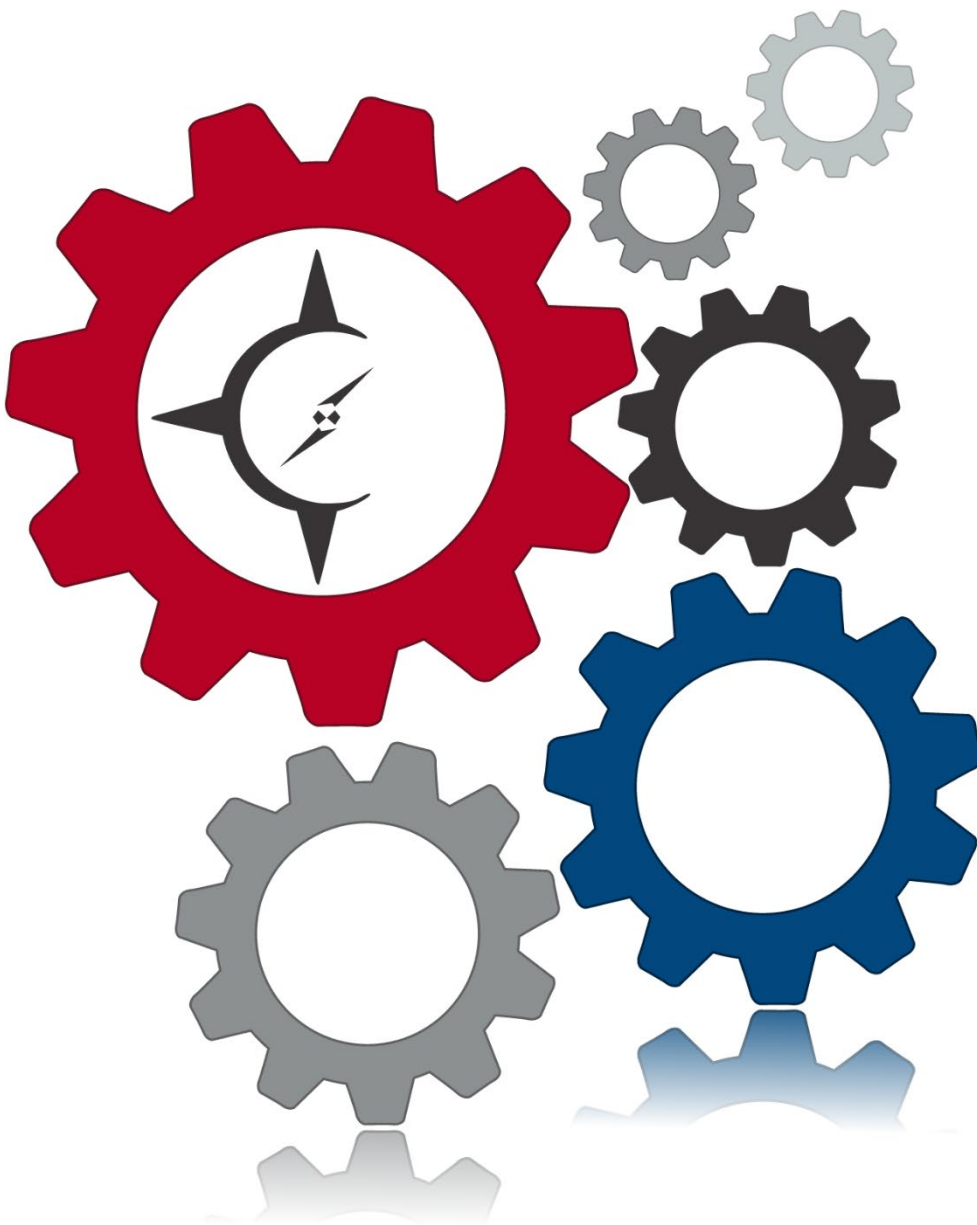


**Beliefs about complete law abidance
reported in the ISSP Role of Government
module in 1996, 2006 and 2016:
Considering the hypotheses on drivers**

