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Reliable and responsive: Government competence and trust

How reliable and responsive do people view their governments' policies and public services? These concepts of reliability and responsiveness – key components of government competence – are important drivers of people's trust in public institutions. This chapter presents results from the Trust Survey on perceptions of government preparedness for a future pandemic; satisfaction with healthcare systems, educational systems, government use of personal data; and the stability of business conditions. It also presents perceptions of governments' and civil servants' responsiveness to public feedback in policy design, reform and delivery.



Key findings and areas for attention

The delivery of public services is a critical, tangible function of governments. The consistency and quality of services varies across OECD countries, reflecting different levels of public investments, government commitments and institutional capacity in different policy areas.

The Trust Survey finds that while citizens view governments as relatively reliable in providing public services, there is considerable room for improvement in how they provide such services, incorporate user feedback, and respond to people's needs.

- People in OECD countries have reasonable levels of confidence in their government's reliability. About half (49.4%) of respondents, on average, say their government is prepared to respond to a future contagious illness. Public confidence in pandemic preparedness, in turn, closely corresponds with trust in the national government.
- A majority of people in most countries are satisfied with their health (61.7%) and educational systems (57.6%), and about half (51.1%) trust their government to use their personal data safely – but only about four in ten trust their government to ensure stable business conditions.
- People are far more sceptical that their government will adapt innovative policies and services in response to public feedback. About four in ten (or fewer) respondents, on average across countries, say that their government would improve a poorly performing service, implement an innovative idea to improve a public service, or change a national policy in response to popular demands.
- Governments should continue investing to improve preparedness for future crises and to minimise uncertainty for people and business. Public confidence in these areas is strongly correlated with trust in the national government.
- Governments are operating in an increasingly complex and fast-paced environment, with growing expectations from citizens for an efficient and seamless interaction with their governments. Public satisfaction with administrative and social services, as well perceptions of fairness and equal treatment, are strongly associated with trust in civil service.
- Governments should recommit to incorporating user feedback and a variety of views when design and reform public programmes, better encourage the testing of innovative ideas in the public sector, improve access and explanations of digital processes and the use of personal data in governance, and evaluate the performance of public services using a combination of objective outcomes and user satisfaction measures.

4.1. ABOUT HALF OF RESPONDENTS ARE CONFIDENT IN PUBLIC HEALTH PREPAREDNESS

The OECD Trust Survey went into the field in most countries in November 2021, nearly two years into the global COVID-19 pandemic. Governments' responses to this health crisis have influenced public trust in government; after an initial "rally around the flag" effect in the early months of COVID-19, trust declined in most countries and has yet to recover (Brezzi et al., 2021^[11]). Trust in government in November 2021 likely corresponds with the intensity of the pandemic at that time.

Respondents were therefore asked a timely question: "If a new serious contagious disease spreads, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that government institutions will be prepared to protect people's lives?"

On average across countries, 49.4% of respondents express confidence that their government *would* be prepared to protect people's lives in the event of a new pandemic (Figure 4.1). This share expressing a "likely" response, i.e. confidence in government, is a majority of respondents in thirteen of the

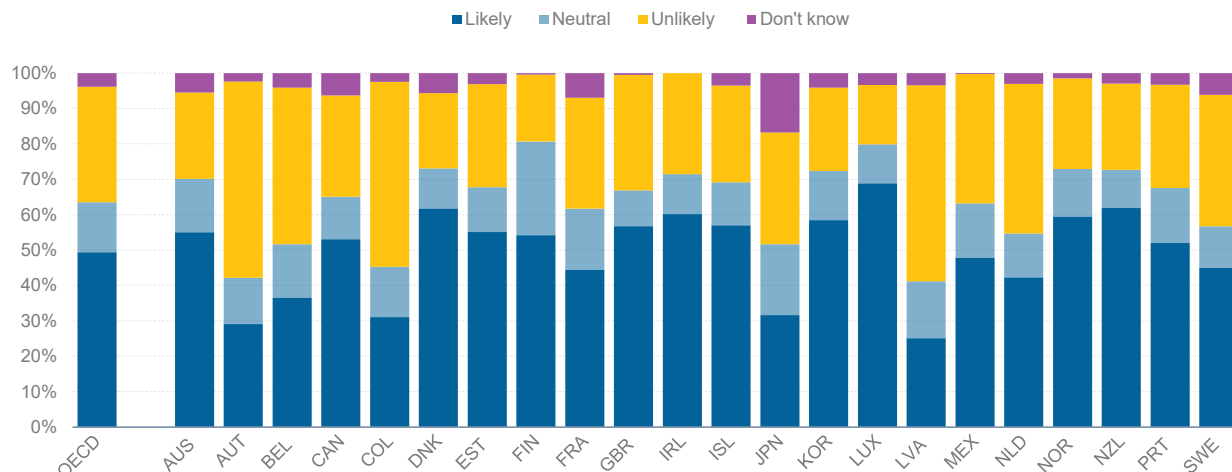
surveyed countries. Combining those respondents with a positive view on government preparedness with those respondents who report a "neutral" view on government preparedness is equal to a majority of respondents in almost all countries. Almost one third (32.6%) of respondents, on average across countries, say their government is *unlikely* to be prepared for the next pandemic.

