

Social cohesion: Definition, measurement and developments

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Introduction

At the World summit for social development in Copenhagen in 1995 the member states committed themselves to “creating an economic, political, social, cultural and legal environment that will enable people to achieve social development” (Commitment 1). This overall commitment was followed by nine additional commitments, which to a large extent can be seen as means to achieve social development; one of them was the commitment to facilitate social integration (commitment 4). In the two decades that followed, the world did indeed experience social development. Especially, the rapid economic growth in China has lifted a large proportion of the world population out of severe poverty. And so has the economic development in India, Africa and South America. However, the same process has pushed the issue of social integration to the forefront. Terms such as “inclusive economic growth” and “social inclusion” have in many countries reached the top of the political agenda, e.g. in China were Prime Minister Hu Jintao in 2004 launched a the concept of a “harmonious society”. The idea was to create a “better balance” than had been the case in the social development that China had experiences so far. In the last two decades, the rich Western countries have also experienced a rapid increase in economic inequality. Therefore “social integration” or “social cohesion” has more or less become a global concern.

This report sets out to explore how terms such as “social integration” and “social cohesion” can be defined and measured. Based on a review of research in this field, the report suggests that the presence or absence of social trust, measured as trust between citizens within counties, is a fruitful way to analyze social integration and social cohesion. In the first section, the report explores the early roots of the term “social cohesion” and provides a formal definition. The second section provides the main argument for the relevance of social trust. The third section introduces how social trust has been measured, discusses some caveats and introduced the data material. The fourth section presents levels of social trust across countries, based on the sixth wave of the World Value Survey collected between 2010 and 2014. The fifth section present changes in levels of social trust between since the third wave of the World Value Survey collected between 1995 and 1999 in to access developments in social trust since the World summit in 1995. The overall finding is that one in finds little change in overall levels

of social trust in most of the countries, which can be followed in the time period. One of the main explanation for stability is the fact that social trust is very stable over the life time, i.e. changes in social trust is primarily caused by generational replacement. Therefore the sixth section analyses generational pattern, which indicate larger changes. Finally, the seventh section discusses the most plausible reasons for the social erosion that can be found in a number of the analyzed countries.

The early roots and definitions of social integration and social cohesion

Social integration and social cohesion are difficult terms to define. I suggest that we define social integration as the process that leads to social cohesion. Thereby we are left with the job of defining social cohesion, which ordinary citizens, policymakers and social scientists often just refer to as the “glue” or the “bonds” that keep societies integrated. However for academic purposes it is important to be more specific about what is actually meant by the terms we use. Based on the review below, I suggest that we define social cohesion as the belief held by citizens of a given nation-state that they share a moral community, which enables them to trust each other (Larsen 2013). This definition brings us a bit closer to a common understanding. But despite the focus on social cohesion, it is often the absence of social cohesion that is central to the discussion. The very discussion of social cohesion often implies its absence and, even more specifically, the decline of social cohesion. I suggest that we label the decline of social cohesion “social erosion”, which we then can define as fewer citizens in a given nation-state having the belief that they share a moral community that enable them to trust each other.

The question of social cohesion is by no means a new theme. It is a classic concern within social science that the bonds that keep societies together might erode in modern societies or highly differentiated societies. This question was at the very heart of the new discipline of sociology in the nineteenth century. In Durkheim’s (1858-1917) terms, the question was what could replace the so-called mechanical solidarity found in pre-modern societies – the solidarity that is established among people who are similar. This similarity could be both material: similar work, housing and food; and non-material: similar beliefs, morality and feelings. Durkheim labelled the non-material part of the community the *conscience collective*, which is the academic origin of the term “social cohesion”. Pre-modern societies were according to Durkheim characterized by a sizeable and strong “collective consciousness”, which typically had a strong religious fundament, so that any deviation from the moral codex was typically interpreted as a religious violation. Thus, strong norms of right and wrong and intense monitoring in small communities upheld non-material similarities. Or using the provided definition of social cohesion, the strong religious fundament and close monitoring made the member of society believe that they shared a moral community that enable them to trust each other.

It was an insightful observation that this kind of solidarity based on material and non-material similarity would come under pressure from the processes of industrialization, urbanization and democratization that marked the shift from pre-modern to modern societies. Therefore many of Durkheim's contemporaries were convinced that the larger differences between citizens in modern society would lead to much higher levels of conflict between them. Among those concerned with the impact of increased differences in material condition, the most influential thinker is without doubt Karl Marx. Among those concerned with the impact of increased differences in non-material differences, I would point the conservative ideology, which developed as a reaction to the socialism advocated by Marx. It is a main line of reasoning within conservative thinking social cohesion that societies earlier were kept integrated by good moral standards, respect for the family, the law and the king (or in the modern version, the nation-state) – which standards have now been eroded. And, in order to restore harmony, one needs to strengthen the old “collective consciousness”. In the Chinese case, the idea of “a harmonious society” has also been followed by a promotion of the moral codex provided by confucianism.

In a modern globalized and multicultural world, it is difficult and problematic to cultivate a similarity of mind. It might actually be in direct conflict with the idea to ensure “non-discrimination, tolerance [and] respect for diversity”, which also were stated in commitment four in the declaration from 1995. Durkheim also rejected the idea that modern societies could be kept together by shared moral standard, though he shared the worries of modern conservative thinking. Instead Durkheim argued that the increased interdependence found in more differentiated societies could develop into a new kind of “organic solidarity”. The increased interdependence is easily spotted in the production structure. In the agrarian economy, a large number of citizens could be more or less self-sufficient, while in a modern society, industrial or service workers are dependent on raw material delivered by others, food produced by others and markets where products can be exchanged. This could, according to Durkheim, establish an organic solidarity, the consciousness in citizens of being dependent on each other (as organs in a body are dependent on each other). Most contemporary sociology question the idea that organic solidarity, the consciousness of being dependent on each other, is sufficient to uphold social cohesion in highly differentiated societies. However, Durkheim's interdependence argument points to a very fundamental aspect of modern society: We all need to interact with persons we do not know. This idea of interdependence is the backbone of the modern sociological thinking concerned with the issue of trust.

Social cohesion and the importance of trust

The shift from pre-modern to modern societies can according to Giddens (1990) be described as a shift from embeddedness to disembeddedness (Giddens 1990). In such a situation, trust becomes a

fundamental precondition for the ontological safety for the individual, as when by simply taking the bus you have to trust in the abilities of the experts who invented the bus, in those of the unknown bus driver, and those of all the other unknown drivers on the road. One can argue that in a “risk society” (Beck 1992) many risks can only be overcome by placing trust in unknown fellow citizens and the roles they fulfill in the social system as policemen and women, social workers, bank advisors and countless others. Even more convincing is the argument that trust in unknown fellow citizens, besides influencing individuals ability to cope with modernity, is crucial for the functioning of modern institutions such as the market, democracy, and the state (Luhmann 1979). Therefore the importance of trust has been so strongly emphasized in contemporary sociological thinking.

Especially horizontal trust between citizens has become a major field of interest, and not only for the discipline of sociology. In political science, trust between citizens is perceived to be a resource that enables societies to overcome the basic problems of collective action (Axelrod, Hamilton 1981, Rothstein 2005). The problem of collective action is highlighted for example by the famous prisoner’s dilemma which shows that players without mutual trust choose a sub-optimal solution. The most famous field-study is Putnam’s description of how democracy’s failure in South Italy and success in North Italy was due to different levels of social trust (1993). Trust also has a prominent place in economics with the basic idea that trust is a way to reduce transaction costs (the cost of using the market), an approach promoted by a number of leading economists (e.g. the 2009 Nobel-Prize winner Oliver Williamson). Empirically, economists have also been able to show a strong correlation between trust between citizens and economic growth (Knack, Keefer 1997).