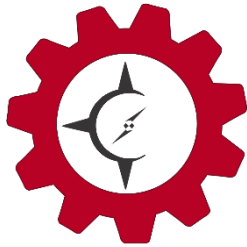


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3 May 2022

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Overview

About the International Social Survey Programme

New Zealand has been participating in the [International Social Survey Programme](#) (ISSP) since 1991¹. Formed in 1985, the ISSP is a transnationally coordinated research initiative presently consisting of 43 member states. The programme examines a different social science topic each year², repeated approximately every ten years. The survey topics (referred to as modules) often have immediate political or social relevance (Bechert & Quandt, 2010) and are based on sets of standardised questions that are asked in all ISSP participating countries. The programme's sustained collaboration and consistent methods has enabled both cross-national and cross-time research on critical social attitudes. Cross-national research is advantageous as a true picture of a nation's identity, i.e., "what a country "is" and what its values and goals "are"", can only emerge with cross-nationally comparative attitudinal research (Frizzell, 1996, p. 1). By clarifying how public attitudes of a country differ from or resemble those in other countries, comparative research puts a country's problems in perspective and offers considerations for inter-country relationships in an era of increasing internationalism and globalisation (Frizzell, 1996). Cross-time attitudinal research that can identify trends and changes has important implications for policy makers as attitudes, values, and beliefs have been shown to influence behaviour and policy support in different contexts (see for examples Beeken & Wardle, 2013; Fazio, 1986; Rauwald & Moore, 2002; Schuman & Johnson, 1976).

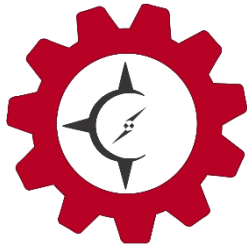
About this report

This report focuses on the dilemma of civil obedience vs individual judgement in obeying laws. We analyse selected items related to civil liberties and political trust from the ISSP Role of Government module (see Edlund & Lindh, 2019), which was implemented in New Zealand in 1996, 2006, and 2016. New Zealanders' perceptions are compared with those held in twenty other countries in which similar data were also collected at least two times. We examine changes or the lack thereof in public perceptions across these years and discuss hypotheses on factors that could be influencing law-abiding attitudes. We also examine whether prevailing law abidance beliefs were reflected in recent compliance with government-mandated COVID-19 mitigation measures.

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¹ Between 1991 and 2010, New Zealand's ISSP was implemented by Massey University. Following a brief gap in New Zealand's participation (years, 2011, 2012 and 2013), the Centre of Methods and Policy Application in the Social Sciences (COMPASS) at the University of Auckland took over administrative responsibilities and has implemented the more recent ISSP surveys in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020 and 2021.

² The topics and their first year of implementation are as follows: Role of Government (1985), Social Networks (1986), Social Inequality (1987), Family and Changing Gender Roles (1988), Work Orientations (1989), Religion (1991), Environment (1993), National Identity (1995), Citizenship (2004), Leisure Time & Sports (2007), and Health and Health Care (2011).



Findings

Perceptions about complete law abidance

In the Role of Government ISSP module, a question concerning civil liberties (Edlund & Lindh, 2019) asked respondents if they thought people should obey the law without exception or if there were exceptional occasions where people should follow their conscience even if it means breaking the law. Complete law abidance at the expense of individual conscience or common sense “means ranking the law and, therefore, the state higher than the individual’s ability and right of judgement” (Bechert & Quandt, 2010, p. 22). On the other hand, following one’s conscience in making individual decisions against the law means taking risks and weakening state protection (Bechert & Quandt, 2010).

Figure 1 summarises the sample proportions across countries that indicated a belief in complete law abidance at the three data collection years.

