A Research Agenda for Political Trust

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A Research Agenda for Political Trust

Edited by

DANIEL DEVINE

Associate Professor of Public Opinion and Behaviour, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Southampton, UK

MALCOLM FAIRBROTHER

Professor, Department of Sociology, Uppsala University and Institute for Future Studies, Sweden

Elgar Research Agendas

Contents

List of contributors

Matthew Bennett, Project Manager, University of Essex, UK.

Eri Bertsou, Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of St. Gallen (HSG), Switzerland.

Lisa Dellmuth, Professor of International Relations, Stockholm University, Sweden.

Daniel Devine, Associate Professor in Public Opinion and Behaviour, University of Southampton, UK.

Malcolm Fairbrother, Professor, Department of Sociology, Uppsala University and Institute for Future Studies, Sweden.

Sarah Kups, Senior Economist, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Marlene Mauk, Postdoctoral Fellow, GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Germany.

Ben Seyd, Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Kent, UK.

Kriti Sharma, PhD student, University of Toronto, Canada.

Laura Stoker, Professor Emerita, University of California, Berkeley, USA.

Viktor Valgarðsson, Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow, University of Southampton, UK.

Tom van der Meer, Professor in Political Science, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

James Weinberg, Senior Lecturer in Politics, University of Sheffield, UK.

Rima Wilkes, Professor, University of British Columbia, Canada.

Cary Wu, Research Chair and Associate Professor, York University, Canada.

Acknowledgements

1

A research agenda for political trust

Daniel Devine and Malcolm Fairbrother

> Our government confronts a crisis of trust. For many years, the radical and corrupt establishment has extracted power and wealth from our citizens, while the pillars of our society lay broken and seemingly in complete disrepair.
> Donald J. Trump (2025 inauguration speech)[1]

Unlike many other things he says, Donald Trump's claim of a crisis of trust in American public life is backed up by data. According to the Pew Research Center, trust in the United States federal government is near the lowest it has ever been, with only about one in five Americans confident that the government "usually does what is right" (Pew Research Center, 2024). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, according to the most recent wave of the decades-long British Social Attitudes (2024) survey, "trust and confidence in government are as low as they have ever been". A record-low proportion of respondents – just 5% – said they expect politicians will be honest, and fewer respondents than ever before said they trusted British governments to prioritise the needs of the nation over the interests of their own party.

The US and the UK are not exceptional; disillusionment with policymakers and public institutions is the norm in many countries, and is declining in several large and established democracies (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Low levels of trust are not new; more than a decade ago, Naurin (2011) showed that most people in many different countries do not believe that politicians keep their promises, even though scholars have shown that political parties, in reality, generally act consistently with their election promises.

The even greater decline in trust in recent years has, moreover, been one of the reasons for the rise of populist-nationalist parties in many national contexts (Algan et al., 2017; Bröning, 2023; Ivanov, 2023). With lower trust in democratic institutions and declining confidence in official information sources, in turn, comes greater acceptance of disinformation (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Zimmermann and Kohring, 2020). Indeed, low trust arguably has eroded and/or threatens the quality of democracy. Arguably, that is precisely the reason that Donald Trump and similar

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[1] https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/

populist-nationalist politicians highlight crises of trust – and suggest that distrust in core political institutions is *justified*. Despite often being part and/or product of the establishment (or at least elite institutions), they decry, such politicians intentionally seek to drive down popular trust in virtually everything but themselves (Larsen, 2023).

Most residents of democratic nations remain committed to democracy (Claassen, 2020; Wuttke et al., 2022). But doubts about governments' trustworthiness appear to be leading many people to want limits on what their governments can do – as shown, for example, by evidence that individuals with low trust are less supportive of welfare spending and more hostile to taxation (Goubin and Kumlin, 2022; Habibov et al., 2018). At the same time, people are arguably looking to policymakers and public agencies to solve problems as much as, if not more than, ever before (NatCen, 2023).

How should we understand this landscape? The purpose of this book is to guide future scholarship grappling with this question.

Political trust sits under the broad umbrella of "political support": "the mixture of positive and negative orientations that citizens have towards the principal actors, institutions, rules, and norms that structure the political system" (Seyd, 2024, p. 49). Along with trust, other key attitudes of political support are, at the most "diffuse" end, support for regime principles (like rule by democracy) and incumbent approval, at the most "specific" end. This way of thinking about "political support" (that is, bounded by diffuse and specific support at opposite ends) can be called the Eastonian approach (Easton, 1965, 1975), though updated by several others since (e.g., Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). Ideally, people trust when it is warranted, and do not when it is not (Norris, 2022). Research suggests trust is important for various aspects of political life, from political participation (Hooghe and Marien, 2013) and vote choice (Rooduijn et al., 2016) to policy preferences (Fairbrother, 2016, 2019; Goubin and Kumlin, 2022; Macdonald, 2021) and support for long-term policymaking (Jacobs and Matthews, 2017; for an overview, see Devine, 2024 and Seyd, 2024, chapter 7). This collection of proposed consequences means many see trust as vital to democratic stability and efficient policymaking (OECD, 2022; Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017). Finally, those more sceptical of trust's direct, causal importance still consider trust (both at the individual and country level) to be an important "symptom" or indicator of the health of the relationship between the governed and governing (Newton, 2024).

Given the vast literature – which we document more systematically in the next section – what can another book on the topic contribute? What could we add beyond the excellent book-length resources published only within the last few years (e.g., Uslaner, 2018; Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017; Newton, 2024; Seyd, 2024)? The idea of this book was born when one of the editors (Malcolm Fairbrother) came to give a talk at the University of Oxford, where the other (Daniel Devine) was then based. With a shared interest in the issue of political trust, we found ourselves discussing a series of unanswered questions about it. Both of us felt that existing research around political trust had become somewhat static, with large and important questions as yet unaddressed.

The consequence of that conversation is this book: a collection of 11 chapters, plus this introduction, with the specific and ambitious aim to advance the study of political trust by providing readers with new ideas. That includes new questions – and new directions for research capable of answering both new and existing questions. It is therefore not meant to be a handbook, textbook, or to extensively review existing work. There are many excellent options for this in journals and books (Carstens, 2023; Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Newton, 2024; Seyd, 2024; Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017). Instead, each chapter in this book provides an agenda and provocative questions to inspire more work on a theme we believe will move research on political trust forward.

We selected these themes because we believe they need addressing, based on our own and our colleagues' experiences. We approached a range of authors who could address these topics, striking a balance between career stages, regions, disciplines and other considerations. For several reasons, including space constraints, we could not include all important topics and approaches, or all fields (though we come from two different disciplines, covering a majority of research on the topic). We believe the book has the merit of representing a concise series of important interventions into the field of political trust.

Unsurprisingly, given the enormous field and the often blurry conceptual boundaries, how people conceptualise and define trust varies. We provided all the chapter authors with our own baseline definition of "political trust", though we assured them they were free to disagree with it and offer their own definition, if they wished. According to our baseline version, political trust is "people's basic evaluative and affective orientation to the institutions and actors governing their polity (Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Miller, 1974), where trust reflects a positive orientation that the actor would produce preferred outcomes even if left unattended and where positive outcomes are uncertain (Easton, 1975)". There are two points we want to highlight here. The first is the distinction between "evaluative" and "affective": political trust is an assessment following some evaluation of trustworthiness and its components, such as competence and benevolence; but it also includes a more stable component that might be driven by personality characteristics and socialised commitment to institutions or actors (such as through shared identity or partisanship). The second is the "even if left unattended and where positive outcomes are uncertain" part of the definition. As Matthew Bennett develops in Chapter 6, a core part of trust, which distinguishes it from other concepts, like "reliance", is that there is uncertainty in the future and we cannot guarantee a trustee's behaviour. The different authors' interpretations of trust reflect the diversity in the literature generally. Our definition does not refer explicitly to vulnerability, and a trustor's willingness to accept it, but we accept arguments about its importance (see Hamm et al., 2019), and see it as implicit in our definition. One who trusts recognises the possibility of unwanted outcomes, and makes oneself vulnerable to another, in the sense that the latter can influence the actually realised (either preferred or unwanted) outcome.

Like others (Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017, p. 4), we use the term "political trust" interchangeably with "institutional trust", "confidence in political institutions", and "trust in government". We freely acknowledge, however, that some studies address "institutional trust" with respect to non-state, or at least state-adjacent, institutions – medical, media, scientific, religious, civil society, business, etc. Even just within the state, there are open questions about a possibly important distinction between trust in implementing (output-side) versus representative (input-side) institutions, as Valgarðsson et al. (2025) have recently shown. Trust in both types of public institutions may play a role, for example, in shaping policy attitudes (Kulin and Johansson Sevä, 2021), but they are distinct, as Bo Rothstein (e.g., 2009) has long emphasised. Indeed, in our definition, the precise limits of what can be taken as "the institutions and actors governing" a given polity are to some extent debatable, and unquestionably vary from country to country. This ambiguity may also help explain how Donald Trump, in the quote at the start of this chapter, could stand up as the ultimate political insider (and an Ivy League graduate born to a wealthy family) and criticise his country's "establishment". When asked, survey respondents can generally report different levels of trust in different specific institutions, with the courts and police, for example, being considered quite trustworthy in many countries, and the national parliament or congress and political parties anything but (OECD, 2024). But our interpretation of the literature is that people also possess an overall, general and perhaps more instinctive relationship with the state as a whole – the "basic evaluative and affective orientation" to which our definition refers (and which Donald Trump was likely exploiting, in railing against America's "establishment").

In the remainder of this chapter, we first chart empirically the field of political trust and those involved – the academic disciplines, the authors and key papers – to act as a starting point for those interested in the topic. We then provide an overview of the chapters to come and summarise the core themes of the chapters. In the concluding section, we highlight unanswered questions that we as editors suggest are important next steps for this field.

A bibliometric review of political trust

To provide a systematic overview of the existing academic literature on political trust, we used the Web of Science – a database of academic publications. Searching for the words "political trust" or "trust in politic" or "political confidence" in the title (not abstract) of published academic outputs, we found 746 publications with 18,200 citations between 1970 and 2024. Again, these are all publications with these words in the *title*.[2] Expanding this search to publications with any of these same three terms in the abstract *or* title identified 2,609 publications with 56,631 citations over the same period. Either way, research on political trust is clearly substantial: an average of 14

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[2]   Query link: https://www.webofscience.com/wos/woscc/summary/306e5f9d-ea2c-4ccf -b893-f5d867783a36-01325a2fe1/relevance/1

publications and 337 citations a year over a period of more than half a century. And this is not including cognate terms that likely allude to or even measure the concept using trust items, such as institutional trust, disaffection, cynicism or dissatisfaction. For some context, we can compare this to long-standing and new research areas: the terms ["partisanship" OR "party identification" OR "party ID"] return 1,959 publications whilst ["affective polariation"] returns 259 (the latter first appearing in 2013). If we assume that partisanship is one of the core concepts in political science, then political trust is not far off.

Considering disciplines, most research on political trust clearly occurs in political science. Figure 1.1 displays the percentage of publications by the top 10 subject fields (as determined by the Web of Science disciplinary categories). Political science, international relations and public administration make up around 70% of the publications since 1970; social sciences generally, sociology and communication studies also contribute around 10% each (since some categories can be overlapping, such as political science *and* communication studies, it does not add up to 100%). This is somewhat surprising; "trust" itself is an extraordinarily interdisciplinary subject, but the "political" part seems to be more limited to the social sciences and specifically sub-disciplines of political science.
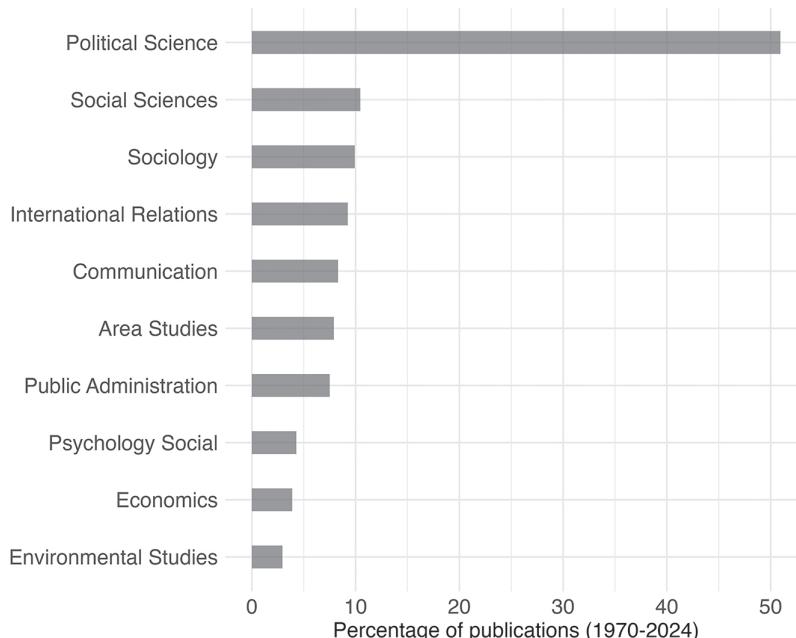
Figure 1.1   The percentage of publications (1970–2024) by Web of Science subject categories

We repeat this for the key authors. Figure 1.2 graphs the number of publications over this period on the X axis by the top-20 authors on the Y axis (some of these can, of course, be co-authored, such that the same publication can count for two of the authors). The most frequent author is Marc Hooghe, who returns 20 publications with the given search terms in the title; he is followed by Sofie Marien (13), Tom van der Meer (12), Christian Schnaudt (10), Yida Zhai (7) and Thomas Rudolph (6). There are subsequently many authors on five or four publications. We think it is important to note that amongst these authors, there are just two women, and only one has not been based at a European or North American university. Hopefully, these numbers will increase in the coming years. For now, these patterns reflect others found in more systematic meta-analyses and reviews (Devine, 2024). Reflecting Figure 1.1, almost all of these are based in the field of political science, with some also in social psychology.

Finally, what are the most cited papers? Table 1.1 lists the top 10 most cited papers with these search terms in the title. Two of these are review articles and, interestingly, two are focused on China. Four of the 10 address the *consequences* of trust (those by Hetherington, both by Marien and Hooghe, and Rudolph and Evans); though, as we touch on in Chapter 11 of this book, there is a clear lack of theoretical and empirical work on the consequences of political trust. The high citation rate of these papers likely reflects that there are few other large-scale publications on trust's consequences. Consistent with Figures 11.1 and 11.2, all but one of these publications are in political
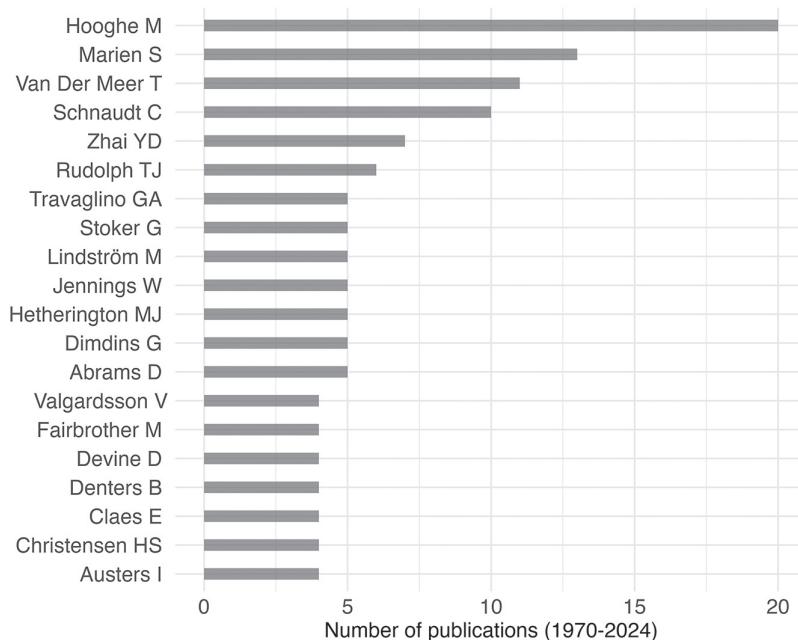
Figure 1.2   The top 20 authors with the key words in their papers' titles

Table 1.1   Top 10 most cited papers included in the search

Paper title	Author(s)	Year	Citations
Political trust and trustworthiness	Levi, M; Stoker, L	2000	1,105
What are the origins of political trust? Testing institutional and cultural theories in post-communist societies	Mishler, W; Rose, R	2001	910
The political relevance of political trust	Hetherington, MJ	1998	844
The new videomalaise: Effects of televised incivility on political trust	Mutz, DC; Reeves, B	2005	560
Does political trust matter? An empirical investigation into the relation between political trust and support for law compliance	Marien, S; Hooghe, M	2011	328
Political trust in rural China	Li, L	2004	318
Political trust, ideology, and public support for government spending	Rudolph, TJ; Evans, J	2005	314
Political trust in a cynical age	Citrin, J; Stoker, L	2018	291
Cultural values and political trust: A comparison of the People's Republic of China and Taiwan	Shi, T	2001	273
A comparative analysis of the relation between political trust and forms of political participation in Europe	Hooghe, M; Marien, S	2013	226

science journals, with the exception being "Political trust in rural China" by Lianjiang Li, which is published in *Modern China* (though the author is a political scientist).

It is worth restating the caveat to this exercise: these are from the search terms given above for words in the titles, and that means important books, articles and authors are omitted where the title does *not* include those search terms (e.g., Dalton, 2004; Norris, 2011). This is an exploratory but, we believe, informative map of the field.

The roadmap

The book is organised into 11 chapters following this introductory chapter. Ben Seyd starts the book by posing questions about *how* people form trust judgements, pitting two broad approaches against each other: the more evaluative (or calculative) basis and the "heuristic" basis. Altogether, the chapter recommends we develop ways of studying trust "as a process, not just as an outcome", and various ways we can do so. Laura Stoker takes up a part of this challenge by encouraging us to think in different ways about the causes of political trust. Whilst there is an enormous literature

on this topic, the chapter pushes us to think of three different causes: the impact of generational change on (aggregate) political trust; the importance of interactions between different levels (such as individual and aggregate causes); and the relevance of *trustworthiness* in trust objects. Sara Kups, bringing a different perspective from the OECD, highlights interventions that policymakers may wish to employ if they seek to enhance trust.

We then turn to focus on conceptual issues. Eri Bertsou discusses one of the most emerging topics in the literature: the conceptual and empirical difference between different "types" of trust, namely distrust and mistrust, and the different consequences these attitudes have. She provides specific avenues for future work in this area. Matthew Bennett takes up this theme. A philosopher by discipline, he enlightens us on the core debates in the philosophy of trust, how it differs from the debates in political science, and how the empirical measures used capture (or, more accurately, do not capture) important philosophical differences. Both of these chapters provide challenging avenues for the conceptual foundations of core political science trust literature.

The subsequent chapters address four topics that we believe are relatively under-researched but have wider lessons for the literature. Lisa Dellmuth extends the literature to international organisations, like the European Union, the African Union and NATO. Whilst the trust literature has focused on national (and to a lesser extent, subnational and European) levels of governance, this chapter proposes how we can extend the literature to international organisations and the wider implications this would have. Cary Wu, Kriti Sharma and Rima Wilkes, on the other hand, provide new questions on the relationship between race, ethnicity and political trust. More generally, this chapter encourages us to think about how political trust differs *amongst population subgroups* and what this teaches us about the causes and consequences of political trust generally. Marlene Mauk exposes another oversight: whilst most of the world lives in non-democratic states, the political trust literature is focused almost entirely on democracies. She argues that trust is important in non-democracies too, and provides an agenda for how we can research it, focusing on the different information environments in democratic and non-democratic states. James Weinberg then focuses on how political elites *perceive* and *feel* public trust, arguing that this shapes the consequences of trust and, finally, causes trust. The chapter argues that this part of the trust dynamic is understudied and provides several research questions to address this.

The final chapters turn to, in our view, one of the more substantial gaps: the consequences of political trust. Malcolm Fairbrother and Daniel Devine develop the primary theory of how trust influences attitudes towards policies – trust as a heuristic – and highlight key theoretical discrepancies and empirical gaps. Viktor Valgarðsson and Tom van der Meer round off the book by turning to the macro level: What consequences does trust have for outcomes such as levels of democracy? And how do we help answer this undoubtedly important question?

Key themes and questions

Across all of these chapters, what themes emerge? Outside of their individual concerns, what do they suggest about the wider literature?

First, several of the chapters point to a need for greater *conceptual and theoretical development* in research on political trust. This comes across most clearly in Chapters 5 (by Eri Bertsou) and 6 (by Matthew Bennett). Whilst the former builds on Bertsou's earlier work and distinguishes distrust and mistrust from trust, the latter raises understudied issues regarding whether one can trust generally or trust in specific domains, how trust is different from reliance (if at all), and how current empirical measures can (or cannot) help answer these questions. These questions have major implications for how we study political trust. Distrust may have different consequences than trust; perhaps it makes no sense to ask people if they "trust government" without specifying what, exactly, they're expected to trust government *to do*. And perhaps the causes and consequences of trust are different depending on the domain. We do not know, but answering these questions will help move the literature forward.

Whilst those two chapters are explicitly conceptual, others ask questions which prompt more careful and greater theorisation, and in different areas, from trust in international organisations (Chapter 7), to how theories of trust formation may differ for different subpopulations (in the case of Chapter 8, ethnicity) and regime types (Chapter 9). We think all of these are important and achievable. Perhaps most accessible with the current empirical resources is how trust varies across subpopulations, and what this can tell us about the causes and consequences of trust. Cary Wu, Kriti Sharma and Rima Wilkes provide a start and helpful directions in Chapter 8. Whilst – and for good reason – trust research has focused on population averages and national democracies, we can learn more theoretically and empirically by extending the focus to specific groups.

In a similar vein, several chapters touch on *the processes of trust development*, or **how individuals form trust judgements**. Most directly, Ben Seyd (Chapter 2) addresses this question head-on. Whilst we know quite a lot about trust as an outcome and its predictors, there is less known about how people reach those judgements in the first place. This is not an easy task, and requires both in-depth qualitative work and well-designed quantitative work; however, "unpacking the black box" can move us towards an improved theory of trust and interventions to improve it (on which topic, Sarah Kups in Chapter 4 provides useful directions). Laura Stoker (Chapter 3) touches on this issue with respect to *trustworthiness*. Arguably, ideally, people should base trust judgements on the trustworthiness of the object of trust. But do they, and if so, what dimensions of trustworthiness do they use; how do they receive and process that information? These questions confront the normative heart of trust. Whilst it's so often assumed that trust is a good thing (or, at least, declining trust is a bad thing), this surely depends on whether trust is an accurate assessment of trustworthiness. In most cases, as Norris (2022) has recently emphasised, it is a serious problem to trust

something that is, in fact, not worthy of trust. Getting under the hood of the process of trust judgements is a potentially fundamental step for the literature.

Finally, several chapters address *the consequences of political trust*. Just shy of a decade has passed since Zmerli and van der Meer (2017) argued the lack of research on the consequences of trust is the "biggest deficiency" in the literature; it is approximately 15 years since Marien and Hooghe (2011) described the lack of reliable knowledge on this topic as "striking". Significant work has been done since, though with at best mixed conclusions. Three of the chapters in this book tackle this head-on, collectively arguing that substantial theoretical and empirical work is required. Theoretically, Fairbrother and Devine (Chapter 11) highlight that the existing, dominant theory (when there is one) for the consequences of trust – trust as a heuristic – has several competing, if not contradictory, expectations about the expected effect(s) of trust, even when applied to the more straightforward and most likely case of (long-term) policy preferences. Valgarðsson and van der Meer (Chapter 12) raise several theoretical and empirical questions at the country level, concerning outcomes like the level and type of democracy and electoral results. Echoing Fairbrother and Devine, they likewise express their surprise that, despite long touting the effects of trust on democracy and other important outcomes, the literature has not developed a set of clear, testable theories. They suggest a range of empirical avenues to help answer these. Finally, Weinberg (Chapter 10) argues that the consequences of trust are relevant insofar as elites *perceive* and *act on* the public's levels of trust. He provides a framework, provisional empirical evidence, and several research questions to guide further research.

Final thoughts

There are likely many more themes that readers will take away from the chapters. Most importantly, we hope that this Introduction and the book as a whole help to advance the study of political trust, particularly by providing readers with new ideas. We have provided the book Open Access, thanks to funding from the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation (Grant 2019.0196), in the hope that as many people as possible can put the ideas here to use. The subfield of political trust is an extremely active and vibrant one, offering a great deal to the broader fields in which it is situated. We see the chapters here all speaking to broader questions in international relations, sociology, politics and philosophy, and fields within those.

Finally, we would like to thank the authors of the chapters for engaging with the process. Editing this book was very smooth (much smoother in fact than multiple colleagues suggested such a process could ever be). That is almost entirely due to the efforts of the authors and their timeliness in writing their own chapters and providing feedback on others. This collegiality is reflective of the wider community studying political trust.

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2

Inside the 'black box': understanding the micro-foundations of political trust

Ben Seyd

As befits a key ingredient of contemporary social and democratic life, political trust (henceforth, 'trust') has received extensive scholarly attention. Much of that attention has focused on measuring levels of trust within and across populations, exploring the causes of trust, and identifying the broad effects of trust (for overviews, see Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017; Uslaner, 2018). Thanks to such studies, we now know a good deal about trust's distribution, antecedents and consequences. Yet scholars have rather neglected an equally important issue, namely, how individuals form trust judgements. Put simply, while analysts now know a good deal about *whether* and *why* people trust civic and political actors and institutions, they know less about *how* people trust; the considerations and mechanisms by which individuals form trust judgements. The primary contention of this chapter is that our understanding of trust would be significantly enhanced if analysts focused greater attention on trust as a process, not merely as an outcome. In shorthand form, this chapter commends studying trust as a verb, not just as a noun (Möllering, 2013: 300).

In this chapter, I lay out an approach to this task by distinguishing two broad perspectives on how individuals form trust judgements. The first perspective suggests that trust reflects individuals' deliberative evaluations of actors' or agencies' behaviour and performance. This has been dubbed the 'trust-as-evaluation' approach (van der Meer and Hakhverdian, 2017; van der Meer, 2018), although I prefer the descriptor 'calculative trust'. On this account, an individual's trust is highly responsive to the actions or performance of an actor or agency, and to any changes in these. Moreover, since trust comprises a deliberative and evaluative judgement, it is likely to be closely aligned with – and perhaps predictive of – a range of individual attitudes and behaviours (Cacioppo et al., 1986). This implies that trust among individuals should correlate strongly with a broad range of important attitudes, norms and behaviours, such as engagement with state actors and agencies and compliance with official rules and injunctions.

The second perspective suggests that the calculative model misdiagnoses the way individuals typically form social judgements like trust. It points to copious research in social psychology that highlights people's tendencies to limit the costs incurred in

forming social judgements. On this account, individuals often avoid deliberative processes involving costly information acquisition and evaluation in favour of less time-intensive (and sometimes emotion- or affect-driven) processes and easily accessed and digested 'heuristic' forms of information (Chaiken, 1980; Chen and Chaiken, 1999). Such simplified processes of judgement-formation are, compared with more effortful and information-rich processes, less likely to induce changes in people's attitudes and less closely attached to attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). If trust arises from such heuristic processes, the implications are that distributions of trust may be relatively impervious to the performance of political actors and agencies and also relatively inconsequential for individuals' engagement with those actors and compliance with their edicts.

Given the very different implications arising from these two perspectives on judgement-formation, I suggest that our understanding of the nature and effects of trust is heavily dependent on insights into how people form trust judgements. We risk faulty conclusions about how trust is shaped and what its wider effects might be if we misdiagnose its 'micro-foundations'. This chapter does not attempt a detailed analysis of these micro-foundations, nor does it suggest that one perspective on trust judgements is necessarily more accurate than the other. Rather, it lays out and explores two different routes that individuals might take in forming trust judgements, and highlights the potential implications of each. On the back of this, various suggestions are made for the future study of trust. The chapter therefore stands not as an attempt to answer a question, but to stimulate greater attention on an important – but to date, somewhat neglected – issue within trust research.

The nature of trust

Trust arises in a situation where one actor (*A*; the 'trustor') has some dependency on another actor or agency (*B*; the 'trustee'). *B* therefore holds some power over *A*, yet *A* must decide whether to engage with *B* without possessing full knowledge of *B*'s intentions and capabilities. *A*'s trust arises from a judgement – based on information about *B* that may be extensive or may be meagre – about whether *B* manifests qualities and features rendering them worthy of trust. This account of trust aligns with the definition provided in the Introductory Chapter 1, namely that trust captures '… people's basic evaluative and affective orientation' to a set of actors and institutions in a situation of uncertainty ('… where positive outcomes [arising from engagement with a trustee] are uncertain'). Appraisals of trustworthiness are often taken to require information about a trustee's competence, benevolence and integrity (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). Yet in other accounts, trust is seen to require little such information; indeed, trust is seen as arising in situations characterised by an absence of detailed information about the trustee. In these situations, trust reflects the 'leap of faith' necessary in a situation of uncertainty for individuals to willingly incur vulnerability towards another. Such leaps arise from general feelings towards, or emotional bonds with, a trustee, rather than from calculative judgements about an actor's trustworthiness (Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Möllering, 2001; Li, 2015).

'Leap-of-faith' arguments are not the only accounts suggesting that trust often arises in low-information, non-calculative contexts. Other accounts suggest that trust largely reflects a trustor's innate characteristics. Thus, one individual may manifest greater levels of trust primarily due to personal dispositions to trust. Trust in other people – a social or interpersonal form of trust – has frequently been explained by reference to such individual dispositions (Rotter, 1967; Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994; Uslaner, 2002). Some forms of institutional trust may also reflect individual dispositions. For example, studies of attitudes towards the police have shown that individuals' trust is partly predicted by a basic predisposition towards low or high authoritarianism (Bradford et al., 2022).

At issue is not how we should conceptualise trust, or what trust *is*. Rather, the issue concerns how trust *arises* or how trust judgements are *formed*. We can draw a basic distinction between trust that arises from calculative judgements – involving deliberation over information about a trustee's performance or behaviour – and trust that arises from more instinctive or impulsive processes, based on an affect-driven willingness to make a 'leap of faith' or on a dispositional tendency to trust. I capture these two routes to trust in Figure 2.1. One end of the continuum is anchored by 'leap-of-faith' and dispositional routes to trust, strongly rooted in affect and basic inclinations. The other end is anchored by calculative routes to trust, resting heavily on the active processing of an extensive body of information about a potential trustee. In the case of political trust, rather few individuals' judgements are likely to cleave wholly to either endpoint. Thus, it is unlikely that many people possess the information and motivation to appraise a political actor's trustworthiness solely on the basis of rigorous cognitive evaluation. Equally, it is difficult to see how trust in a distant political actor might routinely reflect individuals' dispositional qualities or 'leap-of-faith' tendencies. However, in between these endpoints sits a range of more plausible routes to political trust judgements. This area (represented in Figure 2.1 by the shaded area) is marked by variations in the amount of information employed by individuals in reaching trust judgements, and in the use of alternative tools to compensate for a lack of, or unwillingness to process, such information. Thus, individuals might not have access to, or might eschew, detailed information about an actor's performance or behaviour. Instead, they might rest their trust judgements on less informationally rich criteria, such as details about an actor's role (do they have an authoritative-sounding job title?) or social identity (do they look like me and my social group?), or broad images or stereotypes of the actor and generalised feelings and emotional reactions to that actor.
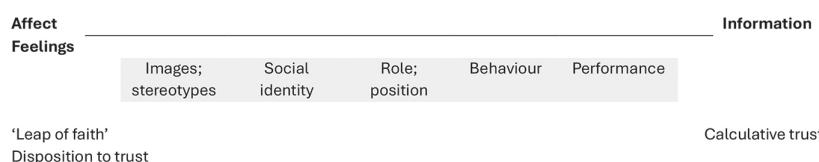
Figure 2.1   The calculative and non-calculative routes to trust judgements

The calculative foundations of trust

The definition of trust provided in the Introductory Chapter (trust as constituting people's 'basic evaluative and affective orientations' to governing actors and institutions) suggests that trust at least partly arises from individuals' considered or deliberative evaluations of political actors and agencies (also note, however, the reference to 'affective orientations', which suggests less cognitive origins). Indeed, analysts have largely assumed that individuals' trust judgements reflect a purposive processing of information (McAllister, 1995; Metzger and Flanagin, 2013). In the political realm, trust is primarily seen to reflect judgements about what politicians do and how they perform. This 'trust-as-evaluation' (van der Meer, 2018), or 'performance'-driven (Mishler and Rose, 2001) model assumes that trust is heavily shaped by perceptions of political outputs: trust is high when politicians are seen to deliver desired outcomes, and low when they are seen to fail in this task. The panoply of empirical studies identifying substantive associations between individuals' trust in government and indicators – whether objective or subjective – of national economic and policy performance (for an overview, see van der Meer, 2018; for a meta-analysis, see Zhang, Li and Yang, 2021) suggests that this outcome-focused assumption holds some validity. Micro-level and experimental studies have also pointed to the tendency for people's trust to be responsive to information about an actor's performance (White, Cours and Göritz, 2011; Porumbescu, Neshkova and Huntoon, 2018).

Yet the empirical associations between an actor or agency's performance and levels of trust are sometimes found to be weak. This may reflect a mismatch between objective and subjective measures of performance (Yang and Holzer, 2006; Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003). The performance–trust link has also been shown to require significant knowledge among individuals of the political actor (PytlikZillig et al., 2017; see also Lubell, 2007). Where individual knowledge of, or direct contact with, that actor is less extensive – as is often the case with distant politicians and political institutions – trust judgements may be less likely to draw on detailed performance appraisals. In this vein, studies have found that levels of individual satisfaction rest more on generalised appraisals of government performance than on more specific evaluations of what government has delivered (Andersen and Hjortskov, 2016).

