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INTERVIEW



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## Colloquy with Steven Van de Walle on trust in Public Administration

María José Canel

Theory and Analysis of Communication, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain

### ABSTRACT

This interview with Professor Steven Van de Walle was framed by the fact that it was conducted during the lockdown caused by COVID-19, a crisis that has shown a globally shared vulnerability and that might be challenging the trustworthiness of governments. The talk starts at a conceptual level, looking at what trust in Public Administration is about. There follows an exploration of the sources of trust. Van de Walle deploys a typology to illustrate how information, rational calculus and emotions might shape a person's judgement about whether to trust. Based on recent research evidence from cross-country comparative data, he elaborates on the issue of what matters the most for citizens when deciding to trust. He deals with several relevant current debates regarding communication research and practice: the gap between real and perceived performance, the relation to post-truth, the impact of transparency, and the challenge of dealing with distrustful citizens. One major topic is how to measure trust: methods, research designs, available data, and current challenges. He also makes some comparative considerations between trust in Public Administration and trust in other organizations such as the Church and NGOs. The final part of the interview is a reflection about how COVID-19 might be affecting citizens' trust in government.

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## Introduction

Steven Van de Walle is Research Professor of Public Management at KU Leuven. His career has been focused on the development of the public sector, looking at organizational and managerial issues, contingencies, values, and at the impact of reforms in different countries.

He has published extensively on trust in Public Administration from different angles: the concept of trust in government, the effects of government performance and of citizens' satisfaction with public policies, the impact of accidental events, trust *versus*

**CONTACT** María José Canel ✉ [mjcanel@ucm.es](mailto:mjcanel@ucm.es) 📧 Theory and Analysis of Communication, Complutense University of Madrid, Madrid, Spain

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distrust, trust trends over time, sources of trust, trust measurements, and the impact of corruption.

Steven Van de Walle has been extremely helpful in dealing with the hazardous circumstances in which this interview had to be conducted because of the confinement due to the COVID-19 crisis. I felt the responsibility of bringing to the talk the present concerns of communication practitioners: Who will be blamed in this crisis? What matters the most for citizens when trusting? What should I do to restore trust? Van de Walle's rigorous, thorough and detailed knowledge of the available data on trust in government and in Public Administration allows him to offer a tranquil response: 'Don't panic, be patient, this storm will calm down' could be the synthesis of his recommendation for governments. For scholars, this interview is a call to look sharper: we have to explore new ways of analysing how, why, and to what extent people trust.

### **Exploring the concept of trust in public administration**

**Let's start with what trust is about. You argue that trust has to do with subjective matters, with decisions and expectations about another in situations of risk and uncertainty. Trust is about relations between citizens and the public sector. Can organizations such as the Public Administration be trusted?**

In theory, there is no need or reason to use the concept of trust in the relation between citizens and Public Administration. Public administrations are bureaucracies, and they are based on full predictability and the elimination of risk. They have clear rules, clear procedures, and clear standards. You just go to a governmental office and you get what you are supposed to get. There is no necessity then for a citizen to trust the Public Administration.

However, in practice, you are not certain that the public administration will deliver what it is supposed to deliver. And this delivery has two aspects: it is about delivering certain results, outcomes, performance. But it is also about delivering according to certain procedural standards; standards of equal treatment, of transparency. Those two aspects, process and outcomes, together determine trust in Public Administration.

Therefore, in most cases you don't need to trust, because most simple public services and products have those well-established procedures. There are, however, more complex services about which you don't know how the civil servant is going to react. Despite the established rules, there is still a lot of uncertainty involved in Public Administration.

Therefore, in theory there is no place for trust in that relation between Public Administration and citizen, but in practice, of course that relation is built on trust.

### **So, how would you define trust in the Public Administration?**

It is a judgement that the Public Administration will follow certain courses of action which relates to your expectations and your values in a situation of uncertainty. You expect or trust that the Public Administration will deliver the service it is supposed to deliver, but that it will also honour the values that you also find important. Trust implies that you have to deliver, but you also have to do it in the right way. Therefore,

it is the expectation that the Public Administration will deliver certain outcomes while following certain procedures that you also value.

## The sources of trust

In exploring the sources of trust, you suggest a typology that differentiates *Calculus-based trust* (based on deterrence), from *Knowledge-based trust* (based on information), and from *Identification-based trust* (based on mutual identification and on shared values and goals) (Lewicki and Bunker 1996; Van de Walle 2011). Where does trust come from?