Given the enduring human and economic costs of the pandemic, and the amount of information a typical person acquired about public health over the past two years, this fairly positive expectation is a noteworthy outcome. It is also worth noting that – in spite of the many challenges governments faced in effectively responding to the economic and health exigencies of the pandemic – this finding suggests that people see governments as having learned from the information gained during this experience. The relatively weaker results in some countries may also reflect a degree of pandemic fatigue (Chapter 1), as the survey went into the field around the time of the introduction of some new lockdown measures, e.g. in Western Europe.




Figure 4.1. About half say their government would be prepared for the next pandemic

Share of respondents reporting different levels of perceived likelihood that their government would be prepared to protect people's lives in the event of a new serious contagious illness (on a 0-10 scale), 2021



Note: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses to the question “If a new serious contagious disease spreads, how likely or unlikely do you think is it that government institutions will be prepared to protect people’s life?” The “likely” proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; “neutral” is equal to a response of 5; “unlikely” is the aggregation of responses from 1-4; and “Don’t know” was a separate answer choice. “OECD” presents the unweighted average of responses across countries. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

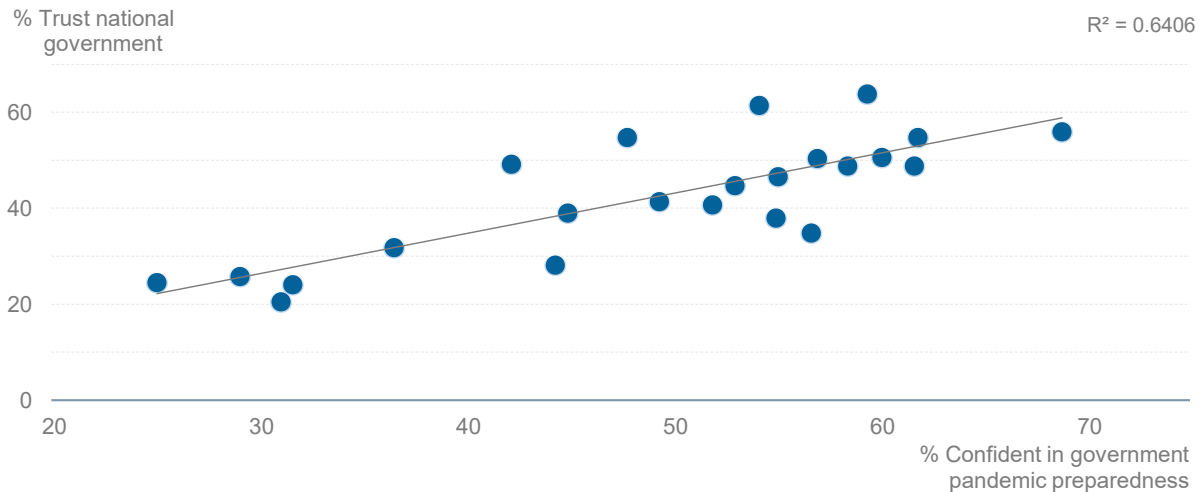
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Trust in the national government closely corresponds with perceptions of preparedness for a future pandemic (Figure 4.2). Countries in which most people think their government

learned from the pandemic are also the countries in which more people are likely to trust that government.

Figure 4.2. Positive perceptions of preparedness for a future pandemic are associated with higher trust in the national government – and vice versa

Share of respondents reporting trust in national government and share of respondents who consider it likely that government institutions will be prepared to protect people's lives in the event of a future pandemic, 2021



Note: This scatterplot presents the share of “trust” responses to the question “On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is completely, how much do you trust your national government?”, equal to the values of responses 6-10 on the response scale, on the y axis. For Mexico and New Zealand, trust in civil servants is used in lieu of trust in the national government as respondents were not asked about trust in the national government. The x axis presents the share of “likely” responses to the question “If a new serious contagious disease spreads, how likely or unlikely do you think is it that government institutions will be prepared to protect people’s lives?”, equal to the values of 6-10 on the response scale. “OECD” presents the unweighted average of responses across countries. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

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Box 4.1. Response scale in the OECD Trust Survey

The OECD Trust Survey offers an eleven-point scale for the response choices on questions about levels of trust and drivers of trust, following reviewed best practices and applications in country studies in Finland and Norway (OECD, 2017^[2]) (OECD, 2021^[3]) (OECD, 2021^[3]). A numerical 0-10 scale with verbal scale anchors is recommended and used here for survey questions on trust, as it allows for variance in responses, increases overall data quality and complexity, and facilitates translatability across languages. The response order was presented consistently from negative to positive outcomes (i.e. 0-10) (OECD, 2017^[2]).

In this report the positive (likely/high confidence) results are the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; “neutral” is equal to a response of 5; and the negative (unlikely/low confidence) results are the aggregation of responses from 1-4. “Do not know” was a separate answer choice.

The exception to these aggregations is Finland, where the response scale ranged from 1-10. Positive responses are therefore coded as 7-10; neutral as 5 and 6; negative as 1-4; and “Do not know” was a separate answer choice. This sorting tends to give Finland a slightly larger “neutral” response rate than other countries.

The inclusion of “Do not know” and “neutral” responses in figures in this report naturally results in lower percentages of respondents who report they trust or do not trust different institutions. The inclusion of these “do not know” and “neutral” responses stands in contrast to some other cross-national surveys measuring trust, but it is arguably a benefit of the OECD Trust Survey – it gives respondents a wider range of response choices and it enables a more nuanced interpretation of results. It is important to note that country-specific cultural, institutional and socioeconomic contexts may also systematically bias trust conclusions and the proportion of neutral and “Do not know” responses in certain countries (Box 2.1 in Chapter 2).