Other studies point out that individual trust is 'sticky', and not easily swayed by new information about good or bad public service performance. Experimental studies have found that when participants are provided with information about government policy performance, the 'updating' effects on trust are often modest (James, 2011; James and Moseley, 2014). While appraisals of public service performance help to explain variations in trust between individuals, changes in those appraisals have been found to be only weakly related to shifts in trust within individuals (Kumlin, Nemčok and Van Hootegem, 2024). A study conducted among Democrats and Republicans in the United States engaging in a trust game with their partisan opponents found that the provision of objective information about their opponents' trustworthiness (measured by the amount of money returned in a monetary allocation game) only partially shifted participants' trust (Hernández-Lagos and Minor, 2020). There may be a ready

explanation for this, namely that strong party-based considerations outweigh other forms of information in shaping individual trust judgements, particularly in a polarised partisan environment. Yet if correct, this explanation merely points to the way that some individuals' trust may rest on factors that sit well away from the calculative assumptions embedded in many analysts' trust models.

The heuristic foundations of trust

While trust may sometimes involve effortful processing of information about an actor's performance and behaviour, at other times such calculative processes are less evident. This reflects humans' well-known tendency to economise on the information and cognitive effort required to form social judgements (Fiske and Taylor, 1984). Moreover, forming judgements about the trustworthiness of distant and unfamiliar actors is often tricky. Individuals must interpret a variety of 'signals' emitted by a potential trustee to convey their trustworthiness. These signals need to be evaluated not only for what they convey about the source's trustworthiness, but also for their veracity or credibility (Bacharach and Gambetta, 2001; Gambetta and Hamill, 2005). Faced with multiple and complex signals of a source's trustworthiness, trustors may engage in a variety of appraisals, some relying on informationally rich judgements (e.g. does the claimed medical expert possess a professional certificate from an accredited training programme?), others on simpler and less informationally complex judgements (e.g. does the medical expert sport a doctor's coat?) (Hampshire et al., 2017).

In general, the greater the significance or salience of the judgement, the more likely individuals are to incur high information costs and to engage in 'systematic' or calculative judgement-formation. But on less salient and consequential judgements, the motivation to bear these costs is lower, and individuals are more likely to fall back on cognitively simpler and less costly processes (Chaiken, 1980; Chen and Chaiken, 1999). When it comes to trust in political actors and institutions, a range of heuristic cues, rules and tools have been identified that provide readily accessible information for individuals, thus simplifying potentially complex judgements.[1] These include actors' traits (Funk, 1996; Barnoy and Reich, 2022), general characteristics (Johnson, 1999; Walls et al., 2004), stereotypes (McCrae and Bodenhausen, 2000; Quinn, Macrae and Bodenhausen, 2007; Johnson, 2020), roles or positions (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013), organisational membership (Yamamoto, 2012), professional affiliation (König and Jucks, 2019) and social background (Salgado, Núñez and Mackenna, 2021). People's

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[1]   Trust itself has sometimes been treated as a heuristic. When individuals are asked to assess a new government initiative, instead of engaging in the informationally intensive task of evaluating the likely success of the measure, a citizen may merely ask themselves 'do I trust the government?', using this – simpler – appraisal as a shortcut to evaluate the merits of the initiative (Rudolph, 2017; see also Chapter 11 in this book by Fairbrother and Devine). Trust can therefore itself serve as a heuristic, but heuristics can also be employed in reaching trust judgements in the first place.

trust judgements may also privilege personal experience of a service over objective performance information (Olsen, 2017; Kumlin, 2004), particularly in cases where relevant information and data are lacking or have not been internalised (Lerman and McCabe, 2017). In some cases, citizens may draw on a single encounter with a public servant (such as a postal service worker) in forming more general judgements about the trustworthiness of national institutions such as the government (Hansen, 2022).

Alongside trust judgements that draw on cognitive evaluations are those that are more heavily shaped by people's affective feelings about an actor (Lewis and Weigert, 1985; Finucane et al., 2000; White, Cours and Göritz, 2011; Theiss-Morse and Barton, 2017). Affective appraisals are likely to complement or even supersede more cognitive processes, particularly in cases where information is scarce (e.g. where a trustor must appraise an unfamiliar object) or where the costs of processing information are high (Midden and Huijts, 2008). Thus, for example, in a study of people's evaluations of agencies working in an unfamiliar field, namely nanotechnology, researchers found stronger effects for affective reactions (notably measures of emotional states like joy and disgust) than for cognitive evaluations (notably assessments of whether a technology is useful or harmful) (van Giesen et al., 2015). A separate study found that as individual familiarity with an agency decreased, the effects of assessed emotional states on trust judgements strengthened (Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005). In other words, affective or emotional feelings can act as a surrogate route to trust judgements, compensating for the lack of information about an actor. Alongside affect or feelings, individuals asked to assess a source's trustworthiness under conditions of limited knowledge may also fall back on evaluations of whether a trustee shares or represents their own strongly held values or beliefs (Gastil et al., 2011).

As these examples suggest, non-calculative or heuristic routes to trust judgements tend to be more prevalent when information about a trustor is limited or costly to obtain. In a study of Californian farmers, it was found that trust judgements of unfamiliar government agencies rested more heavily on general impressions and stereotypes than did trust judgements of more familiar agencies (Lubell, 2007).[2] Similarly, when people become less vigilant towards a potential object of trust, their reliance on heuristics such as stereotypes tends to increase. In a study exploring this issue, vigilance was proxied by respondents' existing state of trust: trusters were assumed to be less vigilant towards an object than were distrusters. Employing this logic, Posten and Mussweiler (2019) found that when participants were primed into a state of distrust, their judgements drew less heavily on stereotypes than when they were primed into a state of trust. Trust judgements, therefore, appear particularly reliant on heuristics,

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[2]   However, a separate study of citizens' evaluations of various US government and non-government agencies found the associations between organisational stereotypes and trust judgements to be no stronger among people who were unfamiliar with the agency than among people who were more familiar with it (Johnson, 2021). In this case, at least, the use of stereotypes in forming trust judgements did not appear to be a tool for overcoming informational deficiencies.

such as stereotypes, in situations where information is lacking or where there are weak incentives to incur high information-processing costs.

Just as individuals facing high information costs tend to rest their trust judgements on various shortcuts, so we also find that individuals who are equipped to bear these costs tend to engage in more effortful and calculative trust processes than their less-equipped counterparts. Thus, in a study on individuals' trust in other people, Rahn (2000) found that general mood (measured by people's feelings about the state of the country) had a stronger association with trust among poorly educated people than among their well-educated counterparts. Similarly, Mondak and colleagues (2007) found that among less politically knowledgeable Americans, evaluations of Congress were more weakly shaped by appraisals of policy performance and representation than were the evaluations of their more knowledgeable counterparts. The former were instead found more prone to base their evaluations on indirect, or proxy, indicators of Congressional performance, such as evaluations of the president and of their own district representative (see also Citrin and Luks, 2001: 18–19). A recent study of citizens across European countries found that politically sophisticated individuals (i.e. those with high levels of education and political interest) were more likely, relative to their less sophisticated counterparts, to rest their trust judgements on information about the procedural and economic performance of political actors (Schnaudt and Popa, 2023).

Making sense of trust judgements

The preceding discussion is not intended to construct a hard dividing line between calculative or systematic routes to trust judgements, on the one hand, and non-calculative or heuristic routes, on the other. One of the main lessons from psychological accounts of attitude formation is that all of us employ more or less deliberative processes to form social judgements. Whether we realise it or not, our social judgements contain a mixture of deliberative, heuristic and affective factors and processes (Lodge and Taber, 2013). For some people, and in some instances, however, the props and shortcuts drawn on in forming trust judgements are likely to involve rather little information about the trustee and rather little active processing of that information. Some trust judgements are likely to rest on fairly shallow and even superficial bases (the elements listed on the left-hand side in Figure 2.1).

The situation is not helped by the way analysts tend to measure trust, in the form of broad and generalised single-item survey measures ('How much do you trust the government?'). Such generalised measures are tricky to answer; respondents presumably have to think about the criteria on which their trust might rest, then evaluate the government's performance against these criteria, and finally aggregate across these evaluations to reach a summative conclusion. Faced with such a potentially demanding process, survey respondents are likely to economise by drawing on a set of simpler cues and tools. As a result, the expressions of trust captured by generalised survey measures may not tap considered evaluations of political actors and institutions as

much as ritualistic negative reflexes that are neither deeply felt nor have significant knock-on effects on individuals' behaviour (Citrin, 1974; Citrin and Muste, 1999: 468–469). Alternative measures of trust – probing appraisals of specific qualities of political actors, such as their competence, benevolence and integrity – may encourage more reflective and deliberative responses among survey respondents, and thus potentially provide better barometers of how citizens evaluate the trustworthiness of political actors and agencies (for a broader discussion of this issue, see Seyd, 2024: chapter 3).[3]

At present, the suspicion is that analysts' usual method of gauging people's trust encourages heuristic response strategies as much as calculative or systematic appraisals. This might help to explain the apparently consistent nature of individual trust judgements. We know that recorded levels of trust often show considerable fluctuation, particularly around political or economic crises (witness the collapse of political trust among the populations of those European countries – notably Greece, Ireland, Portugal and Spain – most negatively affected by the 2007–08 financial crash). Declines in trust can also recover quite markedly, as when national elections replace an unpopular incumbent with a fresh administration. Such fluctuations in trust are, of course, precisely what one would expect under the calculative or trust-as-evaluation model, where citizen evaluations shift in negative and positive directions in line with changes in government performance or composition. Yet recent studies tracking the dynamics of trust among individuals over time have identified high rates of stability in these judgements (Devine and Valgarðsson, 2023; Seyd, 2024: 33–35).[4] While the source of this stability remains unclear, the stability itself is more consistent with the claim that trust judgements rest on generalised feelings and individual dispositions – that tend to change little, and if so, slowly – than with the claim that trust judgements reflect appraisals of political performance.

If trust reflects heuristic processes as much as calculative or deliberative ones, we might also question the degree or scope of its likely implications. Trust that rests on fleeting impressions or images of a political object is unlikely to associate as closely

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[3]   It might be objected that measures that encourage reflection and deliberation on the part of the trustor will give equally misleading data about people's trust. The truth is that we don't know much about the nature and depth of individuals' trust in political actors. Some people may rarely have pondered their trust in such actors; for these people, attempts to measure trust arguably 'manufacture' attitudes rather than 'reveal' them. Other people may have cogitated extensively about trust and, as a result, possess real and complex evaluations. It is difficult to design ways of capturing or measuring the concept when the nature and levels of trust judgements are likely to vary significantly between individuals. Yet privileging one form of measurement – as in the ubiquitous single-item survey indicator – may influence the type of responses 'revealed' by empirical analysis. It would be useful at least to identify whether measured distributions of trust might differ when use is made of alternative measurement instruments that encouraged greater respondent reflection and deliberation.

[4]   Other studies find that people's trust fluctuates in the short term, due to particular events, but thereafter settles back to longer-term levels (Fairbrother et al., 2022).

with a wider set of attitudes and behaviours as is trust that arises from more delib-erative and information-rich evaluations (see Petty and Cacioppo, 1986: 179–180). For example, one empirical study showed that the amount of information about a source held by individuals (proxied by the amount of media exposure they reported) positively predicted certainty of trust judgement. Moreover, certainty of trust also positively predicted individual behaviour, in this case, reported acceptance of, and compliance with, the source's decisions (Song, 2023). If, as has just been suggested, analysts' (survey-based) measures of political trust potentially pick up generalised trust reactions rather than more specific or calculative assessments, this perhaps partly explains a 'puzzle', whereby rates of trust across some national populations have witnessed a sharp decline, without much accompanying evidence of wider nega-tive effects such as weakening support for democratic norms and practices (see Seyd, 2024: 157–159).

A final point to recognise is that trust judgements, like all social judgements, rarely if ever arise wholly from scratch. Judgements about unfamiliar actors and agencies tend to draw on existing beliefs about similar individuals and bodies. Moreover, exist-ing feelings of trust often condition evaluations of new information, in turn shaping subsequent trust judgements (White, Cours and Göritz, 2011). These judgements may therefore become 'locked in', in what Möllering and Sydow (2018) refer to as a 'trust trap'. An individual's state of trust may – for reasons of socialisation, reinforcement or path dependency – become static and enduring. This may partly reflect processes of motivated reasoning, whereby evidence that disconfirms an existing state of trust is discounted or downplayed in an attempt to maintain a trust equilibrium (Campagna et al., 2022; see also Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin and Weibel, 2015).

Implications for future research

This chapter has commended the study of trust as a process, not just as an outcome; analysing trust as a verb, not just a noun (Möllering, 2013: 300). Over a decade ago, Roderick Kramer made a similar point when he argued:

> [t]he accuracy of interpretations regarding others' behaviour is likely to be impaired or clouded by incomplete information, social misperceptions, self-serving cognitive biases and imperfections in social memory. It is important, therefore, to know more about what individuals in real-world trust dilemma situations actually pay attention to when trying to calibrate others' trustworthiness. (Kramer, 2012: 22)

What kind of initiatives might help researchers shed greater light on individuals faced with such trust dilemmas? If trust builds on both heuristic and calculative founda-tions, one promising avenue would involve more explicit exploration of both types of consideration. Thus, for example, analysts might model the effects on trust of a set of performance appraisals (has the economy grown or shrunk? Have hospital waiting times increased or declined?) alongside factors likely to be prominent in more heuris-tically inclined reasoning processes (e.g. people's feelings about the economy or public

services) (for an example of such an approach, see Rahn, 2000). Experimental studies might be used to study the effects on trust of information about an actor or agency's performance, while at the same time manipulating experimental participants' emotional states to determine how feelings and moods might moderate the calculative judgements arising from exposure to information. Quantitative studies should be supplemented by qualitative approaches – ranging from collective group interviews to individual records or diaries of trust experiences – that are capable of unpicking the processes and considerations drawn on by individuals in forming trust judgements in different contexts. Researchers might also explore the determinants of trust – which provide a window into judgement-formation – where trust is measured in different ways. If generalised measures of trust encourage more generalised responses, while more specific trust measures encourage more deliberative reactions, we should find that the type of judgements used by individuals to appraise trust varies depending on what kind of trust question they are faced with. Researchers should recognise that the way they prompt respondents to think about trust is likely to shape the way answers are arrived at. Finally, across all of these exercises, attention should be paid to variations in the factors shaping the way individuals form trust judgements. This chapter has pointed to two such conditionalities – the salience of the trust task and the information that is readily available – but there are likely to be others that would repay systematic study.

Researchers are generally not concerned with whether individual appraisals of an object's trustworthiness are correct or incorrect (although the costs to the individual of mistakenly believing an actor to be trustworthy when they are not, or vice versa, are potentially considerable). Instead, what Kramer's remarks point us towards is the need to identify the foundations on which trust judgements rest, and what the results tell us about the nature of those judgements. Rather than making assumptions about how individuals form trust judgements, analysts would do well to open up what remains something of a 'black box', and to more explicitly probe the 'micro-foundations' of people's trust in political actors and institutions.

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3

Advancing research on the multilevel dynamics of political trust

Laura Stoker

Scholars researching the causes of political trust seek to understand why citizens trust or distrust their governments, why trust levels rise or fall within polities over time, and why trust levels differ across countries, regions, and social groups. One challenge facing researchers is to build an empirical theory that links the micro- and macro-level elements. This chapter addresses three avenues for nudging this agenda forward.

I begin by calling for more research into generation and generational replacement effects on political trust. Here, the cross-level dynamics play out over time: if trust at the individual level depends on the sociopolitical conditions people experienced when coming of age ("generation effects"), then trust at the population level will change as the generational composition of the population shifts over time ("generational replacement effects"). While the political trust literature includes research into generation effects, it has not assessed generational replacement effects. To motivate further work that considers both, I present a brief example focused on the United States (U.S.), which shows that generational replacement accounts for almost all of the decline in trust in the U.S. since the late 1970s.

The second section of this chapter takes a broader look at how analysts can develop the aggregate-level implications of models initially focused on explaining individual differences. I review and illustrate simple ways that analysts can use the results from multilevel statistical analyses to infer why levels of political trust differ across social groups, countries, regions, and/or time. My sense is that such post-estimation steps are not often taken, but that our understanding of the cross-level dynamics of political trust would be enhanced if they were.

The final section turns to a fruitful avenue for new data collection: the development of measures of the perceived trustworthiness of government—that is, measures of how people judge government performance against normative criteria such as competence, integrity, and responsiveness. Efforts to develop comprehensive measures of perceived government trustworthiness are afoot. The challenge is to reach consensus about which questions are valid, reliable, and useful, and to incorporate them into the major cross-national and longitudinal surveys. Doing so would put us in a better

position to study how objective features of governments and political systems influence the level of trust or distrust expressed by citizens, and the causes and consequences of a citizenry that is more or less trusting than circumstances warrant.

Generations

Generation effects arise when people who differ in when they were born experience distinct historical contexts during their formative years, which then leave a lasting imprint on their political orientations. The causal movers can be major sociopolitical events, such as economic crises, wars, and political scandals, or conditions that evolve more continuously, such as the extent of partisan polarization or a changing climate of opinion. Although historical events and sociopolitical conditions can influence the views of everyone in a polity, they typically have the greatest effect on young people whose political impressions and predispositions are just developing.[1]

The presence of distinct generations has important macro-level implications since the generational composition of any population is continually changing over time. If, for example, those exiting represent a more trusting generation than those entering, the result will be less trust within the society as a whole.

Generational replacement effects have three noteworthy characteristics. They are (1) slow-moving: they can contribute to long-term trends but not short-term ups and downs; (2) inevitable, hence potentially powerful: although a society's demographic make-up can shift substantially over the course of 60 to 70 years, its generational composition will shift completely; and (3) lagged: the effects of historical events and sociopolitical conditions will be felt across decades.[2]

Whether generational effects on political trust would be expected in any country depends on its own historical circumstances. Many countries have experienced regime changes, political scandals, economic crises, the rise of anti-government rhetoric, and value change capable of resulting in generational effects. In the U.S., early research showed that the Baby Boomers entering the U.S. electorate during the conflicts over Vietnam and the Watergate scandal were less trusting of government than their elders (e.g., Jennings and Niemi 1975). Lower trust among more recent generations could flow from changes in the media environment, where election coverage has come to focus on strategy rather than substance (Schuck 2017) and to feature politicians and organizations seeking to advance their agendas by attacking government (Fried and

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[1]   See Devine and Valgarðsson (2023) for evidence on trust in government across the life cycle. See Alwin and McCammon (2003) and Stoker (2014) for further discussion of the topic of generations.

[2]   A classic example concerns the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which in 1920 extended suffrage to women. For 60 years after passage, the turnout rates of women steadily rose as the size of the pre-19th amendment generation diminished (Firebaugh and Chen 1995).

Harris 2021). Recent generations of Americans (and Europeans) are more likely to endorse post-materialist and emancipative values (e.g., Inglehart and Welzel 2005) and to express distrust in others (e.g., Clark and Eisenstein 2013), which could yield generational differences in political trust.

Although the possibility of generational differences in political trust is frequently mentioned in the literature, the topic has received little sustained attention. Age is routinely included as a covariate in regression models, and analysts sometimes illustrate how trust differs across age groups. However, age differences at any given point in time are the net result of three distinct causal processes (Riley 1973): those associated with when a person was born and came of age, that is, generation effects; those associated with how long a person has been alive, that is, aging or life-cycle effects; and those associated with age-related differences in demographic composition.

The confounding of demographics and generation can be removed through multivariate analysis that includes both sets of variables. The confounding of generation and age is less tractable. The main way to distinguish the two is to compare the generations when each is the same age, which requires longitudinal data (e.g., Schoon and Cheng 2011). Doing so removes the age confound but introduces a different confound: period effects, where events or conditions are spurring people throughout the population to become more or less trusting, regardless of their age or generation. Comparing two or more generations over time can help, but confounds between generation, age, and period effects remain (e.g., Bell 2020).

In light of this indeterminacy, trust scholars have used three strategies to try to evaluate whether generation effects exist. One focuses attention on whether the relationship between age and political trust is changing over time. This is exemplified by Dalton (2005), who shows that in the 1950s mistrust among Americans rose with age, but by the late 1990s the pattern had reversed, with young people more mistrusting than their elders. This pattern is suggestive that generational change is afoot, since it is implausible to believe the dynamics of aging had reversed, but it does not provide evidence of which generations are distinctive or to what extent.

A second strategy is to build a model that uses year of birth to designate cohorts or generations while using demographic variables like marital status, occupational status, and parental status to try to pick up any effects associated with aging. This, for example, is the approach used by Norris and Inglehart (2019, ch. 4) in their analysis of generational differences in political trust. The vulnerability of this strategy is that age and generation remain confounded if aging effects develop continuously as a function of maturation or the accumulation of political experience.

The third strategy is to estimate an age–period–cohort (APC) model using repeated cross-sectional data. With an APC model, the initial goal is to simultaneously estimate the effects of age, period, and cohort/generation while also controlling for potential demographic confounds and life-cycle covariates. The challenge in doing so is overcoming the multicollinearity between age, period, and cohort variables. The further

goal is to use the APC results to decompose macro-level trends into three constituent parts—change driven by (1) generational replacement, (2) shifts in the population's demographic composition, including age, and (3) period effects.

A handful of publications have estimated APC models to study generation effects on political trust, though none used their results to demonstrate how generational replacement is or is not affecting the macro-political trends. Epperly (2019) shows that younger citizens in post-communist regimes are more trusting of parliament and the legal system than are those who came into adulthood under communism, though he otherwise argues against the idea that low levels of trust in post-communist regimes are a historical legacy. Gauchat (2012) focuses on trust in science in the U.S., but for comparison, also analyzes institutional trust. The analysis finds statistically significant cohort effects, but these are not a focus of the paper and are not discussed at all. Marquis, Kuhn, and Monsch (2022) include trust in the federal government in their APC analysis of "patterns of (de)politicization" in Switzerland. They find higher levels of trust in the federal government among the more recent generations, as well as period effects promoting higher levels of trust. Wuttke, Gavras, and Schoen (2022) estimate APC models of institutional trust within each of 18 European democracies, in an article focused more generally on the thesis of democratic deconsolidation. They display cohort effects in one figure but say little about them aside from describing them as "generally modest" (p. 424). Most recently, Valgarðsson (2024) found mixed results in a study comparing people who were vs. were not in their formative years during the 2008 financial crisis, which considered citizens from six European countries.

Analyzing generational replacement—an illustration

I will present a brief example in the hope of inspiring more consideration of generational replacement as a mechanism by which trust evolves over time. The example works with an APC model fit to face-to-face survey data from the American National Election Studies between 1964 and 2016. The analysis regressed an index of trust in government (coded 0–1) on the following variables using OLS:[3]

- *Period Effects*: Dummy variables for 13 of 14 election years; dummy variables for Democratic and Republican identifiers (pure Independents baseline); interactions between each of the party identification dummies and the period dummies (to capture winner–loser effects).
- *Cohort Effects*: Dummy variables for 28 of 29 cohorts, grouped into four-year birth ranges.
- *Aging Effects*: Age and Age-squared, coded in years.
- *Demographics*: Dummy variables for education, union membership, race/ethnicity, nativity, gender, and marital status.

Figure 3.1 summarizes the cohort effect results, simplified by presenting generational averages. Trust was anchored by the Greatest generation, slipped to lower levels for

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3   See Stoker and Citrin (2020) for further details.
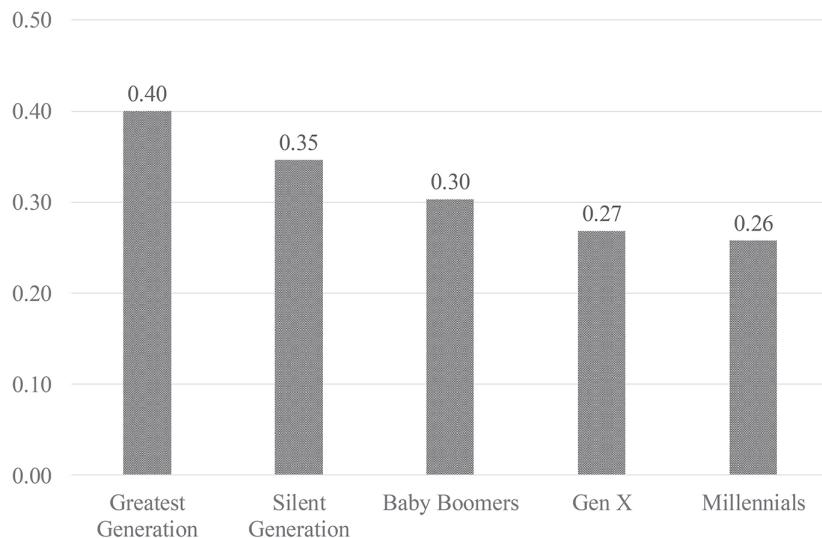
Figure 3.1   Generational differences in trust in government in the U.S.,
1964–2016

the Silent and, especially, Baby Boomer generation, before plateauing at slightly lower levels among Gen Xers and Millennials. The difference between members of the Millennial and Greatest generations (0.14) is substantial when compared to the range (1.0) and standard deviation (0.24) of the trust index.

Over time, the generational composition of the U.S. changed inexorably and dramatically. In 1964, 65% of the eligible voters came from the Greatest generation, but by 2016, almost all of them were gone. Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials, collectively, went from making up 0% of the electorate in 1964 to making up 87% of the electorate in 2016. Figures 3.2 and 3.3 present two ways of illustrating how generational replacement contributed to the decline of trust in government in the U.S. Figure 3.2 shows the actual trend alongside the trend if we assume, counterfactually, that no generational replacement had taken place—that is, if the generational composition of the population after 1964 was exactly the same as it had been in 1964.[4] The overall decline in trust between the beginning and the end of the time series was 0.33 units on the 0–1 scale. Had generational replacement not been taking place, the overall decline would be lessened by almost one-third. After the sharp downturn in trust between 1964 and 1980, the pattern *sans* generational replacement is one of trendless fluctuation, with

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[4]   This is the approach used by Abramson and Inglehart (1986) to show the effects of generational replacement on trends in post-materialism. For the counterfactual line plotted, the means as of 1964 replace the actual means for the cohort variables in each year. All other predictors are set to their overall sample means.
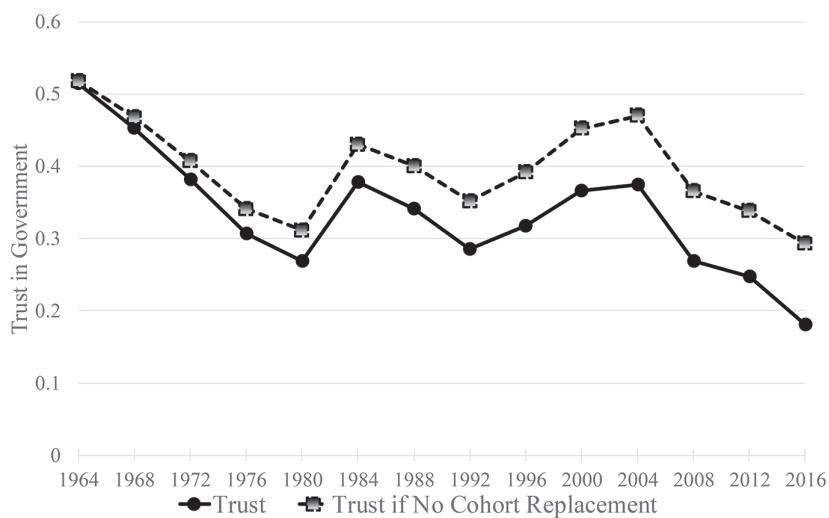
Figure 3.2   U.S. trust in government trend, with and (counterfactually) without generational replacement
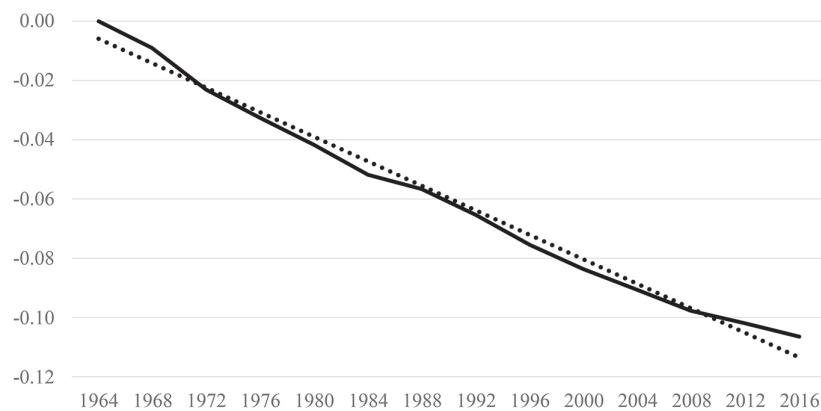
Figure 3.3   Cumulative change in political trust attributable to generational replacement

the level of trust in 2016 nearly the same as that evident in 1980 (less by 0.02). But in actuality, generational replacement led trust to trend downward after 1980 (by 0.09).

Figure 3.3 shows the cumulative effect of generational replacement on the change in trust between 1964 and the year shown on the X axis, along with a linear trend (dotted line). This figure shows that, in the aggregate, generational replacement produced a continual and nearly linear decline in trust across the period, with a decrease of just

over one-tenth (0.106) of the scale in total. The decline was accelerated by the arrival of the Baby Boomers in 1968 and 1972 and shows signs of deceleration toward the end of the series, which reflects the small differences in trust between Millennials and Gen Xers.

Although APC analyses, like this one, often leave open the question about what, exactly, is producing generational differences, they can nevertheless give us an insight into how and why trust in government is trending down or up on the whole, and remind us that the shadow of history is long.

Macro-level implications of multilevel models

Political trust researchers are typically not just interested in why citizens come to trust or distrust government, but also why trust levels differ across countries or change within a polity over time. This is one reason we continue to see a great deal of aggregate-level analysis in the trust literature despite the greatly expanded availability of individual-level survey data. Working with data from cross-sectional and/or longitudinal surveys, scholars are increasingly turning to multilevel (ML) models to study how the trust levels of individuals vary as a function of individual- as well as country-level characteristics. My attention in this section is on simple ways that researchers can, and I think should, use ML results to illuminate the sources of aggregate differences across time, place, or group.

Categorical Y

When researchers work with cross-national survey data and categorical measures of political trust (i.e., Logit or Probit estimation), they commonly calculate the average marginal effect of X on $\hat{p}$ for the sampled cases (AME) or the marginal effect of X on $\hat{p}$ setting all other predictors to their sample means (MEM; see Mize 2019 for further details). When seeking to make country-level inferences, analysts would calculate AME or MEM for each country represented in the data rather than for the sample as a whole; in a dataset with J countries, there would be J AME or MEM estimates, not one. The AMEs would be calculated for the cases within each country, and the MEMs would be calculated by setting the covariates to their country means. Either approach would provide information about how the estimated effect of X differs across countries. They can be used for both individual-level and country-level Xs, recognizing, however, that for the former we observe within-country variation, while for the latter any within-country variation in X is counterfactual. The calculations can be tweaked to make cross-national comparisons focused on subgroups (e.g., comparing effects of Xs among women, cross-nationally), to compare country groupings (e.g., comparing effects of Xs within post-communist vs. non-post-communist countries), or to make over-time comparisons when the data are longitudinal.

A second, and only slightly different, approach employs a strict counterfactual logic. This approach focuses on cases that currently have a certain X value and asks how these cases' overall levels of trust would be expected to differ if X were to change.

Consider, for example, whether the electoral system does (X=1) or does not (X=0) use proportional representation (PR). Using the counterfactual approach, one could first calculate the AME for non-PR democracies (here, the X is changing from 0 to 1) and then calculate the AME for PR democracies (here, the X is changing from 1 to 0). These results would show how each counterfactual shift in institutions would be expected to affect the set of countries experiencing them. As before, the analysis could be tweaked to highlight subnational, supranational, or longitudinal comparisons.

Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978) provide a wonderful example of this approach, albeit one that focuses on voter turnout, not political trust, and on U.S. state-level rather than country-level variation in X. They used survey data on U.S. citizens to estimate the effects of state-level election laws and individual characteristics on a person's likelihood of voting in the 1972 presidential election. They then used the results to calculate the probability of voting for each person under their existing registration law and under the counterfactual that everyone lived in a state that allowed same-day registration. Next, they took the difference between the two sets of predicted values and aggregated the difference by region of the country, racial group, education level, income level, and age group (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978, table 4). This showed, for example, that if all states were to allow same-day registration, it would increase the turnout of those living in the North by an estimated 5.6% but the turnout of those living in the South by 7.3%, and produce much larger increases in turnout among the less educated than among the more educated. Wolfinger and Rosenstone also used the two sets of predicted values to show how changing the registration laws in this fashion would alter the demographic composition of the electorate (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1978, table 5).

Continuous Y

The steps that analysts would take to work out the aggregate implications of an ML analysis with a continuous dependent variable will depend on whether the analysis is cross-sectional or longitudinal. One strategy when working with cross-sectional data is to calculate the *level importance* of each X (Achen 1982) for each country, which is the product of the regression coefficient times the mean of X—that is, $b_{ic}\overline{X}_{ic}$, where b_{ic} and $\overline{X}_{ic}$ are the coefficient and mean of the ith X variable in country c, respectively.[5] As Achen (1982) discusses, the level of importance of a variable can be thought of as indicating how much it contributes to the overall mean of Y, since with least-squares estimation $\overline{Y} = b_0 + \sum\left(b_i\overline{X}_i\right)$. Second, analysts could focus on two (or more) countries of focal interest, calculating the extent to which any, some, or all Xs can explain the aggregate-level difference in trust between the two countries. Here, the workhorse quantity is $b_i\left(\overline{X}_{i,1} - \overline{X}_{i,2}\right)$, where b_i is the coefficient on X_i and $\overline{X}_{i,1}$ and $\overline{X}_{i,2}$ are the means in country 1 and 2, respectively.