*Identification-based trust* is often seen as the ultimate, the highest level of trust. It implies a pretty deep type of relationship, and to be built, it requires even more time than the other two types of trust. Building *Calculus-based trust* is easier: you can draft a contract and include in that contract certain deterrence mechanisms. ‘If you misbehave now you will be punished’. So that makes it easier for me to trust somebody I don’t even know. I do the calculations and conclude it is unlikely that the contract will be violated.

*Knowledge-based trust* is the type of trust you build up through repeated interactions and through getting more information about the other. So, if for instance I want to do business with somebody I don’t know, I go out for dinner, talk about each other’s families, I track records and build the knowledge I need to trust. And that makes it is easy to start trusting.

But *Identification-based trust* is more complex. It is based on shared values. ‘I can trust you because I know you value the same things in life; you have the same values such as I do’. Applied to the Public Administration, I see, for instance, this civil servant who is also a middle-class person, living in the suburbs, with two children, went to the same school as I did . . . . That makes it easy for me to rapidly identify with that person.

This is why trust networks are built on similarity. You see for instance trading networks with ex-pats, or communities of Iranians or Armenians abroad: they feel they have the same values and backgrounds, and that makes a safe platform in which start making business with someone you have even never met before.

We find this within governments where identification is based on political attitudes. ‘You are member of the same party, so I can assume we have the same norms and values, and that makes it easy for me to work with you. I know I can trust you’. You see this, for instance, when politicians have to control public service organizations. They appoint someone from the same political party. That is why politicization of the public administration is so popular, because it is an easy mechanism to build rapid trust between politicians and the public civil servants. There is no need for contracts or for control systems; you know that person will just not violate your trust.

But in building trust you have to take into account that, while identification-based trust works very well, at the same time it is an exclusionary mechanism. Because it means that you don’t trust the people who don’t have the same backgrounds or values. That makes it a very difficult type of trust to really recommend. You include those you know, but you exclude others. So, if you have it, it is a cheap mechanism, but it is not a principle the Public Administration can follow. As a civil servant, you have to serve

those who hold other views, other opinions. Identification-based trust can therefore be a very effective mechanism of controlling public administrations, but it can go against the values the Public Administration stands for, such as neutrality and objectivity. There is a bit of a contrast there.

**This, in a way, supports the idea that trust in Public Administration should be mostly based on rational arguments, on information, on cognitive communication.**

Ideally yes, but you also see that public administrations and governments play the card of, for instance, nationalism, which is also an identification-based trust. The common value you share is that strong national spirit that our country is the best, for instance. It is also a mechanism you could use, but I am not sure that it leads to a better Public Administration. It may, but we don't know that. So, what governments have indeed done is to combine different mechanisms of trust.

Calculus-based trust was a very important mechanism in the New Public Management. Everything was put in contracts, and if someone violated the contract, you could go to court or end the relationship. Therefore, in late 80s and 90s relationships were contractualized; relationships between public administration and citizens, among public administrations, and between politicians and civil servants. Trust was built on calculus, and that led to a massive growth of contracts. It has value, because, as I said, calculus-based trust allows you to rapidly build trust with people you have not worked with before. But it is a very expensive way, and it includes the possibility that people make the calculation that violating the contract is more worthwhile than keeping it.

What you see more commonly in Public Administration is a strong reliance on knowledge-based trust. That led, for instance, especially starting in the mid-1990s, to publication of documents, public performance information, freedom of information, transparency, and so on. The idea was that, if you give more information to the other, it will be easier for the other to start trusting you, because it will demonstrate that you can be trusted. The belief was that this route actually increased trust. But it did not quite work out that way, because people felt overloaded with information, or confronted with conflicting pieces of information, making it very difficult for them to figure out what was going on there.