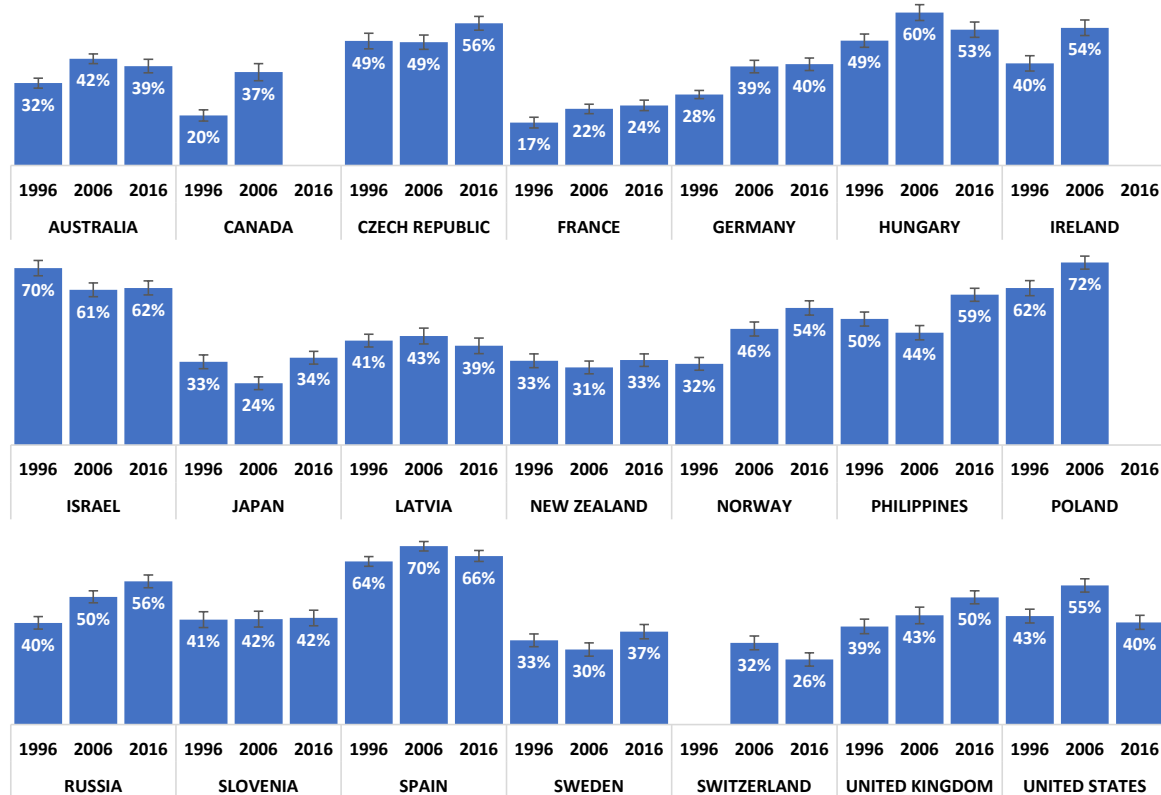


Figure 1: Proportion of respondents who believed that people should obey the law without exception (percentages and 95% CI)

We carried out binary regressions to examine trends across the three decades. There were no significant changes in the percentage of people opting for complete law abidance across the three data collection points in Hungary, Japan, Latvia, New Zealand, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, or the US. In Israel, belief in law abidance decreased by 2.5% per decade ($p=0.010$). In Switzerland, this belief dropped by 6.8% between 2006 and 2016 ($p=0.002$).

In all other countries, there were significant increases in reception towards law abidance, with the largest change being between 1996 and 2006 in Canada, where reception increased by 16.2% ($p < .001$), and in Ireland, where reception increased by 14% ($p < .001$). In descending order, increase per decade was 11.1% in Norway ($p < .001$), 8.7% in Poland ($p < .001$), 8% in Russia ($p < .001$), 6% in Germany ($p < .001$), 6% in the UK ($p < .001$), 4% in the Philippines ($p = 0.001$), 3.7% in France ($p < .001$), 3.8% in Czech Republic ($p < .001$), and 3.8% in Australia ($p < .001$).