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[5]   If the model specifies non-linear and/or interactive effects, these calculations would need adjustment. If, for example, the model included both age and age-squared, the level importance of age would sum both quantities.

To illustrate this second strategy, I used data and published results from Cutler, Nuesser, and Nyblade (2023), who used a multilevel generalized structural equation model to estimate the effects of more than a dozen country-level variables on satisfaction with democracy (SWD). I used the results reported in Table 4 from their paper and scores for each country on the macro-level variables, which were supplied to me by Fred Cutler, to develop several comparisons between Switzerland (SWD=0.74), Great Britain (0.56), and Spain (0.41).

- I first calculated $\hat{Y}_{CHE-GBR} = \sum b_i \left(X_{i.CHE} - X_{i.GBR} \right)$, where b_i refers to the effect of a unit increase in X_i scaled 0–1, and $X_{i.CHE}$ and $X_{i.GBR}$ refer to the values of X_i in Switzerland and Great Britain, respectively. This quantity, $\hat{Y}_{CHE-GBR}$, is the predicted difference in SWD between the two countries as a function of the effects of all the country-level Xs in the model.
- I then repeated this exercise but only used the three variables with the largest estimated effects: GDP/capita, Inequality (GINI), and Corruption (CPI).
- Finally, I repeated both steps above, comparing Switzerland with Spain rather than Great Britain.

Doing this shows that the SWD levels of Switzerland and Great Britain are predicted to differ by 0.085, as a result of the net effects of all the macro-level Xs, while those for Switzerland and Spain are predicted to differ by 0.186, which amounts to 47% and 56% of the observed differences in trust between the pairs of countries, respectively. For the top three predictors, the corresponding differences are 0.083 (46%) and 0.122 (36%). Thus, while the modeled gap in satisfaction between Switzerland and Great Britain is almost entirely driven by the "big 3" (0.083/0.085 = 97%), that is not the case when comparing Switzerland with Spain (0.122/0.186 = 66%); understanding this gap also requires being aware of the countries' differing party systems and political institutions.

When the analysis is longitudinal, the key post-estimation question is how Xs that vary over time have influenced the aggregate trends within a country. The answer to this question is found by multiplying the coefficient on the X(s) by the mean shift in the X(s) across the period. My analysis of generational replacement used this approach; the estimated effect of generational replacement on the change in U.S. trust levels between 1964 and 2016 equals $\sum b_i \left(\bar{X}_{i,1964} - \bar{X}_{i,2016} \right)$, where b_i refers to the effect of cohort variable X_i and $\bar{X}_{i,1964}$ and $\bar{X}_{i,2016}$ refer to the 1964 and 2016 means of cohort variable X_i, respectively. Another example comes from Mewes et al. (2021), who attribute half of the decline in social trust in the U.S. to trends in unemployment, satisfaction with personal finances, and confidence in political institutions. The same approach can be used with cross-country longitudinal data, with the proviso that the calculation be carried out for each country.

When the data are both cross-national and longitudinal, the analysis can include X variables that (A) vary across country but not time, (B) vary across time but not country, and (C) vary across both. Fairbrother (2014) makes the case for creating two variables for each X within category (C): one indicating the over-time mean of X within the

country (C1) and a second reflecting the over-time fluctuation of X within the country (C2). Analysts would use variables in category (A) and (C1) to make cross-national inferences following the strategies I have discussed, and use variables in category (B) and (C2) to make longitudinal inferences.

In sum, researchers have opportunities to develop the implications of their ML results for understanding cross-national differences and/or aggregate trends. I have reviewed a few basic ideas for doing so, and clever researchers could undoubtedly improve on them.

Trustworthiness

Political trust refers to people's basic evaluative and affective orientation to the institutions and actors governing their polity. Whether people exhibit trust or distrust depends in part upon how they judge the functioning of political institutions and behavior of public officials. This premise is explicit in work using a "trust as evaluation" or "institutional" approach, which holds that "citizens grant and withhold trust based on an assessment of particular aspects of their respective political systems" (van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017, p. 98) and that "institutions that perform well generate trust; untrustworthy institutions generate skepticism and distrust" (Mishler and Rose 2001, p. 31). It is the focus of studies making use of qualitative methods to understand what citizens dislike about politicians and government (e.g., Bertsou 2019; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).

It is useful to conceptualize this terrain as concerning citizens' beliefs regarding the trustworthiness of government, where trustworthiness is multidimensional: citizens judge government—or politicians, or specific political institutions—in positive or negative terms along several distinct (if correlated) evaluative dimensions.[6] The challenge for researchers is to first identify the relevant dimensions and then to measure where citizens fall along them. Virtually all scholarly discussions of trustworthiness include competence and integrity as relevant dimensions, but researchers have also suggested benevolence, care, impartiality, accountability, openness, fairness, authenticity, and reliability.[7] The general expectation is that whether people trust the government will depend on how they judge the government's performance along each

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[6]   Some scholars instead use a configural approach, identifying clusters of beliefs that together lead to trust, mistrust, or distrust (Jennings et al. 2021; Pattyn et al. 2012).

[7]   For example, Burns et al. (2023) cites competence, integrity, and benevolence, drawing upon an influential model of trust developed by organizational psychologists (Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis 2007). Norris (2022) cites competence, integrity, impartiality, and accountability, Valgarðsson et al. (2021) cite competence, integrity, and authenticity; and van der Meer and Dekker (2011) cite competence, care, commitment, and reliability. The OECD (2022) dimensions, which include responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness, and fairness, were designed to be applicable cross-nationally and aligned with objective indicators of the quality of government.

dimension, though the importance of each dimension could vary across time, place, and subpopulation.

In the empirical literature on political trust, there are roughly three strands of research related to perceptions of trustworthiness. First, there is the great volume of studies that have addressed the topic through the three most commonly available survey measures: perceptions of economic performance, corruption, and government responsiveness. Second, there are studies that take advantage of special modules in existing survey data to evaluate hypotheses regarding trustworthiness. Examples here include van der Meer and Dekker (2011), who work with the first wave of the European Social Survey (ESS), and Norris (2022), who works with data on ten countries from the seventh wave of the World Values Survey. Various national and cross-national survey projects have included modules relevant to trustworthiness, if only for certain traits. For example, the tenth wave of the ESS included a module asking people to indicate whether they think "the courts treat everybody the same," "the government protects everybody against poverty," "the government changes policy in response to what most people think," and whether "the views of ordinary people prevail over the political elite." The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems in 2016 and 2020 included questions related to impartiality, while the General Social Survey in 2004 and 2014 asked a series of questions regarding the trustworthiness of public administrators.

Very recently, a third cluster of studies has worked to develop a comprehensive set of survey measures on the perceived trustworthiness of government. Tables 3.1a–c illustrate two such efforts, and for comparison, a set of competence questions developed by the Pew Research Center, which illustrate some of the choices that need to be made about content, response format, and question wording. The OECD questions (Table 3.1a) tap expectations regarding the government using hypothetical scenarios. The Burns et al. (2023) questions (Table 3.1b) tap perceptions of the federal government. The Pew Research Center (2022) competence questions (Table 3.1c) address a much broader range of public services than do the OECD (2022) competence questions, and are retrospective in focus, unlike the set from Burns et al. (2023).

A perusal of Tables 3.1a–c also makes it easy to see why comprehensive measures of perceived trustworthiness have not yet made their way into the otherwise booming literature on trust in government. Asking a complete set of questions takes a great deal of survey time, and the burden would grow if questions were tailored to different political institutions. Responses would likely be highly intercorrelated and endogenous to predispositions like partisanship and ideology. Nobody would be surprised if the collection does a good job of predicting trust in government. What would we then learn that is new or important?

A first answer is that comprehensive measures of trustworthiness would put us in a better position to shed light on the black box between country-level characteristics and citizens' trust in government. This is the *raison d'être* behind the OECD's efforts in this area and a position that Tom van der Meer, in particular, has been forcefully articulating for years (e.g., van der Meer and Dekker 2011; van der Meer and

Table 3.1a   Examples of survey measures for trustworthiness dimensions: OECD (2022)

Dimension	Example
Responsiveness	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?
Reliability	If a serious natural disaster occurred in [country], how likely or unlikely do you think it is that existing public emergency plans would be effective in protecting the population?
Openness	If a decision affecting your community is to be made by the local government, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that you would have an opportunity to voice your views?
Integrity	If a government employee is offered a bribe in return for better or faster access to a public service, how likely or unlikely is it that they would accept it?
Fairness	If you or a member of your family would apply for a government benefit or service, how likely or unlikely do you think it is that your application would be treated fairly?
Competence	Satisfaction with health care system, Satisfaction with education system.

Notes: Table 3.1a shows example OECD questions, but others were asked for each dimension. The OECD used a 0–10 response scale, while the Burns et al. (2023) questions are in an agree–disagree format. See also Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies (2017), Halmburger et al. (2019), and Hamm, Smidt, and Mayer (2019).

Table 3.1b   Examples of survey measures for trustworthiness dimensions: Burns et al. (2023)

Dimension	Example
Competence	The federal government (a) can help citizens in need, (b) can protect the health of the population, (c) communicates with citizens effectively, (d) makes decisions that help citizens, (e) shows good judgment, and (f) carries out its duties very well.
Integrity	The federal government (a) is truthful in communication with citizens, (b) delivers on its promises, (c) is honest, and (d) the federal government's work is open and transparent.
Benevolence	The federal government (a) acts in the best interests of citizens, (b) makes decisions that support citizen autonomy, (c) does everything it should to protect the population, (d) is generally interested in the well-being of its citizens, and (e) puts its political agenda ahead of the well-being of the population.

Notes: See Table 3.1a.

Table 3.1c   Examples of survey measures for trustworthiness dimensions: Pew Research Center (2022)

Dimension	Example
Competence	The federal government is doing a very bad, somewhat bad, somewhat good, very good job: responding to natural disasters; keeping the country safe from terrorism; ensuring safe food and medicine; setting fair and safe standards for workplaces; protecting U.S. interests around the world; effectively handling threats to public health; ensuring access to health care; maintaining infrastructure; protecting the environment; strengthening the economy; managing the U.S. immigration system; helping people get out of poverty.

Notes: See Table 3.1a.

Hahkverdian 2017). Scholars now have high-quality data on dozens, if not hundreds, of country-level variables concerning political institutions, party systems, quality of government, socioeconomic characteristics, and more. However, analysts studying cross-national differences in political trust face a degrees of freedom problem; they have limited statistical power to discern the effects of country-level predictors when using either aggregate or multilevel models. Data on perceptions of trustworthiness would provide leverage to compensate for the limited number of cases available. When theory suggests that a country-level X will affect trust via perceptions of trustworthiness along one specific dimension and not others, or along two or even all dimensions, for some but not other individuals, or in some countries and not others, analysts will have the data they need to show whether those expectations are upheld empirically.

Having over-time data on perceived trustworthiness would provide even more leverage, as the data could help us explain why political scandals, economic downturns, and transparency initiatives have inconsistent effects on political trust (Devine et al. 2024; Hamm, Smidt, and Mayer 2019). The effects of scandals may depend upon whether they affect perceptions of government competence as well as integrity (Solé-Ollé and Sorribas-Navarro 2018). Economic crises may especially diminish trust if they lead people to doubt the responsiveness of government (Torcal 2014). Whether transparency initiatives boost or diminish trust presumably depends on whether transparency also brings to light information about government corruption or incompetence (Crepaz and Arikan 2023).

Second, having comprehensive survey measures of perceived trustworthiness would enable us to advance research on warranted vs. unwarranted (dis)trust in government, an agenda initiated by Pippa Norris in *In Praise of Skepticism* (2022). Rationally, people should trust actors they deem trustworthy and distrust those they deem untrustworthy, with their judgments of trustworthiness based on accurate expectations of the actor's performance, undistorted by misinformation, preconception, predisposition, or prejudice. As Norris (2022) argues, even when people are internally consistent—distrusting those they believe to be untrustworthy and trusting those they judge trustworthy, they may be externally inconsistent—holding trustworthiness

judgments at odds with evidence of trustworthiness. The downstream consequences of (dis)trust will depend on whether it is earned.

Although pathbreaking, Norris' analysis was hampered by the lack of individual-level data on perceptions of trustworthiness. By necessity, she focuses on aggregate-level evidence, showing that in open (vs. closed) societies, citizens' overall levels of trust are more likely to be aligned with objective measures of the trustworthiness of their governments. With individual-level data on perceived trustworthiness, the avenues for analysis expand greatly. Research into the causes and consequences of political trust would be enhanced by the ability to identify individuals whose trust is (in)consistent with their perceptions of government's trustworthiness, and whose trustworthiness judgments are (in)consistent with the objective quality of their governments.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed three ways to advance our understanding of the multilevel causal dynamics of political trust: more research into generations and generational replacement effects, more attention to what statistical models of individual differences can tell us about why trust differs across countries or changes over time, and inclusion of questions regarding the trustworthiness of government in the cross-national surveys analyzed by trust scholars.

The topic of generations is especially important to research focused on longitudinal trends in political trust. As I illustrated in the case of the U.S., generational replacement will fuel a trust trend for decades after the events initially giving rise to a generational divide. Although political trust researchers have not ignored the topic of generations, the existing research has focused on whether the trust levels of individuals differ as a function of their generational status and has not examined whether or how generational replacement is influencing macro-level trends.

Generational replacement effects are not directly estimated; they come from post-estimation calculations working with results from an individual-level analysis of generational differences. As I discussed in the second section of this chapter, similar post-estimation calculations can be used whenever researchers are using cross-national and/or longitudinal survey data, to show how Xs producing individual differences in trust are, in turn, yielding differences in trust across countries or regions, within countries or regions over time, and/or across subgroups within countries or regions or over time. The post-estimation steps I discussed are straightforward, unoriginal, and likely familiar to most readers. I reviewed them here nonetheless, because my belief is that researchers rarely take such steps and that our understanding of the cross-level dynamics of political trust would be improved if they did.

The last section of this chapter addressed the growing literature working to develop comprehensive measures of the perceived trustworthiness of government, that is, beliefs evaluating government performance against normative criteria such as

competence, responsiveness, and integrity. Such measures are critical to improving our understanding of the cross-level dynamics of political trust if whether people trust their government depends on how it is actually performing. At present, there is no consensus in the literature about which dimensions/criteria are important, and even less agreement on the optimal measurement approach. Yet, there are significant benefits to striving for consensus and including perceived trustworthiness measures in the major cross-national surveys. Their availability would advance research into how objective characteristics of governments and political systems influence political trust, and into the conditions under which people are more trusting or distrusting of government than circumstances warrant.

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4

Towards evidence-informed policy interventions to increase trust in public institutions

Sarah Kups

In liberal democracies, where people can freely express their views, public trust in government institutions typically reflects how well these institutions meet people's expectations. 'Trust', defined as a person's belief that another person or institution will act consistently with their expectations of positive behaviour, and measured through common social surveys, can therefore reflect how people perceive public institutions and the quality of public governance (Brezzi et al., 2021; OECD, 2022). However, factors aside from public governance performance, including events partially or fully beyond government control, can also influence trust.

Trust reduces transaction costs and promotes compliance, thereby making the implementation of public policies less costly and more efficient, such as in matters of tax collection, public health, and other major reforms (e.g. Heinemann and Tanz, 2008; Devine, 2024; Scholz, 1998). Trust in institutions is particularly important during times of crises, as it plays a vital role in upholding democratic norms (van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017).

Trust is therefore both an input and an outcome of public governance, creating a virtuous cycle wherein increased trust can lead to improved policy outcomes, which in turn can enhance trust. However, the appropriate goal in democratic countries is to foster sceptical trust rooted in evidence about government activities, rather than blind trust that persists regardless of whether institutions prove themselves trustworthy (Norris, 2022).

The focus of the chapter is on trust in public institutions, such as national governments and parliaments, as well as the civil service. Trust-enhancing interventions are policies or programmes that seek to increase trust in public institutions, whether explicitly or not, by influencing public governance drivers of trust. Examples include establishing integrity policies for civil servants and introducing elements of direct democracy within the political system. Interventions with an explicitly political focus, such as calling for a snap election or engaging in political campaigning, or aimed at addressing the socio-economic factors known to affect trust levels (such as raising educational attainment through education), fall outside the scope of this chapter.

The first part of the chapter, which reviews existing evidence, shows that while there is ample evidence that positive perceptions of or output indicators associated with good governance are related to higher trust levels, evidence for the effects of individual interventions on trust levels is still relatively sparse. The second part of the chapter proposes future areas of research that strengthen this evidence, including expanded data collection efforts, collaborations between researchers and policy makers on policy interventions, and the integration of findings from research on strengthening generalised and intra-organisational trust and rebuilding trust in post-conflict environments.

The existing evidence on the impact of trust-enhancing interventions

This section presents a comprehensive review of existing literature on interventions designed to enhance public trust in institutions. The evidence is organised using the Updated OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (Brezzi et al., 2021). This framework identifies five dimensions of public governance which drive trust levels – namely responsiveness, reliability, openness, integrity, and fairness – alongside cultural, economic, and political factors (see Figure 4.1).

Evidence derived from analyses of the link between public governance drivers and trust

The bulk of the available evidence regarding the relationship between government actions and trust comes from cross-sectional analyses that explore the link between trust in institutions, as measured by general opinion polls, and one or several public governance drivers, measured either through an indicator or a subjective population- or expert-survey-based measure.

In studies focusing on government competence, satisfaction with education and health services generally and perceived control of crime (Kim and Voorhees, 2011) are positively correlated with political trust, with varying findings on whether the relationship is stronger (Ellinas and Lamprianou, 2014) or weaker (Rodrigues Sanches, Santana Pereira and Razzuoli, 2018) during crises.

Regarding integrity, some researchers find a positive relationship between past corruption convictions (as a proxy for corruption fighting) (Zhang and Kim, 2018) or perceived control of corruption (Kim and Voorhees, 2011; Espinal, Hartlyn and Kelly, 2006; Van der Walle and Migchelbrink, 2020) while others find no relationship between trust and corruption fighting or corruption perception indicators (Radin, 2019). Juillet (2019) concludes that lobbying registers are unlikely to improve trust based on the existence of few potential causal mechanisms and insufficient information included for citizens to hold politicians accountable.

Political voice and accountability positively affects trust (Spiteri and Briguglio, 2018), as does government transparency in a marginal way (Wang and Guan, 2022; in a

Levels of trust in different public institutions		
Trust in national government, local government, civil service, parliament, police, political parties, courts, legal systems and intergovernmental organisations		
Public Governance Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions		
Competencies	Responsiveness	• Provide efficient, quality, affordable, timely and citizen-centred public services that are co-ordinated across levels of government and satisfy users. • Develop an innovative and efficient civil service that responds to user needs.
	Reliability	• Anticipate needs and assess evolving challenges. • Minimise uncertainty in the economic, social and political environment. • Effectively commit to future-oriented policies and co-operate with stakeholders on global challenges.
Values	Openness	• Provide open and accessible information so the public better understands what government is doing. • Consult, listen, and respond to stakeholders, including through citizen participation and engagement opportunities that lead to tangible results. • Ensure there are equal opportunities to be part of and participate in the institutions of representative democracy.
	Integrity	• Align public institutions with ethical values, principles, and norms to safeguard the public interest. • Take decisions and use public resources ethically, promoting the public interest over private interests while combating corruption. • Ensure accountability mechanisms between public institutions at all levels of governance. • Promote a neutral civil service whose values and standards of conduct uphold and prioritise the public interest.
	Fairness	• Improve living conditions for all. • Provide consistent treatment of businesses and people regardless of their background and identify (e.g. gender, socio-economic status, racial/ethnic origin).
Cultural, Economic and Political Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions		
• Individual and group identities, traits, and preferences, including socio-economic status; interpersonal socialisation and networks. • Distrust of and disengagement from the system.		
Perception of government action on intergenerational and global challenges		
• Perceptions of government commitment to and effectiveness in addressing long-term challenges.		

Source: Brezzi et al. (2021).

Figure 4.1   OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions, 2021

meta-analysis); while the effect of perceived fairness of treatment in public services is not statistically significant when combined with the other measures of public govern-ance quality (Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2020).

Analyses that examine the impact of government competences and values simultane-ously show that service satisfaction tends to remain an important determinant of trust (Espinal, Hartlyn and Kelly, 2006; Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2020). Findings from the 2023 OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions (OECD, 2022; OECD, 2024) a biennial survey that has so far been implemented in 2021 and 2023, covering 22 and 30 OECD countries respectively, suggest that perceptions of reliabil-ity, responsiveness, openness, and fairness, along with perceptions of political agency, are strongly related to trust in the national government and other public institutions.

Perceptions of day-to-day interactions have a stronger relationship with trust in the civil service, and perceptions of government decision-making on complex policy issues are related to trust in the national government.

The literature also considers the impact of choices regarding the political or administrative system on trust. The opportunity to participate in referendums or other direct democratic procedures may boost trust (Bauer and Fatke, 2014), but not all find positive impacts (Holum, 2022), and the actual use of such instruments can, in turn, be negatively related to trust (Bauer and Fatke, 2014). In these as well as in other studies, reverse causality is a difficult issue, as some research suggests that low trust levels can likewise create higher support for direct democracy (Ouattara and van der Meer, 2022). Political decentralisation may have a negative impact on trust, while administrative and fiscal decentralisation may have a positive impact (Tang and Huhe, 2016).

In analyses of the impact of public governance drivers on trust, it is generally difficult to establish causality, and 'objective' governance indicators may not necessarily align with people's perceptions. This can make it difficult to conclude how interventions aimed at improving a public governance competence or values dimension affect trust (cf. e.g. OECD, 2024 on the perception of integrity issues compared to corruption indicators). For example, the 'actual' can differ from perceived performance due to individuals' access to information, their expectations, spillovers in perceptions across different drivers due to halo or horn effects, and people's underlying trust in public institutions (Van de Walle and Bouckaert, 2003). To answer how interventions affect trust, their respective impact on the public governance indicators or perceptions still needs to be understood.

Analyses of the effects of public governance interventions on trust

Other studies more straightforwardly aim to understand how a given policy intervention affected trust. Approaches in this area also include survey experiments.

Interventions likely to enhance perceptions of government competence are related to higher levels of trust. Research from Israel, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Netherlands, respectively, found that performance management (Beeri, Uster and Vigoda-Gadot, 2018), expansions of the local public health system (Chukwuma, Bossert and Croke, 2019), flood aid (Petrova and Rosvold, 2024), and Covid-19 lockdowns (Oude Groeniger et al., 2021) positively affected trust.

Interventions related to openness and integrity do not consistently enhance trust. Studies on deliberative discussions or citizens' initiatives in Canada and Finland, and a local referendum in the Netherlands, found no increase in trust (Boulianne, 2018; Christensen, Karjalainen and Lundell, 2015; Marien and Kern, 2016; Strandberg et al., 2021); and an analysis of participation in an Estonian citizens' assembly even found decreased trust (Karlsson, Åström and Adenskog, 2020); though an experimental study in Finland which compared the outcomes of two different modes of deliberation found that both increased trust (Grönlund, Setälä and Herne, 2010).

Survey experiments and vignette studies suggest that detailed information can boost trust when it emphasises (attributable) performance (Alessandro et al., 2021; Ardanaz, Otálvaro-Ramírez and Scartascini, 2023;Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012). But the information cannot reveal whether government action falls short of people's expectations (Martinez-Bravo and Sanz, 2022).

Discussion

The literature provides a mixed picture of the effectiveness of policy and programme interventions to enhance trust in public institutions. While there is solid evidence that positive perceptions of responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness, and fairness influence trust in political institutions, evidence of policy changes leading to increased levels of trust is sparse.

With regard to the competence–trust link, research generally finds a positive relationship between satisfaction with public services and trust in the responsible agencies or government. Improving public services can thus lead to higher levels of trust. Stable business conditions, sound economic management, and emergency preparedness also build trust, as do improving the public health infrastructure and providing flood assistance in developing countries.

With regard to the values–trust link, (perceived) integrity may be key to maintaining trust, but the extent to which this is true and the actions that governments should take to enhance trust are not clear. Many studies suggest that the perceived ability of institutions to minimise corruption is an important determinant of trust. However, others do not find a statistically significant link, and the evidence on whether specific steps to ensure integrity can influence trust is less certain. Lobbying registers do not necessarily provide sufficient information, and corruption convictions or code of conduct complaints impact trust differently depending on the analysis. One reason for these inconsistent results could be the opposing information present in these types of convictions or complaints: they signal a potential lack of integrity among prosecuted officials, but also indicate the relevant institutions' willingness to tackle the problem.

Transparency, openness, and the perception that individuals have a political voice are often associated with higher levels of trust. However, deliberative events and citizen assemblies, or contacting an ombudsperson, do not consistently increase trust levels, even among participants. Providing detailed information on governance actions and outcomes also yields mixed results; information that falls short of individuals' expectations is unlikely to boost trust. Perceived equal treatment as a sign of fairness is associated with higher levels of trust in different public institutions (OECD, 2022), but specific interventions in this area have not been investigated.

In the realm of political and administrative changes, evidence seems to lean towards decentralisation and against municipal mergers. However, any positive or negative impacts may be counterbalanced with changes in service quality or in political accountability. According to one study, mandatory voting may enhance trust, as does the availability of direct democratic instruments, but their use appears detrimental to

Analyses of the link between public governance drivers and trust

	Identification potential causal pathways	Quantitative analyses		
		Meta-analysis	User surveys	Population surveys
Competencies		Responsiveness: Performance + (Zhang, Li and Yang, 2021[39])		Reliability: Ability to manage economy + (Kim and Voorhees, 2011[8]) Regulatory quality o (Spiteri and Briguglio, 2018[16]); Pandemic preparedness + Stable business conditions + (OECD, 2022[2]) Responsiveness: Service satisfaction + (Rodrigues Sanches, Santana Pereira and Razzuoli, 2018[10]); (Ellinas and Lamprianou, 2014[9]); (Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2020[13]); (Espinal, Hartlyn and Kelly, 2006[12]). Evidence-informed decision making (OECD, 2024[18]) Service satisfaction + (OECD, 2022[2]; OECD, 2024[18])
Values	Integrity: Lobbying register o (Juillet, 2019)	Openness: Transparency + (Wang and Guan, 2022[17])	Openness: Citizen initiatives o (Christensen, 2019[40]); Citizens assembly – (Karlsson, Aström and Adenskog, 2020[33]); Ombudsman o (Hertogh, 2013[41])	Integrity: Perceived ability to manage corruption + (Van de Walle and Migchelbrink, 2020[13]); (Kim and Voorhees, 2011[8]); (Espinal, Hartlyn and Kelly, 2006[12]); Past corruption convictions + (Zhang and Kim, 2018[11]); Corruption fighting o (Radin, 2019[14]); Courts free from political interference + (OECD, 2022[2]) Openness: Political voice + (Spiteri and Briguglio, 2018[16]); Account public consultation views + (OECD, 2022[2]); Parliament holds government accountable + government free from policy capture (OECD, 2024[18]) Fairness: Perceived intergenerational fairness + (OECD, 2024[18])
Administrative/political changes	Public sector reform o (Van de Walle, 2010[42])			Decentralisation: Fiscal and Administrative +; Political - (Tang and Huhe, 2016[22]); Availability of citizens initiatives/direct democratic instruments + (Holum, 2022[20]); (Bauer and Fatke, 2014[19]); Use of direct democratic instruments - (Bauer and Fatke, 2014[19])

Note: + indicates a (marginally) positive, – a (marginally) negative, and o a missing association between the driver/intervention in question and trust in institutions. Studies that cover multiple drivers spanning competences and values simultaneously are presented in both. However, certain interventions can theoretically impact multiple drivers but are only mentioned under one heading. For example, the National Ombudsman in the Netherlands also monitors the quality of public services and can react to complaints concerning the (lack of) integrity or fairness of officials. Therefore, the institution could also be mentioned under responsiveness, fairness and integrity. The results cited for the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions refer to trust in the national government; the drivers with an impact on the civil service and local government are not listed in the figure.

Figure 4.2a   Selected studies on the link between public governance drivers or interventions and trust in national government and institutions

trust. This could be because the availability of direct democratic instruments signals that institutions value citizens' opinion, reinforcing perceptions of openness, while their use suggests that citizens are distrustful of the ability of representative democratic institutions to act in their interest or may be associated with disillusionment if the chosen policies or programmes do not have the impact that voters initially desired.

To a degree, the limited evidence on the impact of interventions on trust can partly be attributed to the challenges common in social science research. Conducting randomised studies on interventions is ethically and practically difficult, and there are few situations that would lend themselves to analyses as natural experiments, given that many interventions of interest are deployed nationwide. This leads to a high reliance on studies that attempt to identify causal effects from analyses of cross-sectional cross-country data. Events partially or entirely outside the control of public actors can sway trust levels, and high-frequency or panel data are rarely available. Moreover, institutional, economic, and cultural cross-country differences can also affect the relationship between the selected policy dimension or intervention and trust (cf. e.g. Zhang, Li and Yang, 2021); and the effects of interventions can differ between

	Analyses of interventions	
	Interventions/natural experiments	Survey experiments
Competencies	Reliability: Health facilities + (Chukwuma, Bossert and Croke, 2019[26]); Flood assistance + (Petrova and Rosvold, 2024[27]); Performance management + (Beeri, Uster and Vigoda-Gadot, 2018[25])	Responsiveness & Integrity: Provide information … on number of contract tracers – (Martinez-Bravo and Sanz, 2022[38]); … on participatory budgeting + (Ardanaz, Otálvaro-Ramírez and Scartascini, 2023[36]); Provide … detailed information about local pollution o (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012[37]); … positive information about local government + (Alessandro et al., 2021[35])
Values	Openness: Deliberative events o (Strandberg et al., 2021[32]); (Boulianne, 2018[29])	Public deliberations + (Grönlund, Setälä and Herne, 2010[34])
Administrative/political changes	Public health system reform - (Taylor-Gooby and Wallace, 2009); Local referendum o (Marien and Kern, 2016[31]) Decentralisation: Local +, regional/national o (Arends et al., 2023[43]) Municipal mergers - (Hansen, 2012[44])	

Note: + indicates a (marginally) positive, – a (marginally) negative, and o a missing association between the driver/intervention in question and trust in institutions. Studies that cover multiple drivers spanning competences and values simultaneously are presented in both. However, certain interventions can theoretically impact multiple drivers but are only mentioned under one heading. For example, the National Ombudsman in the Netherlands also monitors the quality of public services and can react to complaints concerning the (lack of) integrity or fairness of officials. Therefore, the institution could also be mentioned under responsiveness, fairness and integrity. The results cited for the OECD Survey on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions refer to trust in the national government; the drivers with an impact on the civil service and local government are not listed in the figure.

Figure 4.2b   Selected studies on the link between public governance drivers or interventions and trust in national government and institutions

high- and low-trusting citizens (Christensen, Karjalainen and Lundell, 2015) and between countries with low or high baseline levels of trust.

A research agenda on interventions to increase trust in public institutions

Potential directions for future research on trust-enhancing interventions might fall into several categories: Research that maximises the use of existing evidence sources and data, that builds on future expansions of data collection and interventions, and that draws on literature in adjacent fields.

Making the most of existing research and evidence

Consolidating the evidence on the impacts of interventions on outcomes and perceptions

Quite a lot is already known about how perceptions of different aspects of public governance drivers influence trust levels. But few studies have investigated the impacts of specific policy changes or programmes, and the few that have done so have not always found clear answers. This suggests several possible directions for research:

- First, researchers can consolidate the existing evidence on actions institutions can take to improve perceptions in areas where the respective public governance driver–trust link is well established. For example, while improved public perceptions of integrity appear to be positively related to trust, there are few studies on how related policy interventions affect trust. By bringing together the evidence on government actions to improve integrity perceptions, researchers can indirectly support policy makers who wish to enhance trust via this channel. This is the approach that the OECD takes in its Drivers of Trust country case studies, which draw on evidence regarding good policy practices to provide actionable recommendations on how to improve perceptions of public governance facets that people in the country perceive less positively than others.
- Second, for drivers where the strength of their relationship with trust levels still has mixed evidence, further reflection on how to investigate their relationship is warranted. For example, in the area of 'fairness' and equality of treatment, what is the connection between specific governance indicators and trust levels? Regarding openness, given the evidence on deliberative practices and direct democratic interventions is mixed, but perceptions of having a voice and accountability of institutions are positively related to trust, are there interventions that could directly impact the feeling of having a political voice, other than those related to socio-economic characteristics?
- Third, it is worth considering whether any past policy changes that occurred at different points in time, or with different intensities, within the same or across different countries could have affected trust levels; and whether existing data sources could capture the policy change itself, associated changes in governance outcomes or perceptions, and changes in trust levels (cf. Petrova and Rosvold, 2024 for an

example). Institutional knowledge could point towards other instances where policy interventions can be retroactively evaluated. Inspiration for policies and programmes identified by OECD governments as being related to trust can be found in OECD (forthcoming).