If we return to the definition of social cohesion provided above – the belief held by citizens of a given nation-state that they share a moral community – the point is that we are now able to specify the most important aspect of the content of the “shared moral community”. For modern (or post-modern) societies, the most important aspect is not that citizens believe they share the same religion, family values, attitude towards homosexuality or other ideals; for the everyday operation of highly differentiated societies, *the most important aspect of social cohesion is that citizens believe they share the norm of not cheating each other*. Fortunately, a number of international surveys allow us to measure this pivotal aspect of social cohesion.

Measuring social trust

In empirical analyses, horizontal trust between citizens is typically measured by the question; “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted – or – that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?” As high trust levels go together with well-functioning democracies, economic growth and satisfaction with living in a modern society, this item seems to capture what many

contemporary sociologists, political scientists and economists are looking for. Furthermore the question has the great advantage that it has been asked in a number of older surveys; especially its inclusion in the World Value Survey (WVS) is of great importance. Finally, I want to emphasise that the question of trust in “most people” also has the big advantage that it does not aim to measure past experiences, that is, whether the respondent has previously been cheated. Instead, the item tries to measure the “rule of thumb” used by individuals when they interact with unknown fellow citizens. It is exactly these socially constructed rules of thumb that are important when disembedded persons interact in a highly differentiated modern or post-modern society.

The answers given to the standard question of social trust have been given many different interpretations. It is common to make a distinction between this generalised trust (trust in strangers) and specific trust (trust in people one knows e.g. family and friends). However, the term generalised trust is a bit misleading as it is not a trust without boundaries; when answering this question, respondents are likely to think of persons within their nation state. Most people still live their life within national boundaries and therefore “most people” (still) refers to other people within these national boundaries. Furthermore, the respondents that answer the trust question have often been through a questionnaire that constantly refer to the national level, e.g. should it be a governmental responsibility to reduce income differences, should taxes increase etc. Therefore Newton is right in arguing that the answers can be interpreted as the respondents’ evaluation of the moral standard of the society in which they live (Newton 2004). But it should be added that for most current societies the natural boundaries for society have become the territory of the nation state.

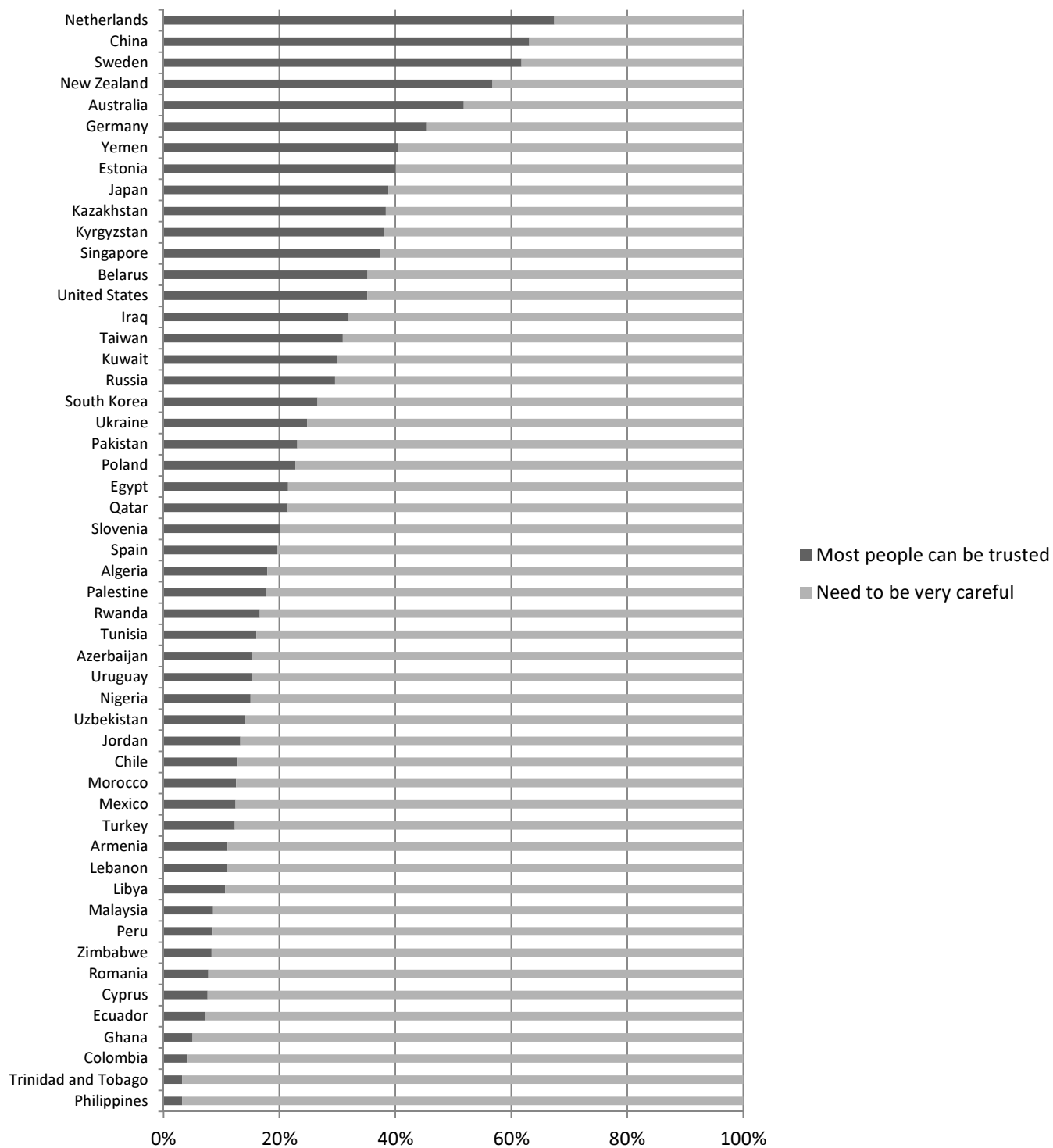
Finally, there is an important issue about whether citizens in different countries actually think along the same line when they answer the standard question about trust. Torpe & Lolle (2011) have analyzed this question by comparing how the same respondents answered the standard question about trust and a new question about trust in a person one “meets for the first time”, which was introduced in the fifth wave of the World Values Survey. For some countries, especially countries found in Africa and Asia, there was a significant discrepancy between the responses given to the two questions. This implies that some respondents do not think of “most people” as somebody they do not know. Therefore the report will, where possible, also adjust the standard measured by treating those answering that “they do not at all” or “not very much” trust a person, which they met for the first time as belonging to the group of non-trusters. However, in terms of development over time, the latter question is not available in the third wave of the World Value survey.