Binomial tests showed that Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Latvia, New Zealand, Slovenia, Sweden, and Switzerland had a lower stance on civil obedience. At each data collection point, significantly lesser proportions of their populace opted for always following the law ($p < 0.001$ in all instances). Israel, Poland, and Spain maintained a strong belief in always following the law, with significantly higher proportions of their populace favouring complete law abidance in each data collection year ($p < 0.001$ in all instances).

Are perceptions about law abidance driven by concerns about terrorism?

In most countries, between 1996 and 2006, people expressed a trend in change from believing in occasional conscience-based individual judgement towards believing in complete law abidance (Bechert & Quandt, 2010). Bechert and Quandt (2010) suggest that the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack in the US, the ongoing presence of the Basque terrorist organisation in Spain and acts of terrorism by the Irish Republican Army in the UK may have steered shifts in belief towards civil obedience in these states. By comparison, people in ISSP countries that remained untouched by terrorism showed little or no shifts in perceptions between 1996 and 2006 (Bechert & Quandt, 2010).

However, the hypothesis that terrorism drives a law-abiding attitude remains in question. The observed percentage point increases in support for complete law abidance between 1996 and 2006 was retained in 2016 for France, Germany, Norway, Russia, and the UK. Binary regressions showed significant increases in support across the three decades in these countries, but not in Hungary, Latvia, Spain, and the US, where there were declines in support (see Figure 1 and trends in changes discussed in the preceding section). This decline in support for civil obedience was despite experiences of terrorism in the years preceding 2016 in the latter two countries. Spain experienced ongoing jihadist threats following the 2004 bomb attack in Madrid (Kosmyńska, 2016), and there was a range of domestic terrorist attacks and plots in the US (Jones et al., 2021).

Furthermore, support for complete law abidance was not always consistent with people's worries about terrorist attacks as measured in the World Values Survey fielded between 2010 and 2014 (see Ritchie et al., 2019). The lesser levels of concern about terrorism in New Zealand (22.4%) and Sweden (22.4%) (Ritchie et al., 2019) may explain the lower support for civil obedience in these countries in 2016 (33% and 39% respectively) (see Figure 1). However, the terrorism hypothesis appears unsupported when considering Japan, where 79.8% were worried about terrorist attacks (Ritchie et al., 2019), but, as detailed in Figure 1, in 2016, only 34% of its populace opted for total law abidance. Although over half (52.7%) in the US held worries about terrorism (Ritchie et al., 2019), as detailed in Figure 1, support for law abidance dropped by 15 percentage points, from 55% in 2006 to 40% in 2016, among its populace.

Could prevailing beliefs about law abidance be influencing compliance with COVID-19 mitigation measures?

Perceptions about law abidance appeared relevant to the present situation, where the public must conform to an array of stringent COVID-19 mitigation measures such as social distancing and mandatory stay-at-home orders that entail relinquishing personal freedom and negative social and economic consequences. We considered if recent findings on levels of compliance with these mitigation mandates were reflective of prevailing perceptions about law abidance.

Binomial tests revealed that significantly higher proportions of the New Zealand and Australian samples in 1996, 2006, and 2016 believed it to be acceptable to break the rules sometimes ($p < 0.001$ in all instances). In March and April 2020, New Zealand had a COVID-19 stringency index of 96 and 83, respectively (Our World In Data, 2022). During this period, among a sample of university students, only 7.6% reported full compliance, and 92.5% had breached at least one policy measure despite being highly aware of lockdown policies (Broodryk & Robinson, 2021). An Australian survey fielded between April and May 2020, when the country had a COVID-19 stringency index of 69 (Our World In Data, 2022), revealed full compliance only among 21.2%, with 76.3% complying with only some of the country's five restriction measures and 2.5% not complying with any measures (Murphy et al., 2020). Based on these two studies it may be proposed that prevailing attitudes about law abidance may be influencing nonchalance about highly stringent COVID-19 mitigation measures. However, a multi-country study carried out in mid-April 2020 (when both countries were in lockdown) reported that just 33.6% in Australia and 12% in New Zealand did not adhere to social distancing guidelines (Becher et al., 2021) – suggesting that the majority were obeying the rule. It may be the case that non-compliance is dependent on the nature of a mandate or law.