Another inherent difficulty is that the policy levers politicians and civil servants have at their disposal to change governance inputs, processes, and outcomes do not always correspond to the population's perceptions and expectations. For instance, integrity policies may contribute to an objective decline in corruption, without this being reflected in corruption perceptions. While some researchers have included both measures of public governance outcomes and perceptions in their analyses, this area still promises further fruitful research avenues; such as investigating how individuals form their perceptions of and expectations for public governance actions and outcomes through qualitative research, or combining data sources containing information on perceptions of drivers with other data sources on governance inputs, processes, and outputs, to evaluate how strongly subjective and objective measures of governance are related immediately and over time.

Understanding how intervention impacts can differ across societal groups and countries

The possibility that interventions may have differing effects on people with different socio-economic characteristics, partisan leanings, and existing trust levels merits further attention. For example, Anderson and Tverdova (2003) showed that having voted for the government in power can attenuate the negative impact of corruption on trust, and van der Meer and Hakhverdian (2016) found that the impact of corruption on distrust is stronger for highly educated individuals.

Accounting for these differential impacts through interaction effects or methods such as quantile regression (which can estimate the impact at different trust levels) can address these differences and potentially reconcile different findings on the impact of similar interventions in different contexts. As an alternative approach, studying the impact of similar interventions, for example, in high- or low-trust countries, in countries with stronger or fewer elements of direct democracy, and in different information environments through a case study approach could provide further insights.

Investing in more data collection and research approaches

Continue existing and invest in additional survey programmes on trust and trust drivers

Investing in population surveys measuring trust levels and governance drivers can contribute to further enhancing the evidence base on trust-enhancing interventions in multiple ways. By covering longer stretches of time while measuring the same variables across different countries, it will be possible to uncover with more precision the relationship between the perception of drivers and trust outcomes, analyse the impact of events that affected certain countries in specific years more strongly than others, and link the perception data to 'objective' indicators of governance inputs, processes,

and outcomes. The continued implementation of the OECD Trust Survey, potential repeats of the trust driver questions in the Cronos2 survey, and the inclusion of relevant questions in other population surveys that already measure trust levels can all be helpful in this regard.

But further investments have the potential to reveal even more:

- First, including a battery of trust-driver and trust-level questions in household panel surveys would open the door for a better understanding of how policy changes, economic and political events, and individual changes in socio-economic status can interact with changes in trust in institutions, would facilitate the investigation of longer-term impacts of interventions, and would complement results from existing panel surveys that include trust measures, including election surveys (Devine and Valgarðsson, 2023).
- Second, including a selected number of more generalised trust-related questions in user and population surveys on the quality of public services would allow the further strengthening of the performance–trust link literature.
- Third, including survey experiments in existing cross-national trust surveys can provide more insights into how individuals living in different countries and with different socio-economic backgrounds might react to the same intervention.

In this context, researchers responsible for the design of relevant surveys can also consider whether existing trust measures can be complemented by other instruments to capture different trust outcomes and the behavioural implications of trust.

Researchers have made the case that trust should be seen as a family of concepts: an absence of trust can indicate either a sceptical attitude towards the trustworthiness of an institution (often labelled as 'mistrust', and similar in concept to 'liberal distrust'; Bertsou, 2019) or an established belief (often labelled as 'distrust') (e.g. Citrin and Stoker, 2018). Similarly, trusting individuals comprise people who have an unquestioned – and potentially unfounded – faith in an institution ('credulous trust') and people whose belief in the trustworthiness of an institution is based on a consideration of relevant information ('sceptical trust') (e.g. Norris, 2022). Jennings et al. (2021) propose to measure trust, distrust, and mistrust through a battery of survey items, such as 'most politicians are honest and truthful', 'politicians don't respect people like me', and 'I am unsure about whether to believe most politicians'.

Future research (Van de Walle and Six, 2013) can further explore the most appropriate measures of distrust, mistrust, as well as credulous and sceptical trust, as well as how interventions affect the different types of trust outcomes. One hypothesis that may warrant further research is whether interventions to decrease the share of distrusting and credulously trusting individuals fundamentally differ from interventions that seek to increase the share of sceptical trusters versus mistrusters. Researchers and policy makers alike should furthermore be interested in understanding the related question of how to erect guardrails that can protect societies from tipping towards

an excessive degree of trust that can be manipulated by politicians with authoritarian goals.

Researchers could also explore whether additional behavioural questions or survey experiments could help provide evidence on the impact of trust-enhancing interventions on the behavioural consequences of trust, or whether such behavioural outcomes could instead be observed through other data sources. In the realm of generalised social trust, questions about past behaviours and survey experiments have been used to understand how conventional trust or confidence measures relate to observed or reported behaviour (cf., e.g. Fehr et al., 2003; Murtin et al., 2018). With regards to trust in institutions, Intawan and Nicholson (2018) propose an implicit association test, but this measure lacks a real-world behavioural implication. Additional measures stemming from a combination of survey and non-survey data, such as the relative frequency of crime victimisations as reported through surveys versus the reporting of crimes, could be explored as a behavioural expression of trust.

Co-designing interventions between policy makers and researchers

Survey experiments could benefit from a closer cooperation between policy makers and researchers. For example, researchers and government communication offices could jointly select modes of presenting information that they are actively considering or have already implemented, and test if different approaches are associated with different levels of trust.

Collaboration on evaluations of the impacts of interventions on governance outcomes and perceptions, as well as trust levels, could involve jointly identifying appropriate measurements of intended intervention outcomes and developing a data collection plan.

Drawing on adjacent areas of research

Increasing political trust via increases to organisational or social trust

At both the individual and the societal level, generalised social and institutional trust tends to be positively related (e.g. Brehm and Rahn, 1997). Though the literature provides more evidence for thinking that institutional influences social trust, compared to vice versa, some results (e.g. Newton and Zmerli, 2011) suggest that interventions to increase social trust might be able to raise institutional trust. Moreover, primarily through a channel of increased performance (Keefer, Perilla and Vlaicu, 2021) and thus increased perceived competence, increases in intra- and inter-agency organisation trust within the civil service might also be positively related to trust in institutions. Finally, trust of political agents in citizens might also be positively related to trust in institutions, as, for example, suggested by different modes of social assistance payments with varying forms of supervisory obligations in a community in the Netherlands (Betkó et al., 2022).

In this sense, drawing on the literature regarding interventions to increase generalised social trust and social cohesion (Orazani, Reynolds and Osborne, 2023) and intra- and

interinstitutional trust (e.g. Ashleigh and Prichard, 2011; Kramer and Lewicki, 2010; Ysa, Sierra and Esteve, 2014) could point towards additional pathways through which trust in public institutions could be reinforced.

Building political trust in post-authoritarian settings as well as among severely distrusting population groups

Much of the existing literature focuses on population-wide effects in countries that have not recently undergone military conflicts or a transition from authoritarian rule, and without a specific focus on population groups which, for historical reasons, may have caused a severely distrusting relationship towards the state. Drawing on the literature on building social and political trust in post-conflict situations can provide avenues for further research that can also be relevant for addressing trust-building in post-authoritarian societies and among population groups in which trust is absent or very low.

One relevant finding from the post-conflict literature is that security perceptions are key in post-conflict societies (e.g. Nomikos and Stollenwerk, 2024). Within a context where a substantial part of the population, even in OECD countries, voices security concerns (OECD, 2024) and where perceptions of insecurity are related to lower trust (OECD, 2024), collaborations between political scientists and criminologists could point towards avenues for identifying interventions that could decrease offending (Farrington and Welsh, 2005) and might have a positive impact on trust. Another focus of the post-conflict literature on trust-building is the importance of transitional justice measures accompanying institution-building. Measures to acknowledge past wrongs, provide compensation, and punish perpetrators, if applied in an appropriate order and inclusive manner alongside institution-building, can help build trust in new institutions through showcasing differences to the prior regime (Mihr, 2020). Case study research of successful and unsuccessful instances of democratic transition can potentially illuminate the general prerequisites for trust-building in the context of a transition from autocracy to democracy (cf. Mihr, 2017).

As regards trust-enhancing interventions in established democracies, the transitional justice and conflict transformation literature (e.g. Budde and Eickhoff, 2022) can point towards avenues for building trust in public institutions among marginalised population groups, though their applicability in situations of power asymmetry needs to be further studied. Work in this area may also provide further insights into the ideal sequencing of trust-enhancing interventions. For example, Lewicki's (2006) distinction between calculus- and identification-based trust, though stemming from research about interpersonal trust relationships, might also find its applicability in political trust in countries in transition or among particularly low-trusting groups: interventions to enhance trust initially likely need to focus on improving perceptions of government competencies and values, but might over time help to build a more inclusive perception of citizenship that could help stabilise trust relationships. Moreover, it may also be worth addressing the question of how and under which conditions government action in the absence of trust, such as third-party enforcement

(Raiser, 1999) and laws and norms that are enforced through sanctions (Getha-Taylor et al., 2018), can ultimately contribute to building trust.

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5

The increasing relevance of political distrust in 21st-century democratic politics

Eri Bertsou

Political distrust has emerged as a critical subject in contemporary political science, dominating how citizens engage with democratic institutions and processes (Citrin and Stoker, 2018). However, in social science research, the emphasis has been placed predominantly on trust rather than distrust, leaving the latter relatively untheorized and obscured. The relationship between political distrust and trust is fast becoming a topic of intense discussion, as is the role that distrust (as opposed to simply trust) plays in democratic societies. This chapter focuses on *political* distrust, as distinct from other forms of distrust that describe social relations between individuals, groups, and other institutions. Political distrust specifically targets political institutions, their actors, and – at least for the purposes of this chapter – the democratic regime. The chapter offers an overview of what distrust means, how it functions, and how it relates to trust and other concepts, such as scepticism. Its aim is to articulate paths for future research, keeping in mind the many implications political distrust has for the functioning of democratic systems.

While much of the existing academic and public discourse has focused on the importance of trust in ensuring democratic stability, the study of political distrust remains equally, if not more, crucial. It has received renewed interest in the past decade, as democratic societies are trying to grapple with stagnating or declining political trust, and scholars strive to better understand the types of distrust and the conditions under which distrust becomes a challenge to democracy (Hardin, 2004). When political distrust is widespread, it is increasingly seen as a key factor undermining democratic legitimacy and the effective functioning of political systems (Easton, 1975). I conceptualize distrust as an *attitude* following *evaluations* of incompetence, unethical behaviour, and value or interest incongruence along deep social divides (Bertsou, 2019). These factors, when left unaddressed, create a *sustained disconnection* between citizens and the political institutions designed to represent them. It is not simply a matter of dissatisfaction – it is a more ingrained and widespread phenomenon. Distrust is hypothesized to threaten democratic stability in the long term, as the inability to provide good governance makes democratic systems vulnerable to attacks from within. This could be in the form of popular revolt, or through the ascent of authoritarian-prone movements and leaders, which find support among distrustful citizens.

On the other hand, recent trends of democratic backsliding highlight how scepticism, the absence of trust, and even active distrust when warranted, can have a beneficial role in democratic systems. This chapter will explore the themes above and the paradox of political distrust as a resource in democratic systems, in an effort to highlight new and old questions for further research. It begins by outlining the theoretical frameworks used to understand political distrust, followed by an analysis of its consequences for democratic stability. Finally, it will consider future directions for research, particularly the relevance of political distrust in addressing the climate emergency and managing the societal impact of AI.

Trust, distrust, and the in-between

Distrust can lead to behaviours and implications for social life that are distinctly different from those associated with trust. For example, distrust of doctors and the medical field leads to refusal of treatment or seeking alternative solutions to medical problems (Hornsey et al., 2020). Distrust of science contributes to climate change denial and conspiratorial thinking (Cologna et al., 2024; Huber et al., 2022). Similarly, distrust of political authorities leads citizens to withdraw from politics, to take matters into their own hands, and to attempt to organize their lives in other ways (Citrin and Stoker, 2018). Distrust of the electoral process and distrust of institutions negates their power and authority to regulate social life (Dyck et al., 2018). It ultimately drives citizens to look for alternatives, to refuse to be subject to rules and regulations imposed by government, and to support leaders championing a break from the existing system.

When people distrust, they will do their best to avoid any interaction that puts them in a position of vulnerability. However, a world without cooperation is extremely difficult to navigate and govern. As social beings, we are designed to live in communities where we interact with others. Research has already documented how people develop very small and closed systems of cooperation to try to survive in communities characterized by distrust, which ultimately limits flourishing, economic growth, and development (Bigoni et al., 2016; Stets and Fares, 2019). In addition to this, states and their institutions permeate social life. Researchers have long argued that in modern complex societies, it is distrust in politics that causally hinders social cooperation. Both experimental and survey evidence show that untrustworthy institutions hinder cooperation among citizens. Institutions which allow free-riding, corruption, and bias cannot provide the basis for cooperation among citizens (Martinangeli et al., 2024; Dinesen et al., 2022).

The observations above help us identify the main issues hindering the study of political distrust. First, there is its relationship to trust: While the two terms are often theorized and measured as opposites of the same concept, trust and distrust are not symmetrical. Starting from semantics, the absence of trust does not describe a state of distrust, and the absence of distrust does not signify a state of trust. This becomes clear when considering the functions of distrust. Trust encourages cooperation and allows citizens to engage positively with political institutions, accepting vulnerability

in exchange for the expectation of mutual benefit. A state of political distrust means there is an expectation of harm when interacting with the state and political actors. It motivates behaviours such as avoidance, disbelief, disengagement, and even aggression when forced to cooperate. It involves anxiety, fear, despair, resentment, and anger. The absence of trust, either as healthy scepticism or as indifference, does not correspond to such behavioural and emotive states.

Scepticism, which has often been conflated with distrust, describes a more suspicious stance, with cautious behaviour and a search for more information and evidence. If a trusting or distrusting evaluation cannot be reached, it signifies the suspension of judgement. Scepticism is thought of as a neutral stance, a middle ground between trust and distrust. It is often touted as a rational and healthy attitude in democratic societies (Hardin, 2004). However, scepticism (unless considered a character trait) cannot be a permanent state regarding one's political system. It can be directed towards new political leaders and governments, but eventually, a judgement needs to be formed about the trustworthiness of the object evaluated.

Critical distrust is a newer term that deserves attention. It is closely related to "liberal distrust", which is rooted in the liberal democratic tradition (Hardin, 2002). Liberal distrust promotes democracy by placing citizens in a vigilant state towards their political leaders. Similar to scepticism, it serves to check politicians' behaviour. Critical distrust describes a state where constant evaluations are made in response to new evidence. It encourages accountability without the disruption that active distrust generates. Critical distrust leads to critical engagement with politics, while active distrust tends to foster withdrawal and alienation (van der Meer and Van Erkel, 2023). For example, critical citizens might demand transparency and participate in public debates, while distrusting citizens may refrain from participating in elections or view political processes as fundamentally illegitimate.

A key question when considering the distinction between distrust and critical distrust, and their role in democracy, is whether distrust is warranted. The normative value and consequences of distrust depend in part on the trustworthiness of the political objects being evaluated (see Norris, 2022). In the absence of democratic safeguards and institutions of checks and balances to offices of political power, critical distrust and active distrust will very likely be an important resource to ensure that political power is not misused, demand reforms when there is foul play, and serve to safeguard democracy. If institutions of checks and balances exist and they function properly, political distrust is a sign of something more complex and ominous. It represents the belief that political actors and institutions are untrustworthy and should therefore alarm those in governing roles, urging them to act so as to correct such perceptions. The road from political distrust (believing the democratic system is untrustworthy) leads easily to support for anti-systemic and anti-democratic alternatives.

While the conceptual difference between distrust and critical distrust is appealing, a drawback relates to its empirical study: to date, we lack the appropriate tools to differentiate between types of distrust, scepticism, warranted or unwarranted distrust,

and even between *trust* and *distrust*. In the final part of the chapter, I will return to this point, as it is evident that future research in political trust and distrust must be radical in the way it approaches *measurement*. The next section presents the theory of political distrust and the underlying evaluations it entails. Innovative instruments are needed so that empirical studies can catch up with conceptual work, and with the realities of the world around us.

Theory of political distrust

It is not surprising that different disciplines have converged in their study of trust and distrust, arguing that it rests upon three evaluative judgements.[1] These three dimensions differ slightly between disciplinary fields and author groups, depending on the specific relationships they study and the object to be trusted or distrusted.[2] Nevertheless, extensive qualitative work to better understand how citizens conceptualize and speak about political distrust in their everyday life shows that political distrust represents judgements made regarding (i) the target's inability to fulfil their role, lacking technical skills and showing incompetence; (ii) judgements of unethical practices, their lack of integrity, inconsistency, deception, and behaviour that violates shared moral values of fairness; and (iii) judgements of perceived incongruence and incompatibility of interests, of values (and in deeply polarized cases of a sense of identity) between a citizen and political actors (Bertsou, 2019; Hardin, 2004). In a state of distrust, one or all of these have faltered, leading citizens to have negative expectations for any interaction with the political system.

At first glance, it may appear that the evaluation processes that underpin distrust are not fundamentally different from those that can lead to trust. However, there are two important differences. The first lies in the prominence of the ethical dimension in judgements of political distrust. Distrust encapsulates a perceived moral failure on the part of those who have political power and do not wield it properly. Pervasive distrust is inextricably linked to perceptions of moral offences (Zak, 2013). Many instances of underperforming political systems can be traced back to practices that, in addition to being inefficient, also violate moral norms. Regarding institutions and processes,

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[1]   Although technically, the earlier accounts of trust put forward by the Russell Sage Foundation publications on trust in the early 2000s focused on the two dimensions of ability and willingness to reciprocate (Hardin, 2002; Levi, 1998), these are now being expanded by newer research in political science, economics, business administration, and psychology.

[2]   There are a combination of Benevolence, Integrity, and Competence (Devine et al., 2024), Technical, Ethical, and Congruence (Bertsou, 2019), Competence, Openness, and Integrity (Cologna et al., 2024), Authenticity, Empathy, and Logic (Frei and Morris, 2020), Integrity, Benevolence, and Alignment of Interests (Hurley, 2011), and Benevolence, Consistency, and Reciprocity (Galford and Seibold Drapeau, 2003) to name but a few. Nevertheless, all these approaches tend to converge and cover the dimensions presented above.

these include practices of corruption, free-riding, and impunity, which violate fairness. Regarding individuals, they include all attributes that indicate a lack of integrity: dishonesty, duplicity, betrayal of promises, and inconsistency (Dinesen, 2012).

Political scandals, a known key predictor of spikes in citizen distrust, directly fuel perceptions of unethical behaviour (Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017). Political distrust can still take hold when the ethical standing of the political class is questioned, even in the absence of scandals. Perceptions of unethical behaviour suffice. In the past two decades, populist leaders have been very successful in mobilizing support by exploiting citizen discontent and amplifying distrust through the rhetoric of a "rotten", "corrupt" politics (Montgomery, 2017). While political distrust should not be conflated with populist attitudes, populists are skilled at articulating messages that tap into this moral dimension of political distrust.

A second important aspect, which has been overlooked due to the focus on political trust rather than distrust, relates to the third evaluative dimension of distrusting judgements. In healthy pluralistic contexts where distrust is specific and may come and go, this dimension is not prominent. When the political system is perceived as trustworthy, group dynamics and the congruence of interests, values, and identities are not prominent considerations in people's minds. They become salient and even of primary importance in conditions of uncertainty, when social groups are in conflict, polarization is high, and the democratic system is pushed to the limits.

The third dimension is perhaps the most challenging to address and to reverse. It is an evaluation based on perceived incompatibility between the citizen and the state or political target deemed to be untrustworthy. Rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), the dimension of incongruence colours all other evaluations that individuals make about politicians, governments, and institutions. In such cases, political distrust becomes a function not of whether a politician or government can deliver what is good for society in general, but of whether they are part of one's in-group, likely to promote the interests of "my kind of people" (Quilter-Pinner et al., 2021; Bertsou, 2019). Some groups might have good reasons to distrust socio-political out-groups, for example, for historical reasons of bias and discrimination. Nevertheless, in democratic systems without mechanisms to manage adversarial politics, this distrust can be destabilizing (Arbatli and Rosenberg, 2021). Add to this the current media environment that allows the proliferation of misinformation and echo chambers, and there is not much politicians can say or do to reach across the divides and provide a basis to dispel these beliefs.

Research from newer democracies shows how trust and distrust based on congruence prevent citizens from evaluating the true democratic performance of their country. It makes them more likely to condone illiberal policies from their in-group (Singer, 2018) or reject legitimate democratic policies from out-groups. This becomes particularly evident with politicians having authoritarian tendencies. Research from democracies where polarization is rising has also documented this destabilizing effect (Graham and Svolik, 2020). The Brexit referendum and Trump's first presidency saw spikes in

polarization and congruence-based distrust (Dyck et al., 2018). Reversing such distrust is tantamount to convincing citizens that leaders from the opposite group are benevolent – a difficult task by all accounts.

A path forward: future research in political distrust

The final section of this chapter presents a series of older and newer, smaller and larger questions that will be helpful in advancing the debates regarding political distrust and democracy. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter and across this book, political trust is understood as a component part of the legitimacy of a regime. The Eastonian model features trust as a measure of diffuse support, putting it on one side of a scale that balances citizens' political demands with their offered support so that the regime can function and produce the outputs requested (Easton, 1975). If demands are not met and citizen support wanes, that brings the political system into a circle of distrust, contributing to the production of poor outcomes for the majority, leading to ever-increasing distrust.

The Eastonian model of system support appears convincing in theory and, in many cases, is supported by empirical observations (Hetherington, 2005). In a context of deep or diffuse political trust, distrust can be contained and addressed at the specific level by changing untrustworthy individuals or parties (Wroe et al., 2013). However, a large number of democratic countries operate as low-trust or even distrust environments without losing regime legitimacy. This is an intriguing observation that suggests there might be a tipping point for distrust, or that distrust equilibria are possible – or that (dis)trust does not matter at all! Further research is needed to understand *how democratic regimes that are distrusted by large segments of their citizens manage to maintain an adequate level of democratic legitimacy in the eyes of these very citizens. How is this distrust equilibrium maintained?*

Distrust, much like trust, can permeate all aspects of a political system and the society it regulates. Additionally, while trust provides "a reservoir of goodwill among citizens" that is expected to sustain the political community through difficult times, through unpredictable shocks and challenges, distrust represents the opposite; an abundance of disbelief and suspicion, which persists and disrupts efforts for positive change. In other words, while trust can be broken and turn into distrust, distrust keeps a firm grip on citizen–state relations and is difficult to dispel. In this peculiarity lies another big opportunity for social scientists interested in the study of political trust and distrust: *understanding the critical junctures where trust turns into distrust, and – more rarely and with greater difficulty – distrust can be phased out to be replaced by trust*. While theoretical accounts of such processes are beginning to emerge due to the conceptual work efforts, empirical accounts and examinations are still limited. It is paradigms for the latter that are sorely needed and can be useful for practitioners.

When distrust and the withholding of political support run deep, this can spill over to central features of a political regime – not only its political class and the government

of the day but also electoral processes, political institutions of law and order, the judiciary, and the shared principles of the regime. Nevertheless, questions still remain regarding the spillovers of distrust between different targets and different levels of the political system. The 1974 debate between Citrin and Miller, which played out in the *American Political Science Review*, tried to determine whether plummeting trust levels in the US were a cause for concern, centred around the question of whether they referred to specific (incumbents) or diffuse (institutions and regime) support (Citrin, 1974; Miller, 1974). Since then, Norris and other scholars have identified more levels of support ranging from the more specific to the most diffuse level of regime principles and community, that is, democracy itself. Despite decades of debates, we still lack a convincing empirical account of the process of distrust spillovers from one level to another, and especially from specific to systemic targets. *Under what conditions does distrust escalate to the diffuse level? Can the three evaluative dimensions of distrust help us in this examination and provide insights for the reversal of distrust?*

Newer approaches that focus on implicit and explicit manifestations of distrust have provided some novel avenues into how a political system can still be implicitly trusted by citizens, and therefore protected, while it is explicitly distrusted (Intawan and Nicholson, 2018). Existing studies about the different levels of trust across political institutions can also provide insights into the way systemic distrust comes about. Researchers have highlighted the finding that citizen trust in non-representative political institutions is consistently higher than in representative institutions of democratic regimes. In other words, we tend to distrust the institutions we elect, rather than those we do not. However, this makes sense if we consider that the primary purpose of non-representative political institutions, such as the judiciary, armed forces, police, and state bureaucracy, is to serve the entire community without bias and to uphold democratic principles. Representative political institutions, on the other hand, are where interests, partisanship, and adversarial politics come into play. Theoretically, distrust in non-representative institutions is more damaging for the long-term stability of a system. Whether it is through the politicization of such institutions (which contributes to polarization), or scandals that afflict them, it is important to direct more scholarly attention to better understand when citizens lose trust in more systemic political actors.

This brings us to what is perhaps the biggest limitation in the study of political distrust at the moment: the lack of empirical measurement tools to study distrust and the vital questions mentioned so far in this chapter. Every question articulated in the paragraphs above is motivated by observable phenomena. We can see distrust equilibria and report on the ruptures that generate political distrust in case studies and qualitative accounts. However, systematic empirical examination is still hindered due to the lack of appropriate empirical measures. As discussed at the outset of this chapter, the emphasis placed on the role of trust for the healthy functioning of democratic institutions has led social scientists to monitor trust trends as early as the 1960s in the US, and the 1970s and 1980s in other democracies around the world. This wealth of longitudinal data has allowed researchers to trace trust levels for more than 50 years. The

disadvantage is that those early formulated survey instruments were not designed to study political distrust, its dimensions and particularities (Cook and Gronke, 2005).

Therefore, the measures we have available cannot help us distinguish between distrust and low trust, nor the absence of trust or mistrust/scepticism. We do not know where trust ends and where distrust begins, and hence, studying those critical junctures where trust turns to distrust is severely hindered. We are also unable to distinguish between critical trust that is warranted and distrust that is unwarranted. Misgivings about political trust survey questions are not new, of course, and most of these problems have been raised by scholars. Nevertheless, researchers are increasingly interpreting citizen attitudes towards politicians, governments, and politics in general as distrustful, rather than trustful, even among the most established democracies. All this cements measurement research as a high priority in the field. Recent efforts by van der Meer and Van Erkel (2023) to empirically examine these two manifestations of distrust by calculating model residuals are innovative approaches necessary to advance our understanding of the relationship between distrust and democracy.

Three newer developments have important implications for the study of political distrust. First, an upended information environment following social media and AI-generated content has left citizens around the world with the daily challenge of judging the reliability of the media and information in general. Rebuilding trust in core institutions is more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in a distrusted information environment, throwing into doubt many efforts to combat distrust through increased transparency, increased competence, or even reforms of behavioural standards. Therefore, it is crucial for research in political distrust to engage with the role of the information environment.

Second, existential crises are likely to increase, and political distrust will greatly affect the ability of governments to respond effectively, as was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jennings et al., 2021). The climate emergency has firmly passed through the door (rather than being at our proverbial "doorstep") with countries across the globe needing to protect their citizens through extreme heatwaves, wildfires, and unprecedented storms and rainfall. How can political distrust be "put on hold" to allow space for political action to tackle the climate crisis? What actors can be brought in to formulate and implement policy that seeks to combat and mitigate the risks associated with the climate crisis? We know that political distrust matters for policy preferences, though in complex ways (Fairbrother and Devine, Chapter 11 in this book). It is clear that a politicization of expertise will be necessary, meaning bringing scientific expertise into politics and policy-making, but how precisely this is done will have diverse effects on whether people will trust the processes and support the policy decisions. Similarly, distrust between relevant stakeholders will be an impediment; therefore, finding ways to combat distrust between political opponents, bureaucracies, scientific communities, and civil society on these pressing topics will be extremely valuable.

Lastly, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and technological innovations represent a novel challenge for political systems and societies at large. It is already playing a role in

governance (Starke et al., 2022; Raviv, 2024), welfare policy and labour markers (Acemoglu and Restrepo, 2020; Agrawal et al., 2019; Gallego and Kurer, 2022), not to mention the ethical and security concerns it raises regarding the power of corporations that develop and support AI tools (Radu, 2021). What is often omitted from discussions is the perceived trustworthiness of the actors developing the algorithms, whether they be state agencies or private technology companies (Starke et al., 2022). What is certain is that in the absence of a trusted political system, effective regulation and the promotion of innovation with successful management of risks will be more difficult. Researchers must again focus on trust and on distrust, where they are warranted: who should be trusted to develop, certify, implement, and oversee the use of AI tools and for what purposes is their use legitimate? Can technological innovations be used by the state in a way that increases its efficiency and its ability to deliver goods and services to its citizens (and therefore combating distrust)? Or are such applications deemed unfair and biased, leading to scandals, violating shared notions of ethical conduct, and hence increasing distrust in politics?

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that political distrust is a crucial and increasingly relevant concept to be studied, as it influences how democratic societies function and how citizens relate to their governments. While past research has mainly focused on trust, it is doubtful that the theory and measures of political trust are fully applicable in answering new and pressing questions regarding *distrust* in politics. Unlike mere scepticism or the absence of trust, political distrust involves settled negative judgements about the competence, ethics, and alignment of political institutions with citizen interests. When left unaddressed, such distrust can weaken democratic legitimacy and open the door to authoritarianism. In its warranted form, however, distrust can serve as a democratic check, demanding accountability and even blocking authoritarian candidates and proposals.

Future research must focus on distinguishing empirically between different forms of distrust and on showing how distrust in specific actors escalates into systemic distrust. Similarly, empirical paradigms for the reversal and de-escalation of distrust will be extremely valuable. Amidst fast-paced developments like the climate crisis and the rise of AI in governance, distrust can hinder coordinated efforts and policy implementation. Ultimately, understanding how to navigate and manage political distrust is key to ensuring democratic resilience. Researchers should explore how democracies can maintain legitimacy amidst growing scepticism, and how new technologies can be used transparently to reinforce public trust. Addressing these questions is essential for safeguarding democratic governance in an era of uncertainty.

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6

Philosophy and political trust

Matthew Bennett

One could be forgiven for thinking that the philosophy of trust has relatively little to contribute to the empirical study of political trust. After all, the philosophy of trust has concentrated foremost on trust between people, and for the most part, only occasionally asks whether and how we might trust political institutions. But the tide is turning, with more philosophers now attending to conceptual and normative questions about public trust in a range of important political and social institutions, including governments (e.g. Cozzaglio, 2023; Faulkner, 2018; Warren, 1999), scientific institutions (e.g. Bennett, 2020; Irzik and Kurtulmus, 2021), and public health initiatives such as vaccine programmes (Goldenberg, 2021).

We are nonetheless still some distance from establishing dialogue between philosophers and other political trust researchers as the norm rather than the exception. With the hope of making a small step in the direction of normalising such a dialogue, the purpose of this chapter is to introduce recent work on the philosophy of trust to social scientists working on political trust, and to reflect on how live philosophical debates on trust might be most pertinent to trust's empirical study.

The chapter: (1) presents a brief history of recent work in the philosophy of trust; (2) outlines some live debates in this area; (3) expands on the philosophical debate most likely to be relevant to empirical study of political trust, namely whether the concept of trust can legitimately apply to attitudes towards institutions; (4) analyses the extent to which extant measures of political trust reflect some of the finer details of philosophical accounts; and (5) suggests some questions for further interdisciplinary research on political trust.

1.   A brief history of the philosophy of trust

Philosophy of trust in its contemporary form first emerged in the 1980s and 1990s from two different origins, generating two distinct traditions in the philosophy of trust: the ethics of trust and the epistemology of trust.[1]

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[1]   There is an older history of philosophers writing about trust, dating back at least to Locke's fiduciary account of legitimate state power. For the purposes of this chapter, I

The foundational paper for the ethics of trust is Baier's "Trust and Antitrust" (1986). On Baier's account, trust is a special form of reliance. Reliance in general could include relying on inanimate objects or relying on the predictable behaviour of another person. But such reliance seems importantly different from trust. For example, a predatory gambling company might rely on its customers' addictions, but it seems odd to say that the company *trusts* its customers to be addicted to gambling. The difference between trust and mere reliance, according to Baier, is that when we trust, we rely on the trusted to have at least a modicum of goodwill towards us, and to be motivated by that goodwill to act in a way that is favourable to us (Baier, 1986, p.234).

Though many of the details of Baier's account have been questioned, most philosophers following her have accepted that trust is distinct from mere reliance. The challenge for this post-Baier tradition has been to successfully explain the trust/reliance distinction. One problem for Baier's goodwill-based account is that sometimes we rely on the goodwill of another without trusting them. For instance, a confidence trickster might exploit the goodwill of their target, but we would not say that the con-artist trusts their victims (Cogley, 2012; Holton, 1994). Another problem is that the term "goodwill" is problematically ambiguous. As Karen Jones (2012, p.67) suggests, "goodwill" could be interpreted to mean "friendly feelings", but this seems too restrictive (must I be friends with my doctor to trust them?; see also McLeod, 2002, p.22). Alternatively, we could interpret "goodwill" expansively to include a range of laudable qualities (e.g. benevolence, honesty, integrity, and conscientiousness). But doing so runs the risk of turning Baier's account into the uninformative thesis that when we trust a person, we expect them to have some unspecified positive attitude (Jones, 2012, p.67).

Consideration of such problems has generated a range of alternative theories. Reactive-attitude accounts, for example, maintain that the difference between relying and trusting is that when we trust a person, they become subject to reactive attitudes, that is, the kind of attitudes we hold towards morally responsible agents (Hieronymi, 2008; Holton, 1994). Reactive attitudes include praise, blame, resentment, and indignation, but the signature reactive attitude of trust is, on this account, betrayal.[2] Thus, according to reactive-attitude theorists, the difference between reliance and trust is that if someone disappoints our trust, we may legitimately feel betrayed, but not so if we merely rely on them.