**Continuing with the sources of trust, your recently published study of 173 European regions finds that both outcomes and processes have significant impact on citizens' trust in Public Administration, but that processes is the strongest institutional determinant (Van de Walle and Migchelbrink 2020). This corroborates extant research in different countries that shows that legitimate processes are more relevant for citizens than high achievements. Can we dissociate those two dimensions in terms of building and measuring trust?**

We wanted to look at whether trust in Public Administration is more due to outcomes or to procedures (more specifically, to the absence of corruption and to equal treatment by Public Administration). What we found was that both aspects are important, but that procedures matter a lot. In fact, they even matter more than outcomes;

only slightly, though. This means that good delivery is not enough if you don't follow the procedures that people value. So, in order to perform well as a Public Administration, to be valued for the outcomes you deliver, you have to deliver according to the right procedures.

### **What do you think this relevance of procedures in people's trust is due to?**

I think this is related to that identification-based trust, because procedures are linked to the values that citizens value precisely as citizens. I do not necessarily want a Public Administration that performs extremely well but that does not follow the right procedures. Citizens can deal with situations in which performance is not benefiting them as an individual (taxes went up, for instance) but which have been achieved with proper procedures.

I think this is something that has to do with value identification of citizens with their governments. It could be that society has other values and that it expects to see them in government. We cannot say for sure that the values we focused on in this study (absence of corruption, fairness and equal treatment) are universal.

## **Building trust via communication**

### **Then, these findings stress the relevance of addressing identification-based trust**

Yes, but it can go in two directions. You can try to strengthen the ideas of the liberal democracy, and the value of transparency, equal treatment, and accountability. But you can also increase identification-based trust by stressing politization, populism. Especially when the nationalist card is played, which is what happens when leaders emphasize the national identity when there is a threat to the nation, like in terrorist attacks or even in the present crisis caused by COVID-19. You may increase trust, but, as I said, it is not necessarily a way of improving the functioning of your government and of your Public Administration. For instance, we see that people trust corrupt authoritarian leaders who don't necessarily perform well. On the other hand, we also see well performing governments who don't invest in building common bonds and values, and who also suffer from low trust. Therefore, you need a little bit of everything.

**Rational arguments, emotional appeals.... This is somehow related to the current debate about the impact of post-truth. In the year 2016 *The Oxford Dictionaries* introduced the word 'post-truth' as the 'circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.' A defining element of the post-truth condition includes a certain relativism where personal values, beliefs and emotions take precedence. What does this mean for the challenge of rebuilding trust in public organizations?**

I think that it is the communicator that matters a lot. If post-truth is communicated by a leading government official, there is very little you can do. If incorrect facts are used by the president of a country or by a political leader, we cannot really expect citizens to recognize what is true and what is not true anymore. Post-truth implies that even the leaders don't care about objective truth. But this makes it very difficult to

other parts of the government or to other political leaders to communicate real and objective information. I have to say that this is not really a topic I have actually dealt with.

**Let's look now at what you have called 'the problem of causality' (Van de Walle and Bouckaert 2003). High citizen satisfaction with public services does not necessarily imply an increase in trust in government. What comes first? Do citizens trust when they are satisfied with the economy and public services, or is it the opposite, their satisfaction with public services derives from their trust in the government?**

I don't know how the causality works, but I think the main challenge is that if people distrust their government or their administration, no matter what you do, people will interpret it as something that does not deserve trust. When there is distrust in the government, people will not believe those governmental messages that try to show good performance. Or when governments want to reform their public administration to make it function even better, people will see all kinds of motives in that reform which confirm their belief that the government is not to be trusted. And I think that that is a very difficult challenge for policy makers: when there is distrust, every action you take will be interpreted from the view point of distrust. This is why it is difficult to have high levels of trust.

If you want to build trust you have to circumvent this, and one way is, for instance, to first convince opinion leaders who are actually trustors. Or have your communication done by someone else from a different brand. The strategy in the late 90s was to get rid of government brands in public services, and communicate as 'the agency for this' or 'the agency for that', trying to prevent citizens from seeing that the government was behind the service.

In building trust, governments have to take into account that people may tend to project an overall prejudice: they think that the Health System is inefficient despite the hospital they go to is working well; or they think that all politicians are totally corrupt, despite their specific MP is doing a great job. People judge that way even when they are confronted with evidence that shows the opposite. There is tension in how the people see the government, and by disaggregating governments into specific entities (local authorities, local members of parliament, the Health System), you may increase levels of trust in specific units or parts of government; but that doesn't increase trust in the overall government. At least not in the short term.