The report uses the World Value Survey, which provides the largest available data source in this field. The report uses the latest wave collected in the period from 2010 to 2014, which included 52 countries. In order to assess development in social trust since the World Summit, the report also used the third wave collected in the period from 1995 to 1999, which included 54 countries (for further introduction to the data material please visit www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

Cross-national levels in social trust around 2010-2013

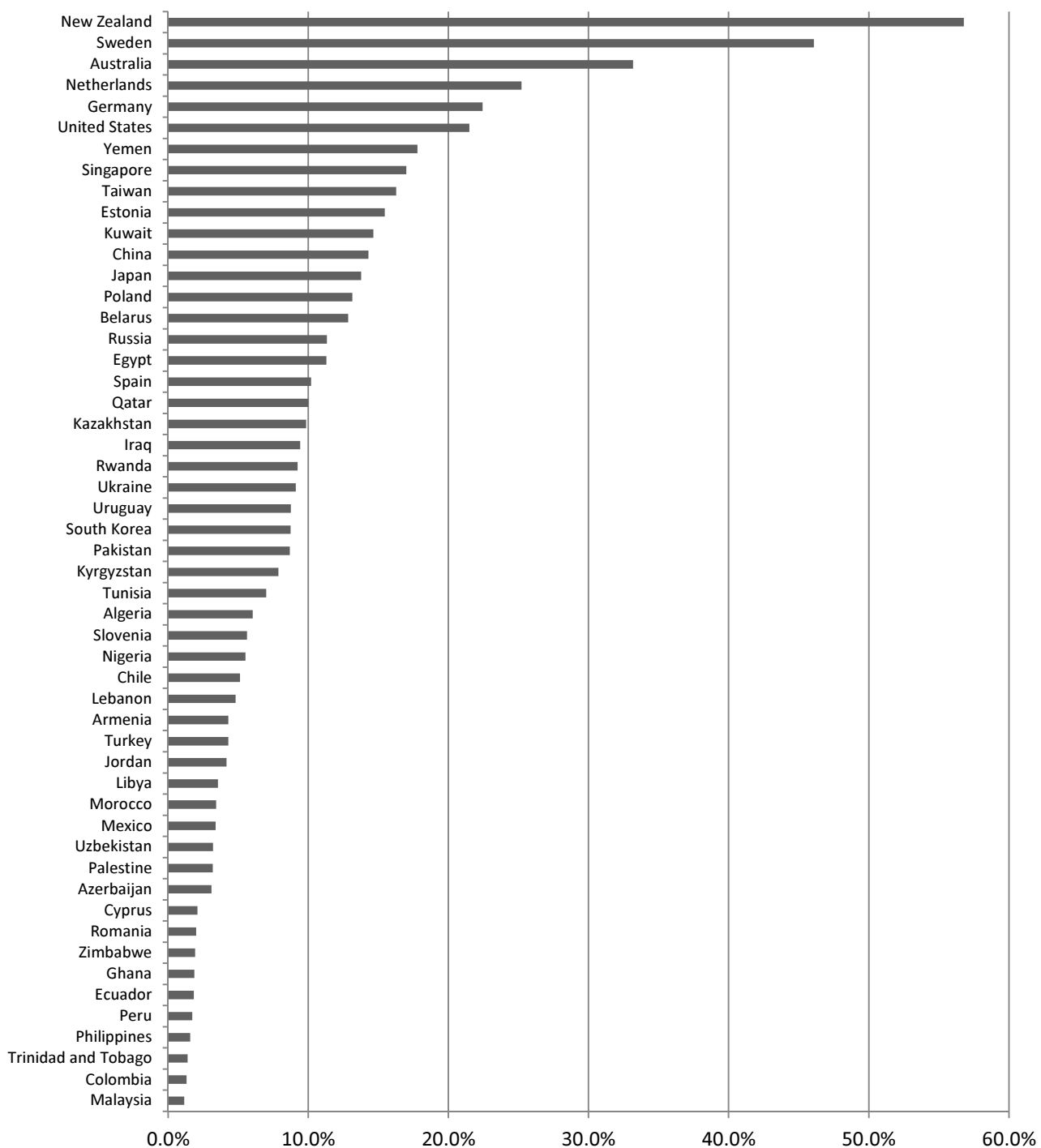
Figure 1 show the unadjusted measure of social trust as measured in the latest wave of the World Value Survey. The main result is that a high level of social trust is a rare phenomenon. Only in five out of the 52 countries included in the survey do those answering that “most people can be trusted” outnumber those answering that “one needs to be very careful”. These five countries were the Netherlands, China, Sweden, New Zealand and Australia. In the other 47 countries, those answering “one needs to be very careful” in most cases clearly outnumbered the group indicating social trust. Among societies with less than ten percent of the citizens believing most people can be trusted one find countries such as the Philippines, Trinidad and Tobago, Colombia, Ghana, Ecuador, Cyprus, Romania, Zimbabwe, Peru and Malaysia. And this result is actually, the most optimistic measure, which can be derived from the data. If one takes into account that some of the respondents indicating trust in “most people” actually pose very little trust in at person they met for the first time, the result become even grimmer. Figure 2 display the share of “trusters” after reclassifying the respondents with no trust in a person they met for the first time as non-trusters. After this adjustment only one of the 52 countries, New Zealand (57 percent) passes the threshold of having a majority of trusters. Sweden (46 percent) is also close to this threshold, while the social trust in Australia (33 percent), Netherlands (25 percent) and especially China (14 percent) is reduced to much more modest levels.

Figure 1: Social trust. Measured by trust in “most people”. WVS 2010-13



Note: Don't know excluded, not weighted

Figure 2: Social trust. Measured by trust in “most people” adjusted for distrust in a person met “for the first time”. WVS 2010-13

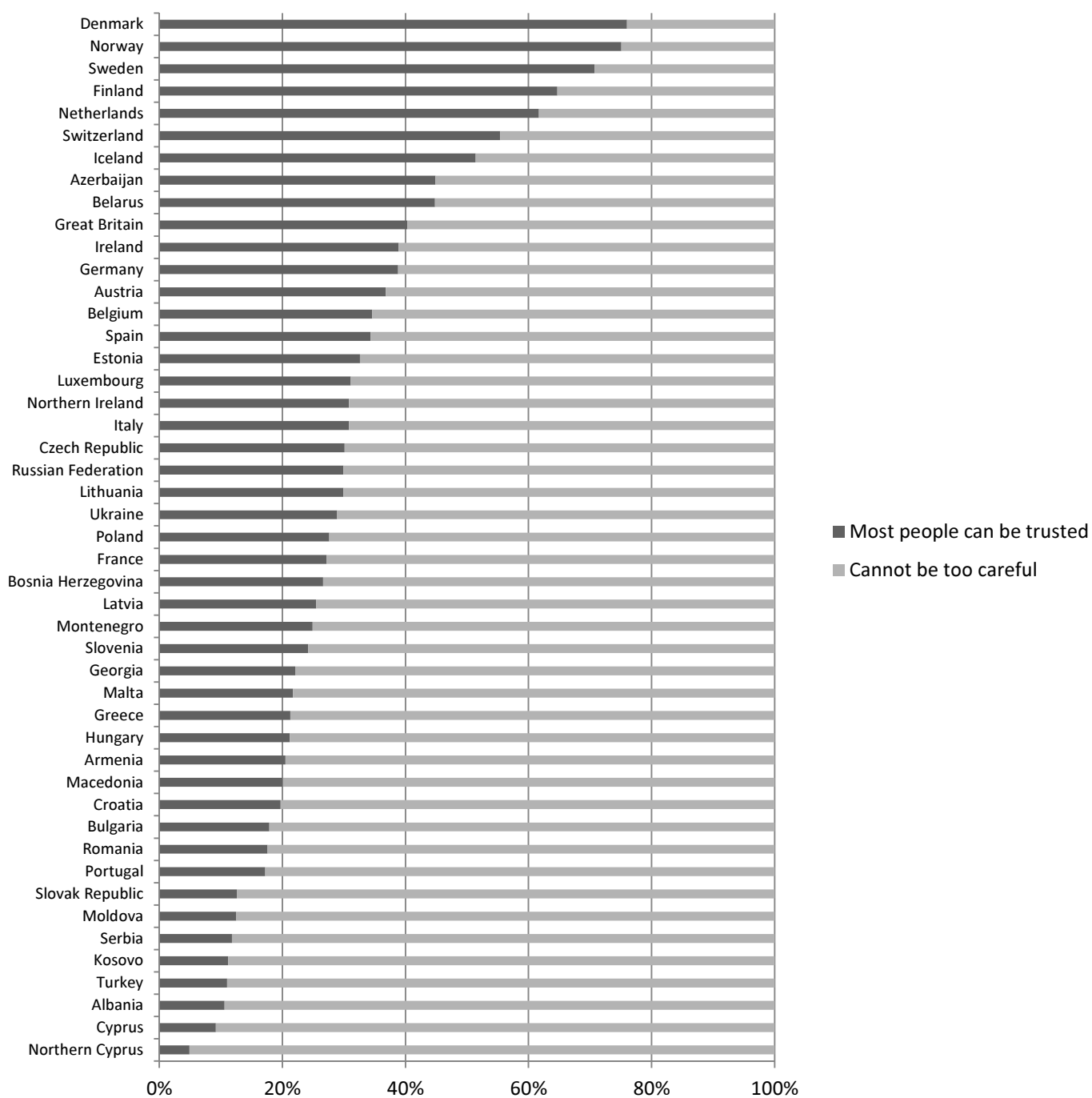


Note: Don't know excluded, not weighted. Respondent answering “do not trust very much” or “do not trust at all” a person they meet for the first time reclassified as non-trusters.

