

Editorial: Trustworthiness, trust and legitimacy of public institutions: foundations of capability

New Zealand society has become distrusting and polarised. It now sits between Ireland and the US in trust ratings (Acumen, 2025). In some ways this reflects global trends, including the impact of Covid-19. But there are local issues too, such as those around the Treaty of Waitangi. The issue of concern to this editorial is preserving the trustworthiness and legitimacy of New Zealand state-funded and mandated agencies. This is a broader scope than the core public service. Without trust and legitimacy, public service capability is lessened, and public services cannot be valued.

While much distrust and polarisation in New Zealand is directed at politicians, public servants (in the broadest sense) are easily caught, and sometimes participate, in the crossfire. Political neutrality extends beyond policy advisors avoiding partisanship over party policy issues, to broader cultural issues and political signifiers that attract public attention and ire. Our argument is that the public service, in both its narrow and broad definitions, needs to concern itself more broadly with neutrality or it risks further harming trust and increasing polarisation.

Trust and legitimacy concerns confidence in institutions, the services and products created, and their contribution to social cohesion, equity and fairness (Faulkner and Kaufman, 2018). Trust is defined as the willingness to be vulnerable, and trustworthiness is whether placement of that trust is justified. Legitimacy concerns generalised perceptions 'that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman, 1995, p.574).

A 2023 OECD study found that 55% of survey participants trusted the New Zealand public service. Drivers of trust included satisfaction with administrative

services (68%), services improving if people complain about them (42.7% think they will) and not taking bribes (48.4% 'of the New Zealand population expects that public servants will refuse a bribe' (OECD, 2023, pp.62–3)). This is a weak case for complacency.

But surveys, commonly reporting averages or frequencies, do not always reflect the moments of truth when people are vulnerable and interact with the state (such as being a victim of crime). Many survey participants may be disengaged or not vulnerable. Some are probably too busy to wonder whether the positive interaction they had with a park ranger really indicates trustworthiness.

In contrast, victims of abuse in care have had to deal first with the abuse, then officials' continual attempts to conceal the issue, and their hounding of victims (from Wellington offices). They could argue that the public service is not trustworthy, and that public servants are not public spirited when tested (Burton, 2024). While many studies, including our own, point to the importance of public service motivation among public servants, public service motivation exists alongside other motivations, including cowardice, callousness and careerism (Plimmer, Cho and Franken, 2019; Raymond, Beddoe and Staniforth, 2017). These motivations warrant more attention from both public servants and academics.

Perceived organisational capture by managers to serve their own political beliefs is another risk to trust and legitimacy. The state-owned and supported Radio New Zealand and Television New Zealand have limited trust (54% and 53% respectively) and are more trusted by leftist voters (Myllylahti and Treadwell, 2025). The judiciary is credibly accused of bias (e.g., Hodder, 2024). Other public institutions, such as universities, also adopt positions that are perceived to violate conventional

norms, values and beliefs about neutrality.

The core public service is not always trustworthy – see the multi-agency omnishambles of Manurewa Marae (Public Service Commission, 2025). But the well-paid and educated Wellington bubble, with political beliefs and voting tendencies contrary to the rest of the country, seems unreflective. These beliefs take us back to public service motivation. One of its dark sides is that it can provide moral licence for unethical behaviour (Ripoll and Schott, 2023). So can a sense of moral superiority (de Bruin Cardoso et al., 2024).

We argue that better (meaning strict and broader) adherence to norms of neutrality would increase trustworthiness. Through these values we can better resolve debates.

Geoff Plimmer and Wonhyuk Cho
Guest Editors

References

- Acumen (2025) *Trust in Aotearoa New Zealand: Acumen Edelman Trust Barometer 2025*, <https://acumennz.com/acumen-edelman-trust-barometer/acumen-edelman-trust-barometer-2025/>
- Burton, T. (2024) *Demystifying the State*, Wellington: New Zealand Initiative
- de Bruin Cardoso, I., A.R. Russell, M. Kaptein and L. Meijs (2024) 'How moral goodness drives unethical behavior: empirical evidence for the NGO halo effect', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 53 (3), pp.589–614
- Faulkner, N. and S. Kaufman (2018) 'Avoiding theoretical stagnation: a systematic review and framework for measuring public value', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 77 (1), pp.69–86
- Hodder, J. (2024) 'One advocate's opinions: the "least dangerous branch"? Predictability and unease', *New Zealand Law Review*, 2024 (3), pp.423–69
- Myllylahti, M. and G. Treadwell (2025) *Trust in News in Aotearoa New Zealand 2025*, AUT Research Centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy, <https://www.jmadre-search.com/trust-in-news-in-new-zealand>
- OECD (2023) *Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in New Zealand: building trust in public institutions*, Paris: OECD Publishing, <https://doi.org/10.1787/948accf8-en>
- Plimmer, G., W. Cho and E. Franken (2019) 'Competing demands and variable managers', *Public Sector*, 42 (3), pp.3–4
- Public Service Commission (2024) 'Inquiry into how government agencies protected personal information provided for the 2023 Census and COVID 19 vaccination purposes', 5 December, Wellington: Public Service Commission
- Raymond, S., L. Beddoe and B. Staniforth (2017) 'Social workers' experiences with whistleblowing: to speak or not to speak?', *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 29 (3), pp.17–29, <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.335758900108226>
- Ripoll, G. and C. Schott (2023) 'Does public service motivation foster justification of unethical behavior? Evidence from survey research among citizens', *International Public Management Journal*, 26 (1), pp.1–22
- Suchman, M.C. (1995) 'Managing legitimacy: strategic and institutional approaches', *Academy of Management Review*, 20 (3), pp.571–610