

The SOM Institute's Notes on Survey Methodology – 2026:5

The measurement of political trust in surveys

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ABSTRACT

Political trust is considered one of the cornerstones of a well-functioning democracy and has been studied by researchers for a long time. However, survey research varies when it comes to the question wordings used to measure trust. The aim of this study is to investigate whether the degree to which the mission statement of public authorities is emphasized in the question wording influences respondents' reported level of trust. Two studies were conducted, where the second one was a replication of the first. The results of both studies indicate that if the mission statement of authorities is specified, the average level of trust is lower, as compared to questions that ask if respondents 1) trust that a given authority "do their job" or 2) simply if they trust the public authority. Future studies could explore how to measure the dimensionality of trust in survey questions with or without a specified mission statement, and the consequences of this in terms of response patterns. Future research could also examine how different indicators of trust are linked to citizens' perceptions of how well authorities perform in different areas.

INTRODUCTION

Political trust is commonly considered one of the cornerstones of a well-functioning democracy. Societies in which people trust the authorities have more compliance, less corruption and stronger economic and environmental performance (Hetherington, 1998; Jagers et al., 2020; Scholz & Lubell, 1998; Warren, 2017).

Political trust has been measured by survey researchers for many decades (Hetherington, 1998). One aspect of the broader concept of political trust concerns trust in public authorities (Rydén et al., 2024). However, one caveat in the trust literature is measurement inconsistency. The question wording used in different studies to measure political trust varies, sometimes even within the same survey¹.

These differences may mirror variations in the conceptualization and operationalization of trust. De Fine Licht and Brülde (2021) outline trust as a three-placed concept "where an agent (A) trusts another agent (B) to perform an act or ensure a state (C)". This perspective on trust can be operationalized in survey questions that ask respondents to state their level of trust in how authorities "carry out their work", in which "C" is explicitly mentioned in the question. Questions can also target respondents' level of trust in "B", without reference to any act or state that the authority should perform or ensure.

The overall aim of this study is to investigate how the phrasing of survey questions about trust in authorities influences respondents' reported level of trust, focusing on the degree to which "C" – the mission statement – of authorities is specified.

Two studies were conducted. The first study tested if the degree to which the survey question specified "C" affected the level of trust respondents had in five different Swedish authorities. The question wording was varied in three ways: 1) without "C", i.e. only about if the authority can be trusted, 2) "C" specified by how authorities "carry out their work",

¹ The SOM survey from the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg has measured institutional trust in surveys since 1986, using different question wordings.

and 3) “C” specified by a brief individual mission statement unique for each authority. Study two was a replication of study one.

STUDY 1

PROCEDURE AND SURVEY

The goal was to test if a stronger specified “C”, i.e. the action or goal the agent is supposed to achieve, affects the perceived trustworthiness of authorities. In the survey, respondents were asked to state their level of trust in five different Swedish authorities: 1) the Tax Agency, 2) the Central Bank (Riksbanken), 3) the Police Authority, 4) the Armed Forces, and 5) the Public Employment Service.

The selection of authorities was made to ensure variation in terms of how much contact the average citizen has with them. Most people in Sweden interact personally with the Tax agency at least on a yearly basis, while fewer are regularly in contact with the Armed Forces or the Central Bank.

The goal of the selection was also to achieve variation in the level of trust that people on average have in the included authorities. For example, previous studies show that the Police Authority has high levels of trust, whereas the trust is low in the Public Employment Service (Rydén et al., 2024; Holmberg & Weissenbilder, 2026).

The experiment consisted of three experiment groups.

Group 1 had no specified C, using a form of question commonly used in surveys: “How much trust do you have in the following institutions and groups?”

Group 2 had a weakly specified C, meaning that an action was described, but it was the same one for all authorities. Group 2 had the following question: “How much trust do you have in the way the following institutions and groups *do their job*?”

Group 3 had a strongly specified C. Therefore, for each of the five authorities selected, a mission statement was specified. These were found by visiting the official website of each authority and finding their stated government mission. These goals were then turned into

survey questions with a base: “How much trust do you have that...?” following an addition for the specific C for each authority. For example, the question for the Swedish tax agency was “How much trust do you have that the tax agency collects taxes correctly?”. See appendix 1 for illustrations of how the question looked in the survey for each experiment group for all authorities.

All three experiment groups had the same 5-point scale: “Very low trust”, “Quite low trust”, “Neither high nor low trust”, “Quite high trust”, “Very high trust”.