The full questionnaire is available in the detailed survey method document accompanying this report, available at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

4.2. IN MOST COUNTRIES, A MAJORITY ARE SATISFIED WITH THEIR HEALTHCARE AND EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

A tangible indicator of government reliability lies in the provision of social protection and educational opportunities. OECD governments devote a massive amount of resources to providing health and education: pre-pandemic, countries spent around 5.6% and 3.4% of GDP, respectively, on average in the OECD (OECD, 2022^[4]; OECD, 2021^[5]). These public services, correspondingly, reach and affect the lives of large shares of national populations.

How are these everyday public services perceived, and how do these perceptions align with actual expenditures and other measurable outcomes? The OECD Trust Survey finds that a majority of respondents, on average across countries, are satisfied with their country’s educational system and healthcare system. Although reported satisfaction with public services may conceal many different aspects of services – such as access, affordability, courtesy, timeliness, and so on – it can provide a general, aggregate account of objective indicators of service performance (Baredes, 2022^[6]).

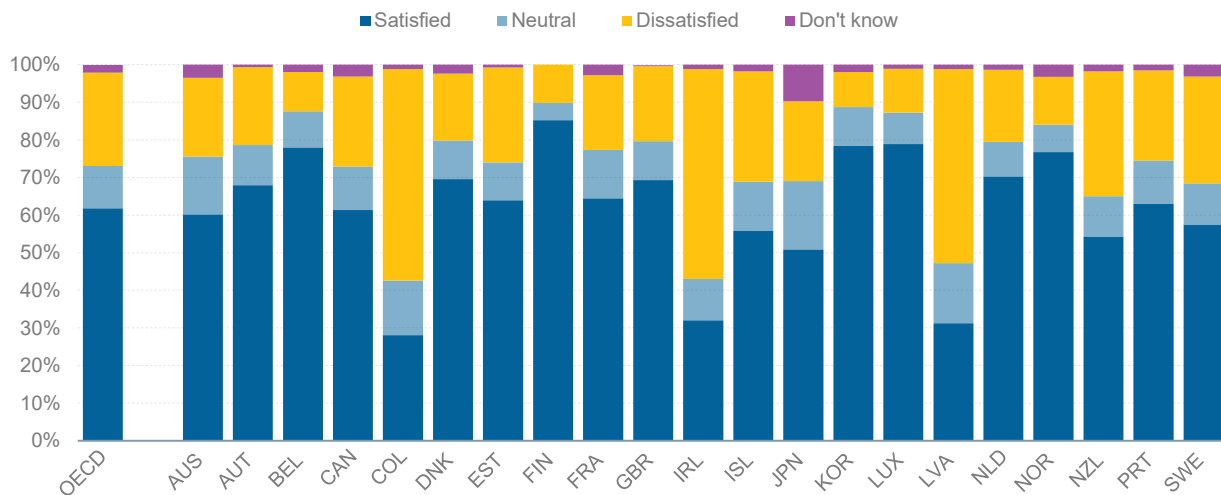
4.2.1. Healthcare

Looking at healthcare, 61.7% of respondents, on average, say they are satisfied with their country's healthcare system (Figure 4.3). Indeed, in all but three countries a majority of respondents feel

satisfied with the healthcare system. This is a noteworthy result in a global pandemic. Satisfaction is slightly higher among users of healthcare, defined here as those who had direct interaction with a health provider in the past year.¹⁰

Figure 4.3. A majority of respondents, across countries, are satisfied with the provision of healthcare

Share of respondents reporting different levels of satisfaction with the healthcare system in their country (on a 0-10 scale), 2021



Note: Figure presents the within-country distribution of responses to the question "On a scale of 0 to 10 [where 0 is 'not at all satisfied' and 10 is 'completely satisfied'], how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the healthcare system in [country] as a whole?" The "satisfied" proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; "neutral" is equal to a response of 5; "unlikely" is the aggregation of responses from 0-4; and "Don't know" was a separate answer choice. In Norway the question referred to satisfaction with primary care doctors, public healthcare centres, nursing homes, and health & care services in the home. Mexico is excluded from the figure as data are not available. "OECD" presents the unweighted average across countries. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

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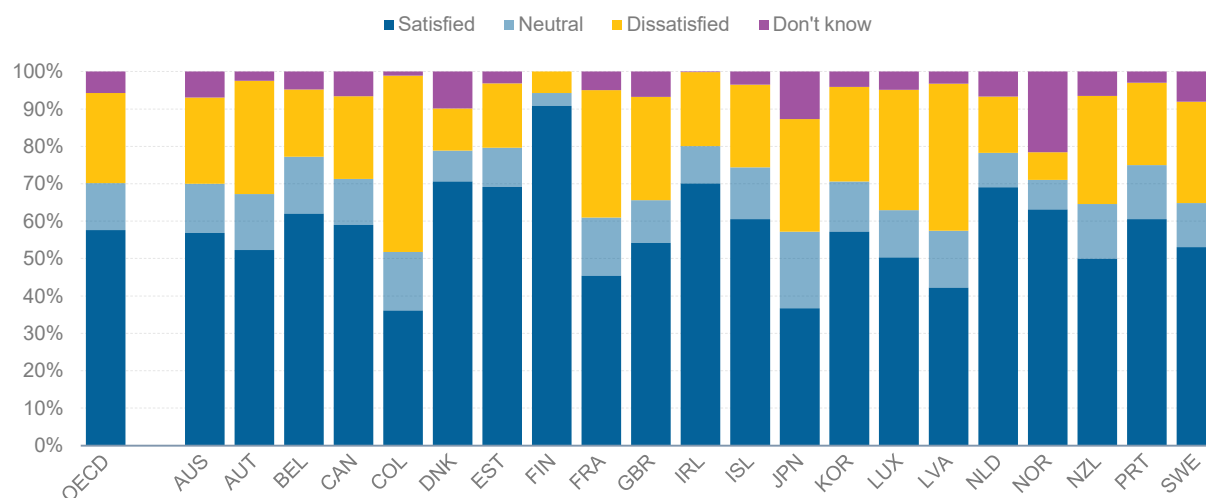
4.2.2. Education