The finding that social trust is a rare phenomenon is naturally contingent on the countries that conducted the six wave of the World Value Survey. Higher trust levels have indeed been found among the rich Western countries, which historically have been better represented in international databases, but it is often forgotten that this particular set of countries by no means reflect the ordinary conditions found around the globe. Figure 3 display the trust level measured in the European Value Survey (EVS) collected between 2006 and 2008. As the question about trust in a person met for the first time is not included in the EVS, one cannot adjust the levels. Thus, Figure 3 resembles the measure used in Figure 1, i.e. the most optimistic measurement of social trust.

Only analyzing Europe, one can indeed find additional countries, which around 2006-08 made it above the majority threshold. Among other countries with a high share of trusters, one finds Denmark (76 percent), Norway (75 percent), Finland (65 percent), Switzerland (55 percent) and Iceland (51 percent). However, one also find additional low-trust-countries such a Albania, Tyrkey, Kosovo, Serbia, Moldova, Slovak Republic, Portugal, Bulgaria and Croatia, where more the 80 percent of the respondents answer that one cannot be too careful.

Figure 3: Social trust. Measured by trust in “most people”. European Value Survey 2006-2008



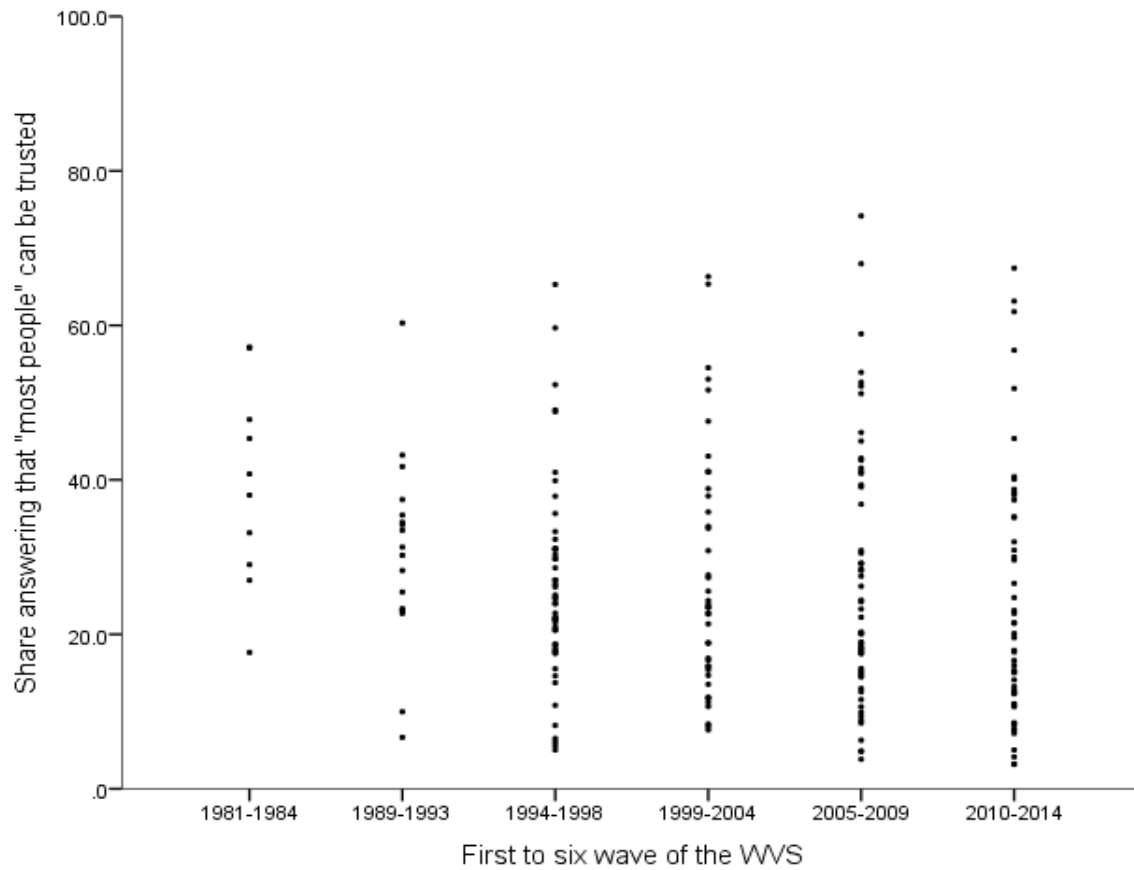
Note: “Do not know excluded

The overall conclusion is that no matter what part of the world one studies, one only finds very few high-trust countries. Despite the importance given to trust by sociology, political science and economics, the conclusion is that by 2010-2013 the most common situation is that citizens around the globe display very little trust in their fellow citizens. This finding naturally highlights the relevance of increasingly addressing the issue of social integration, social cohesion and inclusive growth. Theoretically, there are good reasons to expect that increased social trust would improve the willingness to solve societal problem collectively, improve the economy due to lower transaction cost and increase the life satisfaction in its own regard. And empirically, it is a standard finding that high-trust countries do perform much better than low-trust countries; though the direct of causality always is open for discussion. The problem is, however, is not easy to establish. Despite economic growth and the political commitment to social integration, the next two sections will demonstrate that little actually happened in terms of social cohesion since the World Summit in Copenhagen in 1995; at least when measured by indicators of social trust.

Development in social trust based on WVS and EVS

The WVS and the EVS also provide the best possibilities to access changes in social trust in a large number of countries over a large time span; though, as it will be clear, the data are indeed limited. In Figure X.X is shown the share answering “trust in most people” (unadjusted) in each of the countries that has taken part in the World Value Survey, i.e. each dot represent a country. In the first wave of the WVS (1981-1984) only ten countries conducted the survey, i.e. ten indications of the share of trusters, ten dots, are found in the line above the first wave. As Figure XX indicates more and more countries have taken part in the following waves of the WVS; 18 countries took part in the second wave (1989-93), 51 took part in the third wave (1994-98), 41 took part in the fourth wave (1999-2004), 58 took part in fifth wave (2005-2009) and finally 52 took part the sixth wave (2010-2013). In the latter wave, one finds the 52 countries, which were used in Figure 1. Thus, the dot at the top of the line is Netherlands, which in the last wave had the highest share of persons indicating that most people can be trusted (unadjusted). The dot of the bottom is the Philippine, which had the lowest share of trusters (see Figure 1).