**The performance of public administrations and satisfaction of its users are thus not necessarily related because of the subtle interplay of reality, perception and expectations. What would you recommend governments do in order to close the gap between actual performance and perceived performance, between reality and perception?**

I would say that governments have already partly closed that gap. There is now much more openness about the performance of governments, whereas before citizens didn't have much information. Governments are trying to be more proactive in showing how they are performing. But still word of mouth is very important for people's judgements of trust. It is having a strong impact, especially because most citizens do

not interact with governments very often. They interact with parts of the government system like schools and public transportation; but they hardly ever contact the national central government. In other words, they have direct experience of performance of public services every day, but the ideas about how the national government works is very often built on old or unique individual experiences.

Trying to close the gap between reality and perception has a risk, because it also means actually showing people parts of the Public Administration that do not perform well. This happens even when it concerns public administrations that are trusted such as the police or the education system. People sometimes trust the local school even when they know that the public school system is not good. Some institutions, again, because of an identification-based trust, are trusted even if they don't perform well. Performance is just one aspect in the process of building trust.

**Thinking of the audience of a journal focused on communication, why should trust building be a goal of communication management?**

I think because being trusted makes things easier. When institutions are trusted, people will follow what public authorities establish. They will, for instance, pay taxes, and the government will not have to invest much in compliance and in inspection. You will also have to invest less in communicating your performance. When people trust you, your decisions are challenged less.

In the opposite situation, if you are distrusted, you will have to justify your decisions much better. Or you will find, for instance, reluctance in citizens to provide the information you need from them as a government. Take for instance the issue of Black Lives Matter. If that leads people to distrust the police, any simple interaction involving speeding or littering on the street, would escalate the risk: 'Why are you stopping me?' 'Why do you want my ID card?' Those are very simple things that can become problematic, and of course, as a government, you have to invest, to protect your police, to build the legal department to deal with all the complaints; that makes the system much more expensive to run. Trust makes things much easier.

But of course, you also don't want too much trust, because that means that control upon the government will disappear, and in the long term that is a risk. People shouldn't work on the assumption that every civil servant is an angel.

**Thinking of practitioners, who always have the challenge of combining facts with messages, could you say a bit more on how providing information may help trust?**

If you communicate in order to improve trust, you need to combine your performance (being open also about what you are not doing very well), with communication that shows what your values are. Because in this way people can identify your view. For instance, if you want to convince people to do something, and you put a face on the communication materials that resembles the targeted audience, this may help people to identify with the institution which is behind. But if you are a public administration and communicate a new policy with the typical picture of a civil servant, that might not work, because the audience you are trying to reach to doesn't identify with the picture. You have to send the message with the values that the community you try to reach also finds important.



When government communication is very much focused on how well it is doing, people might not believe it. People believe when governments say that something has gone wrong.

And of course, some parts of governments are still based on secrecy. For instance, judges still deliberate behind closed doors, since parts of the decision-making process are very messy. If that deliberation was disclosed, it would create distress. People would see ‘how sausages are made’: people think governments take always very rational ways of deciding, and when transparency comes, it is shown that other factors rather than just applying the law come into play. If you become too transparent about this, trust may actually decline.

**This brings me to the relation between trust and transparency. Recent reform initiatives of public administration focus on strict administrative procedures and controls to increase the accountability and transparency of administrations towards citizens. To your judgment, to what extent can ‘glass offices’ contribute to (dis-)trust? Does transparency increase trust?**

Transparency does not necessarily increase trust. There have been a couple of studies recently about the effects of transparency on trust, for instance the work by Grimmelikhuijsen in Utrecht (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013). Being more open, being more transparent does not necessarily bring trust. Because transparency also shows citizens new perspectives they did not even know about before, and that they might disapprove of. Transparency may actually have a negative effect on levels of trust.

But at the same time, it is a good principle for governments to be transparent, because it is one of those values that societies tend to find important in government. Governments should aim at transparency as a value in itself, and not as instrumental to increase trust.

**How would you define the value involved in transparency?**

That is very subjective. Why transparency is important? I really don’t know. Perhaps secret decisions or secret councils can work very well. But we need to somehow institutionalize in order to control the system, and transparency can become very helpful in that. It may help to control those in power.