Respondents are similarly positive about education: 57.6% of respondents say they are satisfied with their country's educational system (Figure 4.4). And in spite of the challenges the

pandemic presented for schooling, people whose immediate family had a direct experience with the education system in 2021 are actually slightly more likely to say that they are satisfied with the education system than people without a direct experience.

Figure 4.4. Nearly six out of ten, across countries, are satisfied with the educational system in their country

Within-country distribution of levels of satisfaction with the educational system, 2021



Note: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses to the question “On a scale of 0 to 10, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the education system in your country as a whole?” The “likely” proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; “neutral” is equal to a response of 5; “unlikely” is the aggregation of responses from 0-4; and “Don’t know” was a separate answer choice. “OECD” presents the unweighted average across countries. In Finland, only respondents with experience in the education system were asked about their level of satisfaction; in Norway respondents were asked specifically about satisfaction with upper secondary education/schools and primary schools. Mexico is excluded from the figure as data are not available. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

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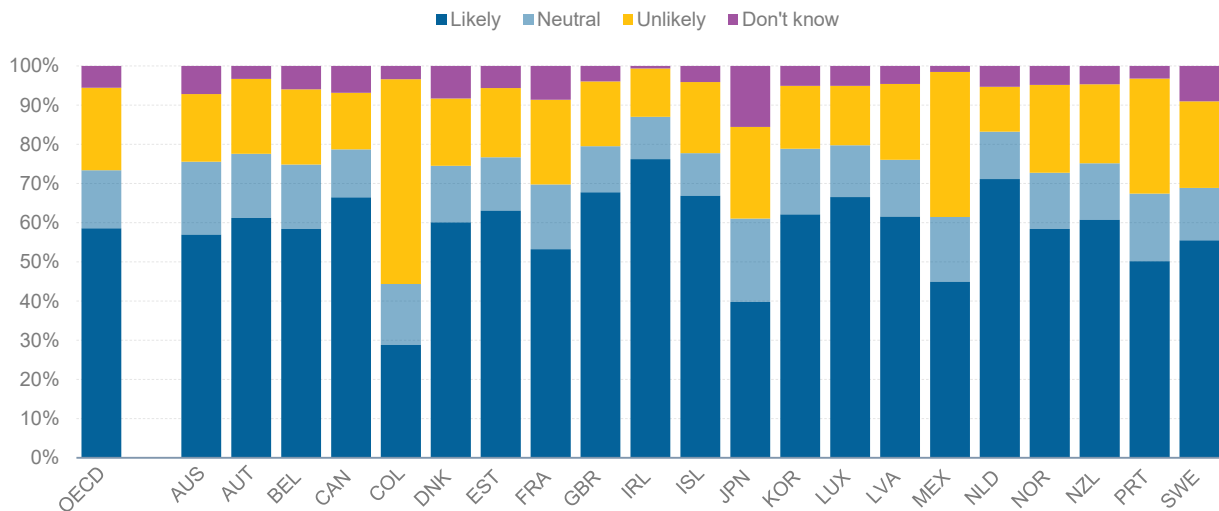
These results on satisfaction with healthcare and education should be interpreted with caution. While a majority of respondents in most countries report that they are satisfied with these services, these are not large majorities in most countries. The Trust Survey does not ask about the affordability, accessibility and quality of healthcare and education, which has led to considerably lower levels of satisfaction in the OECD Risks that Matter survey focused on social protection (OECD, 2021^[7]) (OECD, 2019^[8]). People in OECD countries also consistently rank the risks of poor health/disability and the future social mobility of their children as their top worries, both across countries and over time (OECD, 2021^[7]) (OECD, 2019^[8]). In short, there is still much room for improvement in social service delivery.

4.2.3. Applications to public benefits or services

When being asked about their own potential application for a generic government benefit or service, a high share of respondents – 58.5% – feel that their application would be treated fairly (Figure 4.5). The share of respondents who expect to be treated fairly is above 50% in 18 of the surveyed OECD countries, with above 70% in Ireland and the Netherlands. Across countries, being confident about a fair treatment in government benefits or services is highly and significantly correlated with trust in the civil servants (Chapter 2).