SAMPLE

The sample consisted of a stratified probability-based sample of people being invited via post to join the Swedish Citizen panel. The study was part of their invitation-survey to join the panel. The sample consisted of a total of 1,442 participants in three experiment groups. Group 1 (no specified C) 510, group 2 (weakly specified C) 472 and group 3 (strongly specified C) 460.

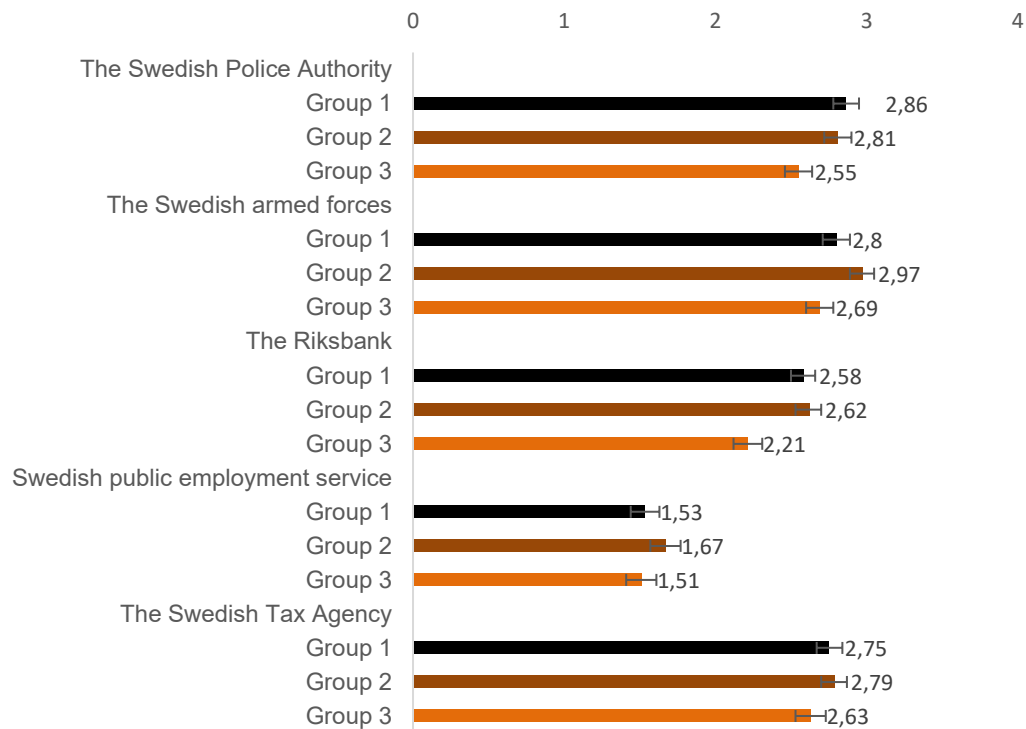
The data collection occurred between 25th of June until 29th of August 2025. The participants received two reminders, one via post and one via text-message.

RESULTS

The mean of trust for each Swedish authority is presented in Figure 1 below. Overall, the results indicate that group 2, with a weakly specified C, had a higher mean than group 3 with a more specified C. For example, the mean trust score for the Armed Forces on a scale from 0 to 4, was 2.97 in group 2, as compared to 2.69 in group 3.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the means across the groups for each authority. For the Police there was a significant difference between the groups, $F(2, 1397) = 14.15, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$), with a Bonferroni test which indicated that group 2 reported a significantly higher trust than group 3. Similar results were seen for the Armed Forces ($F(2, 1384) = 9.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$) and for the Riksbank ($F(2, 1389) = 24.66, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$). However, the post hoc test indicated that the difference between group 2 and 3 was not significant for Employment Service ($p = .07$) or the Swedish tax agency ($p = .06$).