Another approach is provided by dependence-responsiveness theories, according to which when we trust a person, we expect them to be motivated by the fact that we depend on them (Faulkner, 2007, 2018; Jones, 2012; McGeer and Petit, 2017). Relying on someone's predictable behaviour need not include an expectation that the predictable person knows or cares about my relying on them. By contrast, on this account,

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will follow the lead of most contemporary philosophers of trust and restrict focus to developments over the last 40 years.

2   The *locus classicus* for the theory of reactive attitudes that underpins this account of trust is Strawson (1962).

when I trust, I expect the person to care about the fact that I am relying on them, and to act accordingly. One notable feature of this approach is that it can accommodate a broad range of relevant motives that a truster might attribute to those they trust. I need not think a person is particularly virtuous or friendly towards me to expect them to respond to my dependence on them. Similarly relaxed approaches to the motives of the people we trust are found in two other prominent post-Baier theories: commitment accounts, which hold that we trust people when we rely on them to act on their commitments (Bennett, 2021; Hawley, 2014, 2019; Mullin, 2005); and Hardin's encapsulated-interest account, which maintains that I can trust those who have an interest in maintaining a good relationship with me, and who thereby have an incentive to incorporate my interests within theirs (Hardin, 2002a).

The post-Baier tradition has tended to focus on cases of practical trust, that is, cases in which a person trusts someone to act in a certain way. A parallel tradition in the philosophy of trust has debated the nature of epistemic trust, that is, trusting that a speaker is speaking the truth. This second tradition does not originate in a single paper but rather a collection of work on a subtopic in epistemology, namely testimonial knowledge.

Knowledge based on the testimony of others raises a range of questions for epistemologists, the most relevant of which for our purposes is how testimonial knowledge is justified. Say that I know that the library is closed today because my friend has told me so. How exactly is my belief justified? One option is an assurance view, according to which when my friend tells me the library is closed, they thereby assure me that this is the case and if I have the right kind of relationship with my friend, I can reasonably take their assurance as good enough grounds to believe the library is closed (Moran, 2006). But what kind of relationship do I need with a speaker in order to take their assurance as grounds for belief? The answer, for some, is trust; if I have reasonable trust in a speaker, and they tell me the library is closed, I thereby have good grounds to believe the library is closed (Faulkner, 2007).

One task for epistemologists is to give an account of the kind of trust that would be needed to play this role in assurance theories of testimonial knowledge. This is where theories that have emerged in the ethics and epistemology of trust often overlap. Faulkner, for instance, has argued for a theory of epistemic trust that is similar to dependence-responsiveness theories in the ethics of trust. Faulkner invokes a distinction similar to the trust/reliance distinction recounted above, this time termed predictive trust, where we depend on a person's predictability, and affective trust, where we expect the trusted person to be motivated to tell the truth by the fact that we depend on them to do so (Faulkner, 2007). According to Faulkner, only the latter can play the role we need trust to play in supporting testimonial knowledge.

2.   Live debates in the philosophy of trust

Forty years is not a long time in philosophy, and many of the details of the accounts featured in this second section are still up for debate. One such detail is whether, as Baier suggested, trust is best understood as a three-place relation, that is, X entrusts Y with Z (Baier, 1986, p.236).[3] The three-place model is still very common in the philosophy of trust (e.g. Bennett, 2021; Carter, 2022; Simion and Willard-Kyle, 2023). One reason to adopt it is that it respects the way in which trust is often domain-specific, for very often we trust people with regard to one thing or a range of things but not everything. Thus, I might trust a plumber to fix my boiler but not to cut my hair. Arguably, I do not trust the plumber without qualification; I trust the plumber with regard to a particular task.

However, there are reasons to think three-place trust is not the whole story. It is also natural in English to talk of trust as two-place: I trust my friend, I trust my children, I trust my spouse, etc. And as Holton and Domenicucci have noted, not only is two-place trust also possible in other languages, in some (Latin, Italian, French) it is more natural than three-place locutions (Holton and Domenicucci, 2017, p.150). Holton and Domenicucci argue that trust is better understood primarily as a relation with other people that is analogous to love and friendship, neither of which is ordinarily understood to be restricted to a particular domain (it would be odd, and probably offensive, to tell someone I am friends with them only when playing chess). Attempts have also been made to theorise trust as four-place (Forst's "A trusts B in context C in relation to D" (Forst, 2022)) and even one-place ("X trusts" or "X has a trusting-attitude"; Faulkner, 2018, p.628).

One other reason not to ignore the two-place framework is that the contrary of trust, distrust, also lends itself to two-place locutions, and arguably is more naturally understood without a domain-restriction ("I distrust politicians" rather than "I distrust politicians with Z"; Holton and Domenicucci, 2017, p.150) Since Hawley noted that the concept of distrust has been conspicuously absent in contemporary philosophy of trust (Hawley, 2014), distrust has gained greater prominence in the philosophical literature (see e.g. D'Cruz, 2019, 2020), a development concurrent with the growth in work on distrust in political science (see e.g. Bertsou, 2019; Jennings et al., 2021; Van De Walle and Six, 2013; note that Hardin's work on political distrust predates both developments (Hardin, 2002b)). Hawley's account of distrust included the claim that distrust is the contrary of trust rather than merely its contradictory, in the sense that distrust is not merely the absence of trust (its contradictory opposite) but also has stronger negative connotations of attitudes such as suspicion or wariness. This claim is widely endorsed, but has been challenged by Faulkner, who argues that distrust is always present when trust is absent when we think of trust as either two-place or

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[3]   Note that Baier was aware that using a tripartite structure to analyse trust would "involve some distortion" (ibid.), but she thought this a price worth paying.

one-place: "Where trust is the background attitude – where it is two-place, or one-place – if trust is lost what remains is not merely its lack but distrust" (Faulkner, 2017, p.121).

Aside from such conceptual questions about distrust, philosophers have recently been interested in the value of distrust.[4] According to O'Neill, trust is only valuable when it is placed in the trustworthy, and distrust when directed to the untrustworthy (O'Neill, 2002). This much is generally uncontested, but one question that follows is how best to achieve well-placed trust and distrust. O'Neill suggests we should aim to direct our distrust to those we judge untrustworthy (ibid.). But as D'Cruz (2019) observes, there are good reasons to think we are generally prone to false positives in our judgements of whether other people are untrustworthy, particularly when making such judgements of people who are already members of marginalised social groups. D'Cruz argues that instead of positively aiming for distrust of the untrustworthy – a practice likely to lead to unjust distrust – we should instead practise "humble trust", that is, a practice that is informed by a healthy scepticism of our ability to accurately judge trustworthiness, but not so generous as to constitute blind trust of everyone and everything.[5] In a similar vein, unjust epistemic distrust has been a recurrent theme in philosophical work on what Fricker dubbed "testimonial injustice" (Fricker, 2007), that is, the ascription of credibility deficit to a speaker on the basis of unjust social stereotypes (consider, for instance, a medical professional disbelieving a female patient because the professional thinks that women tend to exaggerate their symptoms).

In short, distrust, both in the practical and epistemic sense, is often thought by philosophers to be prone to misfire in ways that have important social justice implications. However, as we will see in the next section, some philosophers think that before we can even discuss the value of trust and distrust in *institutions*, a case must first be made for the legitimacy of the concept of institutional trust itself.

3.   Can we trust institutions?

Though contemporary philosophy of trust has mostly focused on trust between individual people, some philosophers have asked whether the insights of this work could also apply to trust in institutions. A handful of philosophers have expressed scepticism about the appropriateness of the concept of trust when trying to understand our attitudes towards institutions (e.g. Hardin, 2002a; Hawley, 2017). Others have argued against this scepticism, and in the process attempted to be more specific about how

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[4]   As have political theorists and social scientists. See, for example, Hardin (2002b), Krishnamurthy (2015), and Bertsou (2019).

[5]   We might think of this as analogous to Pippa Norris' recommendation that we practise "skeptical trust" (2022). Norris recommends we treat our inclinations to political trust with a healthy degree of scepticism, enough to motivate us to seek reliable information about the trustworthiness of political institutions. Analogously, D'Cruz recommends we treat our inclinations to distrust, which too often misfire, with a similar scepticism.

theories of trust between people might extend to trust in governments, political parties, and other important social institutions such as the police and medical institutions (e.g. Bennett, 2023; Faulkner, 2018; Pouryousefi and Tallant, 2023).

Before looking at this debate in more detail, it is worth noting that even if the sceptic is right, their scepticism need not be fatal for the study of political trust, for arguably one could define political trust without trust in institutions. Consider, for instance, the definition of political trust offered in the Introductory Chapter to this book. According to that definition, "trust reflects a positive orientation that the actor [governing their polity] would produce preferred outcomes even if left unattended and where positive outcomes are uncertain" (Devine and Fairbrother, Chapter 1 in this book). One natural interpretation of this definition would maintain that the object of political trust (an actor) must be a person. If this is our definition of political trust, it survives successful institution-trust scepticism. However, the resilience of this definition comes at a cost, for if we restrict objects of trust to people, then much of what we usually want to talk about when we talk about political trust – trust in governments, trust in parliaments, trust in political systems – would be either excluded altogether or reduced to trust in the individuals who populate those institutions.

Can we, then, save a concept of trust in political *institutions*? Since the trust/reliance distinction has been so prominent in contemporary philosophy of trust, a particularly appropriate way into this debate is to consider whether that trust/reliance distinction can also apply to the attitudes we hold towards institutions. Is there anything to distinguish what we call trust in, say, government from merely relying on government? It may seem at first that this question puts defenders of institutional trust on the back foot. A standard way of illustrating the trust/reliance distinction is to observe that it makes sense to talk about relying on inanimate objects (ropes, bridges, cars, shelves), but when we talk of trusting them, we mean this only metaphorically. Trust, it seems, is reserved for attitudes between people. And it seems that the kinds of relationships we can have with people, which make trust possible, are not the kind of relationships we can have with institutions.

Sceptics about institutional trust differ on the details of how we cash out this intuition that we cannot enter into a trusting relationship with institutions. Indeed, how a sceptic explains this intuition depends on their favoured account of trust. For instance, Hardin expands on his scepticism about institutional trust in terms of his encapsulated-interest account of trust, according to which I have good reason to trust someone only if I know that they want to promote my interests in order to sustain our mutually beneficial relationship (2002a, pp.151–172). The problem with the concept of institutional trust, according to Hardin, is that the conditions that allow encapsulated interests to thrive between people are rarely found in relationships between members of the public and political and social institutions. One such condition is an iterative interaction through which each party can build confidence in their mutually beneficial relationship. Another is sufficient knowledge of the interests and intentions of the trusted person. Neither, Hardin argues, are very plausible in a relation between people and institutions (ibid.).

The problem is not exclusive to encapsulated-interest accounts of trust. As I mentioned in section 2, another popular way of distinguishing trust from reliance is to appeal to reactive attitudes. On this account, the difference between reliance and trust is that if someone disappoints our trust, we may legitimately feel betrayed, but not so if we merely rely on them. But this account of trust has also generated scepticism about institutional trust. Hawley, for instance, has argued that institutions are not legitimate objects of reactive attitudes like betrayal, and that where we do talk of feeling betrayed by institutions, the attitude of betrayal is better understood as a feeling directed towards individuals whom we associate with the institution (Hawley, 2017, pp.243–246). Thus, on Hawley's account, we might rely on institutions and feel disappointed when they let us down, but betrayal, and with it trust, is not appropriate to institutions.

What about epistemic trust in institutions? Here, Hawley is sceptical too, though on different grounds. In section 2, we saw that philosophers have turned to epistemic trust to solve problems of testimonial knowledge. Another such problem is generated by the fact that speakers can choose what information they wish to convey with their testimony, which exposes listeners to lies and distortions. Having good reason to trust a speaker can, according to some, allow us to bypass this problem and take people at their word (Moran, 2006). But Hawley argues that the testimony of institutions, if there even is such a thing, does not operate with the same risk of dishonesty (Hawley, 2017, p.242). This is because, unlike the freely chosen words of human speakers, information provided by institutions is a product of "the functioning of internal mechanisms" (ibid.). Trust, on this account, performs no distinctive epistemological role in our relations with institutions.

Not all philosophers endorse scepticism about institutional trust. One way to resist the sceptic is to show that the trust/reliance distinction that has been central to the philosophy of interpersonal trust can, in fact, be applied to our attitudes to institutions. Pouryousefi and Tallant (2023) have argued, *pace* Hawley, that a trust/reliance distinction based on reactive attitudes can translate to institutions after all. They focus on anger, arguing that anger towards institutions is a legitimate example of a reactive attitude, and cite survey data that indicates widespread anger towards UK banks during the 2008 financial crisis (Pouryousefi and Tallant, 2023, p.455). Bennett (2023) has also argued against Hawley's scepticism but chooses a commitments account of the trust/reliance distinction over reactive attitudes. On Bennett's account, the difference between trust and reliance is that when we trust people, we depend on their capacity for practical rationality, specifically the way in which that capacity allows people to undertake commitments that ground our confidence that they will act favourably. Institutions, Bennett argues, also have that capacity to undertake commitments, and are thereby legitimate objects of trust.

Alternatively, we might accept that the ways we make the trust/reliance distinction interpersonally do not translate to institutions, and nonetheless argue that there is a distinctive attitude of trust that is appropriate to institutions and not reducible to other similar attitudes like relying or depending on institutions. Faulkner, for

instance, argues that a more promising approach to the concept of institutional trust is to understand it as two-place, that is, in terms of "trusting government" as opposed to "trusting government to X" (Faulkner, 2018). On Faulkner's account, we can legitimately talk about "generalised trust" in institutions like government, if by generalised trust we mean being optimistic that the institution will "do the right thing" (Faulkner, 2018, p.640).

4.   Do political trust measures align with philosophical theories?

There are options, then, for those who wish to defend the concept of institutional trust. But even for those philosophers who accept the legitimacy of the concept of institutional trust, questions remain about the empirical study of trust in institutions. Since the remit of this chapter is political trust, in this penultimate section, I will consider three obstacles to aligning the details of the philosophy of trust with concepts and measures used specifically in the study of political trust. (To keep matters contained, I will focus exclusively on survey methods.)

The first obstacle is that, as discussed in section 3, philosophers often prefer to analyse trust as a three-place relation, in which X entrusts Y with Z. Even regarding this basic structure of trust, it seems there is some divergence between philosophers and empirical social scientists. Many national panel studies generate political-trust data via relatively simple questions about the level of the respondent's trust or confidence in a political institution. Thus, for instance, the British Election Study asks "How much trust do you have in Members of Parliament in general?", and the German Longitudinal Election Study asks "Please state if you trust these institutions or not. [e.g.] The Bundestag?" (Devine and Valgarðsson, 2022, p.12). Such questions do not specify what the respondents trust the institutions to do; they ask simply whether respondents trust the institution *per se*.

This is not necessarily a shortcoming of such questions, and philosophers generally do not deny the legitimacy of a two-place concept of trust altogether. But focusing exclusively on two-place trust could mask variations in trust in institutions that depend on what we are trusting the institution to do. Perhaps, for instance, I trust the government with national security, but not with civil liberties. To know more about these variations in public trust, we would need to ask something else.

Luckily, there is already significant precedent for survey questions better suited to a three-place model of trust. A slightly more specific trust question appears in the American National Election Survey (ANES), which asks whether respondents think that the "government in Washington" can be trusted to "do what is right" (for discussion, see Norris, 2022, p.70). Moreover, the ANES supplements this with questions about whether the government wastes taxes, acts for the benefit of vested interests, and is "crooked" (ibid.). Together, these questions give us a more precise idea of what American respondents do or do not trust the federal government to do. Other studies

designed for more specific purposes can and have asked narrowly focused questions about trusting government institutions specifically with, for example, handling hazardous waste (Flynn et al., 1992). Thus, this first obstacle to aligning the philosophy of trust with political trust measures – that philosophers often prefer a three-place model of trust – might be easily overcome.

The second obstacle is generated by the level of detail we find in philosophical theories. As recounted in section 2, philosophers have argued for a variety of specifications of the attitude of trust. Theories include encapsulated interests, dependency responsiveness, and commitment-based theories. If we want to be very exacting about whether the attitude we measure really counts as trust, we might want to make sure that our survey items reflect the details of our preferred concept of trust. Thus, for example, if we prefer a dependency responsiveness account, we might want to ask survey respondents whether they think the government is likely to respond to their dependency (perhaps rewording the question to make it less jargonistic).

The problem is that more specific, philosophically informed questions could cause practical difficulties. One significant use of survey data on trust is to make cross-country comparisons. Another is to track longitudinal fluctuations. But data on political trust can only be reliable for these purposes if the surveys used in different countries or at different times use broadly similar questions. If philosophy drives us to be more specific in the questions we ask, then it could become more difficult to ensure comparability of questions and data across surveys internationally. If a panel study in, say, the UK were to adopt questions reflecting an encapsulated-interest concept of trust, then it is possible that the trust data generated by this study would no longer be comparable to data from other surveys. One might think there is an easy solution to this problem: every nation's panel study agrees to adopt the same philosophical theory of political trust. But this is at best highly impracticable, and at worst wholly implausible. There is no consensus on the best theory among philosophers; why expect any different among survey methodologists?

The third obstacle to the alignment of philosophy and political science of trust is generated by the scepticism about trust in institutions outlined in section 3. That scepticism doubts the viability of the very concept of trust in institutions, including political institutions. Debate about this scepticism continues, but as we saw in section 3, there are some philosophers who are confident in the concept of institutional trust and, by extension, political trust. However, another form of scepticism remains. For we might alternatively doubt not that political trust is conceptually viable, but rather that existing survey items accurately measure such trust. I will refer to such doubt as measurement scepticism.

Measurement scepticism is not the exclusive domain of philosophers. Empirical social scientists already worry, for instance, that existing survey questions might be too imprecise to tell us whether we are measuring trust in the institution of government or trust in the incumbent (see e.g. Marien, 2017, p.91). But there is a distinctive kind of measurement scepticism that is generated by the philosopher's obsession with

distinguishing trust from other similar-seeming attitudes. Sometimes the study of trust interchanges the terms trust, confidence, and support in politics (Norris, 2017, p.19). But philosophers insist that they are not the same thing. Thus, we might ask: when we measure "trust", do we really measure the distinctive attitude of trust?

We might worry that when we ask whether somebody trusts the government, their answer will likely reflect their level of support for the current government rather than their level of trust in the institution of government. Thankfully, there is some evidence to suggest that political trust data is not significantly affected by this problem. Devine and Valgarðsson (2022) find that individual political trust levels are remarkably stable over the course of an adult life, and although those trust levels are affected in the short term by changes of government, they return to the individual's normal level of trust after a few years. Were the relevant trust questions tracking support for incumbents rather than trust in government, we would expect to see much greater volatility around changes in government. And as Levi and Stoker note, though there is evidence that responses to the ANES trust questions are affected by respondents' opinions of the incumbent, this would not explain the long-term trends that have been observed through the ANES (Levi and Stoker, 2000, p.488).

Alternatively, we might doubt that trust measures successfully distinguish trust from confidence. This problem is analogous to the trust/reliance question. I can be confident that a rope will hold, or that a gambling addict will continue to spend money at my casino. Many philosophers would not count such confidence as trust. We might worry, then, that when we ask questions designed to track confidence in politics and political institutions, we are not really asking about trust, and it would be a mistake to take data generated by the former as data about trust.

If we take this worry seriously, then we have reason to prefer some trust measures over others. The Longitudinal Internet studies for the Social Sciences in the Netherlands, for example, asks "Can you indicate…how much confidence you personally have in each of the following institutions?". If we want to distinguish confidence data from trust data, it seems we might prefer other questions to this one. One approach is to generate data through questions that help us pick out the distinctive qualities of trust as opposed to confidence, support, or reliance. The ANES is a good place to start; its questions have a better claim to track a distinctive attitude of trust because they ask not just about confidence *per se* but about confidence in the integrity of government and the likelihood not just that it will be functional but that it will act in the interests of the public.

Nonetheless, many surveys that generate trust data are not so specific in their questions. Must we, then, jettison a significant proportion of the data that many researchers currently rely on to study political trust? Probably not. If philosophers' distinctions between trust and a range of similar attitudes (reliance, confidence, support, etc.) are not reflected in the empirical study of political trust, this could mean that those conducting such studies ought to refine their tools, but it could also mean that philosophers ought to rethink their theories. After all, it could be the case (and the editors of

this book tell me that *is* the case) that empirical study of trust in politics shows that there is no significant difference between the way the general public answers questions about trust and about confidence. If this is so, we could infer that while philosophers take such distinctions to be very important, they are not reflected in popular usage of the terms. Either way, and above all else, it is important that philosophers do not simply police the concepts of other disciplines, but work with those disciplines to carefully identify where measures ought to be improved, and how.

5.   Continuing the dialogue

I introduced the chapter by stating my hope of taking a small step towards normalising dialogue between philosophers of trust and empirical social scientists. I will end with a few brief observations about how that dialogue might continue. First, recall that one of the obstacles to aligning the philosophy of trust and empirical study of political trust was that the details of the former might not lend themselves well to measures used by the latter, particularly if we want to generate comparable data. Nonetheless, there could be value in exploring philosophically informed measures even if their data are not suitable for comparative research. One question in particular arises if we want to operationalise the philosophy of trust in empirical measures: do any of the great variety of philosophical accounts of trust lend themselves particularly well to the measurement of political trust?

A robust answer to this question must be interdisciplinary: social scientists can tell us what makes for a good measure; philosophers can tell us what makes for a good concept supporting the measure. The benefits of answering such a question can also be interdisciplinary. An answer to this question gives philosophers further insight into the relative merits and demerits of competing theories of trust. An answer to this question could give social scientists greater confidence in response to the measurement scepticism shared by both theorists and empirical researchers.

Another potential benefit to testing measures based on different philosophical theories is that, in doing so, we can discover whether or not these theories capture really existing differences in public attitudes towards politics. Do people reject the notion that state institutions operate with goodwill, yet still feel confident they will respond to our dependency? Are members of the public more confident that the state will act in the public interest than they are that the state will keep its commitments? If measures for these different concepts of trust show that these attitudes do in fact diverge not just in theory but in practice, then it could be that more specific trust measures will help us understand with greater precision why publics lose confidence in politics.

Finally, a broader question is whether the philosophical distinction between trust and reliance matters for the empirical study of political trust. As suggested above, the analogous distinction most relevant to the study of political trust is between trust and confidence. For a philosopher, trust in government and confidence in government are different concepts. But does that matter for empirical research? After all, the effects

on, for instance, political participation, wellbeing, and social trust would presumably remain the same regardless of the word we use to label the political attitude captured by existing trust measures.

One way to approach this topic with further research would be to investigate whether, as a philosopher might put it, the difference in intension between trust and confidence is reflected in a similar difference in extension. In other words, is it the case that wherever we find confidence in politics, we also find trust in politics? Or is it sometimes the case that we find one without the other? And if they do diverge, what does this tell us about the underlying causes of downward trends in support for political institutions? Such questions, I submit, are a good place to start for joint work between philosophers and social scientists of trust.

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7 Political trust in multi-level and global governance

Lisa Dellmuth

Do individuals trust multi-level and global governance institutions, and to the extent they do, why? In view of pressing transboundary policy challenges, we need a firm evidence base on political trust in the international organizations (IOs) governing the globe, such as the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Southern Common Market (Mercosur), United Nations (UN), and World Trade Organization (WTO). The main topic of this chapter is political trust in IOs.

These organizations are the core pillars of multi-level and global governance and are central to promoting cooperation on the big policy challenges of our time. Consider climate change, health pandemics, food insecurity, violent conflict, and more. To aid in this endeavor, IOs have been delegated increasing authority in recent decades. They exert political influence through a variety of mechanisms, such as norm diffusion, social shaming, policy change, peace diplomacy, and economic coercion (Barnett, Pevehouse and Raustiala, 2021). In this rules-based global system, IOs have a frontline role in helping states make the world more sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous.

As IOs have weak capacities to enforce norms and rules, the acceptance of and compliance with international norms and rules among populations tends to depend on their political trust. Political trust fosters a sense of belonging to any political institution and makes it more likely that individuals internalize and comply with the norms an institution promotes (Marien and Hooghe, 2011). This is particularly important for IOs, which cannot coerce actors into compliance (Hurd, 1999) and have been increasingly contested in recent decades, both by constructive forces pushing for a more equal and fair world order, and by nationalist populists seeking to undermine multilateral cooperation (Walter, 2021). When individuals distrust IOs, they may disengage and even favor that their states withdraw from IOs entirely. We have witnessed such dynamics during the Brexit vote in the UK, for instance, which has led the country to leave the European Union (Hobolt, 2016). For IOs to be effective and viable, they require political trust.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses how political trust is commonly conceptualized, measured, and studied in relation to IOs. The

section outlines central findings about political trust in IOs, pertaining to the patterns of political trust and the individual- and contextual-level determinants of variation in political trust in IOs. Central themes are the transposition of political trust from national to multi-level and global governance, and the challenges faced by the global system, including shifting global distributions of power, authoritarian diffusion, and the contestation of IOs among elites and mass publics.

The second section pursues the core purpose of the chapter, namely, identifying avenues for future research. It provides an assessment of how greater cross-fertilization between the literatures on political trust and International Relations (IR) can be achieved. This assessment is formulated in four research strategies. The first strategy is to draw more on the insights from theories of political trust to study the determinants of political trust in IOs. The second is to marry insights from both areas of research on the role of the ongoing wave of authoritarian diffusion to study the effects of political system features on political trust in IOs. The third strategy suggests incorporating the study of technological change and new media outlets more firmly into the study of IO trust. The fourth strategy suggests an extension of the object of study of political trust beyond IOs to newer forms of multi-level and global governance, such as trans-governmental networks, informal institutions, and private or hybrid governance arrangements.

The third, concluding section summarizes the chapter's message in three key points. First, political trust and IR theories could be more extensively combined to study political trust in multi-level and global governance. Second, more systematic inquiries are needed to explain how ongoing processes of authoritarian diffusion and technological change shape political trust in IOs. Third, we need more theorization and empirical study of political trust formation in the context of informal, private, trans-governmental, or public–private cooperation beyond the multilateral system. Ultimately, a better understanding of political trust in multi-level and global governance can contribute to a robust knowledge base for how contemporary societies can solve joint problems in the future.

Studying political trust in international organizations

Multi-level governance is on the rise. Governments around the world have delegated significant portions of authority to subnational and global and regional organizations for a wide range of functions (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019a; Zürn, Tokhi and Binder, 2021). There are two main types of multi-level governance: Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 denotes a system of multi-level governance that is well developed at a limited number of levels and governed by a general-purpose organization. Examples are the polity of the EU or systems of cooperative federalism. Type 2 is rather emerging and fragmented, consisting of many task-specific institutions with overlapping memberships. Cases in point are global governance or systems of decentralized federalism (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019a; Zürn, 2020).

This chapter leaves political trust in subnational authority aside and hones in on the study of political trust in EU and global governance. Global governance refers to the system of organizations, processes, and structures at global and regional levels that develop and implement rules and norms for the management of collective problems (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2014). At the core of this system are the major IOs established in the post-1945 period, which include the EU, UN, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Bretton Woods organizations. Based on this postwar system, a multilateral system of about 534 global organizations has developed (Pevehouse et al., 2020), of which about 35 are major regional organizations (Lenz, 2021). Since the end of the Cold War, global governance has become more complex mainly due to a rapid increase in informal, private, and hybrid governance arrangements (Barnett, Pevehouse and Raustiala, 2021).

Conceptualizing political trust and legitimacy at the global level

Increased authority at the European and global levels brings questions about political trust to the fore. As elaborated above, IOs usually cannot rely on fear or coercion to enforce norms and rules, and so depend upon public trust to foster a willingness to accept and internalize IOs' authority (Hurd, 1999). This reasoning mirrors assessments from national political institutions, for which political trust is similarly vital (Zmerli, 2014). In relation to European and global governance, this issue has mainly been talked about in terms of IO legitimacy.

Drawing from the study of legitimacy at the national level (Weber, 1922/1978; Tyler, 2006), legitimacy has been defined in a variety of ways. It can be understood as public acceptance of an organization's authority or the belief that an institution ought to be obeyed for motives other than fear or material self-interest (Hurd, 1999). From this perspective, people abide by the rules of an institution even if it were to make decisions that go against their self-interest (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006). Alternative definitions exclude the notion of acceptance and other concepts of behavior, defining legitimacy as the perception of appropriately exercised authority (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019). Such studies usually invoke the distinction between the study of 'sociological legitimacy,' which is interested in public beliefs and which is in focus in this chapter, and 'normative legitimacy,' which develops the principles underpinning IOs' right to rule based on philosophical reasoning (Dellmuth et al., 2022).

There is a burgeoning and by now quite substantial literature on IO legitimacy beliefs, which draws from and speaks to political trust research. In IR, political confidence has often been used to measure IO legitimacy, both in relation to elite and mass attitudes (e.g., Johnson, 2011; Persson, Parker and Widmalm, 2019; Voeten, 2013; Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021; Scholte, Verhaegen and Tallberg, 2021; Dellmuth et al., 2022). Others have argued that legitimacy is a multidimensional belief system (Bernauer and Gampfer, 2013; Dellmuth and Schlipphak, 2020).

Political trust, as defined in this book, refers to people's basic evaluative and affective orientation to the institutions and actors governing their polity (Citrin and Stoker, 2018), where trust reflects the belief that the actor would produce preferred outcomes

(Easton, 1975). This definition overlaps with the notion of legitimacy but is not synonymous (Thomassen, Andeweg and Van Ham, 2017). While legitimacy perceptions are commonly assumed to be grounded in moral convictions, independent of short-term satisfaction with outcomes (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006; Hurd, 2007: 30; Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2024), political trust can be based both on moral considerations and utilitarian evaluations of outcomes. When citizens base their beliefs on moral convictions, they accept the rules and requirements of political institutions when they are seen as conformant to their 'own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere' (Easton, 1975: 451; Suchman, 1995: 574; Steffek, 2023). In contrast, when people's legitimacy beliefs include self-interest, institutions are judged on the basis of whether they yield a specific payoff, which tends to be a function of the performance of an institution (Dalton, 1999; Dellmuth and Schlipphak, 2020).

There is a large and still increasing literature on political trust in and public support for the EU, which likewise is a positive orientation that can be based on self-interest (see Hobolt and De Vries, 2016, for an overview). Moving beyond the distinction between moral and self-interested considerations when forming political trust, this literature has emphasized the affective component of political support (Dalton, 1999; see also Citrin and Stoker, 2018). From this vantage point, attitudes toward IOs can reflect affective polarization in terms of stereotyping and out-group prejudice (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2021).

Patterns of global political trust and legitimacy

Political trust varies chiefly across organizations, across geographies, and over time. At the organizational level, there is evidence from the years 2017 to 2019 that IOs with profiles in human security tend to enjoy more political confidence than IOs with mandates in economic governance, both among elites and mass publics. This is found among both elites – that is, people who hold leading positions in society that strive to be politically influential (Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021) – and mass publics in relation to three economic IOs (International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, WTO) and three human security IOs (International Criminal Court (ICC), UN, World Health Organization (WHO)) (Dellmuth et al., 2022: chs. 3 and 7). There might be a similar mechanism at play when people evaluate judiciary and police institutions at the national level, which provide security rather than resource distribution, and which tend to enjoy higher levels of trust than government (e.g., Böhringer and Boucher, 2024).

The EU, which has exceptionally high authority and an elected legislative body, has been less trusted among the general public in its member states than general-purpose IOs, such as the AU, Mercosur, and the UN, in their respective member states during the years 2007 to 2013. The comparatively low levels of trust in the EU can in part be explained by economic insecurity following the years after the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, which many have blamed the EU for (Talving and Vasilopoulou, 2021). Generally, regional integration in the EU has brought about economic winners and losers, which people blame the EU for, rather than individual politicians or decision-makers (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). Economic dissatisfaction has also brought about

an increasing vote share of right-wing populist parties in the European Parliament, which has risen 'from a low of 1 percent in 1982 to a historic high of 12.3 percent in 2016' (Broz, Frieden and Weymouth, 2021: 470). Cultural factors also matter for this development, as people are increasingly skeptical toward immigration and globalization, and distrust IOs (e.g., McLaren, 2012; Inglehart and Norris, 2017).

With regard to geography, the distinction between creditor and debtor countries has proven useful in the EU. Considering the years between 2004 and 2016, political trust in the EU fluctuates most among debtor countries, while trust is relatively stable among creditor countries (Foster and Frieden, 2017). Outside the EU, the patterns are more variegated. One source of geographical variation is 'guilt-by-association,' whereby unfavorable perceptions among elites and mass publics about the influence of a particular state in an IO can undermine their trust in that IO. This is found particularly in Russia and Japan in respect of US influence in the IMF, UN, and World Bank (Johnson, 2011). Moreover, evidence suggests that elites and broader populations in Brazil and Russia trust the IMF less than in countries with different historical experiences with the organization (Dellmuth et al., 2022).

A more recent but swiftly increasing literature has revealed that political trust also varies across subnational areas. This literature uses mainly data on EU support and trust to show weaker trust in the EU in poorer subnational areas (Ejrnæs et al., 2023) and areas suffering from long-term economic decline (Lipps and Schraff, 2021). However, such patterns vary considerably over time (Mayne and Katsanidou, 2023). By contrast, global-scale analysis using World Values Survey data from 2017 to 2022 suggests that political trust in six major supranational organizations is higher in poorer areas when compared to richer areas. This pattern is observed only on the basis of democracies in the global sample (Dellmuth, 2024).