Like Australia and New Zealand, in all three ISSP survey time points, significantly higher proportions of respondents in Latvia and Sweden believed it to be acceptable to break laws sometimes ($p < 0.001$ in all instances). However, Latvia and Sweden had relatively less stringent COVID-19 measures. Between 26 August and 18 November, when the COVID-19 stringency index fluctuated between 29 and 54 in Latvia (Our World In Data, 2022), the compliance rate was 75% for social distancing and 74% for stay-at-home (Georgieva et al., 2021). During the same period, when the COVID-19 stringency index transitioned from 56 to 58 in Sweden (Our World In Data, 2022), compliance was 83% for social distancing and 88% for mandatory stay-at-home in Sweden (Georgieva et al., 2021). The compliance with the social distancing measure in Sweden increased compared to the 51.6% adherence reported in an earlier survey in April 2020 (Becher et al., 2021). It may be the case that the higher level of compliance in Latvia and Sweden may be attributed to the lower levels of policy stringency. However, it may also be argued that concerns over threats to public health under extreme circumstances may override prevailing beliefs about individual rights in making judgements about following rules.

Contrary to the preceding countries, significantly higher proportions ($p < 0.001$) of the people of Poland vouched for complete law abidance in 1996 (61.8%) and 2006 (72%) (see Figure 1). However, self-reported citizens' compliance with COVID-19 rules was just 65% for social distancing and 68% for staying-at-home (Georgieva et al., 2021) between 26 August and 18 November 2020, when the country's COVID-19 policy stringency index fluctuated between a low index of 23 and a high of 75 (Our World In Data, 2022). In this case, compliance with COVID-19 restrictions does not seem to reflect pre-existing perceptions about complete law abidance.

Is complete law abidance predicted by levels of trust in Government officials?

Preceding studies have shown associations between societal adherence to laws and political trust (Marien & Hooghe, 2011) – suggesting the hypothesis that law abidance may be influenced by trust in government officials. In the ISSP Role of Government module, two items concerning political trust (Edlund & Lindh, 2019) measured incumbent-based trust – i.e., a belief that members of parliament (MPs) try to keep promises made during the election and that most civil servants can be trusted to do what is best for the country (Bechert & Quandt, 2010). The proportions of individuals who expressed this trust across the three data collection years are detailed in Figures 2 and 3.

