



EXAMPLE OF PARAPHRASING A SENTENCE

An abundance of social science research indicates that high economic inequality comes along with several undesirable outcomes, such as higher levels of violence and lower levels of health, happiness and satisfaction with life. But inequality has been rising in almost all developed countries since the 1970s, which raises an important question. If high inequality is detrimental to the well-being of a large majority of the populace and if democracy is about realizing “the will of the people,” why has inequality been allowed to increase in most democracies? Put differently, if most people would benefit from enhancing equality, why have voters not elected politicians who would implement policies to do that? This is one of the most significant paradoxes of our time. Scholars provide a variety of explanations: Some point to the limited foresight, knowledge and rationality of voters. Others argue that the increased power of money in politics has prevented politicians who would launch redistributive policies from coming to power. A third view is that economic changes have weakened the power of trade unions, which used to be a strong force supporting equality. A fourth argument is that the political agenda has changed. For various reasons, issues about economic inequality have received less attention in political debates, whereas questions about ethnic, sexual and other identities have become more central. I would like to add yet another factor to this discussion—trust, in two distinct forms. One is social trust, the extent to which people trust most others in their society. An important asset for any community, it influences how likely individuals are to participate in politics or civic organizations, how tolerant they are of minorities and even how optimistic they are about their life chances. The other kind is institutional trust—the extent to which people believe their public insti-





tutions can be trusted. Surveys conducted since the 1960s indicate remarkable variation in both types of trust among countries. For example, the World Values Survey that was completed in 2014 shows that in Sweden and the Netherlands, more than 60 percent—and in Norway, more than 70 percent—believe “most people can be trusted.” In highly unequal countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, Romania and Tanzania, fewer than 10 percent trust others. Institutional trust also varies hugely—not only among countries but also among different parts of the public sector. For example, you may distrust the current government if the political party you support is not in power, but you may still trust the courts or the social security and tax administrations. Also significant is the change in trust levels over time. In Nordic countries, social trust has increased slightly since the 1980s. But in the U.S., according to data from different surveys, it has declined dramatically—from 77 percent of Americans being “trustees” in 1964 down to 56 percent in 1968 and further down to between 31 and 38 percent in 2014. Similarly, institutional trust has risen sharply in Denmark and dropped just as steeply in the U. S. In the early 1960s more than 70 percent of Americans believed they could trust the federal government “always” or “most of the time.” But in 2014 less than 20 percent thought that to be the case. An index constructed by the Pew Research Center shows an almost parallel decline of institutional and social trust in the U.S. Such rapid change indicates that neither form of trust is ingrained in the inherited culture of a society. Both kinds are highly correlated, however, across countries and time spans with inequality. That gives rise to a chicken-and-egg question: Which came first? Some scholars, such as social epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson and political scientist Eric





Uslaner, hold that high economic inequality intensifies social hierarchies and leads to low social trust. In a very unequal society, say, Brazil or Romania, the lives of the rich and poor hardly ever intersect: They go to different schools and hospitals, and they live in different areas—gated communities or slums. Having little familiarity with the “other,” they also tend to be suspicious of anyone from a different social class. I contend, on the other hand, that yet another factor stands at the head of the causal chain—having cascading effects on institutional trust, social trust and inequality. That fountainhead is corruption, which undermines not only trust in public institutions but also social trust. If people perceive that public servants are generally dishonest, incompetent or discriminatory, they are likely to make two inferences. To begin with, if you cannot trust the judges, police officers or tax collectors who are supposed to act in the public interest, why should you trust anyone else? If most people have to pay bribes or use personal contacts to get what they need from the public sector, how can they be trusted? If powerful, money-eyed lobbies are observed to extract undue favors from the government, as seems all too common today, especially in the U.S., that too undermines institutional trust and, in consequence, social trust.