On average, political trust also varies systematically over time. There is increasing distrust in IOs and populist nationalism (Foster and Frieden, 2017; Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019b). While these dynamics underpin the ongoing backlash against globalization, it is important to note that when looking at political trust in isolation, we rather see that political trust in IOs fluctuates in the short and medium term, without showing a consistent pattern of long-term decline (Walter, 2021; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023). These aggregate patterns of trust in IOs are in line with evidence on the stability of political trust from individual-level panel data, which suggests that political trust is a quite stable predisposition but fluctuates somewhat over the life course (Devine and Valgarðsson, 2024).

Causes of global political trust and legitimacy

The main debate hinges upon the individual and contextual determinants of political trust in IOs. It has featured five categories of individual-level determinants: domestic political trust; socio-economic status; social identification; political ideology; and cue taking. Moreover, there is evidence that contextual factors, mainly the procedures and performances of IOs, shape political trust and related attitudes. The key findings across the support, trust, and legitimacy literatures are briefly synthesized here, as

encompassing reviews have been provided (Hobolt and De Vries, 2016; Walter, 2021; De Vries, 2022; Steffek, 2023; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2026), though not with a focus on all three indicators in relation to IOs at the same time.

Key to understanding the variation in political trust in IOs is the extrapolation of political trust from the national to European and global levels. Domestic political trust is typically used as a benchmark in the formation of attitudes toward the EU (e.g., De Vries, 2018; Lipps and Schraff, 2021) or as a heuristic when evaluating the EU (e.g., Harteveld, van der Meer and De Vries, 2013; Armingeon and Ceka, 2014). This transposition of political trust from domestic to global levels can also be observed in relation to other IOs, both among elites (Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021; Dellmuth et al., 2022) and mass publics (Johnson, 2011; Voeten, 2013).

There is also much evidence for an effect of socio-economic status on IO trust. The mechanism driving the effect of socio-economic status on trust in IOs is perceived economic utility. As people evaluate IOs based on cost–benefit assessments, those who perceive their country or themselves to benefit from IOs may trust IOs more, while those who perceive their country or themselves to be on the losing side may trust IOs less (Dellmuth et al., 2022: ch. 6). Evidence for an effect of socio-economic status on political trust in IOs is found both in mass publics (e.g., Gabel, 1998; Edwards, 2009; Braun and Tausendpfund, 2014) and elite samples (e.g., Bauer, 2012; Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021; Tallberg and Verhaegen, 2020).

The evidence for the other three main determinants is patchier. Political trust is varyingly related to social identification with social groups across borders, and the importance of social identification depends on the time period studied (e.g., Carey, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2004). Political trust and political ideology are linked, but the direction and significance of the relationship vary across countries (Dellmuth et al., 2022) and over time (Van Elsas and Van der Brug, 2015). Political ideology appears to be particularly important for internationalist attitudes in the context of polarized public opinion, such as in the US (Brutger and Clark, 2023).

Moreover, cue taking can be effective, but experimental evidence suggests that this depends on the IO in question, the credibility of the sender, the political polarization of the context (e.g., De Vries, 2018; Ghassim, 2022; Brutger and Clark, 2023; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023), and the domestic communication environment (e.g., Schuck and de Vreese, 2006; Brosius, Van Elsas and de Vreese, 2018). Cueing effects also depend on whether people perceive their home nation to benefit or lose from the governance of the IO (e.g., Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi and Cabrera, 2022; Schlipphak, Meiners and Kiratli, 2022).

Finally, the institutional features of IOs themselves matter for individual-level beliefs. Most notably, IO trust is shaped by the procedures and performances of IOs, both among elites (e.g., Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021; Jongen and Scholte, 2022; Panke, Polat and Hohlstein, 2022) and among mass publics (e.g., Anderson, Bernauer and Kachi, 2018; Bernauer, Mohrenberg and Koubi, 2020; Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi

and Cabrera, 2022). More recent accounts have found that the role of an IO's social purpose (Lenz and Viola, 2017) and authority (Schlipphak, 2021) matters for legitimacy beliefs vis-à-vis IOs, but evidence is still sparse.

Avenues for future research on political trust in international organizations

This section suggests four research strategies to advance knowledge on the patterns, causes, and consequences of political trust in multi-level and global governance.

The first strategy is to draw more on the literature on political trust to study political trust in IOs. The review in the previous section suggests that the EU literature has made some headway in studying political trust in various European political organizations, such as the European Parliament and the EU as a whole. However, many theories of political trust have not yet been applied to or further developed in the study of IOs other than the EU. Given that global governance is a looser, more complex, and less well-known governance system than the EU and the national context, and one that is becoming increasingly publicly contested (Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Zürn, 2020), this opens up for novel theorizing. Four main areas of future research are highlighted.

- The complexity of the EU makes it more difficult for people to hold decision-makers accountable, implying that dissatisfied people often blame the EU as a whole (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). We can expect a similar dynamic in the context of IOs, but scholars have yet to systematically examine when and why individuals correctly attribute blame or reward IOs for good performance, with consequences for IO trust.
- Despite increasing public contestation of IOs (Walter, 2021), global governance is communicated about less when compared to communication about domestic politics. There is room for more research on how far theories about elite cues and political trust formation hold in the context of IOs. As IOs are more diverse than national governments in terms of aims, governance, and structure, this complexity might be used strategically by elites and affect the effects of their cues on political trust in IOs.
- Multi-level and global governance issues are nowadays being talked about at the domestic level and increasingly being linked to domestic political issues (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023). Future research could usefully expand the study of how the changing interlinkages between domestic and global political issues, as well as their framings, affect trust formation in both domestic political institutions and IOs.

The second strategy concerns the systematic study of the role of authoritarian diffusion and technological change for political trust in IOs. In the ongoing wave of autocratization, governments holding authoritarian values are hollowing out democratic structures to seize long-term power. Authoritarian and populist parties are fueling

the backlash against globalization (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019b). These issues could be studied as follows:

- Democracy fosters the ability of individuals to get information about IOs in a free communication environment, which enables them to base their political trust on correct information (Norris, 2022). Understanding authoritarian diffusion and the implications for how informed people are when developing IO trust is thus an important research agenda for the future. In authoritarian countries, governments are more likely to control the information environment than in democracies. Future studies could examine the effects of political systems on IO trust with global data.
- Autocracies and democracies differ in how far they delegate authority to and engage with IOs (Poast and Urpelainen, 2013). With the risk of oversimplifying, autocratic governments tend to pursue resources to secure their own power, while democracies are more prone to seeking cooperation for joint problem-solving. It has rarely been studied whether, how, and why governments' engagement with IOs affects elites' and mass publics' political trust in IOs.

The third strategy implies linking the study of political trust in IOs to technological change. Artificial intelligence, digitalization, and the rise of new media are all phenomena that might affect IO trust. In particular, changes in information technology present challenges for individuals to gather correct and unbiased information about IOs to form trust independently.

- On online platforms and social media, the general public is nowadays confronted with a broader range of peer-to-peer communication, which many people are exposed to more than to news from traditional news media or political communication (Messing and Westwood, 2014). This new type of communication about politics can affect people's political perceptions and attitudes (Lewandowsky et al., 2019). Future studies could focus on different media outlets and the type of communication people engage in, as these choices or practices may contribute to shaping trust in IOs.
- Artificial intelligence affects how people are exposed to the content and intensity of political messages. Algorithms, which on some media platforms adapt to previous user behavior to customize content, can structure the information exposed to (Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2025) and the ways in which people engage with the information (Nanz and Matthes, 2022). The role of such new technologies, through mechanisms such as machine learning, in shaping political trust in IOs, is largely unknown.

The fourth strategy implies an extension of the object of study of political trust beyond IOs to newer forms of multi-level and global governance. As described earlier, the past three decades have seen an increase in governance arrangements based on informality, market solutions, and public–private sector cooperation as a complement to classic multilateral cooperation (Barnett, Pevehouse and Raustiala, 2021). Such modes of

governance nowadays enjoy authority, raising the question of how trusted they are (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2026).

- Informal governance arrangements, such as the G20 or the Shanghai Five, might be less politicized and raise fewer sovereignty concerns, given that they tend to have less authority than traditional multilateral organizations (Vabulas and Snidal, 2021). However, when trust in multilateral cooperation within IOs decreases, then elites may place hopes in informal governance instead, with implications for the democratic quality of global governance. The consequences of IO trust for political trust in informal governance are thus an important topic for future research.
- Private governance initiatives and public–private partnerships are often publicly visible through their activities, labels, and standards. Consider the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Renewable Energy Policy Network for the 21st Century (REN21). Such organizations are largely removed from state oversight, which has raised scholarly interest in their legitimacy (e.g., Nasiritousi and Verhaegen, 2020; Koliev and Bäckstrand, 2024). Yet, evidence about political trust and legitimacy in such initiatives is sparse and limited to elite samples.
- Moreover, private authority raises the question of how this exercise of authority affects the legitimacy of state interventions in markets, something that has rarely been studied (Amengual and Bartley, 2022). Future research could usefully study the consequences of the legitimacy of private governance institutions and companies themselves for political trust in government and in IOs. More broadly, we need to better understand how trust in private governance and trust in IOs are related.

Conclusions

This chapter has made three main points. First, political trust and IR theories have been combined to advance knowledge on political trust in IOs, but there remains much room for improvement. The study of political trust in the EU has made some headway, but theories of political trust at the national level have mostly not yet been extended to IOs. The complexity of global governance with respect to its aims, institutions, and structures opens up for novel theorization of the patterns and sources of political trust in both formal and informal IOs.

Second, some of the most profound changes of our times pertain to authoritarian diffusion and technological change. Both have affected domestic and global information environments and the availability of information about IOs, albeit in different ways. IOs themselves have adapted and professionalized their communication strategies and made efforts to self-legitimize (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2020). However, it remains an important question for future research as to how authoritarian diffusion and technological change, both combined and in isolation, influence political trust in IOs.

Third and finally, IOs enjoy moderate levels of political trust and legitimacy among both elites and greater publics, and there is a significant elite–citizen gap in IO

legitimacy (Dellmuth et al., 2022). It is unclear if this conclusion also applies to newer forms of governance, such as informal, private, or hybrid governance arrangements. Newer forms of global governance organizations are here to stay, complementing yet often challenging classic multilateral cooperation. How, when, and why they are trusted by elites and mass publics is largely unknown. Relatedly, scholars have yet to systematically study how and why trust in new governance arrangements may be related to political trust in IOs.

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8

Ethnicity and political trust: a critical assessment and future directions

Cary Wu, Kriti Sharma and Rima Wilkes

How ethnicity and political trust are related remains an open question. In this chapter, we seek to provide key recommendations on future directions in conceptualizing, theorizing, and empirically investigating the relationship between ethnicity and political trust. We start by describing several distinct approaches to ethnicity and political trust, largely corresponding to how "ethnicity" is operationalized. Most studies have focused on comparing and explaining variations in the level of political trust within the different categories of ethnicity, such as race, nationality, immigrant status, religion, and language (for a review, see Wilkes and Wu 2018a). Currently, there is a mismatch between theoretical expectations and empirical patterns within the current literature on ethnicity and political trust. In particular, explanations rooted in the general theories of political trust are mostly pattern-driven. In other words, scholars have developed post-hoc arguments or explanations for ethnic disparities in political trust, or the absence thereof, based on the empirical patterns shown in their data. Such explanations offer a limited understanding of why political trust is not always lower among racial and ethnic minorities.

Existing literature also suffers from several major limitations including (1) the prevalence of a binary approach: current studies have primarily concentrated on between-group comparisons, particularly between binary categories such as White–Black, native–immigrant, and majority–minority groups; (2) excessive reliance on the White reference: in comparing differences in the level of political trust between racial and ethnic categories, scholars have commonly treated "Whites," "Natives," or "the majority group" as the reference group; (3) dominance of the Western perspective: the large literature on ethnicity and political trust developed over the past few decades has a dominant focus on North American and European contexts, and (4) over-reliance on a quantitative methodological approach: most studies that consider the ethnicity and political trust association have taken a quantitative approach, using data from cross-sectional surveys in particular.

In the final section, we outline future directions for advancing the study of the relationship between ethnicity and political trust, including directions in how we approach the association conceptually, how we explain it theoretically, and how we

test it empirically. Conceptually, we suggest future research needs to capture the multidimensional aspects of the relationship, considering not only between-group variations, but also within-ethnicity and within-institutional variations. Theoretically, current studies often rely on pattern-driven explanations, where theories are constructed primarily to fit empirical findings. We suggest the need for ethnicity-specific theorizing to understand how different racial and ethnic groups trust or distrust political institutions for distinct reasons. However, this does not preclude the possibility of a unified framework that integrates these specificities. Such a framework could accommodate the unique historical, cultural, and structural contexts shaping trust dynamics across groups, allowing for both group-specific contingencies and a cohesive theoretical structure. Methodologically, there is a need to extend dominant survey research to include experimental designs and big data analysis. Additionally, qualitative and interpretive approaches, as well as historical and comparative analysis, may better capture lived experiences and contextual dynamics that shape trust within and across racial and ethnic groups. Future research would also benefit from incorporating non-Western contexts for both theoretical and empirical explorations of the relationship between ethnicity and political trust. These proposed directions are closely connected. Together, they contribute to a more cohesive and integrated approach to understanding the complexities of ethnicity and political trust.

Ethnicity and political trust patterns

Ethnicity refers to a homogeneous group identity characterized by a shared belief in common ancestry and cultural heritage (Weber 2006; Kastoryano and Schader 2014). Empirically, the concept has been operationalized in diverse ways, including race, nationality, citizenship, religion, language, and immigration status. As a result, research exploring the relationship between ethnicity and political trust has branched out into many different lines of inquiry. This section outlines three major approaches to ethnicity and political trust: race; national origin/immigrant status; and majority–minority status. We discuss how studies comparing political trust across ethnic groups reveal inconsistent patterns within each approach.

Ethnicity as race: This approach is taken mostly by scholars in North America, where race has historically been a central organizing feature of politics and society. Scholars have particularly focused on comparing the gap in political trust between Black and White people in the U.S. (e.g., Miller 1974; Wilkes 2015), with only a few studies that incorporate other racial categories such as Asians, Hispanics, and Indigenous populations (e.g., Koch 2019). The reported Black–White gap in political trust has varied across studies and over time, reflecting the complexity of this relationship (Howell and Fagan 1988; Bobo and Gilliam 1990; see also Wilkes and Wu 2018a; Wu et al. 2022). For example, Aberbach and Walker (1970) analyzed data from Detroit, a city which experienced major civil disturbances in 1943 and 1967, and found significant political disaffection among Black individuals leading to their lower trust. Around the same time, Miller (1974) presented one of the first longitudinal analyses of political trust using the American National Election Studies data spanning from 1964 to 1970. He found that

Black respondents demonstrated more trust in the government than Whites prior to 1968, with a sharp reversal occurring after 1968. Studies find that Latinos in the U.S. tend to be more trusting of government than other racial/ethnic groups, including White Americans (Michelson 2001; 2003). Abrajano and Alvarez (2010) have a similar finding for Latinos more broadly. Among those studies that include Asian and Native Americans, both groups show comparable levels of trust to White Americans, but higher than Black Americans (Koch 2019). Data from the American National Election Studies show that the gap in trust between racial and ethnic minorities and Whites has varied not only in size but also in direction (Wu et al. 2022).

Ethnicity as national origin (immigrant status): A second approach conceptualizes ethnicity as an individual's national origin, which refers to the ethnic or cultural origins of the person's ancestors. This approach is most common in studies of immigrants and political trust, comparing trust differences in the native-born population and immigrants from different national origins. For instance, Fennema and Tillie (1999) in their study of political trust focus on four major ethnic communities—Antillean, Surinamese, Turkish, and Moroccan—that came to the Netherlands in different waves of immigration, showing, as compared to Dutch locals, that trust is lower among Turks, but higher among other groups. Indeed, similar to the race-based approach, conclusions regarding the immigrant–native gap in political trust are also mixed. Many studies show that immigrants tend to be either more or equally trusting compared to natives (Röder and Mühlau 2012; de Vroome et al. 2013; Hwang 2017). However, some studies have found that native- and foreign-born people do not differ in their levels of political trust. Soroka et al. (2007) and André (2014) found little difference in overall levels of political trust among immigrants and natives in Canada and Europe, respectively. McLaren (2015) shows that political trust reflects how immigrants see themselves in terms of their national identity and how the country treats and incorporates immigrants. Trust is higher among individuals who show a more inclusive identity, such as highlighting the importance of voting and associational life and in countries where there are more welcoming immigrant incorporation policies. The immigrant–native gap in political trust also changes depending on when and for how long immigrants have lived in the host country (Michelson 2001; 2003; Wals and Rudolph 2019).

Ethnicity as majority–minority status: A third approach is where scholars have researched ethnicity and political trust association in a majority–minority framework (e.g., Wilkes and Wu 2018b). This approach differentiates ethnic majority and minority groups using various criteria, including numerical representation (religious minorities), power imbalance (the dominant-oppressed groups), or the subjective perceptions of minority and majority status among individuals within a society (e.g., individuals self-report whether they feel part of the same race or ethnic group as most people in the country). Under this approach, the majority group is often the powerful group. However, using categories like race, religion, or language to identify majority and minority groups complicates cross-context comparisons of political trust. For instance, in Bangladesh, Hindus are the religious minority and Muslims the religious majority, while in the Indian state of West Bengal, the roles are reversed (Gupta et al.

2018). This variation in majority–minority status underscores how political trust can be influenced by the power dynamics and social structures specific to each context. The majority–minority gap in trust can vary based not only on how the majority and minority status are defined but also on the sociopolitical settings. For example, in Canada, while non-White Canadians generally exhibit higher political trust (Grabb et al. 2009), Indigenous populations tend to have lower trust in political institutions (Hwang 2017; Taiaiake et al. 2009). Within religious groups in Germany and the U.K., Muslim minorities are found to be more politically trusting than non-Muslims (Doerschler and Jackson 2012; Maxwell 2010).

Explaining the ethnicity and political trust association

Two established theories offer distinct explanations for the origins of political trust (for a review, see e.g., Mishler and Rose 2005; Citrin and Stoker 2018). An experiential perspective suggests that an individual's trust in political institutions reflects how they perceive and evaluate the performance of political organizations, and people's contemporary interactions with public institutions and officials (e.g., Mishler and Rose 2001; Stoyan et al. 2016). A cultural theory suggests that trust in political institutions originates in deeply rooted and long-standing cultural norms, which are transmitted through early-life socialization and are deeply embedded in society (e.g., Putnam 2000; Inglehart and Welzel 2018).

Scholars have largely followed these two general theories of political trust to explain ethnicity and political trust patterns. However, existing explanations are often pattern-driven. Arguments are developed based on the patterns found in comparing the political trust differences between ethnic majorities and minorities, or between immigrants and natives. Table 8.1 provides an overview of existing explanations.

Following the cultural perspective, scholars of ethnicity and political trust have attributed racial and ethnic differences in political trust to differences in cultural norms, shared values and identities. When political trust is found to be lower among racial and ethnic minorities or immigrants, scholars of the cultural theory have argued that low trust among minority groups stems from historically discriminatory practices and the scars of colonialism that form their widespread perceptions about the prevalence of systemic racism. Such discrimination includes the denial of equal access to resources, power, and protection (Aberbach and Walker 1970; Wilkes 2015; Hwang 2017). Other scholars have also pointed to the political socialization among racial and ethnic minorities. The argument is that racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants from non-democratic countries tend to be less politically active. Their lower political participation and social engagement, lower trust in others, and lower ties with others lead to their lower trust in political institutions (Fennema and Tillie 1999). For immigrants, their acculturation and increasing awareness of inequality and the practice of discrimination lead to their lower trust (Wals and Rudolph 2019). Michelson (2003: 922) notes that, as Mexican Americans acculturate, their identity "is transformed

Table 8.1   Summary of pattern-driven explanations of ethnicity and political trust association

Theory	When trust is found to be lower among minorities/immigrants	When trust is found to be higher among minorities/immigrants or no difference
Cultural theory	(1) Widespread discontent with the political system due to the historical and ongoing exploitation and the scars of colonialism (2) Minorities/immigrants came from less democratic countries (lower civic engagement and lower trust in others) (3) Acculturation and awareness of inequality and the practice of discrimination	(1) Conservative values and lower expectations (2) Minorities/immigrants came from less democratic countries (the reference category, and the honeymoon period for recent immigrants) (3) Optimism, "over-confidence"; A more diffuse orientation toward the political system
Experiential theory	(1) Experiences of struggles and hardships, and perception that their interests are not being served by the government (2) Unfair treatment and negative interactions with the political system	(1) Changes in political realities, greater descriptive representation, and empowerment, sense of political hope (2) Exposure to host country institutions, and welcoming immigration policies

Notes: Empirical patterns (Political trust differences between ethnic majorities and minorities, or between natives and immigrants).

from an immigrant looking forward to membership in the dominant society into that of a member of a minority group that is denied the full benefits of that membership."

When political trust is found to be higher among racial and ethnic minorities, and among immigrants in particular, scholars of cultural theory point to the political culture of their country of origin as well as individuals' worldviews and outlooks. For example, Wals and Rudolph (2019) argue that immigrants' political trust in the new host nation is shaped by their premigratory exposure to democracy during preadult socialization in their countries of origin. More specifically, they find that immigrants who were socialized under authoritarian systems were politically more trusting than those who were socialized in more democratic regimes. More recent immigrants coming from other countries are more likely to have a positive view and hence higher trust in the government in the host country (Grabb et al. 2009; Hwang 2017). In Canada, Bilodeau and Nevitte (2003) find that immigrants from non-democratic countries are more satisfied with the performance of Canadian institutions, and these more positive evaluations lead them to have greater confidence in the political institutions. Their higher levels of confidence compared to people born in Canada remain even after taking into consideration their evaluations of institutional performance. Röder and Mühlau (2012) suggest that immigrants' "over-confidence" stems largely from their lower expectations, shaped by the institutional performance of their home countries,

which differs significantly from that of their host country, thereby emphasizing the pivotal role of expectations in determining trust levels. They suggest that immigrants' higher trust levels and weakened frame of reference effect are partially attributed to conservative values prevalent among immigrants from politically unstable countries, prioritizing stability and conformity.

Following the experiential perspective, racial and ethnic differences in political trust are attributed to differences in experiences of struggles and hardships due to socio-economic inequalities and political realities, and perceptions of the extent to which the government serves the interests of different racial groups or caters to their political needs. In this view, the presence of a relationship between ethnicity and political trust indicates that the political system is less responsive and less accessible to members of particular groups, or, at the very least, that particular groups perceive the political system as less responsive and accessible (Wilkes 2015). The theory highlights the role of socioeconomic factors—education, income—as well as everyday experiences of discrimination. When trust is found to be lower among racial and ethnic minorities, the underlying assumption is that because racial and ethnic minorities often have lower socioeconomic status and therefore suffer more frequently from the associated hardships, they may perceive their interests as not being served by the government, making them less likely to trust.

The everyday experience of unfair treatment is another common explanation. For example, Wu and Cao (2018) find that Americans who have a stronger sense of being discriminated against have reduced confidence in the police, and that both African and Latino Americans reported significantly lower levels of confidence compared to White Americans due to their higher perceptions of discrimination. Focusing on comparing the political trust of immigrants and natives, de Vroome et al. (2013) suggest that the initially observed differences can almost be fully attributed to differences in economic position and social resources. They conclude that native–immigrant differences in political trust are most clearly associated with the economic and social integration of immigrants in the host society.

When trust is found to be higher, scholars have pointed to changes in political situations, such as the implementation of racially just policies and the election of racially representative officials, that will also help increase the legitimacy of governmental institutions among racial minorities. For example, many have argued that greater descriptive representation of racial and ethnic minorities often renders their higher political empowerment and therefore leads to higher trust among racial and ethnic minorities (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Emig et al. 1996; Wu 2008). When comparing Black residents living in cities with a Black mayor to those with a White mayor, Rahn and Rudolph (2005) found that the former tend to exhibit a higher level of trust in local government. These findings not only confirm the general trend of lower trust among Black compared to White respondents but also indicate that the extent of this racial disparity in political trust is influenced by the presence of political representation.

Scholars have made the argument that racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants in particular, may be less critical and less aware of social and political inequalities. Their higher satisfaction with government performance leads to their higher political trust. Among Muslims in the U.K., Maxwell (2010) finds that the strongest predictors of political trust are satisfaction with government performance and political efficacy. Superti and Gidron (2022) suggest that immigrants use their home country as a point of reference when interacting with host country institutions, and those from less democratic home nations tend to accumulate positive political trust, while those from more democratic nations accumulate negative trust. This is especially true among immigrants who migrated at an older age because they are "too old to forget the historical and contextual features of the country-of-origin institutions at the time of migration" (Superti and Gidron 2022: 624). Other experiences, such as perceptions of discrimination and expressions of pro-immigrant support, also influence non-Western immigrants' political trust (Tyrberg 2024; Simon 2024).

A critical assessment

While research on ethnicity and political trust has made significant strides in illuminating the complex interplay between trust dynamics and ethnic identity, it suffers from several theoretical and methodological caveats. We outline four major limitations. These include a binary approach, the White reference, a Western perspective, and a purely quantitative methodological approach.

A binary approach: Current research on ethnicity and political trust has focused on comparing differences in political trust between racial and ethnic categories. In particular, scholars have frequently framed trust levels within the context of rigid binaries, such as Black–White, Latino–Non-Latino, and immigrant–native. Rigid binaries are problematic in many ways. Such an approach not only excludes many diverse racial and ethnic categories but also overlooks variations within racial and ethnic categories. For example, the dominant focus on the Black–White dichotomy in the context of the United States often leaves out other racial groups such as Asians, Hispanics, and Indigenous Americans. The binary approach also tends to lump together marginalized or racialized groups under the general category of non-White, visible minorities, or immigrants. This approach can be inherently flawed. For instance, in Canada, visible minorities are very heterogeneous, containing groups including Chinese, South Asian, and Black. Lumping these groups together can lead to a canceling effect. That is, when some minority groups demonstrate higher levels of trust, while others exhibit lower levels, the combined effect may lead to an average trust level among diverse racial minority groups that doesn't accurately represent any specific group. The same goes for the majority group.

The White reference: Furthermore, in comparing differences in the level of political trust between racial and ethnic categories, scholars have commonly treated "Whites," "Natives," or "the majority group" as the reference group. In the North American context, studies frequently use White trust as the default reference category against

which trust among Black, Indigenous, Asian, or Hispanic respondents is assessed. Johfre and Freese (2021) offer compelling evidence of this practice within the broader field of sociology. They observed that over 89 percent of studies in the *American Sociological Review* from 2014 to 2019 used "White" as the reference group. Although this may seem arbitrary, the authors argue that the choice of reference group affects the interpretability of results and does not necessarily imply cognitive neutrality. This is because when we compare minority groups (e.g., African Americans) with the majority group (e.g., White), we normalize the racial hierarchy that majority groups are "baseline" and marginalized groups are "deviations" (Johfre and Freese 2021: 254; see also Wilkes and Karimi 2024). Indeed, by consistently using White trust as the benchmark, researchers reinforce the dominance of Whiteness in the racial hierarchy and fail to consider alternative reference categories that may provide more accurate and nuanced insights. Additionally, when dealing with race variables, treating White as a reference is not the full truth, since "White" is its own variable and not a control group. Since researchers have always compared trust among racial minorities to White trust, this has caused the research to be studied from a White perspective. Indeed, such an approach does more than set a baseline for interpretation—it inherently centers White trust as the normative standard.

A Western perspective: The large literature on ethnicity and political trust developed over the past few decades has mostly focused on North American and European contexts. Racial disparities in other parts of the world have been largely overlooked, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Wu 2008 in Taiwan). As a result, the Western (and therefore White) perspectives heavily influence both the theoretical and empirical literature, despite the potential for other regions to offer distinct outlooks. The same pattern also exists in the studies of immigrant–native differences in political trust, which have largely focused on South to North and East to West immigration. Given that political trust among immigrants (therefore diverse ethnic and racial groups) can be shaped by both the place of origin and the place of destination, there is a need to consider ethnicity and political trust dynamics within and between other sending and receiving dyads.

A purely quantitative methodological approach: Thus far, most studies that consider the ethnicity and political trust association have taken a quantitative approach, using data from cross-sectional surveys in particular. Survey research, especially longitudinal data analysis, provides invaluable insights, but it also has its limitations. For example, measuring ethnic identity in surveys has traditionally been problematic because it often uses a single question and only allows the respondent to choose one category from a pre-defined list. Closed-ended questions restrict respondents from elaborating on the deeper context behind their answers. This has led to the issue of treating multidimensional, fluid, and contextually and relationally specific concepts as if they were unidimensional, fixed, and stable (Burton et al. 2010). The survey approach also has limitations in testing the underlying mechanisms in the association between ethnicity and political trust. In existing studies, racial and ethnic groups, or minority group status, are merely a container or "black box" for other experiences and characteristics.

There is a need to identify the mechanism, that is, the process or set of experiences, through which these status group markers connect to trust.

Where do we go from here? Future directions

In this section, we outline future directions for advancing the study of the relationship between ethnicity and political trust, including directions in how we approach the association conceptually, how we explain it theoretically, and how we test it empirically.

Conceptually, what aspects or dimensions are explored when investigating the relationship between ethnicity and political trust?

Future research needs to capture the multidimensional aspects of the relationship, considering not only between-group variations, but also within-ethnicity and within-institutional variations. Two crucial dimensions of ethnicity and political association have been overlooked in existing literature. One is the within-ethnicity dimension, which captures differences in trust across institutions within a single ethnic group. For example, Black Americans may place more trust in some political institutions than others, and the pattern can be group-specific. Studying variations in trust across different political institutions within any given ethnic group, how this compares to the variation found within other ethnic groups, and how it changes over time can be fruitful. It can help uncover group-specific dynamics shaped by distinctive cultural and historical influences. It can also help uncover whether different racial and ethnic groups express distinct forms of political trust. For example, some studies have suggested that racial and ethnic minorities may express more diffuse trust—a generalized trust in the overall political system (Bilodeau and Nevitte 2003; Röder and Mühlau 2012). However, it has been an empirical challenge to separate this diffuse trust from a specific trust that is based more on political performance (see Easton 1975). More recently, we developed a response pattern approach that considers how individuals place their trust in different political institutions to separate these two forms of trust. We argued that when individuals have low variations in their trust across different political institutions, their trust is more diffuse, while when they have more trust in some institutions than others, they are more likely to express specific trust (Wu and Wilkes 2018). Racial and ethnic minorities are less inclined to differentiate between individual institutions when expressing trust or distrust, which could stem from historical experiences of systemic exclusion, limited access to institutional power, and, therefore, specific knowledge about different political institutions.

Another is the within-institution variation that captures differences in trust across ethnic groups for a single institution. For example, trust in the police may vary across racial and ethnic groups, and the pattern can be institution-specific. When breaking down specific political institutions, racial and ethnic minorities may have more trust in some institutions than Whites, and at the same time, they may show lower trust in other institutions than Whites. For example, in Canada, Hwang (2017) finds that racial and ethnic minorities have lower trust in the police than Whites. However, when we

compare different institutions, it is perhaps not that racial and ethnic minorities have lower trust in the police, but Whites have extremely higher levels of trust in the police. Examining within-institution variations can also better inform interventions, such as institutional reforms tailored to build trust in specific political institutions.

Combining within-ethnicity and within-institution dimensions with traditional between-group comparisons provides a more comprehensive understanding of political trust. Approaching the relationship between ethnicity and political trust multidimensionally and comparatively also allows for the change in always using the White group or the dominant group as the reference category. Instead, it allows for comparisons among all groups without defaulting to White trust as the benchmark. This would shift the focus toward understanding political trust on its own terms within majority and minority populations. For example, there could be theoretical reasons to expect that some political institutions are not very well trusted among certain ethnic groups. Adopting a multidimensional and comparative approach will help test this expectation and uncover the complexity of political trust. Further, by identifying specific areas where trust is weak, whether within certain subgroups or institutions, policymakers can design targeted interventions to address disparities and foster trust.

Theoretically, how do we avoid pattern-driven explanations and develop a coherent framework to explain the relationship between ethnicity and political trust?

Theoretically, current studies often rely on pattern-driven explanations, where theories are constructed primarily to fit empirical findings. Pattern-driven approaches risk creating fragmented and ad hoc explanations, which fail to provide a cohesive theoretical understanding of why ethnic disparities in trust emerge and persist. Such approaches often describe variations in trust levels without probing the underlying mechanisms or historical contexts that shape them. We suggest the need for ethnic-specific theorizing to understand how different racial and ethnic groups trust or distrust political institutions for distinct reasons. The theoretical exploration of the relationship between ethnicity and political trust, as discussed in earlier sections, has largely been shaped by two key frameworks: a cultural framework that highlights the impact of enduring norms, values, and socialization processes, and an institutional framework that centers on assessments of institutional performance, such as government competence and fairness. However, mixed empirical patterns do not align well with these two theories. As a result, current explanations are largely pattern-driven.

The application of these frameworks to the association between ethnicity and political trust has relied on two broad assumptions. First, there is an assumption that the sources of political trust are the same across all racial and ethnic groups, meaning that variations in trust levels are attributed to differences in factors such as evaluations of government performance, political efficacy, or civic engagement, rather than to group-specific dynamics. Second, it is assumed that political trust is universally conceptualized, treating it as a singular construct that is understood and experienced in the same way across all racial and ethnic groups. These assumptions overlook the

unique historical, cultural, and social contexts that influence how different communities develop, interpret, and experience political trust.