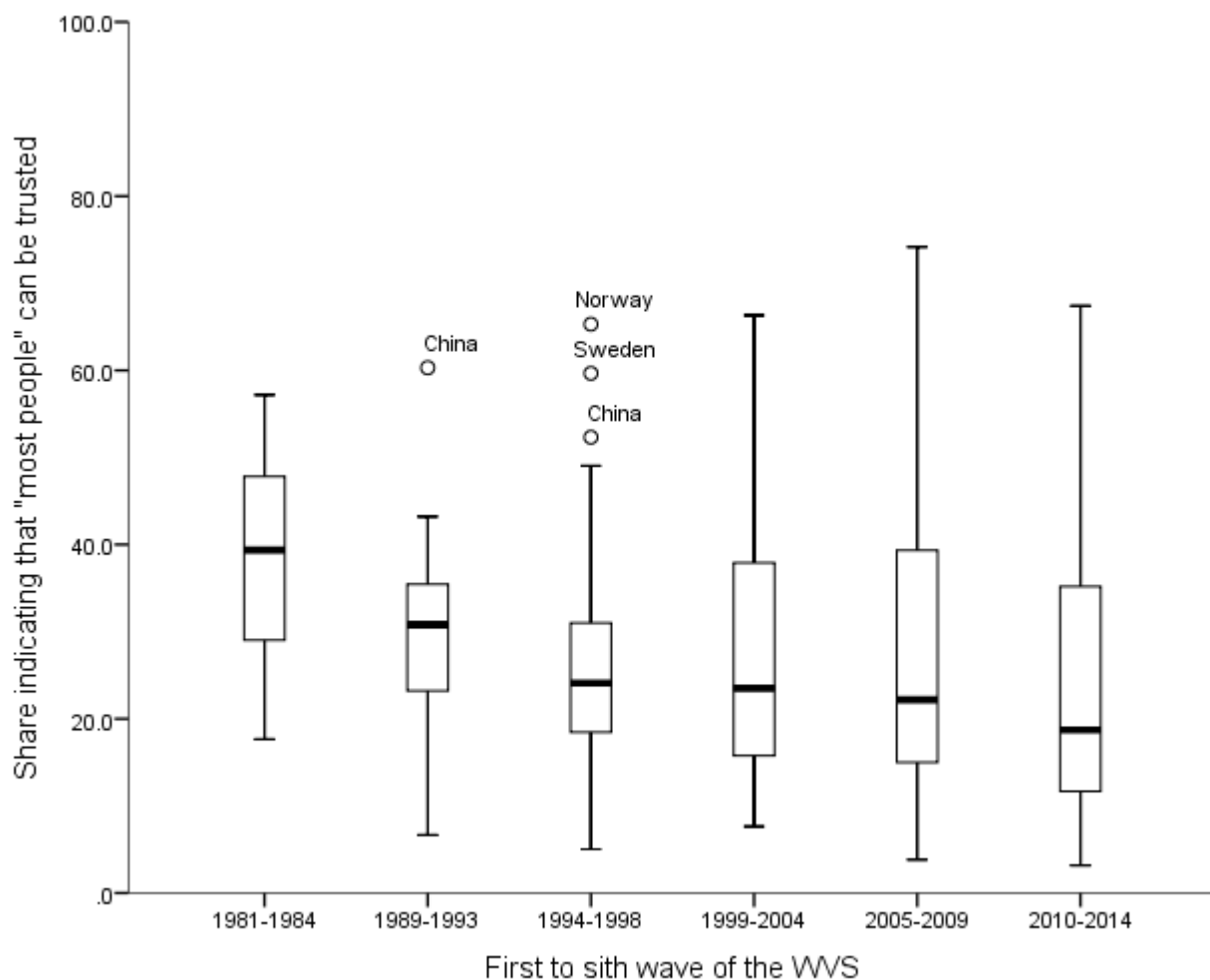
Figure X.X. Share in each country answering that “most people” be trust. All six waves of WVS



A so-called box-plot, see Figure XX, is a convenient way to get an indication of the development over time in the data material. The horizontal bold line in the middle of the boxes is the median found in each wave, i.e. the country where half of the countries have a higher share of trusters and another half of the countries have a lower share. In the first wave, the median country had 39 percent indicating that most people can be trusted. As can be seen from horizontal bold lines in the boxes, the median social trust levels have declined over time. In the last wave, median country only had 19 percent indicating that most people can be trusted. The boxes and the Ts are indications of the variation in the trust levels across countries. The upper- and lower value of the boxes are set so the range between them include half of all the countries (the first and third quintiles). In the first wave, one finds a trust level between 29 and 50 percent in half of the countries. In the last wave, half of the countries had a share of trust between 11 percent and 35 percent. Thus, the larger the boxes, the larger the variation in trust levels across countries. Finally, the Ts define the maximum and minimum share of trusters in the wave. Thus, in the last wave, the upper T stops at 67 percent, the share of trusters in the Netherlands, and the lower T stops at 3 percent, the share of trusters in the Philippines. However, in cases where the maximum or minimum share of trusters is more the 1.5 times higher or lower than the median value, then name of

the country is stated (an the next highest/lowest value defines the T). This is a standard way to spot extreme outliers. As can be seen in Figure XX, China, Sweden and Norway did stand out as extreme outliers (judged by the trust levels found in the other countries in the wave). As demonstrated in in the previous section, this extremely high trust levels in China is partly an artifact, if one adjust for trust in persons, meet for the first time, whereas the trust levels found in the Nordic countries might indeed be exceptional.

Figure X.X. Box plot of the share answering that “most people” can be trusted (unadjusted). All countries included in the WVS



The same kind of analysis can be applied to European Values Survey, which (so far) includes four

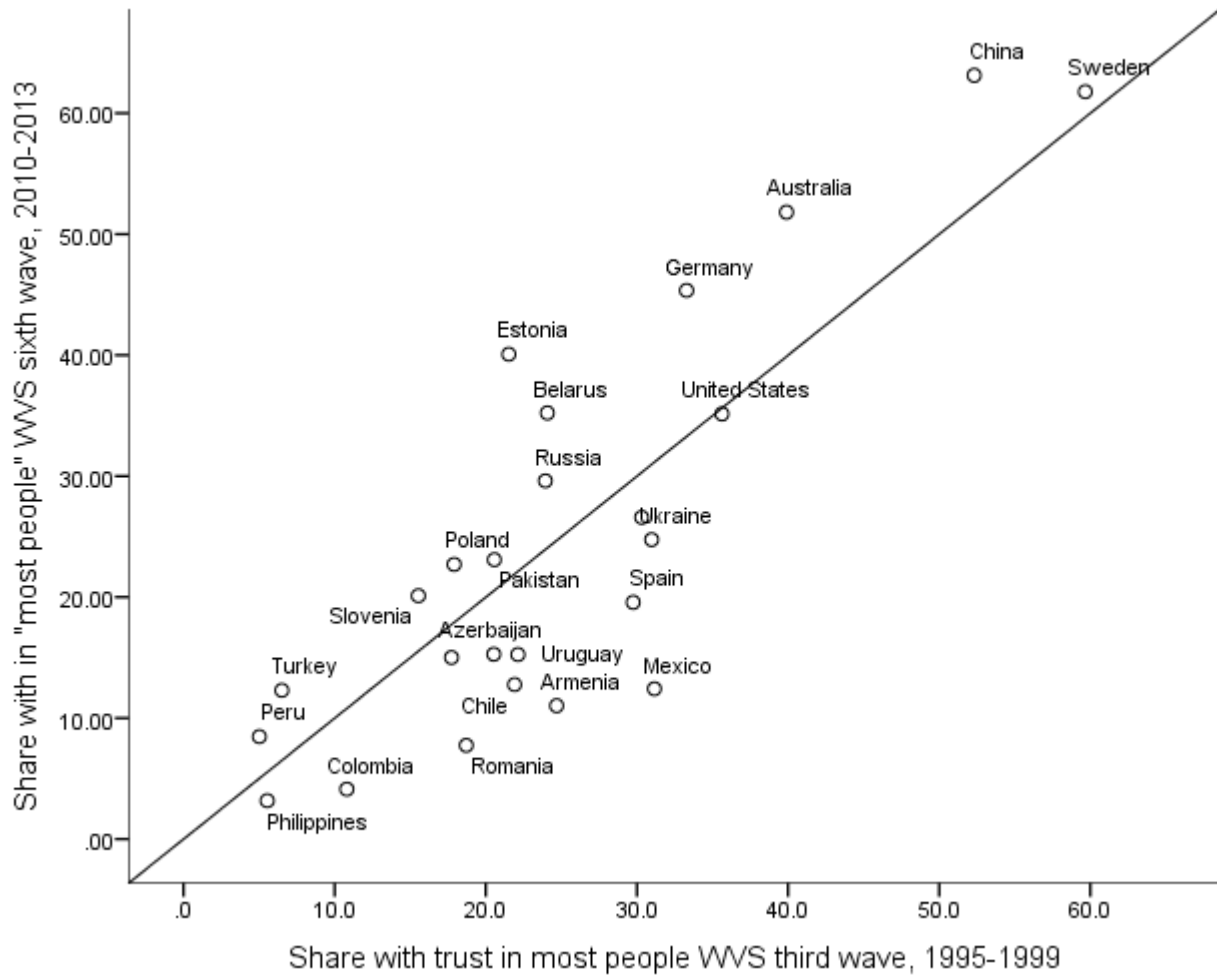
Thus, if we for a moment imagine the countries taken part in the WVS and EVS were randomly selected, the overall conclusion would be that there is a general trend towards lower levels of social trust but also a trends towards higher variations in levels of social trust. Now, taking part in the WVS and EVS is clearly not a random process. Thus, the decline in trust as well as the increase variation could simply be a matter of low trust-countries increasingly taken part in the WVS and EVS. This is indeed a possibility and probably part of the explanations. Decline in the social levels measured in each Wave is not without interest but the variation within countries across time is naturally a much better measure.