Figure 4.5. The majority of respondents expect that their application for a government benefit or service would be treated fairly

Share of respondents who indicate different levels of perceived likelihood that a government would treat their application for a government benefit or service fairly (on a 0-10 scale), 2021



Note: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses to the question "If you or a member of your family would apply for a government benefit or service (e.g. unemployment benefits or other forms of income support), how likely or unlikely do you think it is that your application would be treated fairly?" The "likely" proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; "neutral" is equal to a response of 5; "unlikely" is the aggregation of responses from 0-4; and "Don't know" was a separate answer choice. "OECD" presents the unweighted average across countries. In Mexico and Norway, the question was formulated in a slightly different way. Finland is excluded from the figure as the data are not available. For more detailed information, please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

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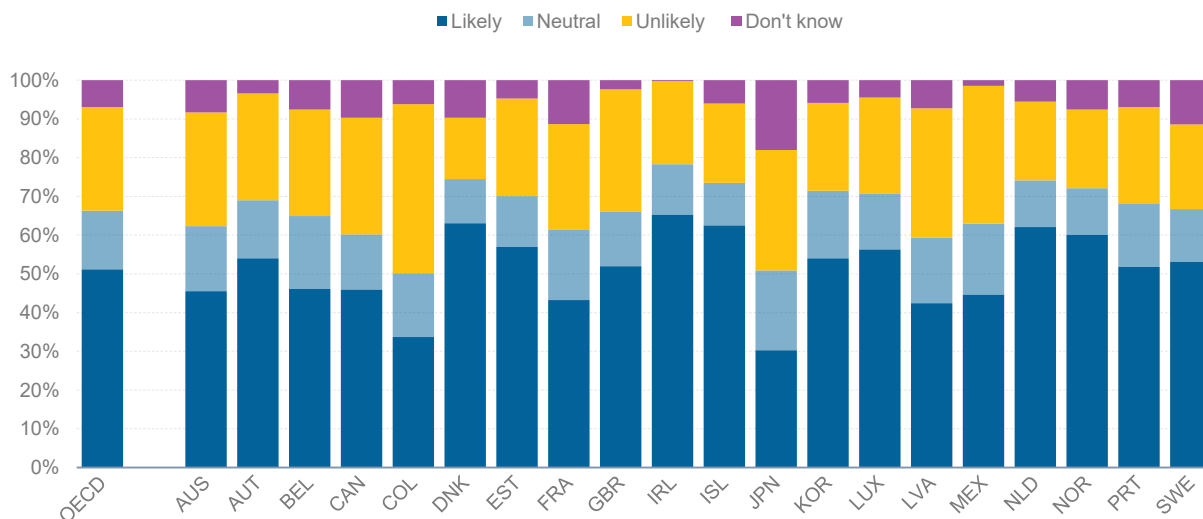
4.3. PEOPLE TRUST GOVERNMENT WITH THEIR DATA, BUT ARE LESS CERTAIN ABOUT THE STABILITY OF BUSINESS CONDITIONS

Governments' efforts to inform the population about how their personal data are processed, stored and used is another important aspect of government reliability. The COVID-19 pandemic has further spurred remote service delivery and digital interactions of the population with the public sector, making the responsible use of personal data by public agencies even more relevant. The Trust Survey finds that governments are doing fairly well on this.

On average across countries, 51.1% of respondents say that, if they were to share their personal data with a public agency/office, it is likely that the data would be exclusively used for "legitimate purposes" (Figure 4.6). Respondents in Denmark, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands and Norway have especially high levels of trust in their government's use of their data. Yet even in the countries with the lowest levels of trust in the government's use of data, typically fewer than one-third of respondents feel their government is not likely to use personal data responsibly. This suggests that government misuse of personal data is not a widespread concern.

Figure 4.6. Half of respondents, on average, trust their government to use their personal data for legitimate purposes

Share of respondents reporting different levels of perceived likelihood that their government would use personal data exclusively for “legitimate purposes” (on a 0-10 scale), 2021



Note: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses to the question “If you share your personal data with a [public agency/office], how likely or unlikely do you think it is that it would be exclusively used for legitimate purposes?”. The “likely” proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; “neutral” is equal to a response of 5; “unlikely” is the aggregation of responses from 1-4; and “Don’t know” was a separate answer choice. Finland and New Zealand are excluded from this figure as data were not available. “OECD” presents the unweighted average across countries. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

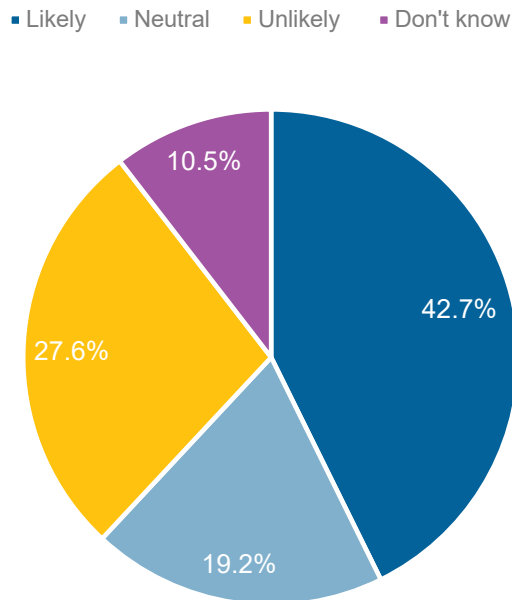
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People are less optimistic, across countries, about the capacity of governments to minimise instability and unpredictability of business conditions (Figure 4.7). Just over four in ten respondents (42.7%), on average across countries, say it is likely that business conditions (e.g. laws and regulations) will be stable and predictable, with the most positive feedback in Korea, where 54.3% report anticipating stable business conditions. At the same time, respondents are not overly pessimistic. Only

27.6% say it is *unlikely* that business conditions will remain stable, and there are large shares of neutral responses across countries. The relatively high average share of “Don’t know” responses to this question, relative to the other policy questions in the survey, also suggests that knowledge of business conditions – and perhaps knowledge of policy tools to influence business conditions – may be limited in the general population.

