

# Measuring social trust in cross-country analysis

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## **Abstract**

As many have argued, social trust is a key element in making larger democracies work. While particularized trust is important for cooperation inside, smaller communities, generalized or social trust lubricates cooperation between socially and culturally divided citizens and groups and hence facilitates the making and implementation of collective decisions in large modern societies. It is therefore important to be able to identify social trust and to increase our knowledge of what creates trust.

Survey analysis is an important tool in this endeavour. Normally one single measure has been used to identify generalized social trust, namely 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?” This standard

measure of social trust is said to capture the underlying meaning of trust in strangers. But, actually, we know very little about what is in peoples mind when answering this question. How do people interpret “most people”? Do people interpret the question of trust in the same way throughout the world? Who are included, and who are excluded in “most people”? Is the standard question of trust really able to identify “social trusters”?

We approach these questions in different ways. Firstly, we have carried out an experiment among Danish students, where the question of trust is accompanied by different interpretations of what is meant by “most people”. Secondly, we examine surveys from different parts of the world to see if “most people” also includes strangers. Thirdly, we examine whether all citizens regardless of their nationality and religious background are included in “most people” and in “people you meet for the first time”.