Figure 1. Mean of trust in five Swedish authorities across the different experiment groups, (95 % confidence intervals) 2025



Note. The mean for each group across all five authorities. The 5-point scale for each question was coded as follows: 0 = “Very low trust”, 1 = “Quite low trust”, 2 = “Neither high nor low trust”, 3 = “Quite high trust” and 4 = “Very high trust”. For group 1 the question was phrased: “How much trust do you have in the following institutions and groups?” followed by each authority. For group 2 the question was phrased: “How much trust do you have in the way the following institutions and groups do their job?” For group 3 each authority had a specified C, the Swedish police authority: “How much trust do you have that the police combat crime effectively?” The Swedish armed forces: “How much trust do you have that the Armed Forces defend Sweden?” The Riksbank: “How much trust do you have that the Riksbank keeps inflation low and stable?” Swedish Public Employment Service: “How much trust do you have that the Swedish Public Employment Service contributes to increased employment?” The Swedish Tax agency: “How much trust do you have that the Tax Agency collects taxes correctly?”

n=1,442

While group 2 had the highest mean across four out of five authorities, the difference was not significant compared to group 1 without any C. One exception was the Armed Forces where the mean for group 2 was significantly higher than for group 1 according to Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc comparisons ($p = .02$). In contrast to group 2, group 3 had the lowest trust in all five authorities.

The results from study 1 indicate a pattern of lower trust with the more specified C of group 3, and no significant difference between group 1 and 2.

STUDY 2

PROCEDURE AND SURVEY

The second study was a replication of the first study. In the survey, respondents were asked to state their level of trust in the same five different Swedish authorities as in study one: 1) the Tax Agency, 2) the Central Bank (Riksbanken), 3) the Police Authority, 4) the Armed Forces, and 5) the Public Employment Service. Further, study 2 had the same three experiment groups: Group 1 with no C, Group 2 with a weakly specified C and finally Group 3 with a strongly specified C.

SAMPLE

The second study was conducted with a new data collection. The sample consisted of a non-probability sample in the Swedish Citizen panel, stratified on sex, age and education level to be representative of the Swedish population. A total of 4,800 panelists were invited to complete the survey, and 2,963 answered more than 80% of the applicable questions.

The data collection occurred between 4th of November until 24th of November 2025. The participants received two reminders via email.

RESULTS

The mean of trust for each of the five Swedish authorities in study 2 is presented in Figure 2 below and looks similar to Figure 1.

As seen in Figure 2, group 2 had higher mean levels of trust than group 3 across all five authorities. To test whether the groups' mean levels of trust significantly differed, one-way ANOVAs with Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc tests were conducted.

The one-way ANOVA showed significant differences between group 2 and group 3 for all five authorities (The Police Authority: $F(2, 2993) = 82.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$); The Armed Forces: ($F(2, 2989) = 15.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$); The Riksbank: ($F(2, 2992) = 33.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$); The Employment Service: ($F(2, 2991) = 15.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$); The Swedish Tax Agency: ($F(2, 2989) = 6.53, p = .002, \eta^2 = .004$)).

The Bonferroni-adjusted post hoc tests further showed that the differences between group 2 and group 3 were statistically significant for all five authorities (all $p \leq .001$).

Group 1 also had significantly higher mean trust levels than group 3 for four of the authorities (The Police Authority ($p < .001$); The Armed Forces ($p < .001$); The Riksbank ($p < .001$); The Employment Service ($p < .001$)). However, no significant difference was observed between group 1 and group 3 for The Swedish Tax Agency ($p = .111$).

Comparisons between group 1 and group 2 showed a statistically significant difference only for the Riksbank ($p = .027$). No other differences between group 1 and group 2 were statistically significant.

The results of study 2 further confirms the findings from study 1. Group 3, with the more specified C, consistently reported lower levels of trust and differed significantly from the other two groups, whereas group 1 and group 2 were largely similar in their levels of trust. See Appendix 2 to see how the trust in the 5 authorities differs between the experiment groups in more detail and across gender, age and levels of education of the respondents.

Figure 2. Mean of trust in five Swedish authorities across the different experiment groups, study 2 (95 % confidence intervals)



Note. The mean for each group across all five authorities. See figure 1 for information about the questions asked. $n \geq 2,992$

CONCLUSION

Survey research varies when it comes to the question wordings used to measure trust. The aim of this study was to investigate whether the degree to which the mission statement of public authorities is emphasized in the question wording influences respondents' reported level of trust.

Two separate experimental studies show consistent results. The general pattern is that if the mission statement of authorities is specified, the average level of trust is lower, compared to questions that ask if respondents 1) trust that a given authority "do their job" or 2) simply if they trust the public authority. Furthermore, there are small or largely

insignificant differences between responses to questions phrased as “trust an authority to do its job” and simple trust questions.

The present study was not designed to investigate the reasons for the observed differences. Yet one interpretation resonating from dual processing theory could be that a question with a more pronounced mission statement triggers cognitive and more deliberate rather than emotional and faster evaluations of authorities. Respondents’ evaluation will thus be more oriented towards performance and outcomes rather than “wishful thinking” about what one normatively would like or expect authorities to be like.