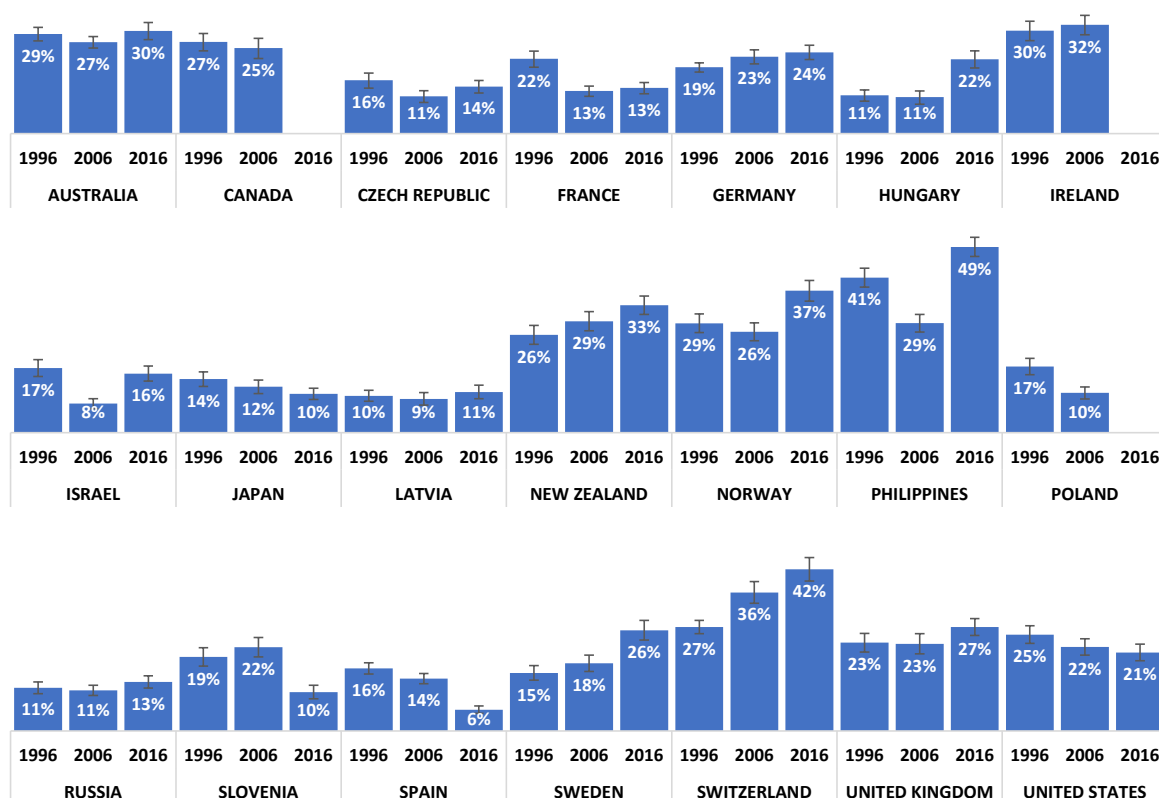


Figure 2: Proportion of respondents who believed that MPs do try to keep promises made during the election (percentages and 95% CI)

