

‘PUBLIC INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY’ DEFINED

Trust matters to institutions. There is a growing recognition that if citizens do not have a rational basis to trust their public institutions, then the legitimacy of those institutions corrodes and finally collapses. Citizens will rightly feel that such institutions have lost any moral right to rule, and thus ultimately are reduced to nothing but organs of naked power.

But what, exactly, constitutes a rational basis for such trust? If our current public institutions wish to rebuild trust, *what exactly is it* that they need to rebuild?

The field of ‘public institutional integrity’ has been launched to answer this question. Its basic claim is that public institutional integrity is the fundamental rational basis for trust in public institutions and hence their legitimacy.

Other, well-researched aspects may also be significant for a public institution’s trustworthiness and legitimacy, such as levels of individual and institutional corruption, nepotism, accountability, open access orders, transparency, quality of government, impartiality, ethical universalism, state capture, and so on. However, the significance of such aspects should ultimately turn upon how they bear upon that institution’s overall integrity. Fixing things along these other dimensions may all be parts of the puzzle for a failing institution, but the puzzle itself is its public institutional integrity.

However, what do we mean, precisely, by ‘public institutional integrity’? Let us provide a working definition:

Public institutional integrity is the robust disposition of a public institution to legitimately pursue its legitimate purpose, to the best of its abilities, consistent with its commitments.

If we take building public institutional integrity to be an overriding imperative for institutions, then the proper overriding role of individual public officers is to do whatever best supports that imperative. In other words, a definition of individual ‘public officer integrity’ falls out of this working definition of public institutional integrity:

Public officer integrity is the robust disposition of a public officer, in the course of her public duties, to pursue the integrity of her institution to the best of her abilities.

There are a number of dimensions to public institutional integrity that are useful to highlight:

- **'purpose'**: In order to have integrity a public institution needs a clearly defined purpose (or, set of purposes with clarity about how they are to be balanced against one another). A public institution without a clear purpose may not be corrupt, but it will lack integrity. Public institutions that keep their purposes vague, or in tension and unresolved, may survive politically in the short-term, being all-things-to-all-people, but they will lack the institutional integrity necessary for long-term trustworthiness and legitimacy.

- **'legitimate'**: A *'legitimate'* purpose is a purpose worthy of respect from citizens. Citizens might not agree that a particular purpose is best for a particular institution, or the most just or equitable, but they should agree that, given who and/or how that purpose was set (eg. by a democratically elected government in accordance with the constitution) the institution is permitted to have such a purpose. To *pursue* that purpose *'legitimately'* means that the institution's actions are within the limits of its authority. Citizens might not agree that it has pursued its purpose in the best way, or the most just or equitable manner, but they should agree that, given who and/or how the scope of the domain and possibilities of its authority were set, the institution is currently permitted to so act.

- **'pursue'**: An institution must pursue its purpose to the best of its abilities, given the resources that it has. It demands intention (manifest in the decision-making of its leadership) and maximal effort (manifest in the actions of its constitutive parts). Integrity, therefore, does not require that the institution necessarily achieve its purpose. Such achievement may be impossible (to cure a disease that is ultimately found to be incurable), or unlikely (to defend the nation valiantly against an overwhelming enemy force), or never-ending (to secure the proper administration of justice). Further, it is not necessarily diminished merely because the institution's ability to achieve its purpose is compromised by exogenous shocks or being under-resourced, so long as it continues to pursue its purpose to the best of its abilities (for example, a well-run but under-resourced national health service doing the best with what it has).

- **'consistent with its own commitments'**: On the one hand, institutional integrity abhors 'compliance culture', that is, creating and complying with internal rules as an end in itself. Compliance with rules and norms that fail to serve the purpose of the institution undermines the integrity of the institution. However, on the other hand, breaking such rules and norms, even in pursuit of purpose, also undermines the integrity of the institution. This situation would arise because the rule (whether formal or informal) and the purpose, as constitutive parts of the institution, remain inconsistent with one another. Institutional integrity, therefore, demands both procedural propriety with respect to internal rules, and also mechanisms to

ensure that those rules continue to be fit for purpose so that no such inconsistency arises.