Development in social trust since the World Summit in 1995

It is well-established in previous trust research that levels in social trust are sticky, i.e. there is simply no quick fix to increase the level of social trust in a country. Therefore it would be too optimistic too expect that the commitments at the World Summit in 1995 should have resulted in a large increase in social trust within countries. However, it is still relevant to analyze whether the last two decades have resulted in less or more social trust. This is not an easy task as the available data material is scarce. From the countries, which one can follow over time, one might not be able to conclusion whether trust levels have increased or increased on the global level. But at least it possible to pinpoint interesting cases where levels of social trust actually did change. Lessons might both be learned from countries where the level of social trust increased and decreased.

In Figure 4 is shown the share of respondents answering that “most people” can be trusted (unadjusted) in the 25 countries, which both took part in the third and sixth wave of the WVS. The first thing to be noticed, which is the standard finding in trust research, is that overall trust levels are rather stable over time. Trust is “sticky”. The correlation between the trust level measured in mid- and end of the 1990s and the one measured from 2010-13 is high (0.84 at the aggregated level, Pearson).

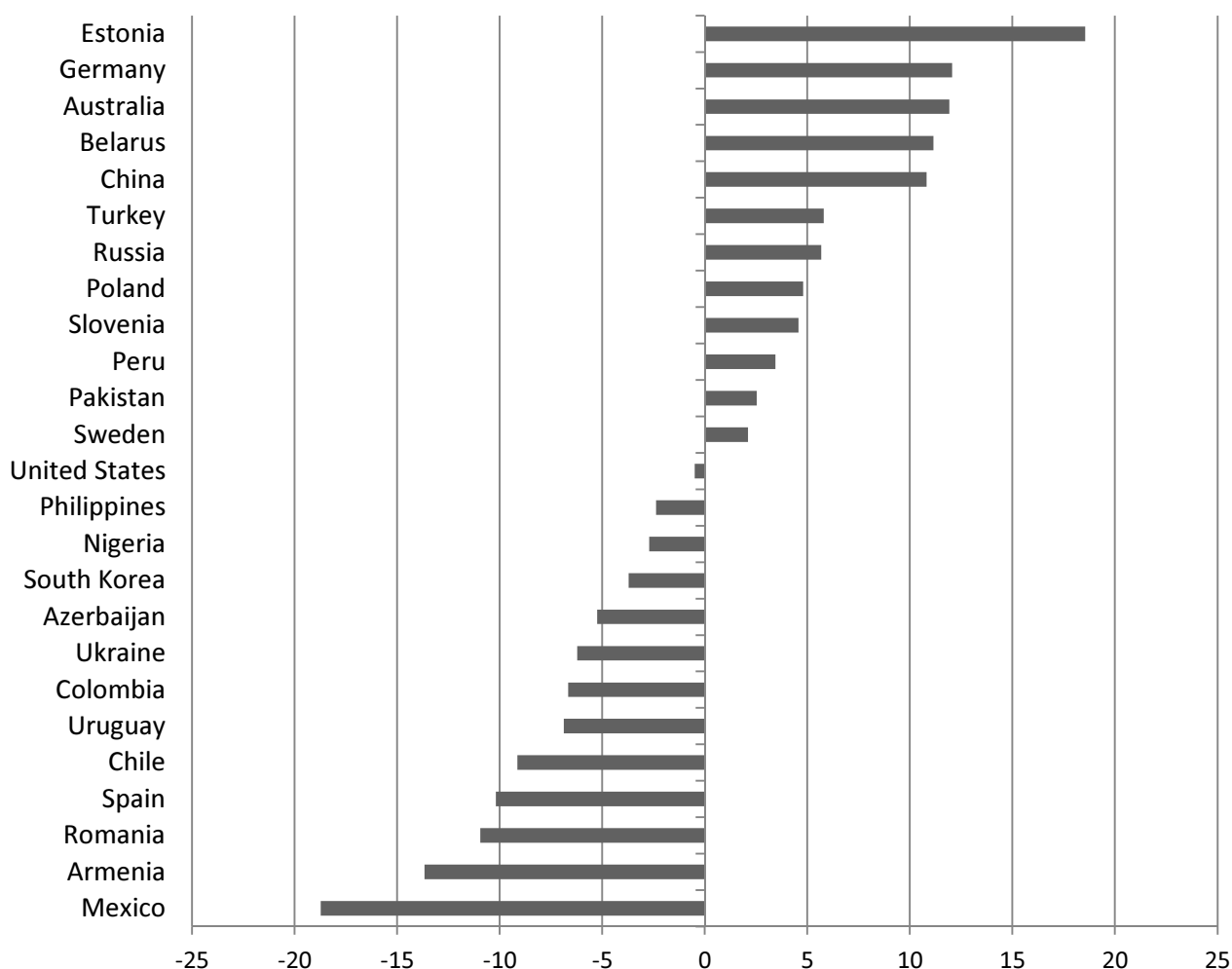
Figure 4: Share of citizens with trust in “most people” respectively in the third wave, 1995-99, and sixth wave, 2010-13. Including referenceline



There are, however, some differences between the trust levels measured at the two points in time. In the 12 countries, which are placed above the reference line in Figure 5, the share answering that “most people” can be trusted was higher in the sixth than in the third wave, i.e. a higher trust level was measured. In the 13 countries, which are placed below the reference line, the share answering that “most people” can be trusted was lower in the sixth than in the third wave. Some of these differences can simply be caused by random measurement errors. As our measurement of social trust is based on samples of citizens, there will always be small variations caused by the fact that a different group of citizens has been asked at the two points in time. Thus, as a rule of thumb, differences below five percentage points, could simply be a matter of measurement errors. In Figure 5 is shown the percentage point difference in trust levels measured at the two points in time in the 25 countries. So due to potential measurement errors we cannot be certain that social trust actually increased in Poland,

Slovenia, Peru, Pakistan and Sweden and actually decreased in South Korea, Nigeria, the Philippines and the United States. For these nine countries, the main conclusion is that social trust levels have been stable.