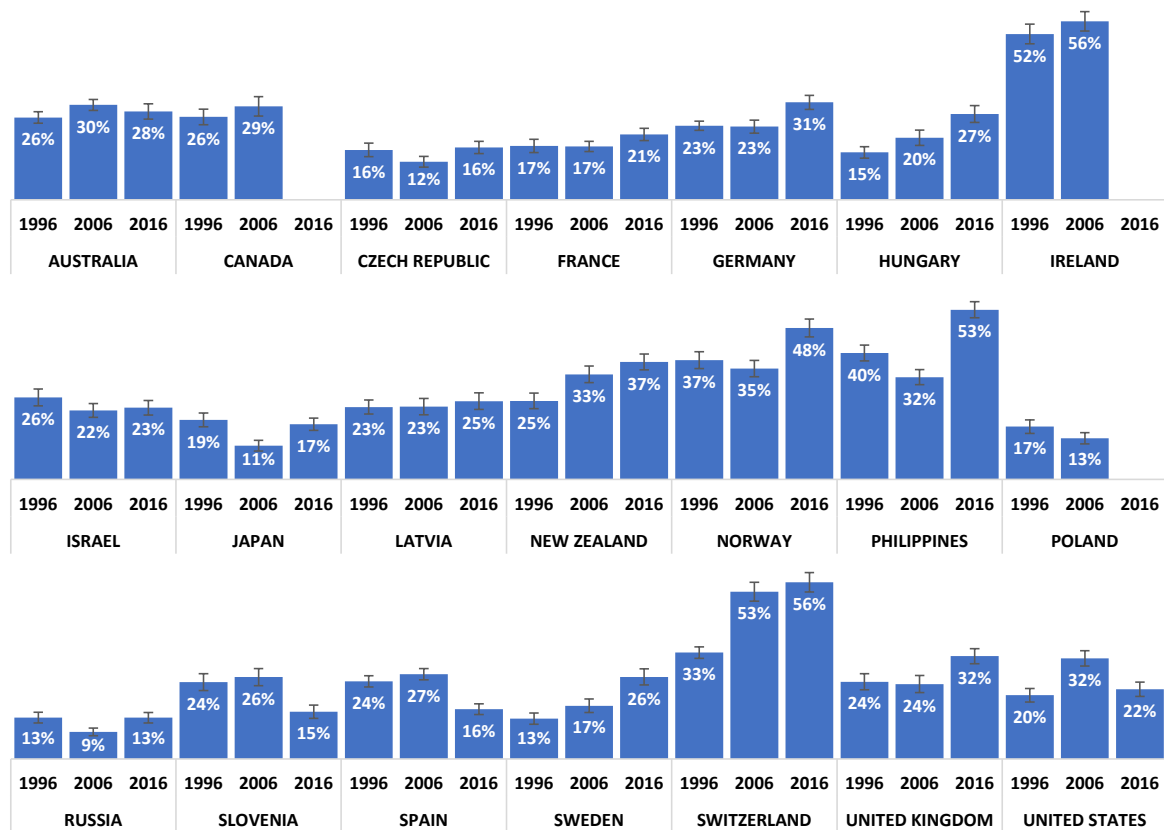


Figure 3: Proportion of respondents who believed that most civil servants could be trusted to do what is best for the country

Binary regressions revealed that the trust of both MPs and civil servants remained unchanged in Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Latvia, and Russia over the decades. In New Zealand, however, trust in MPs increased by 4% per decade ($p < 0.001$), and trust in civil servants increased by 6.1% per decade ($p < 0.001$). A similar trend of increased trust in Government officials per decade was evident in seven other countries:

- Germany - by 2% for MPs ($p = 0.002$) and by 3.4% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$)
- Hungary - by 4.8% for MPs ($p < 0.001$) and by 6.1% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$)
- Norway - by 4% for MPs ($p < 0.001$) and by 4.9% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$)
- the Philippines - by 3.4% for MPs ($p = 0.002$) and by 6.2% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$)
- Sweden - by 5.3% for MPs ($p < 0.001$) and by 6.3% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$)
- Switzerland - by 8% for MPs ($p < 0.001$) and by 12% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$)
- the UK - by 2.5% for MPs ($p = 0.010$) and by 4.4% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$).

On the other hand, in four other countries, there was a consistent trend of per decade decline in trust in Government officials:

- Israel - by 2.9% for MPs ($p < 0.001$) and by 3.4% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$).
- Poland - by 6.4% for MPs ($p < 0.001$) and by 3.9% for civil servants ($p = 0.018$)
- Slovenia - by 5.2% for MPs ($p < 0.001$) and by 5.1% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$)
- Spain - by 5.7% for MPs ($p < 0.001$) and by 4.7% for civil servants ($p < 0.001$).

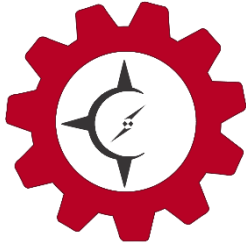
Trust in MPs declined by 3.9% per decade ($p < 0.001$) in France, 1.9% per decade ($p = 0.003$) in Japan, and 2.2% per decade ($p = 0.013$) in the US, but trust in civil servants remained unaltered in these three countries.

While these trends indicate either an increase or decrease in trust of Government officials over the decades, binomial tests showed that apart from a few cases, the proportions in all country samples indicating trust in MPs and civil servants were significantly lesser than the proportions that did not across all data collection years ($p < 0.001$ in all instances). The proportions indicating trust in civil servants was significantly higher than the proportions not indicating this trust in Ireland in 2006 ($p < 0.001$), Switzerland in 2016 ($p < 0.001$), and the Philippines in 2016 ($p < 0.05$). The proportions indicating trust in civil servants were similar to the proportions not indicating this trust in 1996 in Ireland ($p = 0.19$), in 2006 in Switzerland ($p = 0.095$) and 2016 in Norway ($p = 0.106$). In 2016, in the Philippines, the proportion expressing trust in MPs was similar to the proportion that did not ($p = 0.366$).