- **'robust'**: Current and historical coherence to purpose is not sufficient for an institution to have integrity. It needs to have sufficient strength and resolve, such that it can be relied upon to cohere come what may, across time and circumstance. Like a building, its structural integrity does not turn upon whether it stands, but whether it is easily vulnerable to collapse in adverse environmental conditions. Thus, for example, an institution that is vulnerable to possible conflicts of interest lacks integrity, even if currently no such conflicts of interest exist.

There are also a few features of the definition as a whole that it is useful to explicate.

First, our basic claim 'that institutional integrity is the fundamental rational basis for trust in institutions and hence their legitimacy' is a normative claim. It is a claim about what public trust and perceptions of legitimacy *should* turn upon. A central part of our research program, however, is to also determine whether the complementary empirical claim is true, that is, whether public trust and perceptions of legitimacy *in fact* turn upon institutional integrity.

Second, it follows from our definition, that the public needs to be able to trust a public institution to pursue its legitimate purpose, robustly, consistent with its commitments and legitimacy. Thus, on the one hand, trustworthiness does not strictly speaking turn upon what might be called 'performance', that is, an institution *achieving* its purpose. If that were the case, very few institutions would actually be trustworthy. Instead, it is the institution's wholehearted pursuit of purpose that matters. On the other hand, so-called 'performance' is not sufficient for trustworthiness either, if the institution fails other conditions of institutional integrity, such as lacking robustness, acting in an illegitimate manner, or failing to fulfil its commitments. Hence, a drug squad that plays fast-and-loose with the law and safety may successfully curtail a drug gang, but by compromising its integrity, it will compromise its trustworthiness in the process.

Third, since public institutional integrity can be compromised in a number of ways, it invites us to define a clear taxonomy of complementary institutional pathologies, and research their interaction. Thus, whilst institutional corruption, currently defined, only arises when an institution has a clear purpose but external strategic and systematic influences lead it to deviate from that purpose; we might define 'institutional confusion' as occurring when an institution loses clarity over its purpose; and 'institutional corrosion' when an institution's constitutive parts for any reason start to fail to cohere to purpose; or 'institutional capture', when the very authority dictating the purpose of the organization is corrupted, and changes the institution's purpose to serve private ends; and so on.

Finally, some may see the requirement that a public institution's purpose must be 'legitimate' as an analytical weakness. This is because sometimes it is deeply controversial whether a particular purpose is legitimate or not, and thus it becomes controversial as to whether an institution that coheres to such a purpose can have integrity. For example, it is controversial as to whether it is legitimate for a national border protection force to have the purpose of preventing prospective asylum seekers from claiming asylum by forcibly keeping them outside of territorial waters. As such, it becomes controversial as to whether any border force that pursues such a purpose has integrity. Such a controversy might be intractable, turning upon deep debates about the moral right of any government ever to act contrary to basic, internationally declared human rights. Would it not be better to avoid such messiness and simply drop the legitimacy condition?

We do not think so. First, dropping the legitimacy condition entails that any well-run, purpose-driven, robust-but-evil public institution can be said to have integrity. This seems to distort the concept out of recognition and sever it from its intuitive positive normative implications. Secondly, and more importantly, in our view the fact that the concept entails this controversy is actually an analytical strength: it rightly explains not merely when and why public institutional integrity will sometimes be difficult for the independent observer to determine, but also when and why it will sometimes be difficult for on-the-ground decision-makers to determine how to preserve their institution's integrity, the trust of the people, and the institution's long-term legitimacy. The concept, therefore, properly entails that sometimes achieving public institutional integrity will demand uncertain, controversial, and risky decisions.

The imperative of many governments at the current moment is to rebuild trust and hence legitimacy. However, current efforts to measure and improve public institutions are multiple, and their pursuit is often conflicting. The concept of public institutional integrity offers a potential framework in which these measures and efforts can be brought together, buttressed, and balanced in a principled way, keeping the promotion of public trust and legitimacy as the ultimate purpose of such research. In this way, it might bring institutional integrity to the research of government itself.