Figure 5: Change in share that “trust most people” from the third (1995-1999) to the sixth (2010-13) WVS wave

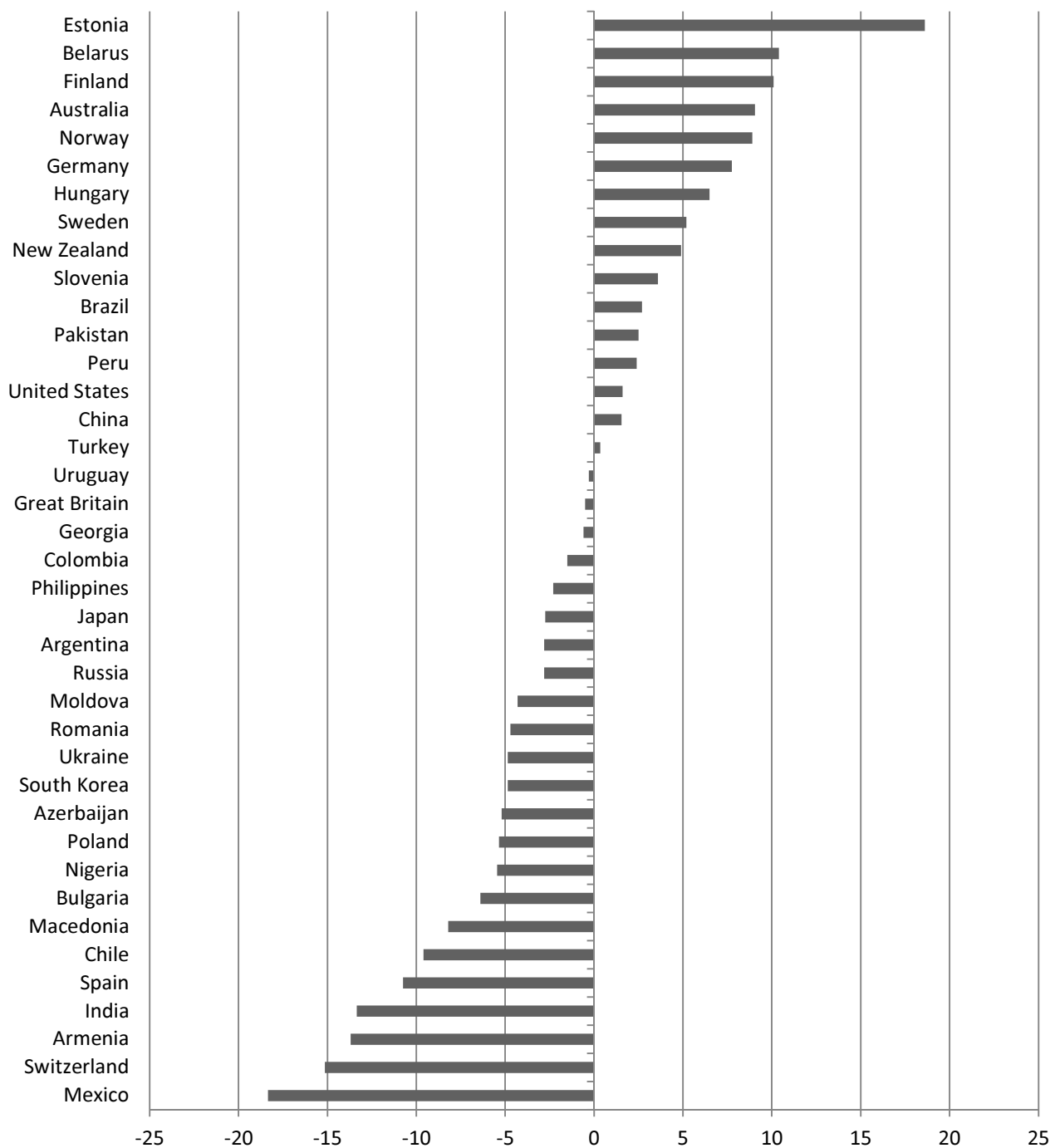


For the other 16 countries, the differences in trust levels are so high that it is unlikely that they are simply caused by measurement errors. In five countries, Estonia, Germany, Australia, Belarus and China, one finds an increase in the share answering that most people can be trusted above 10 percentage points. In Turkey and Russia, the increase in social trust level is around six percentage point. As for the decreases, one finds four countries, Mexico, Armenia, Romania and Spain where the drop in share answering that “most people” can be trusted is above 10 percentage points. Furthermore,

five countries, Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan , experienced a drop in social trust between 5 and 10 percentage point.

Based in this little subsample of the countries of the world, the 25 countries, which both took part in the third and sixth wave of the WVS, the main conclusion is that social trust levels have not changed much in the two decades that followed the World Summit in 1995. And for the changes that do occur, one finds as many cases of decreased levels of social trust as of increased levels of social trust. However, before one infers this conclusion to the rest of the world, it is fruitful to look at generational patterns in a wider set of countries. The inclusion of more countries creates a better basis for making worldwide inferences and the analysis of generational pattern challenge the overall conclusion about stability.

Figure XX: Change in trust in most people (unadjusted) from 1990s (second/ third wave) to the 2000s (fifth/sixth wave)



Generational patterns social trust

When social trust levels change it is typically caused by general replacement. The reason is that trust in fellow citizens is very stable over the life course. As one grows up in a given society, one forms a basic understanding of this society and its citizens. And these basic impressions from the socialization in youth are hard to shake. This is one of the main explanations for the “stickiness” when social trust levels are measured at various time points in the same country. Thus, when overall trust levels in a society increase overtime it is typically caused by the coming of a new generation with more faith in the trustworthiness of fellow citizens and the dying of a generation with less faith in fellow citizens. And the other way around, a decline in overall trust levels over time is typically caused by the coming of a new generation with low social trust and the dying of a generation with higher social trust. The classic example is from the US, the best analyzed case of a decline in social trust (Putnam 2000, Uslaner 2002, Larsen 2013). The decline in social trust in the period from 1959, when it was first measured in the US, to the 1990s, was not a matter of everyone losing trust in other citizens. Asked in 2010, almost half of the Americans born in the 1940s responded that most people could be trusted (Larsen 2013). This generation, often labelled the baby boomers, which grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, often label the “golden age”, displays the highest trust levels ever experienced in the US. And within this generation, one actually finds a counter-trend; the so-called early baby-boomers (born between 1946 and 1955) actually increased their trust levels somewhat over the period (Uslaner 2002:174). Thus, the American decline in trust is primarily caused by younger generations having less trust.

Due to this importance of socialization in youth it is interesting to analyze whether the new generation, socialized in the two decades after World submit indicates more or less social trust than older generations. If the young generation indicates higher trust than the older, it is a sign that the given society might be on a path towards social coherence. If the opposite it the, it is a sign that the given society might be on a path towards social erosion. As the new, post-World-Submit, generation, the report classifies respondents born in 1980 or thereafter. Thus, oldest of the this generation was 15 years old when the World Submit was held and 33 years old, when the latest WVS was collected in 2013. The youngest of the generation, included in the latest wave of the WVS, was 18 years old when the first wave six WVS surveys was collected in 2010 and thus only three years old when the World summit was held in 1995. By means of this setup one is able to study stability and change in all the 52 countries, which conducted the World Value Survey in 2010.

