discrepancy between political self-efficacy and political trust in a cross-country comparison.

Interestingly, the empirical analysis also revealed that political interest matters to the relationship between political trust and political self-efficacy, but only for those who have low self-efficacy. This result explains the existence of the committed citizens and separates them from the alienated ones. Although not trusting their own capabilities to participate in politics, the committed citizens still have some curiosity when it comes to politics, which engages them and attaches them to the political system at some level. The situation is more desperate for the alienated citizens who have no interest in politics, do not feel competent to understand it and have no trust

in the system itself. Political knowledge and interest in public matters are central prerequisites for citizen involvement and, as Putnam (2000, 35) aptly writes: “If you don’t know the rules of the game and the players and don’t care about the outcome, you’re unlikely to try playing yourself”. Since we know that all these three components matter for political participation, this sends a worrying message to both scholars and decision-makers who have already been concerned about the differentiation of political participation in Finland (see Chapter 5). Any efforts that focus on increasing the Finnish citizens’ political self-efficacy would, therefore, likely further benefit their attachment to the political system and their interest in participating in politics.

Notes

- 1 Europe here includes respondents from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Spain, Finland, France, United Kingdom, Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden, Slovenia and Slovakia.
- 2 Measurement of political self-efficacy in ESS 2018: ‘How confident are you in your own ability to participate in politics?’. Scale from 1 to 5, with a higher value indicating a more efficacious answer.

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