## **Addressing distrustful citizens**

**Differentiating trust from distrust, you argue that they are not parts of a same continuum, but that they should be conceptualized as two different constructs (Van De Walle and Six 2014). You even talk about the merits of distrust (Van de Walle 2017).**

Trust is something you build in the daily work of the government interacting with citizens. But distrust is something you need to vest in institutions. Most democracies institutionalize distrust via systems of check and balance, or via compulsory accountability mechanisms. These are mechanisms for institutionalizing distrust which assure that people cannot abuse the position of trust. You need to maintain those institutions,

because otherwise there is a risk that at certain times, especially with identification-based trust, high levels of trust become a risk. This happens when, for instance, the majority of parliament also controls the Public Administration through political appointments. Having a certain level of distrust can be very helpful.

Another area where we should take a closer look at distrust is that of concerned citizens with profound distrust in institutions. We don't see these people much more in surveys, because they don't answer surveys. And they will not be convinced by any argument about the government doing something good for them. Think for instance of the people withdrawing from society becoming solitary individuals who go to live in the forest, or who set their own security systems. These are people with high distrust and with no possibility of coming back to see the benefits of the government.

This distrust is the one that some social movements try to capitalize on, saying: 'You are right, you shouldn't trust the government, but you should trust us as political party, because we are not politicians. We are as much outsiders as you are'.

### **To what extent is this second type of distrust good for societies?**

This distrust can be good when governments are not to be trusted, for example, dictatorships. But again, the problem is who decides who is to be trusted, what the standards are to state what trust/distrust is good.

Also, this distrust is not a problem when levels of trust are stable. But once these groups start to grow, then problems may emerge. Because governments cannot reach them anymore, they cannot steer these people any more, they cannot control them ... and these distrustful people start building alternative societies. They don't accept the authorities, they go to alternative providers, for instance caring for children at home rather than sending them to school; or they listen just to communications coming from their own media. This always existed, but in my view, it becomes problematic when people start translating their views into actions.

### **What recommendation would you then provide to governments for working with distrustful citizens?**

I think that working with these distrustful citizens is a major challenge for governments. It is very difficult to convince distrustful citizens that you have good intentions. So probably you have to take very small steps, and reassure them, and hopefully undertake repeated interactions to rebuild trust. I think there is a real risk if you don't try to still work with people who want to entirely exit the system, people who don't use services they are entitled to. You may start losing them, and it is important to try to connect with them, even if you think that what they are thinking and saying is total nonsense.

## **Measuring trust**

**We have talked about what trust is, what causes it, and about building it. Let's focus now on identifying the extent of trust. What is measuring trust about?**

It is, first, about knowing how much trust there is and whether that level is high or low comparing to other periods or across groups. And secondly, it is about assessing whether there is an impact of this trust on certain behaviours.

**Based on data from international and comparative surveys, rankings and barometers (such as NES, WVS, Eurobarometer, Gallup), you conclude in 2008 that there is no evidence to support a long-term decline of trust in the public sector. You claimed that we need more robust data, as well as better tools and approaches to measure trust (Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek, and Bouckaert 2008). You also found that sociodemographic and socio-economic elements are not major explanatory factors for differences in confidence (Van de Walle and Lahat 2017). To what extent have we advanced in this respect? What are we still missing in measuring trust?**

If we compare the situation now with twenty years ago, the amount of data has grown tremendously. In the 80s and the 90s we had a couple of Eurobarometer surveys and the World Value Survey every ten years; and that was about it. That meant you had just a little bit of national data every couple of years.

We now have much more detailed measurements, better quality surveys, and we also have a lot of commercial companies which are constantly measuring trust in institutions. We now can even start drilling down to measuring trust at the local level and across different municipalities. So, the amount of data has increased a lot.

It remains problematic though that non-response is very high, and especially people who distrust are also people who are not participating in surveys. I fear that trust measurements are missing out that part of the distrusting society.

We still largely rely on traditional ways of surveying. We need to look for other ways of establishing whether there is trust or not. New things are developed using for instance sentiment analysis in social media, and we need to advance in that area.

We should also be looking more at behavioural measures of trust. What are people actually doing as a result of trust or distrust? Protests, movements, exit behaviours, ... Those are stronger signals. For instance, people say they don't trust Public Administration, but they send their children to a public school. How do these two things go together? Or if you say you trust the police, but if they stop you and you refuse to show your ID card, that is a behavioural indicator that there is distrust. We need to look at whether attitudes about trust really matter in the end, and for that, we have to look at people's behaviours. We should therefore move beyond the mere attitude measurement of trust.