We carried out Chi-Square tests for associations to explore the hypothesised relationship between trust in Government officials and law abidance. Associations between trust in civil servants and law abidance were consistently significant in Japan, the US, and Ireland across the data collection years ($p < 0.001$ in all cases) – providing some support for the trust-driven law-abiding attitudes hypothesis. On the other hand, at each data collection year, there was a consistent lack of association between these two factors in Canada, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Israel, the Philippines, and Poland. Associations between complete law abidance and trust in MPs were also consistently statistically insignificant across the data collection years in Canada, Norway, the Philippines, and Switzerland.

The association between trust in civil servants and law abidance was significant in New Zealand in 2006 ($p = 0.002$) but not in 1996 or 2016. The association between trust in New Zealand MPs and complete law abidance was significant in the years 2006 ($p = 0.001$) and 2016 ($p < 0.001$) but not in 1996. Similarly, associations between trust in civil servants and law compliance were variable in Australia, France, Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Norway, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the UK across the three time points. Associations between trust in MPs and law abidance were also variable in Australia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, the UK, and the US.

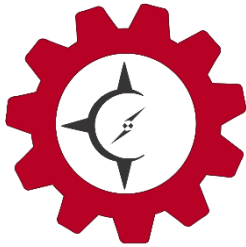
Overall, the inconsistencies in associations between trust in Government officials and responses to the question about law abidance in the ISSP module suggest weak support for the hypothesis that trust in Government officials drives law-abiding attitudes. Even so, recent research suggests the importance of political trust for achieving compliance with COVID-19 prevention measures (Ezeibe et al., 2020; Georgieva et al., 2021; Goldfinch et al., 2021; Goldstein & Wiedemann, 2021; Pak et al., 2021; Sabat et al., 2020; Shanka & Menebo, 2022) and lifting vaccination rates (Bollyky et al., 2022). For instance, low trust in Government was associated with non-compliance with governmental COVID-19 restrictions in Switzerland, Italy, and France (Lalot et al., 2020; Nivette et al., 2021). Similarly, a multi-country study ($n = 102,627$) reported a strong association between public trust in Government and compliance with COVID-19 preventative measures (Pak et al., 2021). Relative to those who held low trust, compliance with strict measures was twice as large among those who held a high trust in the Government (Pak et al., 2021). Hence, support for the trust-driven law abiding-attitudes hypothesis may be dependent on the political contexts of an issue.



Future Research

Our findings provide little support for the hypotheses put forward to explain the drivers of law-abiding attitudes nor the outcomes of such attitudes. Nevertheless, compliance with COVID-19 mandates seemed to reflect historical perceptions about law abidance in some countries. We could thus propose a hypothesis that underlying perceptions about obeying the law may predict compliance with COVID-19 public health rules and mandates alongside other factors such as gender (Galasso et al., 2020) and trust in Government (Shanka & Menebo, 2022). Studies focusing on predictors of compliance to COVID-19 public health policies could consider this underlying ideology about law abidance as a factor. The testing of this hypothesis using existing ISSP data would also be possible with multi-country COVID-19 compliance data based on standardised measures.

It may also be the case that people have offences that are perceived as minor or low risk in mind (e.g., breaking traffic rules) when answering this ISSP question. If the Role of Government module is implemented again in 2026, additional questions about law abidance could help clarify the types of laws and regulations perceived to be subject to individual judgement when it comes to compliance and the driving forces behind the belief in complete law abidance. Such enquiry could provide a more precise understanding that can lend practicable applications in government campaigns focused on challenging law-breaking behaviours and communication strategies during emergencies such as epidemics and pandemics.



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