Figure 4.7. Four in ten say they trust business conditions that government can influence to remain stable

Share of respondents reporting different levels of perceived likelihood that business conditions that government can influence will be stable and predictable (on a 0-10 scale), unweighted OECD average, 2021



Note: Figure presents the OECD unweighted average distribution of responses to the question “How likely or unlikely do you think it is that the business conditions that the government can influence (e.g. laws and regulations businesses need to comply with) will be stable and predictable?”. The “likely” proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; “neutral” is equal to a response of 5; “unlikely” is the aggregation of responses from 1-4; and “Don’t know” was a separate answer choice. Mexico is excluded from this figure as the data were not available. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

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4.4. THERE IS SCEPTICISM ABOUT THE RESPONSIVENESS OF GOVERNMENTS

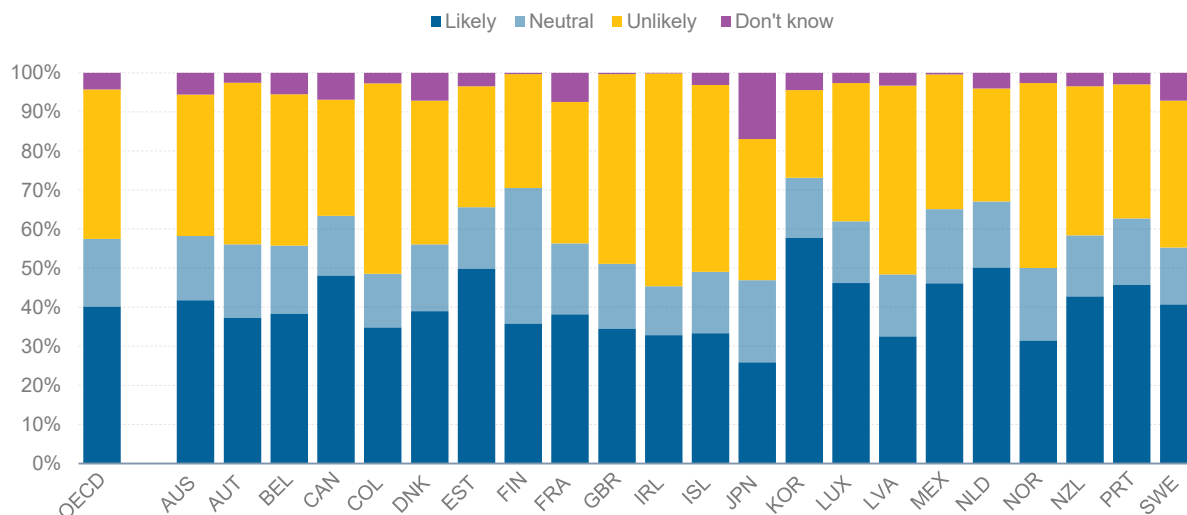
While the Trust Survey finds moderate levels of confidence in government reliability, governments fare less well in people’s evaluations of their *responsiveness*. The Trust Survey attempts to estimate to what degree OECD governments are perceived as 1) providing efficient, quality, affordable, timely and citizen-centred public services and 2) employing an innovative and efficient civil service that responds to user needs (for more on this, see the Trust Framework in Chapter 1). These questions on the capacity of governments to adapt and innovate

are particularly relevant given that OECD governments are operating in an increasingly complex and fast-paced environment, with growing expectations from citizens for an efficient and seamless interaction with their governments.

The Trust Survey asks people, across a range of questions, to consider how well institutions adapt policies and public services to citizens’ views. Only 40.2% of respondents say a public service would be likely to be improved if many people complained about the service working poorly (Figure 4.8). Estonia, Korea and the Netherlands are the only countries in which a majority of respondents say a public service would be improved in response to complaints.

Figure 4.8. A minority of respondents say a public service would be improved if people complained

Share of respondents reporting different levels of perceived likelihood that a poorly-performing public service would be improved if many people complained about it (on a 0-10 scale), 2021



Note: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses to the question “If many people complained about a public service that is working badly, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that it would be improved?” The “likely” proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; “neutral” is equal to a response of 5; “unlikely” is the aggregation of responses from 1-4; and “Don’t know” was a separate answer choice. “OECD” presents the unweighted average across countries. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