Figure 6: Share of trusters (adjusted) among the young (born 1980 or after) and old generation (born before 1980). All available countries in the sixth wave of WVS, 2010-13

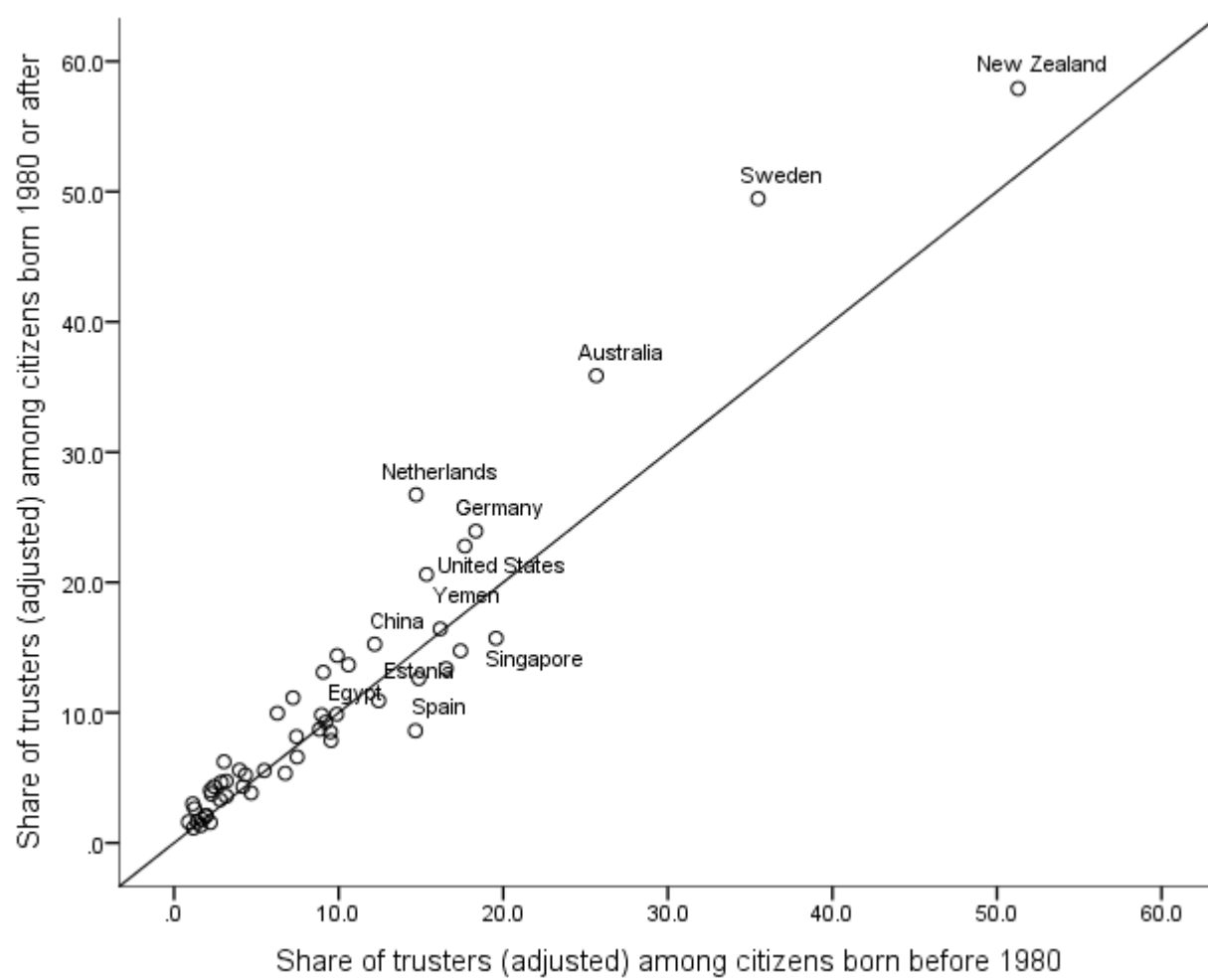
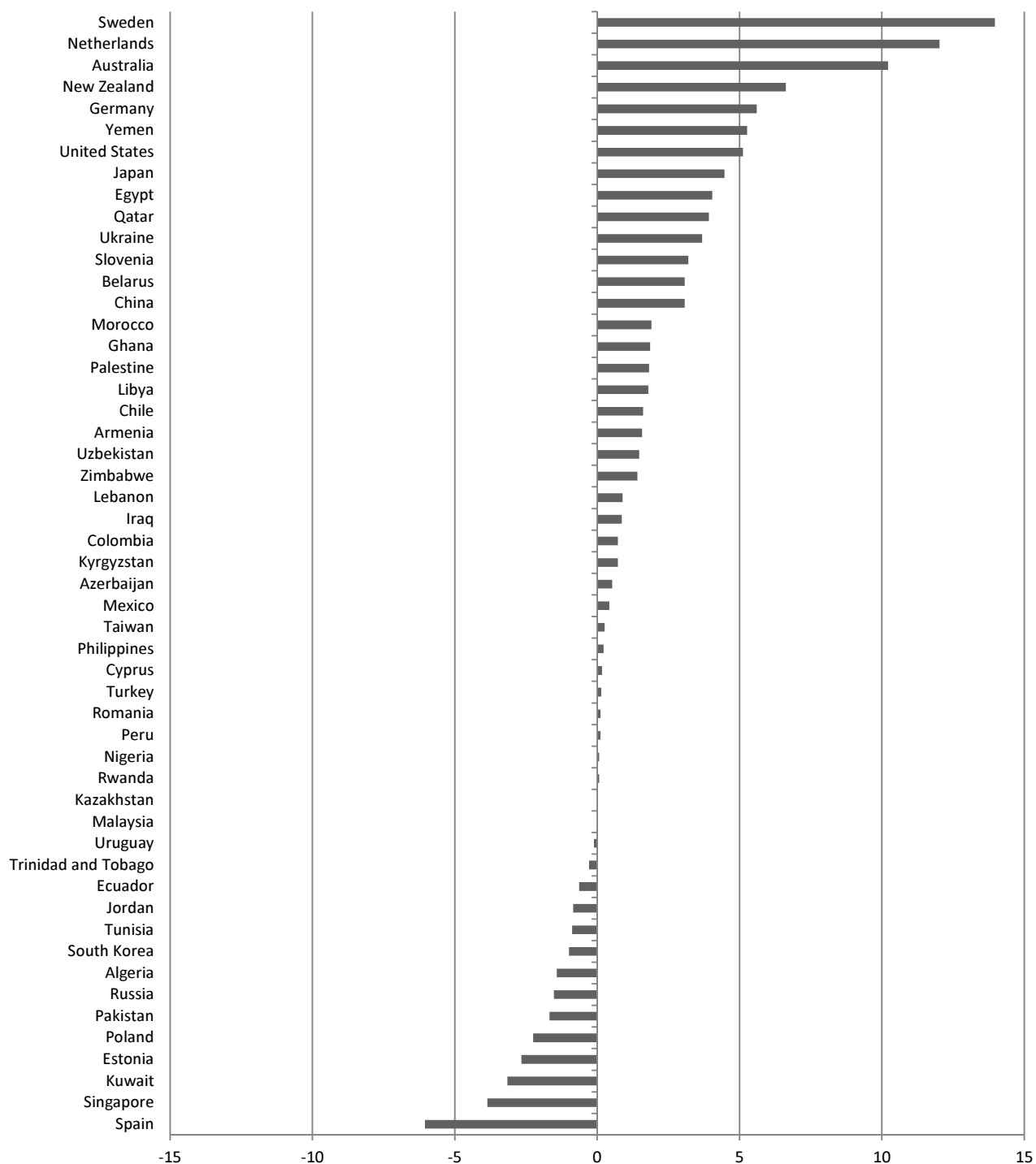


Figure 7: Difference in share of trusters (adjusted) between the young (born 1980 or after) and old generation (born before 1980). Percentage point



Explanations for decline and increase in social trust

Conclusion

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