To illustrate, when people are asked about their level of trust in the police, they base their evaluation on what they hope the police are like, in order for them to feel safe. However, if they are asked if they trust that the police effectively fight crime, respondents evaluate performance, more in line with the tradition of evaluating the *job performance* of public authorities (Holmberg & Weissenbilder, 2026). Yet, the difference between survey question typically used to measure job performance and trust is that the former asks about if public authorities “do their job” and the latter about if they “trust” that they do their job. Future research could investigate whether this subtle difference may trigger different kinds of performance evaluations.

These findings have both theoretical and practical implications. Theorists and practitioners need to consider that trust in authorities can be conceptualized in different ways, and that survey questions may tilt respondents’ reactions in different directions. For survey researchers, this study indicates that different trust questions commonly used to measure trust produce largely similar outcomes in terms of respondents’ levels of trust.

Survey researchers are developing questions to capture different dimensions of trust. One example is the use of indicators representing trust dimensions such as competence, motivation, and opportunity (Rydén et al., 2024). Future studies could therefore explore how to measure the dimensionality of trust in survey questions with or without a specified mission statement, and the consequences of this in terms of response patterns. Future research could also examine how different indicators of trust are linked to citizens’ perceptions of how well authorities perform in different areas.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1

Illustrations of the questions of each experiment group in the survey in Swedish.

Figure A1. Group 1

Hur stort förtroende har du för?

	Mycket stort förtroende	Ganska stort förtroende	Varken stort eller litet förtroende	Ganska litet förtroende	Mycket litet förtroende
Polisen	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Försvarmakten	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Riksbanken	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Arbetsförmedlingen	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Skatteverket	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure A2. Group 2

Hur stort förtroende har du för det sätt på vilket följande institutioner sköter sitt arbete?

	Mycket stort förtroende	Ganska stort förtroende	Varken stort eller litet förtroende	Ganska litet förtroende	Mycket litet förtroende
Polisen	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Försvarmakten	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Riksbanken	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Arbetsförmedlingen	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Skatteverket	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Figure A3. Group 3

Hur stort förtroende har du för att...?

	Mycket stort förtroende	Ganska stort förtroende	Varken stort eller litet förtroende	Ganska litet förtroende	Mycket litet förtroende
Polisen bekämpar brott effektivt	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Försvarmakten försvarar Sverige	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Riksbanken håller inflationen låg och stabil	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Arbetsförmedlingen bidrar till en ökad sysselsättning	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Skatteverket tar in skatter korrekt	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

APPENDIX 2

Table A1. Trust in The Swedish Police across groups in study 2, (percent)

	Very low trust	Quite low trust	Neither high nor low trust	Quite high trust	Very high trust	sum	n
Total	5	13	20	43	19	100	2,996
Gender							
Woman	3	9	18	48	22	100	1,437
Man	7	17	22	38	16	100	1,559
Age groups							
Below 30	11	15	21	35	18	100	104
30–39	8	19	20	37	16	100	339
40–49	7	16	20	39	18	100	834
50–59	3	11	22	42	22	100	466
60–69	3	11	20	47	19	100	604
70 years or older	3	10	20	48	19	100	649
Education							
Upper secondary education	6	14	19	43	18	100	885
Post-secondary education shorter than three years	5	13	22	42	18	100	1,094
Post-secondary education three years or longer	4	13	19	44	20	100	1,017
Experiment group							
Group 1	3	10	17	47	23	100	993
Group 2	4	9	19	46	22	100	993
Group 3	7	20	25	37	11	100	1,010

Note. The question was phrased: “How much trust do you have in the following institutions and groups?” followed by each authority.

Table A2. Trust in The Swedish Armed Forces across groups in study 2, (percent)

	Very low trust	Quite low trust	Neither high nor low trust	Quite high trust	Very high trust	sum	n
Total	3	7	18	43	29	100	2,992
Gender							
Woman	2	7	20	45	26	100	1,430
Man	4	7	18	41	30	100	1,562
Age groups							
Below 30	6	10	15	31	38	100	104
30–39	4	8	20	40	28	100	338
40–49	3	7	18	42	30	100	834
50–59	2	7	18	43	30	100	466
60–69	3	6	20	44	27	100	604
70 years or older	2	6	18	47	27	100	646
Education							
Upper secondary education	4	7	20	41	28	100	886
Post-secondary education shorter than three years	3	5	18	43	31	100	1,092
Post-secondary education three years or longer	2	9	17	46	26	100	1,014
Experiment group							
Group 1	2	6	18	44	30	100	992
Group 2	3	5	17	43	32	100	990
Group 3	4	9	20	43	24	100	1,010

Note. The question was phrased: “How much trust do you have in the following institutions and groups?” followed by each authority.