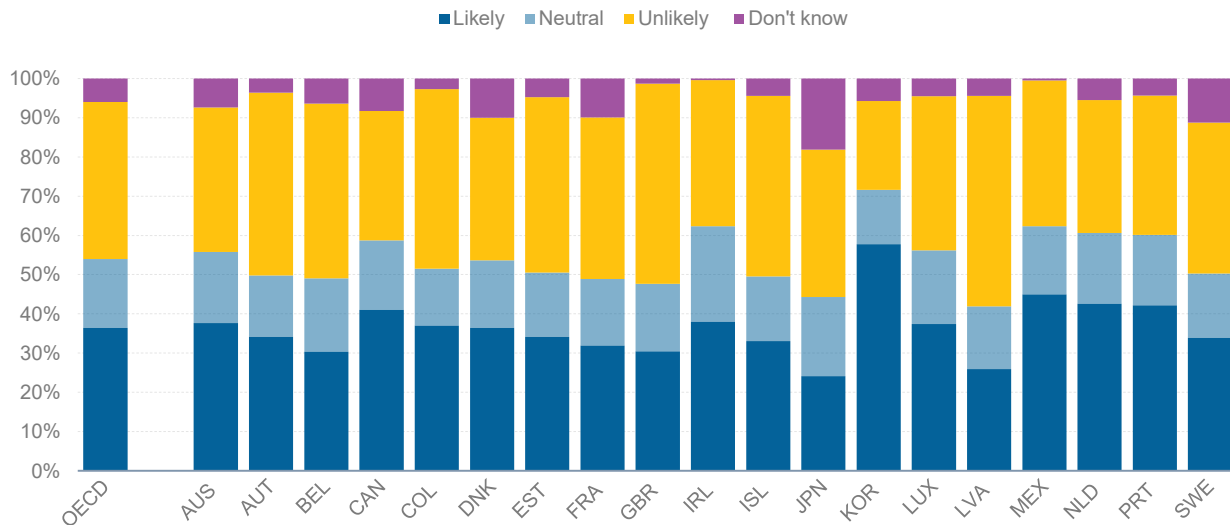
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When looking at a higher level of governance, e.g. a national policy, people are similarly sceptical of their government’s responsiveness (Figure 4.9). Only 36.5% of respondents say a national policy would be changed if a majority of the population opposed the policy. In only one country – Korea – are a majority (57.8%) of respondents optimistic that the government would change a policy.

Of course, not every national policy *should* reflect majority opinions – indeed, the protection of minority rights against the tyranny of the majority is a keystone of modern democracy (Tocqueville, 1838^[9]). But these estimates suggest that governments in general are not viewed as being very adaptive to public attitudes.

Figure 4.9. Most people do not think national policies adapt to public views

Share of respondents reporting different levels of perceived likelihood that a national policy would be changed if a majority of people expressed a view against it (on a 0-10 scale), 2021



Note: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses to the question “If over half of the people clearly express a view against a national policy, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that would be changed?” The “likely” proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; “neutral” is equal to a response of 5; “unlikely” is the aggregation of responses from 1-4; and “Don't know” was a separate answer choice. Finland, New Zealand and Norway are excluded from this figure as question was not asked. “OECD” presents the unweighted cross-national average. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>. Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

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Governments’ weaker scores on the responsiveness component of the Trust Framework align with similar findings on government openness: people are highly sceptical of their ability to influence government decision making at the local level, and they do not feel their views would be incorporated even if they participate in, for example, a public consultation on policy reform (Chapter 5). These findings also correspond with respondents’ widely held views that they lack political voice (Chapter 6).

The results from the OECD Trust Survey suggest that more can be done to ensure that policies and services – even if reasonably well-delivered – are aligned with people’s expectations and adapt as needed. This sense of a lack of voice in

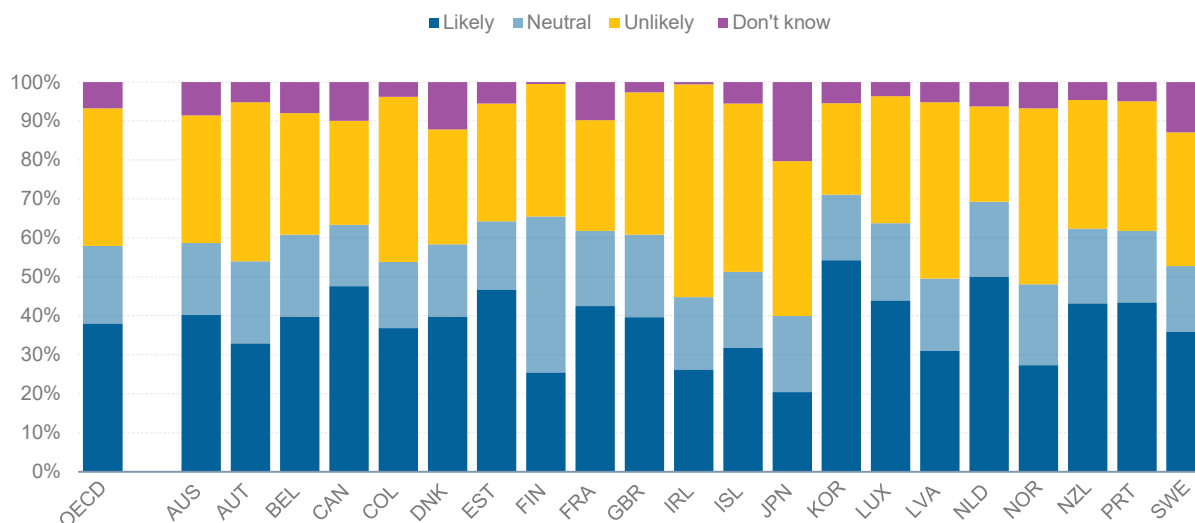
governance has important implications for trust and for the strength of democracy in general.

4.5. FEW PEOPLE SEE PUBLIC AGENCIES ADOPTING INNOVATIVE IDEAS

Related to public scepticism over government responsiveness, just fewer than one in four (38.0%, on average across OECD countries), feel that a public agency would be likely to adopt an innovative idea to improve a public service. Korea, the Netherlands, Canada and Estonia score most highly on this measure, perhaps reflecting dedicated, people-centred policy engagement efforts in these countries (OECD/KDI, 2018₍₁₀₎).