Both assumptions have been challenged by emerging research. Studies such as those by Miller and Hoffmann (1998) and Wilkes (2015) demonstrate that the sources of political trust differ significantly across racial and ethnic groups. For instance, White individuals may associate political distrust with perceived mismanagement of tax dollars, which prompts increased political engagement. Conversely, people of color often link distrust to systemic injustices, particularly in the criminal justice system, leading to disengagement and a desire for invisibility in interactions with the state (Rosenthal 2019). In addition to varying sources, the meaning of political trust itself is not universal. Kearns et al. (2020) found significant differences in how racial and ethnic groups define concepts like trust and legitimacy, highlighting the contextual and cultural specificity of these terms. Such findings challenge the notion of political trust as a static, one-size-fits-all construct, underscoring its contingent and multifaceted nature.

These insights about the variability in both the sources and meanings of political trust underscore the need for ethnicity-specific theorization. Ethnicity-specific theorization involves developing frameworks that account for the unique ways in which political trust is formed across different racial and ethnic groups. Such theorization moves away from universal assumptions and acknowledges the distinct historical, cultural, and social contexts that shape trust dynamics. However, this does not necessarily imply the need for entirely separating theories for each group. A unified framework can incorporate these ethnic-specific dynamics, allowing for flexibility and contingency within a single theory. Such a framework would be capable of explaining the varying trust experiences across different groups while maintaining coherence, recognizing that political trust is shaped by both shared and distinct factors across racial and ethnic lines. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of political trust without ignoring the complexity of ethnic identity and its role in shaping trust in political institutions.

Methodologically, is there a need to incorporate more diverse methods to broaden the lens through which ethnicity and political trust are empirically investigated?

Methodologically, trust research tends to be dominated by survey research. This needs to be extended to also include experimental designs and big data analysis. Experimental designs and big data analysis will help enhance both the precision of causal findings and the generalizability to broader populations. Additionally, qualitative and interpretive approaches, as well as historical and comparative analysis, may better capture lived experiences and contextual dynamics that shape trust within and across racial and ethnic groups. For example, qualitative data, rooted in rich, storied human experiences, provide researchers with the tools to explore trust as a complex, contextual phenomenon. Narratives from different racial and ethnic groups can reveal how trust is negotiated, challenged, and rebuilt in the face of systemic barriers.

These qualitative approaches can help uncover the cultural and relational dimensions of trust, offering deeper insights into the lived experiences of diverse groups.

Political trust is often approached as a contemporary issue, with limited attention paid to the historical trajectories of exclusion, marginalization, and systemic discrimination that shape trust dynamics. Historical and comparative analysis helps situate the relationship between ethnicity and political trust within broader historical and systemic contexts today. The historic injustice of chattel slavery, as well as long-standing racial bias that permeated institutional practices and federal policy (for example, the Tuskegee Syphilis experiment), could play a role in shaping how Black Americans view political establishments (see also Wu et al. 2022). Investigating these historical processes can shed light on how current disparities in trust and generational differences have been shaped by historical events (e.g., colonialism, civil rights movements).

At the same time, mixed-methods approaches—integrating multiple methods and data—offer powerful potential for advancing our understanding of the relationship. While quantitative methods can provide measurable insights, such as variations in trust levels within and between ethnic groups and over time, qualitative methods offer context and meaning, helping to explain the underlying causes of these disparities. Future research would also benefit from incorporating non-Western contexts for both theoretical and empirical explorations of the relationship between ethnicity and political trust.

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9 Political trust, autocratic regimes, and the information environment

Marlene Mauk

Political trust is important not only in democracies. Even autocracies, despite their ability to use repression and cooptation to keep their population at bay, have an interest in upholding at least a minimum amount of political trust from their citizens (Gerschewski, 2013). As we know from research on democracies, people with higher trust are more likely to comply with the law and less prone to demanding fundamental regime change (Dalton, 2004; Marien and Hooghe, 2011). A trusting population will thus be easier to rule over than a distrusting one and can greatly reduce the need for and cost of control and supervision.

Previous research suggests that levels of trust in autocracies are not as low as one might expect given their inherent lack of democratic legitimation (Mauk, 2020). This begs the question of what political trust is based upon in non-democratic political systems. When investigating the sources of political trust, the bulk of studies show that the individual-level foundations of political trust in autocracies are very similar to those in democracies: satisfaction with the national economy, perceived corruption, political value orientations, perceptions of political rights and other public goods such as safety and administrative services, as well as incumbent support, affect how much trust citizens have in political and state institutions in both democracies and autocracies (Chang, Chu and Welsh, 2013; Mauk, 2020).

However, system-level sources such as Gross National Income per capita or the degree of political liberalization seem to play a much smaller role in shaping political trust in autocracies (Dellmuth, 2024; Mauk, 2017), and citizens' perceptions of these real-world characteristics appear much more skewed than in democracies, to the point where objective realities bear little to no relation to what people think about, for example, the level of democracy in their country (Kruse, Ravlik and Welzel, 2019). This chapter posits that one of, or perhaps *the* core differences between democracies and autocracies is how accurately real-world characteristics are reflected in citizens' perceptions of and beliefs about their environment, and that the *information environment* is key in determining how big this disconnect is. It argues that future research on political trust in autocracies should take seriously the role of the information environment and how it impacts citizens' perceptions of the autocratic regime.

The information environment in autocracies

As citizens to a substantial extent rely upon indirect communications through, for instance, the mass media, to learn about their environment, the information environment plays a crucial role in how citizens form their perceptions of the political system in which they live. Mauk and Grömping (2024) have shown that disinformation, representing a low-quality information environment, can seriously distort citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity, and Kerr and Lührmann (2017) demonstrate that the quality of election administration is only reflected in citizens' perceptions if there is a high level of media freedom, indicating a high-quality information environment. The information environment differs systematically between democracies and autocracies: whereas democracies typically provide a pluralistic information environment with diverse sources of information, autocracies have a greater need to use both indoctrination and propaganda to manipulate the information citizens receive and how they evaluate this information (Guriev and Treisman, 2020).

Autocracies cannot create and maintain citizen support in the same way that democracies can. Free and fair elections in democracies not only provide normative grounds for legitimation but also hold incumbents accountable to the population as a whole. In autocracies, in contrast, a typically small ruling elite ultimately decides whether incumbents stay in power. This not only entails a profound lack of democratic legitimation but also means that autocratic rulers are primarily accountable to this ruling elite, and their policies foremost need to be designed to benefit this elite rather than the population as a whole. While this does not mean that autocracies cannot implement policies that benefit larger segments of the population – for example, social policies – they ultimately have to prioritize the needs of the ruling elite (Knutsen and Rasmussen, 2018). Autocracies thus suffer from both a lack of democratic legitimation and a lack of responsiveness to citizen demands. Consequently, they need to employ indoctrination and propaganda as alternative means of creating and maintaining citizen support.

Indoctrination in this context means the process through which autocracies instill their citizens with values that they see as conducive to their own autocratic rule; *propaganda* in this context means the spread of biased information about the political regime and its performance. Whereas indoctrination typically works through the education system, propaganda is primarily spread through the mass media. For example, indoctrination may involve teaching schoolchildren that collective interest is more important than individual rights to make them more tolerant of violations of civil liberties; propaganda may involve launching newspaper articles claiming corruption to have been eradicated in an effort to elicit positive perceptions of the regime's political performance.

Regarding their impact on political trust, indoctrination and propaganda should both ultimately serve to increase citizens' trust in the autocratic regime, but they do so through different pathways. Indoctrination, on the one hand, aims at shaping citizens' value orientations in a way that is conducive to the autocratic regime. This can be

either directly through instilling them with regime-conducive, that is, pro-autocratic, values that will directly affect how citizens evaluate the political regime itself, or more indirectly through instilling them with values that serve as skewed benchmarks for citizens' evaluation of the regime's performance. For example, if citizens value law and order more than individual liberties, they might evaluate the political performance of an autocratic police state more positively than they would if they valued individual liberties more than law and order. Corroborating the latter perspective, Österman and Robinson (2023) find that – in present-day democracies – those citizens educated under a democratic regime were more satisfied with democracy than those educated under an autocratic regime. Both autocratic political value orientations and positive evaluations of the regime's economic and political performance have previously been found to relate to higher political trust in autocracies (Chen, 2017; Pernia, 2022). Propaganda, on the other hand, aims at manipulating citizens' perceptions of the regime's performance. By feeding citizens biased information about the regime's economic, political, or any other performance, that is, portraying the regime's performance as higher than it actually is, autocratic regimes may increase political trust, as, again, citizens' evaluations of both economic and political performance are well-established determinants of political trust in autocracies.

Both of these strategies build on the information environment being significantly less free in autocracies: unlike in democracies, where citizens have ample opportunities to gather independent information about how high the unemployment rate is or whether there was fraud in the most recent election, the lack of media freedom allows autocracies to spread propaganda portraying the regime's performance more positively than it actually is and suppress voices criticizing the government and other institutions. In addition to media-based propaganda, autocracies can use the state-controlled education system to politically indoctrinate their citizens and instill them with regime-conducive ideas, for example, advocating conceptions of democracy that focus on harmony rather than pluralism or propagating the importance of strong leadership. As a result, citizens' beliefs and perceptions may become almost entirely decoupled from reality.

Data from the Varieties-of-Indoctrination dataset (Neundorf et al., 2023) clearly show that, for the past 30 years, autocracies have engaged in indoctrination much more than democracies: not only do they have a considerably higher potential for indoctrination in education (Figure 9.1, top panel), they are also more likely to emphasize regime values as well as ideologies not based on democratic values (Figure 9.1, bottom left panel). Instead, autocracies tend to promulgate nationalist and religious ideologies (Figure 9.1, bottom right panel).

The same is evident when it comes to propaganda efforts: Autocracies exert a much higher control over the media, regardless of whether we look at the centralization of media control and control over media agents (Figure 9.2, left panel) or the government's influence on both state-owned and private media coverage (Figure 9.2, right panel).
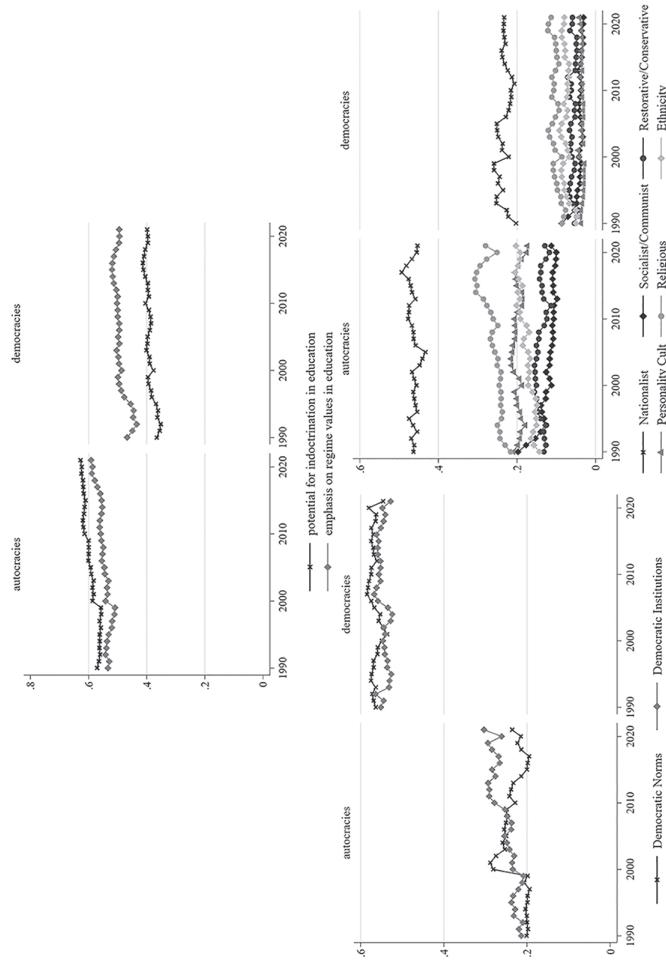
Note: *Top*: Yearly means of respective variable for autocracies and democracies. *Bottom*: Yearly means of each variable. Numbers represent the share of autocratic (democratic) countries in any given year that promoted democratic norms/democratic institutions/Nationalist, Socialist/Communist, ... ideologies through their history curricula.

Source: Varieties-of-Indoctrination V1.

Figure 9.1   Indoctrination efforts in autocracies and democracies
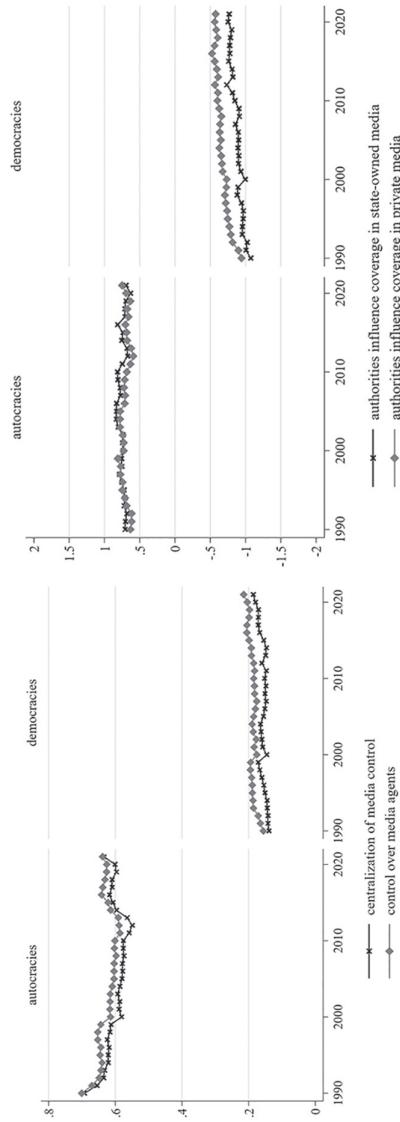
Note: Yearly means of each variable.

Source: Varieties-of-Indoctrination V1.

Figure 9.2   Propaganda efforts in autocracies and democracies

A research agenda for political trust in autocracies

With indoctrination and propaganda being this prevalent in autocracies, citizens' perceptions of real-world characteristics like macroeconomic performance or political liberalization are likely to be distorted. Future research thus needs to move away from its present focus on individual-level determinants of political trust. While previous research has found that, for example, satisfaction with the national economy or perceived level of democracy relates to political trust in autocracies, this knowledge does not actually tell us much about how, for instance, macroeconomic downturns or restrictions in political freedoms might impact political trust, and thus bear few policy implications. Instead, future research should tackle the question of *how citizens arrive at those individual-level attitudes that have repeatedly been identified as antecedents of political trust and which mechanisms contribute to forming citizens' perceptions of reality* (see Seyd, Chapter 2 in this book). For autocracies, we cannot simply assume – as we tend to do in democracies (though, arguably, this might also be a fallacy) – that individual-level perceptions bear any tangible relation to (changes in) real-world conditions. We need to take seriously the disconnect between real-world characteristics and citizens' perceptions of and beliefs about these characteristics and investigate the impact of the information environment on how citizens form their beliefs about the autocratic regime.

Four main areas of research present themselves to political scientists interested in unpacking political trust in autocracies: first, the causal chain that links the information environment to political trust; second, the content of indoctrination and propaganda; third, alternative sources of information; and fourth, the individual-level moderators that may condition the effects of indoctrination and propaganda. Ultimately, studying these research areas will present us with greater insight into the overarching question of *the formation of political trust in autocratic regimes and the relevance of the information environment*. The following subsections discuss each of the four research areas in turn, formulate concrete research questions, and provide some suggestions for theoretical frameworks as well as empirical strategies that may help answer these research questions.

Research area 1: the causal chain that links the information environment to political trust

The first research area concerns *linking the information environment to political trust*. At the most basic level, future research should be interested in the overall effect of indoctrination and propaganda on political trust, asking:

(RQ1) Do indoctrination and propaganda increase political trust in autocracies?

As already touched upon in the previous section, we cannot expect indoctrination and propaganda to affect political trust directly but rather through a chain of causal mechanisms. To uncover this causal chain, future research can draw on social psychology's rich body of literature on belief and attitude formation (for an overview:
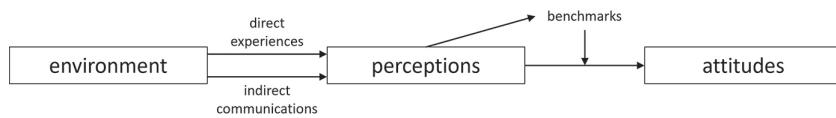
Figure 9.3   General model of attitude formation

Eagly and Chaiken, 1993, pp. 219–498). Most of these models identify four fundamental elements of the attitude-formation process: environment, information, beliefs/perceptions, and attitudes. Building on this work, we can sketch a general model of attitude formation (Figure 9.3) that links real-world characteristics such as the state of the national economy (the "environment") to those individual-level attitudes that have often been identified as antecedents of political trust, such as satisfaction with the national economy, via beliefs about or perceptions of this environment, such as the perceived unemployment rate. For these beliefs or perceptions to be formed or updated, information about the environment needs to be conveyed to the individual through either direct experiences or indirect communications. This information is then received and interpreted through various physiological and cognitive processes (cf. Wickens and Carswell, 2021), and finally compared to and integrated with existing benchmarks such as expectations regarding the goods that should be delivered by the political regime to arrive at the evaluative attitudes that ultimately affect political trust.

We would therefore expect the information environment not to affect political trust *directly* but rather *indirectly* through the causal chain outlined above. Insofar as the first step of this causal chain is concerned, future research may ask:

(RQ2) (How) do indoctrination and propaganda affect citizens' perceptions of the values dominant in society and the regime's performance?

As outlined in the previous section, indoctrination aims primarily at instilling citizens with values that are seen as conducive to the survival of the autocratic regime. Referring to the general model of attitude formation (Figure 9.3) and theories of political socialization (for an overview: Stoker and Bass, 2011), this would work by influencing citizens' perceptions about what the dominant and widely accepted values within society are. Propaganda, in contrast, operates through providing citizens with biased information about the performance (economic, political, or otherwise) of the autocratic regime and thus aims at skewing their perceptions of this performance.

High-quality survey data on political attitudes is available for many autocracies from, for example, the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al., 2022) or regional projects like the Afrobarometer (Afrobarometer, 2024), Arab Barometer (Arab Barometer, 2024), AmericasBarometer (LAPOP, 2024), Asian Barometer Survey (Asian Barometer, 2024), or Latinobarómetro (Corporacion Latinobarómetro, 2024). However, few public opinion surveys to date have explicitly asked about citizens' *perceptions* of dominant

values or regime performance.[1] In addition, it may prove difficult altogether to dis-entangle raw perceptions and evaluations with standard survey questions. For exam-ple, responses to the fairly common survey question on how democratic respondents think their country currently is may often contain at least a certain evaluative compo-nent despite not asking about "satisfaction" or "judgement."[2] Researchers interested in these topics would therefore be well advised to collect their own data, making use of qualitative approaches like focus group interviews to tease out the differences between perceptions and evaluations.

Moving one step further along the causal chain that links the information environ-ment to political trust, future research may be interested in whether indoctrination and propaganda actually affect citizens' attitudes, and if they do so in the direction envisaged by the autocratic regime. We can expect the information environment to affect citizens' attitudes toward pro-autocratic values – their value orientations – and toward the regime's performance – their performance evaluations – so a potential research question at this stage reads:

(RQ3) Do more indoctrination and propaganda result in citizens holding more pro-autocratic political value orientations and more positive performance evaluations?

Given the comparatively wide availability of at least basic[3] cross-national comparative survey data on both value orientations and performance evaluations, researchers may tackle this question using existing data.

As changing citizens' value orientations may also result in changing citizens' bench-marks, indoctrination may affect how citizens evaluate the regime's performance as well. Digging deeper into this mechanism, future research could explicitly assess the benchmarks that citizens use for their performance evaluations.

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[1]   A notable exception is the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 6, which asked respondents to what extent they thought different aspects of democratic quality (e.g., opposition parties are free to criticize the government, rights of minority groups are protected) applied in their country.

[2]   As a case in point, those involved in the construction of the ESS Round 6 Questionnaire, as well as most analyses based on the survey's results, interpret the responses as "eval-uations" rather than "perceptions" (Winstone, Widdop and Fitzgerald, 2016).

[3]   Questions on value orientations and economic as well as political performance evalu-ations are included in almost all major cross-national public opinion surveys, but are often limited to rather general single-item questions, for example, asking about the preference for democracy as a political system or about satisfaction with the national economy.

(RQ4) Onto which benchmarks do citizens base their evaluations of the regime's performance?

As prior research has shown, citizens may differ considerably regarding how they evaluate, for example, their regime's democratic quality (Pietsch, 2015). Apart from citizens receiving different information and thus holding different perceptions of the regime's performance, this may also result from citizens applying different benchmarks against which they compare their perceptions. In the case of democratic quality, for instance, citizens may have diverging understandings of democracy, and prior research has demonstrated that citizens in autocracies who understand democracy in minimalist or substantive terms evaluate the level of democracy in their own country as higher than those who hold a procedural or liberal understanding of democracy (e.g., Zhai, 2023).

Assessing these benchmarks is likely best achieved by collecting more qualitative data that allows gathering information about the thought processes that citizens go through to arrive at evaluations of, for instance, the regime's macroeconomic performance.

Linking these steps together and tying them in with existing theories and empirical findings on the individual-level determinants of political trust, future research will be able to examine the entire causal chain through which indoctrination and propaganda affect political trust (the first question in this research area).

Of course, an encompassing analysis also needs to consider the actual environment. One way to look at the above research questions, therefore, is to examine how more objective measures of the autocratic regime (e.g., its political performance) relate to citizens' perceptions, evaluations, and political trust, and how this relationship is *moderated* by indoctrination and propaganda.

Research area 2: the content of indoctrination and propaganda

So far, the discussion has treated the *content of indoctrination and propaganda* as uniform across autocratic political systems, simply stating that indoctrination will propagate regime-conducive values and propaganda will spread biased information on the regime's performance. However, indoctrination and propaganda messages vary across regimes. While Russian history classes emphasize the importance of strong leadership (Liñán, 2010), "moral education" in Vietnamese schools promotes interdependence and harmonious relationships (Doan, 2005). Naturally, these variations affect the specific value orientations and performance evaluations that citizens in any given autocratic regime are likely to form, and the accuracy of their perceptions may vary considerably between countries and between domains. Future research must therefore unpack these differences and examine more closely the content of indoctrination and propaganda, asking:

(RQ5) Which values does indoctrination propagate?

(RQ6) Which aspect(s) of the autocratic regime's performance does propaganda target?

One key determinant of which values and which aspects of regime performance indoctrination and propaganda messages focus on is autocratic legitimation strategies. Common legitimation strategies for autocracies include ideology (e.g., the Communist ideology of China), personalism (e.g., the leader cult in North Korea), and economic performance (e.g., the rapid modernization of Singapore). Depending on which strategy (or strategies) the autocratic regime pursues, we can expect the thematic foci of indoctrination and propaganda to vary: if the regime bases its legitimacy on economic performance, its propaganda messages should exaggerate growth rates and underreport unemployment figures; if the regime's legitimacy is based on strongman personalism, indoctrination messages should propagate values like authority and subordination.

One legitimation strategy that almost all contemporary autocracies employ at least to a certain extent is procedural legitimacy: as democracy has diffused as a universal value, few autocracies can afford not to keep at least a minimal democratic façade. Accordingly, electoral institutions abound in autocracies, and we can expect the vast majority of autocracies to engage in election-related indoctrination and propaganda. Correspondingly, previous research has found citizens' perceptions of their regime's electoral or overall democratic quality to be more distorted than their perceptions of other aspects of regime performance (Mauk, 2020).

Conceptually, research in this area can be informed by the emerging literature on autocratic legitimation strategies (for an overview: Grauvogel and Soest, 2024). Empirically, it could draw on the Regime Legitimation Strategies dataset (Tannenberg et al., 2021), which covers 183 countries from 1900 to 2019 and contains expert-coded measures of the extent to which these regimes make use of ideological, personalistic, rational-legal, and performance-based legitimation strategies. To assess the content of indoctrination messages, researchers can utilize the Varieties-of-Indoctrination dataset, which includes indicators on the content of school curricula as well as some limited information on the promotion of patriotism through the mass media for 160 countries from 1945 to 2020. To dig deeper into the content of indoctrination and to study the topical foci of autocratic propaganda, researchers may need to employ large-scale content analysis of state-controlled print and broadcast media as well as social media. Thanks to advances in computational social science, such analyses are becoming increasingly feasible, and researchers can apply automated methods of data collection as well as of data analysis.

Research area 3: alternative sources of information

Another avenue could be to investigate other macro-level characteristics of the information environment, namely the *availability of alternative sources of information*. Whereas autocratic regimes are likely to try to control the information environment,

state-sponsored indoctrination and propaganda messages are not the only sources of information available to citizens, even in the most totalitarian political systems. Alternative sources can provide citizens with more accurate – or at least different – information, which they may use to update their perceptions of the real-world environment. The role and effectiveness of such corrective information have so far mainly been studied within the field of communication science and within the context of "fake news" or misinformation. Even though experimental research in democracies suggests that misinformation can be sticky even when corrected immediately (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010), other accounts are more optimistic (Walter et al., 2020). In addition, alternative sources may not only send *corrective* information but also provide *new* or *additional* information, which may be more effective in shaping citizens' perceptions.

What are potential sources of alternative information? As indicated above, information can generally be conveyed through either indirect communications or direct experience. The primary source of indirect communications about the political regime is the mass media (McQuail, 2010), but interpersonal communication can also convey information about both the dominant values and the regime's performance (Amsalem and Nir, 2021). We can therefore distinguish three (groups of) alternative information sources: independent (mass) media; interpersonal communication; and direct experiences.

Regarding first, independent media as alternative sources of information, researchers may ask:

(RQ7) How does the existence and reach of independent media outlets interact with indoctrination and propaganda in shaping citizens' perceptions?

Even though the mass media in most autocracies follow the so-called "dominant media" model (McQuail, 2010, p. 87) in which the government exerts tight control both through censorship and state ownership of media outlets, the extent of this control varies greatly between countries and has never been fully effective. In many autocracies, journalists continue to regard themselves as "watchdogs" (Hamada and Abdel-Salam, 2024), independent pockets of print and broadcast media have proven to be remarkably resilient (Paskhalis, Rosenfeld and Tertytchnaya, 2022), and even the "Great Firewall of China" has not been able to completely cut off the population from outside information (Rambert et al., 2021). Prior research in this area has demonstrated that access to independent TV stations relates to lower vote shares for Putin (Enikolopov, Petrova and Zhuravskaya, 2011) and that citizens living in countries with a higher level of press freedom have more accurate perceptions of government corruption (Flavin and Montgomery, 2019). For online media, the effects appear more ambiguous (Rød and Weidmann, 2015), and researchers interested in investigating the role of independent media should thus distinguish between the traditional print/broadcast and "new" media.

Summative data on media freedom are available from several sources, for instance, the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). Regarding

traditional media, the Varieties-of-Indoctrination and Varieties-of-Democracy datasets (Coppedge et al., 2024; Neundorf et al., 2023) contain data on state ownership, censorship, and the range of perspectives for at least 160 countries from 1945 to 2021; for online media, the Digital Society Project (Mechkova et al., 2024) supplies data on, among others, government internet filtering and online media perspectives for 179 countries from 2000 to 2023. Conveniently, all these measures are included in the Varieties-of-Democracy dataset; however, they may prove rather crude, and researchers might prefer using more fine-grained data on the national media systems.

Second, researchers interested in alternative sources of information may turn to interpersonal communication, asking:

(RQ8) What role do family and friends play in shaping citizens' perceptions?

Interpersonal communication, typically defined as conversations between two (or more) people that can take place through a variety of channels (Southwell and Yzer, 2007), can both bring in new information and mediate – as well as potentially reinforce, attenuate, or distort – information from other sources, for example, propaganda or indoctrination messages. Previous research in the field of public health shows that the effects of interpersonal communication on citizens' knowledge are stronger than those of mass media (Solovei and van den Putte, 2020), suggesting that interpersonal communication may play an important role in shaping citizens' perceptions. Classical models from communication science, like Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) Two-Step Flow of Communication, can serve as fruitful vantage points for theory building. Regarding the attenuation of indoctrination effects, the literature on (political) socialization provides a useful backdrop as well. This literature can help identify the relevant socialization agents that contribute to shaping citizens' value orientations – for instance, family, peer groups, teachers, co-workers – their respective contributions, and the question of how influential childhood socialization remains throughout life (for an overview: Sears and Levy, 2003).

Survey data on interpersonal communication is often collected within the field of social network studies, although these data mostly contain little information on the content of these communications. Qualitative approaches like focus group interviews might provide additional insights into the extent and content of interpersonal communication.

Social media constitutes a special form of interpersonal communication. Other than face-to-face, phone, private messages, or emails, communication on social media is typically (semi-)public and available for anyone to consume. On the one hand, this allows it to serve as a particularly powerful tool for disseminating alternative information. On the other hand, this subjects it to potential censorship and opens up the possibility for it to spread and intensify indoctrination and propaganda. Researchers interested in the role of social media should thus pay particular attention to the question of whether they can actually serve as effective sources of alternative information:

(RQ9) Does social media provide citizens with alternative information, or does it amplify regime indoctrination and propaganda?

To empirically analyze the effects of social media, researchers are best advised to make use of computational social science methods for both data collection (web scraping, web tracking) and data analysis (automated text analysis).

Finally, direct experiences present another opportunity for citizens to gather alternative information. For example, losing one's job can provide information about the state of the economy, or being beaten up by police during a peaceful demonstration can provide information about the level of freedom of expression. Similarly, through living in society and participating in politics, citizens can obtain information about which values are widely accepted, for example, whether individuals typically treat each other as equals or whether strong hierarchies dominate social interactions.

Other than interpersonal communication and mass media messages, direct experiences provide reasonably accurate information almost all the time; however, this information is likely to be rather localized. Nonetheless, previous research on Russia shows that citizens are able to extract accurate economic information from personal experience that can correct regime propaganda (Rosenfeld, 2018); yet, the literature on voting-day experiences and perceptions of electoral integrity paints a more mixed picture (Kerr, 2017; Shah, 2015). Researchers must therefore ask:

(RQ10) To what extent can direct experiences provide citizens with more accurate information and perceptions?

Data for empirical analysis can come from public opinion surveys, many of which at least include questions about respondents' personal economic situation. Some surveys, especially national election studies, also contain modules regarding voting-day experiences or asking about encountering repression. For example, the Comparative National Elections Project (2024) curates 70 election surveys from 29 countries that include indicators on encountering electoral malpractice, such as being offered a reward for voting for a specific candidate. Additionally, subnational/local macroeconomic data may be leveraged to approximate citizens' direct experiences with the regime's economic performance, as can be data on local repression events or political violence like the Armed Conflict Location and Event Dataset (Raleigh, Kishi and Linke, 2023) or the Social Conflicts Analysis Database (Salehyan et al., 2012).

By studying the effects of alternative sources of information, researchers may not only gain insight into the dynamics of belief formation but also contribute to assessing the potential of foreign interventions in changing citizens' perceptions, for example, through cultural-diplomacy measures, social media campaigns, or capacity-building programs in journalism.

Research area 4: individual-level moderators

One final research area concerns the *individual-level characteristics that may moderate the effects of indoctrination and propaganda*. While the previous subsections have centered on aggregate-level characteristics of the information environment, the effects of indoctrination and propaganda are unlikely to be uniform across the entire population. Instead, they will vary according to how much indoctrination and propaganda the individual citizen actually encounters and how much of it they understand, as well as believe. Future research should consider this individual-level variation and ask:

(RQ11) How much indoctrination and propaganda do citizens encounter?

(RQ12) How much of the indoctrination and propaganda messages do citizens process (correctly)?

(RQ13) How much of the indoctrination and propaganda messages do citizens believe?

Regarding how much indoctrination and propaganda citizens *encounter*, we can derive two central moderators from the primary channels through which indoctrination and propaganda are disseminated, the education system and the mass media: exposure to indoctrination should relate to time spent in the state-controlled education system, and exposure to propaganda should relate to the amount of state-controlled media consumed. Supporting the latter, Kennedy (2009) shows that Chinese citizens who consume more of the state-controlled news media are more supportive of their political regime. Furthermore, political interest may play a role in determining citizens' attention to political messages in particular, increasing the likelihood that they receive both indoctrination and propaganda. Most major surveys contain questions on education, news consumption, media use, and political interest, allowing researchers to approximate how much indoctrination and propaganda citizens encounter. Web tracking data may provide more fine-grained information on the amount and content of state-sponsored messages citizens encounter.

Moving on to the *processing* of this indoctrination and propaganda information, the main question is whether citizens understand the content of the message correctly – that is, in the way the autocratic regime intended. Apart from cognitive capabilities (e.g., attention span, language skills, and memory), prior knowledge can help citizens contextualize new information. Whereas large-scale data on cognitive capabilities are hard to come by, (laboratory) experimental designs could contribute to understanding which citizens are more likely to correctly process indoctrination and propaganda.

Finally, with regard to *believing* indoctrination and propaganda, it appears reasonable to assume that cognitive capabilities like logical reasoning and critical thinking, political knowledge, education, and access to alternative information affect citizens' ability to discern indoctrination and propaganda as what they are. In addition,

personality factors like predisposition toward authority can determine citizens' motivation to critically examine government messages. Accordingly, Geddes and Zaller (1989) argue that highly educated citizens were better able to resist government propaganda in authoritarian Brazil, and Shirikov (2024) finds that Putin supporters are more likely to believe state propaganda. Survey experiments in which respondents are presented with different news items and asked whether they thought these were truthful or not can provide data on who believes in indoctrination and propaganda.