Table A3. Trust in The Riksbank across groups in study 2, (percent)

	Very low trust	Quite low trust	Neither high nor low trust	Quite high trust	Very high trust	sum	n
Total	3	8	26	41	22	100	2,995
Gender							
Woman	2	8	31	39	20	100	1,435
Man	4	9	22	40	25	100	1,560
Age groups							
Below 30	3	13	26	34	24	100	104
30–39	6	13	26	35	20	100	339
40–49	3	11	28	41	17	100	832
50–59	3	6	27	40	24	100	465
60–69	1	6	28	44	21	100	604
70 years or older	1	4	22	42	31	100	651
Education							
Upper secondary education	3	10	29	39	19	100	888
Post-secondary education shorter than three years	3	7	28	40	22	100	1,092
Post-secondary education three years or longer	2	8	22	41	27	100	1,015
Experiment group							
Group 1	2	9	26	38	25	100	993
Group 2	2	6	23	41	28	100	992
Group 3	4	10	30	41	15	100	1,010

Note. The question was phrased: “How much trust do you have in the following institutions and groups?” followed by each authority.

Table A4. Trust in Swedish Public Employment Service across groups in study 2, (percent)

	Very low trust	Quite low trust	Neither high nor low trust	Quite high trust	Very high trust	sum	n
Total	24	34	30	11	1	100	2,994
Gender							
Woman	21	35	30	12	2	100	1,433
Man	27	33	29	10	1	100	1,561
Age groups							
Below 30	17	22	32	25	4	100	104
30–39	30	37	21	10	2	100	339
40–49	27	33	28	11	1	100	834
50–59	25	36	26	11	2	100	464
60–69	23	36	30	10	1	100	603
70 years or older	17	32	39	11	1	100	650
Education							
Upper secondary education	26	34	29	10	1	100	886
Post-secondary education shorter than three years	25	34	29	11	1	100	1,094
Post-secondary education three years or longer	20	34	31	13	2	100	1,014
Experiment group							
Group 1	22	34	31	12	1	100	990
Group 2	21	33	32	12	2	100	991
Group 3	29	36	25	9	1	100	1,013

Note. The question was phrased: “How much trust do you have in the following institutions and groups?” followed by each authority.

Table A5. Trust in The Swedish Tax Agency across groups in study 2, (percent)

	Very low trust	Quite low trust	Neither high nor low trust	Quite high trust	Very high trust	sum	n
Total	2	6	15	44	33	100	2,992
Gender							
Woman	1	5	15	46	33	100	1,434
Man	2	7	16	42	33	100	1,558
Age groups							
Below 30	2	8	11	37	42	100	104
30–39	3	6	12	41	38	100	339
40–49	2	8	13	44	33	100	832
50–59	2	3	16	45	34	100	465
60–69	1	7	18	44	30	100	603
70 years or older	1	5	16	46	32	100	649
Education							
Upper secondary education	3	8	21	44	24	100	885
Post-secondary education shorter than three years	1	8	15	46	30	100	1,093
Post-secondary education three years or longer	1	3	10	42	44	100	1,014
Experiment group							
Group 1	1	6	16	45	32	100	992
Group 2	2	5	14	43	36	100	993
Group 3	2	8	15	44	31	100	1,007

Note. The question was phrased: “How much trust do you have in the following institutions and groups?” followed by each authority.



The SOM Institute is an academic organization located at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. Since 1986 the SOM Institute conducts annual cross-sectional surveys among the Swedish population with a focus on Society, Opinion, and Media, as well as administering the web panel called the Swedish Citizen Panel. The annual surveys and the web panel both function as infrastructures, enabling researchers and public organizations to effectively collect research and opinion data in collaboration with researchers at the SOM Institute.

In order to strengthen contemporary research on Swedish society, as well as to contribute to international methodological development, the SOM Institute frequently publishes notes on methodological research. These are made available for scholars and the public alike at <https://www.gu.se/en/som-institute/publications/research-on-survey-methodology>

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