Figure 4.10. The public has a lack of confidence in public agencies adopting innovative ideas

Share of respondents reporting different levels of perceived likelihood that a public agency/office would adopt an innovative idea that could improve a public service (on a 0-10 scale), 2021



Note: Figure presents the within-country distributions of responses to the question "If there is an innovative idea that could improve a public service, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that it would be adopted by the responsible public agency/office?" The "likely" proportion is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 on the scale; "neutral" is equal to a response of 5; "unlikely" is the aggregation of responses from 1-4; and "Don't know" was a separate answer choice. The scale ranges from 0-10. "OECD" presents the unweighted cross-national average. Mexico is excluded from this figure as data are not available. The question is phrased slightly differently in Norway. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>.

Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

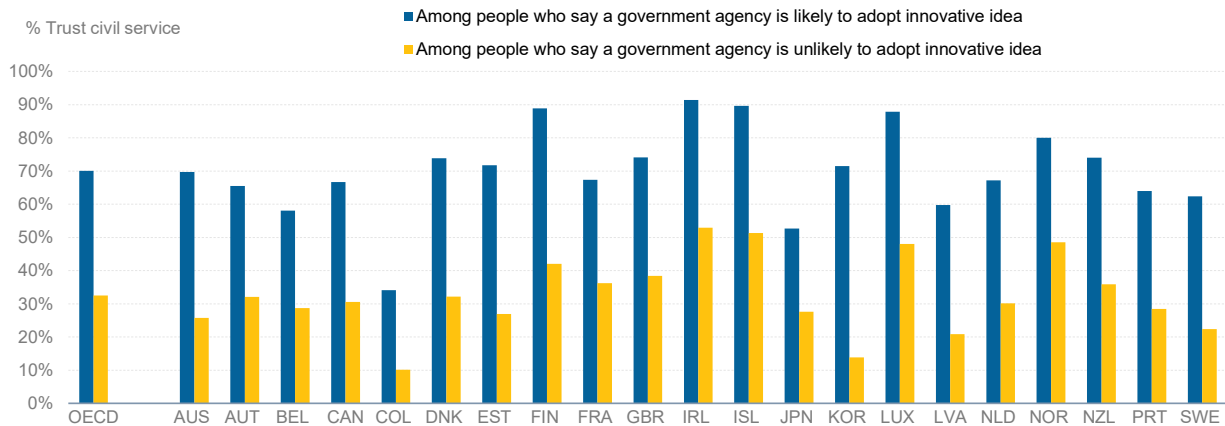
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Confidence in government agencies' agility in adopting new ideas is directly related to trust in civil service. In every country, people who say they are confident about innovation in a public office are much more likely to trust civil servants: on average across OECD countries, the share of

people that trust the civil service is equal to 70% among those who are confident about public sector innovation, a value more than two times larger than among those who say that the public sector would not adopt innovative ideas (Figure 4.11).

Figure 4.11. Higher confidence that a government agency would adopt innovative ideas is associated with higher trust in civil servants

Share of respondents who report they trust the civil service, sorted by their perception that a government agency would or would not adopt an innovative idea, 2021



Note: Figure presents the average share of respondents who trust their civil service, sorted by whether or not they think a government agency would adopt innovative ideas. The share of respondents who think government agency would adopt innovative idea is the aggregation of responses from 6-10 to the question “If there is an innovative idea that could improve a public service, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that it would be adopted by the responsible [public agency/office]?”; The group of people with high trust in civil service consists of responses from 6-10 to the question “On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all and 10 is completely, how much do you trust each of the following? The civil service (non-elected government employees at central or local levels of government).” Mexico is excluded from this figure as data on confidence in public agencies adopting innovative ideas are not available. “OECD” presents the unweighted average across countries. For more detailed information please find the survey method document at <http://oe.cd/trust>. Source: OECD Trust Survey (<http://oe.cd/trust>)

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Box 4.2. Improving responsiveness in practice: The case of Korea

There are applied and practical ways to improve the responsiveness of government. The case of Korea offers a good example. Concerned with a relatively low level of trust in government, in contrast with the good performance in many public governance areas, Korea implemented a pilot version of the OECD Trust Survey in 2017 to better understand drivers of public trust (OECD/KDI, 2018^[10]). The study found that only about 40% of the population considered the government to be responsive and reliable (estimated as the aggregation of values of 6-10 on the eleven-point scale used in the Trust Survey). By the time of the 2021 OECD Trust Survey data collection, however, around 55% of Koreans viewed their government as responsive and reliable (Figure 2.6 in Chapter 2).

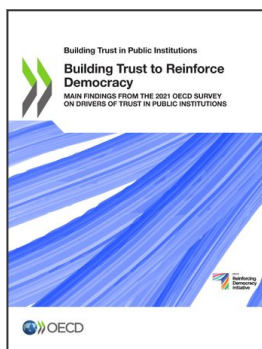
The 2018 trust case study provided a number of recommendations to Korea to strengthen government’s competence and institutional trust. Following the 2018 study, Korea has implemented actions geared towards enhancing public sector innovation and upgrading skills, adjusting risk management frameworks to improve disaster and safety management, and engaging with citizens more actively on service design and delivery, among others. Moreover, “achieving a trustworthy government” has become an explicit public policy goal in the Government Innovation Strategy of the Ministry of Interior and Safety (MOIS).

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NOTE

¹⁰ Results across users/non-users are not shown here because a majority of respondents in all countries had interacted with a healthcare provider in the year prior to the survey.



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