Also, most research on trust is based on path dependencies, and we continue using the questions and items that were once developed. More can be done in terms of having a better picture of trust.

There is also the issue of the topics of trust research. Trust measures are influenced by what is popular in a certain period. For instance, in the 80s we had a lot of measurements of declining trust in authority institutions, such as the Army or religious institutions. Now there is a focus on declining trust in political parties, because there is an interest in explaining populism. The way of how we measure trust is inspired by what is happening at a certain moment in time. But a result of that is that if a new phenomenon emerges, we don't have historical data to go to. Because if we are not

interested in that phenomenon today, we are not measuring it, and we will not have measures of it in ten years, when it becomes relevant.

## **Trust, the Church and NGOs**

**Let's now look at measurement of trust, exploring similarities and differences between public sector organizations and another organization in which the audience of this journal is very much interested: the Catholic Church.**

I can see similarities in the sense that both the Church and the Public Administration are evaluated in terms of processes: both are required to provide procedural justice, to be transparent, to be free of corruption. I am not sure, however, about the evaluation of outcomes: in the case of the Church, it is difficult to evaluate it on its performance, since its performance standards are not actually clear. It is unlikely that performance of church organizations is a big determinant of citizens' trust. It has to come from the procedural aspects of how these organizations function (due process, fairness, and so on).

But I find it difficult to establish comparisons between these two institutions. Because most citizens still use the Public Administration, so if you compare older statistics to new ones, although the level of trust may differ, the population is more or less the same, which is what allows you to look across time. Whereas if you compare statistics from the Church, there is a change in the number of people identifying with the organization. Therefore, if you now put out a survey about the Church, the approach should be different, since for many people the reaction would be: 'What kind of question are you asking me? You are asking me about an organization with which I have no relationship. Why does this matter?' Now you would need to make a lot of questions to get the information you need.

Of course, there are behavioural data that could help with measuring trust in the Church, like for instance secularization, or people no longer marrying in the Church. In this regard, it is interesting to note the current strengthening of fringe groups, either liberal or conservative. This could be a sign of distrust within the Catholic Church: distrust is then not translated into secularization, but in the strengthening of fringe groups within the Church system.

Overall, there is a lack of solid data to explore trust in religious institutions. There used to be a lot of research on this, done by sociologists of religion, who measured trust in the Church in the European Values Study. Also, the Eurobarometer measured trust in the Church, but they stopped doing this ten years ago. I haven't found solid data about trust in religious institutions.

I think it has to do with changes in the community of scholars. Some found that societies were modernizing and that church-going behaviours were declining. Research on measuring trust today is more inspired by scholars interested in political behaviours, or by people looking at social capital or even at migration movements. Religion is part of that, but only part.

**What about trust in NGOs?**

I would say that trust in NGOs has always been a typical question included in most surveys, and people had something to say about it, but maybe without really knowing what to answer since NGOs were pretty absent from most people's lives. But what has changed in recent years is the political rhetoric, which is really pointing to NGOs as a source of all evil. So, while ten years ago people did not know much about NGOs, they are becoming more salient in the political discourse. And I have the impression – I haven't checked statistics, I must say – that people now give a response of distrust in trust surveys. But not as a result of a personal experience with NGOs, rather because of a higher visibility of these organizations in the political discourse.

And in a sense, NGOs have also been the victim of their own transparency. Things go wrong every now and then, and when you become more transparent, there are more scandals, which reflects badly in the NGO sector.

### **The effect of government performance in COVID-19 on trust in government**

**We will end this interview with a consideration of the present situation. The COVID-19 crisis has shown a globally shared vulnerability, and has challenged governments' trustworthiness. You state that the objective of building and keeping trust is even more important in a period of crisis where the public sector needs to be a stronghold in the economy and in society (Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek, and Bouckaert 2005). How do contingencies/incidents challenge trust? Do they bring about anything positive? How would you describe the challenge that public sector organizations are going through in the crisis caused by COVID-19?**

Yes, with COVID-19, there is a very high uncertainty for public administrations, but at the same time, for many of them this is partly about falling back on existing routines. They seem to be managing well with that uncertainty. And what we are also seeing is that protests against public administrations for what they are expected to deliver during the crisis are not common.

People are following the rules to a very great extent; governments could enforce the lockdown. What we have seen during the COVID-19 crisis is that levels of trust in administration appear to be relatively high. People follow largely the government, the police, the local mayors, the Health System. In the end people are responding pretty well to those commands.

What is also happening during the COVID-19 crisis is a rally around the flag effect. When big crises happen, trust goes up. People start rallying around the leader, especially at the beginning of the crisis. We saw it after 11/9, and we are seeing it now with COVID. Where trust is measured on a very regular basis, we are seeing that trust tends to go up, and then it goes down, but there is no loss. It goes back to its original levels. Trust is therefore a pretty stable phenomenon: in ten, twenty years, trust does not change much.

**Could you elaborate a bit more on the stability of trust levels?**

I think that very often, when there is a crisis, or when something happens, people tend to assume that trust will collapse. And that sometimes happens, but for a very short period.

Trust is built over repeated experiences. It is something you learn to have over a long period of time. And if from an early age you see that you can trust certain parts of the government then single events will not bring big changes.

This is so in the other way round also. If you always distrust the government, evidence that it is doing well will not influence you that much. You rather will use your basic attitude towards the government to interpret positive information about it. 'Oh, well, the government is publishing these performance indicators, they are pretty positive, but I don't trust the government, so I don't believe this is true'. You will disregard that information. So, new information has very limited effects on the level of trust.

What we do see is some long-term trends in trust. For instance, the decline of trust in authority institutions which has happened during the 80 s and 90 s. Institutions such as the police, churches, and armies. Levels of trust in them have actually declined over the long term. I wouldn't say collapsed. But at the same time, regarding the level of trust in politicians, that has always been very low, and hasn't changed either. So, what you see are very slow changes. And that makes it difficult for public administrations to influence levels of trust. Because you probably need a lot of repeated interactions to either restore trust or to make trust collapse.

**So, going back to the present crisis, you don't see a big effect of the performance of COVID-19 on trust in governments.**

I would say I do not expect big changes in trust out of COVID-19. Trust in the Health system is now high, but it was already high anyway. It is a trusted institution whose performance was pretty ok given the circumstances. Trust in politicians is now low, but it was low already anyway.

And if there was one, a positive rally around the flag effect will disappear. This is what we have seen in most external events where trust was measured, like a bombing, an attack. There are also some other incidents from the past with long lasting effects, when trusted institutions finally lost their trust; cases of crime in the police being made public, or institutions such as the Army or the Church which had big turnarounds in trust. The number of events that actually have a major impact on trust is really limited. True, they were very discrete events in the sense that they happened in a very short period of time, while COVID-19 is going in a much longer period. But I don't expect big changes, because in this crisis there is not really a kind of core institution which is now under pressure. Trust will go back to the old levels again in the future.

**Do you think this stability also applies to countries in which the radicalization of the political debate is increasing criticism towards performance regarding COVID-19?**

I cannot really predict to what institution that distrust will be directed. Could it be the government, the local government, the Health System, or something else? This is something I don't know. In any case, since the government is enjoying so little trust,

the effect will not be massive. And where there is an increase of trust because of COVID-19, this is not a guarantee for the future.

## Disclosure statement

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## Notes on contributor

*María José Canel* is Professor in Political and Public Sector Communication, University Complutense Madrid (Spain), Co-Chair Public Marketing and Communication (EGPA), Founding President Asociación de Comunicación Política (ACOP) and leading scholar, Victory Awards (Washington DC, 2016). She has published widely exploring the role of intangible resources (including trust) in the development of Public Administration. Journals to which she has contributed: Political Communication, European Journal of Communication, Press/Politics, Public Relations Review, Communication Management. Publishers of her work include: Wiley-Blackwell, Bloomsbury, Palgrave, Hampton Press. Some of her book titles include *Comunicación de la Administración Pública*, *Public Sector Communication*, *Government Communication*, *Political Scandals*. She was Co-editor of the *Handbook of Public Sector Communication* (Wiley-Blackwell). Countries in which her works are published include: Spain, USA, UK, Italy, Poland, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina. She has a public sector practitioner background and was chief of a Minister's Cabinet for the Government of Spain. She has been involved in several election campaigns and in the development of government communication in different countries. Experienced in training public sector communicators (Spain, France, The Netherlands, México, Colombia, Guatemala, Chile).

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