Communication science as well as social psychology provide theoretical backdrops that may help identify the individual-level characteristics that moderate the effects of indoctrination and propaganda. For instance, McGuire's (1968) Exposure-Acceptance Model identifies attention, comprehension, and yielding as the three central steps that determine whether or not persuasive communication has an effect, and Petty and Cacioppo's (1986) Elaboration-Likelihood Model examines the individual-level characteristics that determine how information is processed, accepted, and retained.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the role of the information environment in shaping citizens' trust in the autocratic regime. It argued that, compared to democracies, autocracies have a greater incentive to use both indoctrination and propaganda to distort citizens' perceptions of reality in an attempt to increase regime legitimacy. Empirical analyses confirmed that autocracies use considerably more indoctrination and propaganda, suggesting that citizens' perceptions of reality may be heavily distorted.

This should caution us against relying on public opinion data alone when trying to gauge how much and why citizens trust their autocratic regime. As citizens' perceptions may not accurately reflect the reality they live in, we cannot simply draw inferences from the individual to the aggregate level. For example, finding that more positive individual-level economic performance evaluations relate to higher political trust does not necessarily mean that autocracies can generate trust by improving their macroeconomic performance. At the same time, economic crises or violations of citizen rights may not deter citizens' trust in autocratic institutions as much as we would expect based on the well-established individual-level findings. This does not mean that we cannot measure and study political trust and/or its sources in autocracies: as political trust refers to "people's basic evaluative and affective orientation to the institutions and actors governing their polity" (cf. Chapter 1, this book), the concept is in itself of a decisively subjective nature and thus *should* reflect potential distortions in how citizens perceive their regime.

However, we should take seriously the potential disconnect between real-world characteristics and citizens' perceptions of reality, and move away from the current focus on individual-level determinants of political trust in autocracies. Instead, future research should explore how the information environment affects citizens' perceptions and how citizens arrive at those individual-level attitudes that have repeatedly

been identified as antecedents of political trust. This chapter recommended four broad areas for future research that can help untangle the mechanisms that shape citizens' perceptions and, ultimately, connect political trust to real-world developments: the causal mechanisms that link the information environment to political trust; the content of indoctrination and propaganda; the availability of alternative information sources; and the individual-level moderators that may condition the effects of indoctrination and propaganda. Research in these areas should make use of various data sources, combine quantitative and qualitative methods, and be informed by the literature on political socialization, autocratic legitimation, and neighboring disciplines like communication science and social psychology.

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10 Political trust and elites

James Weinberg

Almost 30 years ago, Clark and Payne (1997, p.205) outlined four dominant approaches to the study of trust. The first understands trust as a personality trait or a general response pattern based upon socialisation. The second focuses on trust as an act and tends towards experimental research on trusting behaviours. The third takes trust as a property of collective units or a social reality to be explored by sociological theory, while the fourth breaks it down into content areas of individual perception regarding the trustworthy characteristics of another actor – often leaders or 'elite' individuals – in specific organisational settings or domains of action. The last of these traditions has dominated the scholarship on *political* trust and it is also the guiding paradigm that underpins the definition set forth by the editors in Chapter 1 in this book; principally, political trust refers to people's basic evaluative and affective orientation to the institutions and actors governing their polity.

Within this fourth tradition, judgements about the trustworthiness of political elites – including their competence, integrity and benevolence (see Mayer et al., 1995) – are commonly understood as 'psychological conduits' (Hamm et al., 2019, p.2) that link our prior experiences and evaluations of their behaviour with commensurate actions and attitudes typical of parent concepts such as trust, distrust and mistrust (see Bunting et al., 2021; Jennings et al., 2021). In this respect, citizens' trust judgements entail a logical evaluation of the risk involved in trusting politicians who are largely *left unattended* to make decisions in contexts where *positive outcomes are uncertain* (see Devine and Fairbrother, Chapter 1 in this book). As such, trust helps citizens to resolve dilemmas about vote choice, policy support (especially where policies require sacrifice or compromise), or even legal compliance (e.g. Marien and Hooghe, 2011; Devine, 2024). In turn, elites such as politicians are presumed to respond to these expressions of citizens' trust in the way that they govern. It is this simple causal logic (Figure 10.1) that informs the majority of research into political trust and the assumptions made about its potential benefits for democratic governance.

Yet despite general acknowledgement that political trust is relational and responsive to what elites do and say, there has been a surprising dearth of research about these objects of political trust, including politicians, civil servants and other 'policy elites'. Where research *has* focused on elites, it has been concerned with understanding the signals of trustworthiness that they project to the public through their actions, policy outputs or leadership styles (Green and Jennings, 2017; Haugsgjerd and Kumlin, 2020;
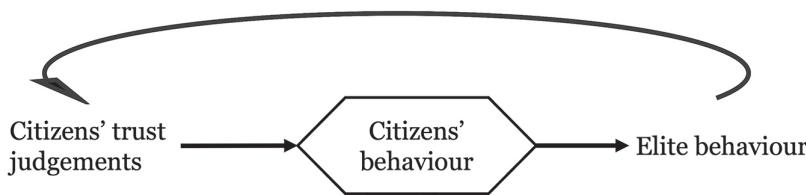
Figure 10.1   The dynamics of political trust #1

Legood et al., 2020). Taking one step back, we know extremely little – if anything! – about how these 'trustees' actually intuit the trust placed in them (cf. Weinberg, 2023). There are good reasons, however, to believe that the practical significance of a dialogic trust-based relationship between politicians and citizens – whereby the former's actions affect the latter's responses and vice versa – *depends* upon the perceptions of each about the other (Figure 10.2). Whilst a robust body of research has shown that citizens' perceptions of elite trustworthiness are often flawed (e.g. Metzger and Flanagin, 2013; Theiss-Morse and Barton, 2017; Norris, 2022), there has been practically no consideration of how the other side of this equation works.

For the purpose of stimulating a new research agenda on political trust, I suggest that this black box demands more attention. Why? First, we might rationally expect that public trust is most likely to facilitate sound and responsive governance (itself a contested claim), and distrust is most likely to stimulate change (outside of elections), where policy elites accurately perceive levels of each. Put slightly differently, politicians' and citizens' perceptions of one another are a mediating lens through which (dis)trust-based claims and responses might elicit proportionate reactions (Figure 10.2). Where these perceptions are not aligned with reality, we might expect elite behaviour to be out of step with broader public attitudes or even those of fellow policy actors, and thus fuel spirals of distrust or reinforce low-trust appraisals. Second, existing research on politicians suggests that they are generally poor judges of public opinion across a variety of policy topics (Pereira, 2021; Walgrave et al., 2023). As trust researchers, we should work to establish the extent to which this replicates for
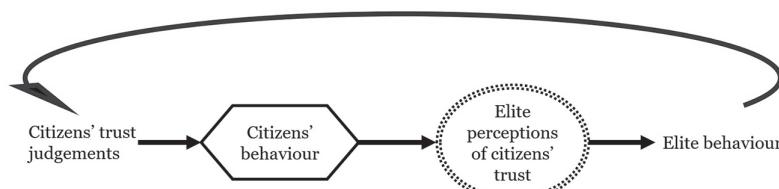
Figure 10.2   The dynamics of political trust #2

political trust across different geographies and political systems. Third, voters *expect* their representatives to be in tune with and attentive to their opinions (Dassonneville et al., 2021). Do they get what they want? And does this matter more or less for different social or political groups? These are just some of the questions explored in this chapter and offered as important avenues for future research.

In what follows, I briefly introduce existing work on the perceptual mechanism in political science, outline the content and significance of elite trust perceptions or what I call the family of 'felt' trust concepts, and examine preliminary data on UK politicians' trust perceptions. Throughout the chapter, I suggest a series of future research questions (or FRQs) as provocations for this exciting new subfield of trust studies. Each FRQ is supported by initial theoretical arguments or empirical evidence, which are offered up as a point of departure in an ambitious new research agenda.

The perceptual mechanism

Theoretical work on democratic representation is replete with arguments about elected representatives' grasp of public opinion and the importance thereof. In his influential review article of 1977, Aage Clausen (pp.362–363) wrote

> [i]t is widely believed, but less forcefully articulated, that the most durable and effective leaders are those who correctly perceive the attitudes and beliefs of their constituencies. Countless are the references to the leader who succeeds through an accurate assessment of the 'mood' of the assembly, the 'sense' of the meeting, and the 'pulse of the nation'.

In fact, the theoretical claim that politicians' perceptions of public opinion *define* the quality of policy responsiveness and thus many aspects of democratic representation is now commonplace to the point of being implicit in much of contemporary political science (Mansbridge, 2003; Broockman and Skovron, 2018; Varone and Helfer, 2022).

A great deal of recent scholarship rests on the shoulders of work done by Miller and Stokes (1963), who argued that there were essentially two pathways linking public opinion with policy outputs: citizens could elect the 'right' politicians (i.e. those sharing their opinions) or politicians could hold the 'right' perceptions of public opinion. In either case, politicians' behaviour should reflect what citizens want. Gathering unprecedented data from Congress and the mass public in the US, Miller and Stokes found much stronger correlations between constituency opinion and representatives' perceptions thereof than with representatives' own attitudes, and the indirect effect on roll call behaviour was greater through those perceptions. Policy responsiveness was thus seen to hinge on representatives' grasp of public preferences. Subsequent publications go on to suggest that representative democracy can sustain itself *because* rational vote-seeking politicians naturally try to ascertain public preferences and act accordingly (in particular, Stimson et al., 1995; see also Butler and Nickerson, 2011).

Despite the fact that citizens themselves also expect politicians to be attentive to public opinion and follow it in office (e.g. Werner, 2019; Dassonneville et al., 2021), modern self-report data from politicians tells a story of perceptual *in*accuracy. In the most far-reaching study to date, Walgrave et al. (2023) test attitude and perception congruence between politicians and voters in four countries across eight salient policy areas. All other things being equal, they find that politicians misplace majority public opinion 29% of the time (even in many cases where there is a clear distribution of public preferences on one side or the other of a policy debate); roughly one-fifth of politicians make estimates that are equal to or worse than chance; politicians have an average error in judgement of 17.6 percentage points; and perception gaps exist between politicians and their party voters as well as the general public. As representatives of 'the people', these findings suggest that voters get the 'wrong' politicians.

Barring the data reported above, very few studies of the perceptual mechanism in politics are comparative. Moreover, none deal with political trust (cf. Weinberg, 2023). However, whether elite trust perceptions align or diverge with public trust judgements could have equally important consequences for political behaviour and democratic linkage. For example, elites may well misperceive the specific policy preferences of a nation or a specific subset of voters (as documented elsewhere), but they are unlikely to advance a policy unless they also feel in command of enough personal cachet to act. In other words, they need to feel trusted enough to assume that their electors will grant them credit when new policies align with their preferences and, more importantly, will not seek to punish them when those policies are delayed, unfulfilled, or require sacrifice and compromise (Weinberg, 2023). Trust perceptions thus become integral to the risk calculations that politicians perform ahead of professional choices.

If existing empirical work on the perceptual mechanism translates accurately, then we have little reason to expect that politicians will perform well at ascertaining levels of public trust. Unlike policy preferences, trust is also a complex concept that operates in a target-driven, multidimensional, and often highly subjective manner. For that reason, there is more theoretical work to be done around defining what it actually means to feel trusted in politics, and how that relates to prior thinking on the perceptual mechanism, before we can meaningfully talk of its democratic consequences. In the next section of this chapter, I introduce the felt trust concepts as a scaffold for this work.

A family of 'felt' trust concepts

To theorise the perceptual mechanism more precisely as it pertains to trust, I turn to the concept of 'felt trust'. Coined in Psychology, felt trust reflects, very simply, the extent to which one person believes that another person trusts them (e.g. Baer et al., 2015). Like its more prosaic counterpart, felt trust is relational and can refer to feeling trusted by both individuals (Lau et al., 2014) and groups (Salamon and Robinson, 2008). Although the existing research base is relatively slim, previous empirical work suggests that felt trust can motivate better occupational performance and, in turn,

a stronger drive to maintain colleagues' trust even where individuals incur costs to do so (see Campagna et al., 2019). Whilst most of this research focuses exclusively on *employees'* felt trust about their leaders in the workplace, the concept arguably has even more analytical leverage when studied in reverse (see Campagna et al., 2020). And in the context of the present chapter, it also has the potential to add to our understanding of when or why *politicians* make particular choices in low- or high-trust environments.

As alien as it may sound to colleagues working on political trust, felt trust is one of a number of relational concepts that have been studied outside of politics in a way that mirrors much of the work done on the perceptual mechanism inside the discipline (Table 10.1). In Criminology and Sociology, the terms 'felt legitimacy' and 'felt authority' are used to study police officers and prison guards; 'felt accountability' has recently made an appearance in Public Administration; and psychologists have studied 'felt power' across a number of social and institutional settings. Common to the work on each of these concepts is an attempt to ascertain 'dyadic meta-accuracy' or, put another way, the level of alignment between one person's perceptions and the

Table 10.1   'Felt' concepts in social science

Concept	Definition	Primary disciplinary applications to date	Key citations
Felt Accountability	A belief that one's decisions or actions within a specific accountability environment will be evaluated by a salient audience with the ability to sanction.	Psychology Public Administration	Hall and Ferris (2010); Overman and Schillemans (2022)
Felt Legitimacy	The degree to which authority figures believe that the public or organisational followers view them as legitimate.	Psychology Criminology Sociology Management Studies	Bottoms and Tankebe (2012); Nix and Wolfe (2017)
Felt Power	The amount of power that an individual believes they wield over another person in a specific situation, above or beyond any power granted by their position.	Psychology	Anderson et al. (2012); Bombari et al. (2017)
Felt Trust	The degree to which one person believes that another person or group of people trusts them.	Psychology Management Studies Criminology	Baer et al. (2015); Lau et al. (2014); Campagna et al. (2020)

actual thoughts or attitudes of another person in a two-way relationship with them. Scholars writing on felt trust, in particular, have argued that there are normative and practical reasons to strive for minimal gaps between felt trust and actual trust, not least as a basis upon which to build cooperative and effective interpersonal relations (see Brion et al., 2015).

Prior to any investigation of politicians' dyadic meta-accuracy, we need to agree upon *what* is actually being measured and *how* it should be measured when we talk of elite felt trust in politics. Here, future work in political science might set out to establish:

FRQ1: What do elites think it means to be trusted in politics?

FRQ2: What kinds of evidence do elites draw upon to reach conclusions about public trust, and do they grant more or less weight to different sources of evidence? Does felt trust fluctuate in response to new evidence?

FRQ3: Do elite judgements of public trust load onto similar latent concepts as public trust judgements of them?

FRQ4: To what extent do elites distinguish between felt trust in different social, geographical, or political groups?

FRQ5: Is felt trust a cognitive evaluation, an affective orientation, or a mixture of both?

As an initial response to these questions, I suggest that politicians may compute a number of relevant other-to-self trust judgements based on both internal beliefs and external evidence about how constituents, voters, or the broader public see them. These judgements may involve evaluations of different trustworthy characteristics that become more or less prominent depending on their salience in any given moment. For example, politicians might concurrently believe that a specific audience has faith in their technical expertise (i.e. trust perceptions related to their competence), questions their fidelity to public interests (i.e. trust perceptions related to their benevolence), or monitors and double-checks their every word and action (i.e. trust perceptions related to their integrity). If this thesis holds, then it should be possible to map those inverted trust judgements onto latent concepts of felt trust (a belief in citizens' positive regard for their trustworthiness and willingness to accept vulnerability), felt distrust (a belief in citizens' cynicism about their trustworthiness and unwillingness to enter into a relationship), and felt mistrust (a belief in citizens' scepticism about their trustworthiness and their need to monitor the politician). To the extent that this logic echoes the rhetoric used elsewhere in research on *citizens'* political trust, I argue that it makes sense to talk of an underlying *family of felt trust concepts* that require multiple indicators in survey or experimental research.

So how accurate might we expect politicians' inverted trust judgements to be? In seeking to understand levels of dyadic meta-accuracy, existing work on various 'felt'

concepts focuses on a series of external and internal explanatory pathways. In the first instance, felt trust stems from external observable behaviours or third-party information that can be read as a signal of another person's trust (e.g. Nerstad et al., 2018). Yet the relationship between a politician and their electors, let alone the general public, is far from bilateral. More often than not, politicians reach the public through a series of mediators, including their party, local or national interest groups, polling companies, and a 24-hour news media bent on political personalisation and scandalisation (e.g. Graβl et al., 2021). Thus, the information that politicians receive about public trust may be considerably transformed as it passes through these agencies in multiple stages. One might intuitively conclude that perceptual inaccuracy is more likely to occur than it does in other occupational settings.

On the other hand, felt trust might stem from characteristics of the individual, such as levels of narcissistic personality, their innate aptitude for perspective taking, or their belief in attitude and behaviour reciprocity (e.g. Carlson and Kenny, 2012; Weinberg, 2023). On this basis, too, however, politicians may be hypothesised to be poor estimators of public trust. For example, we now know that politicians around the world score higher than general populations for personality traits such as Extraversion (Scott and Medeiros, 2020; Weinberg, 2020), which correlates strongly with positive self-evaluation and interpersonal self-enhancement (see Skorek et al., 2014; Vaughan-Johnston et al., 2021). Both of these cognitive strategies may naturally lead to inflated trust perceptions regardless of the external evidence available. Building on this reasoning, future research might ask:

FRQ6: What are the most important variables for dyadic meta-accuracy in elite trust perceptions, and do suitable self-report measures or observational metrics exist to gather data on politicians and other policy elites?

FRQ7: Is the external or internal pathway more important for explaining dyadic meta-accuracy?

FRQ8: Are there alternative pathways of explanation, and how might they be defined or measured?

Politicians' dyadic meta-accuracy

To make sense of why trust perceptions matter in politics, an instructive starting point can be found in the various counterfactuals implied when dyadic meta-accuracy succeeds or fails (Figure 10.3).[1] In cell 1, citizens have overall trust in a particular

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[1]   I discount mistrust here as the least valenced of the trust concepts, which is conceived as neither affirming nor ending political relationships in the same way that trust and distrust might do.

		Trustee (e.g. elected politician)	
		Feels trusted	*Feels distrusted*
Trustor (e.g. voter)	*Trusts the trustee*	1. **Perceptual alignment**	2. **Perceptual divergence**
	Distrusts the trustee	3. **Perceptual divergence**	4. **Perceptual alignment**

Figure 10.3   Perceptual alignment and divergence in political trust relations

elite or group of elites (e.g. politicians), and those elites accurately perceive that trust. Cell 1 is to some extent the gold standard, given a general presumption in the felt trust literature that perceptual accuracy improves relational outcomes and perceptual inaccuracy harms those outcomes. Existing research in non-political organisations shows, for instance, that this kind of perceptual alignment produces lower rates of relationship conflict as leaders perpetrate fewer violations of employee expectations (Campagna et al., 2020). This reasoning also translates into politics, where existing research makes the assumption that (a) voters will be more receptive to and supportive of bold or difficult policy decisions when they trust political leaders, and (b) politicians will be more likely to commit to democratic norms or sound governance strategies when public trust is high (e.g. Stoker and Evans, 2019). At the same time, political commentators and scholars alike have started to question the utility of political trust when it is blindly placed in undemocratic elites who exploit it for nefarious ends (for a discussion, see Norris, 2022). There are good reasons, therefore, to be circumspect about when and why perceptual alignment is and is not desirable.

Perceptual alignment also occurs in cell 4, where citizens have overall distrust of particular elites and those same elites accurately perceive that distrust. In an ideal scenario, this type of perceptual alignment would lead to responsive behaviours as distrusted politicians seek to regain public trust by correcting prior mistakes, reinstalling standards in public life, or seeking to ameliorate public dissatisfaction with particular services or policies. Again, however, perceptual alignment may not always be normatively desirable. In non-political organisations, research suggests that relationship conflict can be highest when leaders' felt trust and employees' trust are

negative and aligned, resulting in less transparent communication and decreased cooperation (Campagna et al., 2020). In politics, too, a well-developed literature already highlights politicians' proclivity for blame avoidance behaviours (e.g. Hood, 2010) as well as the populist turn that can occur in elite rhetoric during low-trust episodes (e.g. Mauk, 2020).

Nevertheless, if we recall the evaluative model of political trust presented in Figure 10.1 and Figure 10.2, there remains more reason to expect that cells 2 and 3, characterised by perceptual divergence, might produce spirals of distrust as elites act in ways that are disproportionate or non-responsive to the actual levels of trust and distrust placed in them. In the case of cell 3, for example, elites may take decisions that ask too much of citizens when they are not willing to accept vulnerability, or alternatively, elites may complacently take liberties that distrustful citizens see as conceited or contravening the levelling spirit of democracy. In the case of cell 2, elites may either waste the opportunity to enact bold, strategic, or long-term policy decisions in the belief that the public is unprepared or unwilling to accommodate such choices, or they may seek to depoliticise or obfuscate their actions for fear of public reprisal. Returning to the definition of political trust put forward in this book, perceptual divergence may heighten the likelihood that elites act independently without censure and in spite of uncertainty, either through an unfounded sense of citizen validation to do so (cell 3) or a misplaced sense of citizen disapproval that needs to be circumvented (cell 4). To draw on Hirschman's (1972) classic dissection of elite–citizen relations, citizens can respond to these relational norm violations by either *voicing* their concerns through protest and complaint or *exiting* from the relationship altogether by withdrawing support for the politician, their party, and the policies they [seek to] enact.

The matrix in Figure 10.3 provides a useful reference point for future comparative research, which might now ask:

FRQ9: Which countries fall into each cell of the matrix, and what are the key characteristics of their electoral systems and political cultures?

FRQ10: What are the agentic, institutional, or structural arrangements for elite–citizen interaction in countries in each state of alignment or divergence?

FRQ11: To what extent do states of perceptual alignment and divergence lead to positive and negative outcomes, respectively, and are these findings consistent across comparative case studies?

FRQ12: When and why do countries move between states of perceptual alignment and divergence, if at all?

Empirical evidence from the United Kingdom

In an exploratory project on dyadic meta-accuracy carried out between 2020 and 2022, local and national UK politicians were recruited to complete a 24-item battery of inverted trust judgements at roughly the same time as a sample of the UK public completed an ordinary version of that same inventory about both MPs and local councillors (see Weinberg, 2023, for sampling and methodology). Responses to the items on these surveys loaded onto three latent factors of [felt] trust, [felt] distrust, and [felt] mistrust. An example is presented in Table 10.2.

Data gathered from this project point to a distinct trust gap between politicians and citizens that, like politicians' estimates of public opinion on individual policies, exists regardless of whether or not they are compared to party voters or the general public (Figure 10.4). To be precise, UK politicians' average perceptions of public trust were substantially higher than the public's actual trust, and their perceptions of public distrust were substantially lower. UK politicians also perceived higher levels of public mistrust than were actually the case, which suggests that politicians harbour inflated notions of how much the public monitors them. Contrary to parallel evidence that elite misperceptions of public policy opinions arise from unequal exposure to different subconstituencies of citizens with opinions that do not reflect the median voter (e.g. Pereira, 2021), there was no evidence in the current project that trust perceptions follow the same trend. For example, UK politicians were no more likely to misperceive the political trust placed in them by blue-collar workers than white-collar workers in brokerage occupations adjacent to politics with similar socio-economic characteristics (Weinberg, 2023, chapter 2).

After completing the survey battery of felt trust, the majority of UK politicians (*c.*80% of the sample) reported that they had been thinking about *all voters in their electoral constituency or ward* when answering each question. Trust perceptions may, therefore, take on a geographical component in democratic politics that demands more fine-grained dyadic mapping of politicians and voters within specific electoral units. This level of data specificity is extremely hard to achieve at scale without a huge amount of resources. In the current project, just 24 UK MPs made themselves identifiable in a way that allowed for matched comparisons with constituency-level data gathered slightly earlier in Wave 17 of the British Election Study (BES). These MPs responded to a single follow-up question about felt trust ('How much do your local constituents trust you?'), which was then compared to a parallel question fielded to constituents

Table 10.2   An example of two items for the public and elites of 'felt distrust'

An item tapping felt distrust fielded to politicians	The parallel item fielded to the public
The public think you are happy to make promises at elections, but then forget them afterwards.	MPs are happy to make promises at elections, but then forget them afterwards.
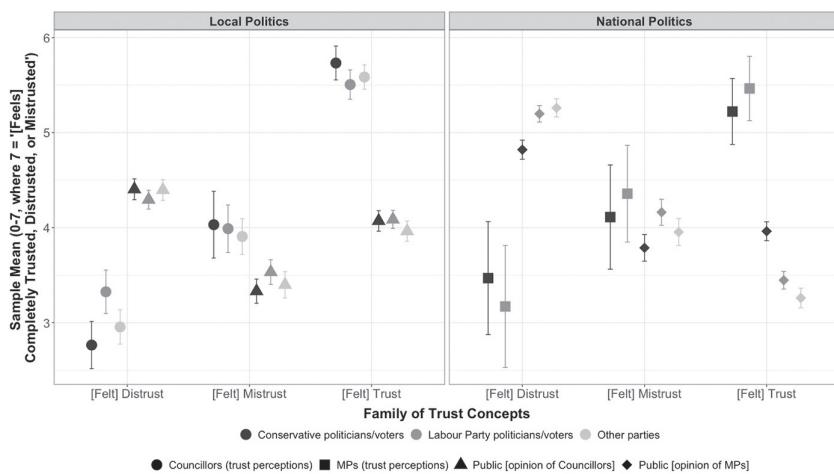
Notes: Weighted means with 95% confidence intervals; total N = 298 (politicians) and 1145 (public).

Source: Data collected for Leverhulme Trust ECF 2020/21.

Figure 10.4   Trust gaps in UK politics: average levels of political trust, distrust and mistrust (and elite perceptions thereof) in the UK
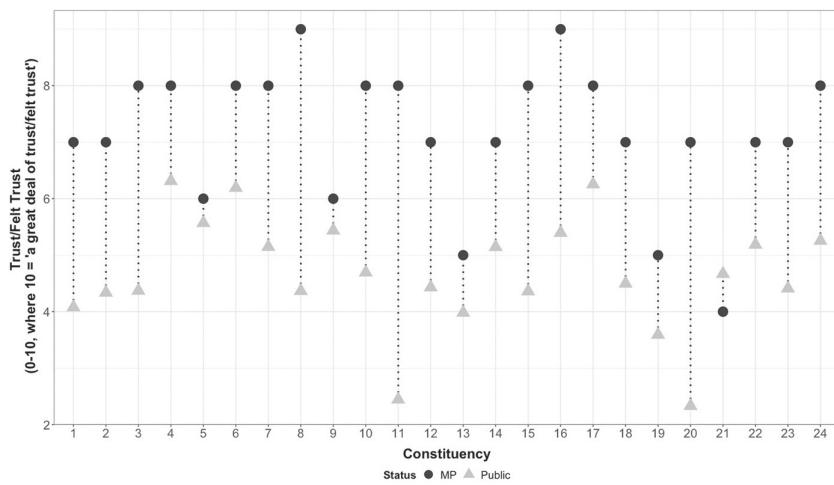
Source: Leverhulme Trust ECF 2020/21: Subsample of UK MPs (N = 24); British Election Study 2019: Subsample of UK citizens (N = 306; 10–20/constituency).

Figure 10.5   Constituency level trust gaps in the UK: the average trust of citizens in their local MP to that MP's felt trust

in the BES ('How much trust do you have in the MP in your local constituency?'). As illustrated in Figure 10.5, the conclusion remains the same as before. Even when asked to estimate the trust of their local constituents, politicians overestimate how trust-worthy they are seen to be in the eyes of those they represent. Of this small sample, 22/24 MPs also reported higher rates of felt trust than the actual trust of constituents *who voted for them*.

These results provide indicative evidence that democratic politics in the UK is in a state of perceptual divergence when it comes to political trust. As future researchers seek to replicate these substantive findings across time, location, and different tiers of governance, they might also ask several pertinent methodological questions.

FRQ13: How much added value can be gained from using multi-item instruments over single items when measuring trust perceptions? How big are the trade-offs in terms of internal and external validity?

FRQ14: Is it possible to devise new multi-item instruments of trust perceptions that mirror existing batteries of public trust in large international surveys and field these to elites simultaneously?

FRQ15: To what extent might trust perceptions be measured implicitly using observational metrics or proxy behaviours in order to boost sample sizes?

FRQ16: How can researchers account for or capture the different heuristic targets underpinning elite responses to questions about trust perceptions without fielding multiple versions of the same instrument?

The felt trust–behaviour link

If perceptual divergence matters for democratic politics, then we need to be certain that trust perceptions factor into politicians' behavioural choices. At the start of this chapter, I suggested that there are good theoretical reasons to believe this is the case if, indeed, felt trust affects politicians' risk calculations in office. When the risks attached to a particular governing decision or behaviour are high, then the felt trust concepts might provide a conscious or unconscious bellwether of anticipated reactions among relevant audiences that, in turn, helps politicians to resolve uncertainty in situations with multiple behavioural options. By unpicking this logic, it is possible to better discern between when and why the positive and negative potentialities of perceptual alignment and divergence might arise. In what follows, I make a first step towards doing this by drawing on the trust-as-heuristic thesis.

In existing work on *citizens'* trust, there is already a well-established seam of research suggesting that trust acts as a heuristic for resolving uncertainty about whether or not to support a policy or vote for a party, and that the strength of this trust–behaviour

link depends on (a) the amount of risk implicit in a decision, and (b) the nature of possible losses that are being risked in that decision (e.g. Hetherington, 2005; Rudolph, 2017). When trust in the architect of those policies or the leader of a party is high, and distrust is low, then citizens are more likely to accept vulnerability. There are good reasons to believe that this conceptual logic might travel to the present discussion of felt trust. On one hand, a number of empirical studies in recent years have demonstrated that politicians are just as likely as citizens to rely on heuristics when faced with too much information, poor quality information, or high levels of uncertainty (see Vis, 2019; Sheffer and Loewen, 2019; Weinberg, 2022). On the other hand, politicians at all levels carry out a job that is beset by personal and professional risks. The backbench politician representing a marginal seat faces individualised electoral risks every time they defy their party whip or vote with the whip in favour of unpopular policies. The minister signing off on public health reforms or acts of war faces drastic risks for the public they govern. In sum, the art of politics is interwoven with the ontological fabric of risk.

If the trust-as-heuristic thesis holds in reverse, then politicians who feel trusted will be more likely to accept personal or public risks and politicians who feel distrusted or mistrusted will be more likely to overweight and avoid those risks. To elaborate, felt trust may reassure politicians that they are acting in line with public expectations and with public support, which in turn increases the likelihood (or anticipation) of positive character attributions in moments of success and decreases the likelihood (or anticipation) of blame attribution in moments of failure. In contrast, felt distrust may reduce politicians' internal efficacy and their motivation to take *any* action (in the knowledge that the public is already cynically disengaged) or heighten their expectation of punishment if things go wrong (i.e. intense loss aversion). Finally, felt mistrust may lead politicians to deliberate over decisions for longer or shy away from risks where they can be avoided in the belief that their words and actions are being tightly scrutinised and thus require added justification. As Dalton (2004, p.200) suggests, 'politicians' behaviour will change if they confront a more sceptical public'.

These propositions are offered as a starting point for future researchers who might build them into analytical accounts of political outcomes. In doing so, researchers might ask:

FRQ17: To what extent and under what conditions do trust perceptions influence elite behaviour in politics?

FRQ18: What are the salient features of any single situation or choice set that heighten or diminish the effects of elite trust perceptions in politics?

In response to FRQ18, researchers might consider 'what' is being decided, 'who' is likely to be affected, 'how' much risk is involved, 'what' is the primary reference point for that risk (public/policy or personal/electoral), and 'to what extent' is the decision process visible to relevant account holders (e.g. citizens) with authority over the office- or vote- success of the decision-maker (e.g. politician).

As with politicians' dyadic meta-accuracy, there has only been one exploratory attempt to test this causal logic. Between 2020 and 2022, samples of politicians in the UK, Canada, and South Africa were invited to participate in a series of survey experiments about risky decision-making (see Weinberg, 2022; 2023). The results supported the assumption that trust perceptions act as a heuristic for politicians in high-risk scenarios with uncertain outcomes. Specifically:

1. Felt trust influenced politicians' behaviour when facing risky decisions defined by policy outcomes. In particular, high levels of felt trust reduced risk-taking that might negatively impact the public.
2. Felt distrust influenced politicians' behaviour when facing risky decisions defined by individual electoral outcomes. In particular, high levels of felt distrust reduced risk-taking that might negatively impact politicians' career prospects.
3. Felt distrust increased politicians' preferences for blame avoidance behaviours. This included agency strategies (e.g. delegating high-risk decisions to third parties), policy strategies (e.g. supporting legislation to get on the right side of popular opinion in spite of lacking personal conviction), and presentational strategies (e.g. problem and responsibility denial when things go wrong).

These findings highlight the appraisive potential of the felt trust concepts as a tool for understanding elite political behaviour. At the same time, they demand replication in a wider range of comparative contexts and across a greater number of political scenarios, ideally using observational behaviours rather than survey experiments.

Conclusion

In contrast to the dominant perspective in political science that simply sees elites as the object of citizens' trust, I argue that there are compelling reasons to give more attention to elites' perceptions of that trust. Adding to work in Psychology, I present the family of felt trust concepts as a conceptual and analytical framework for opening up a black box that might help scholars to close debates about when political trust matters and when it does not. Indeed, if we are interested in the outcomes of political trust, and we accept that trust perceptions play a role in shaping the way that political elites behave, then a research agenda into trust perceptions might define a new and fruitful approach to this field of study.

The study of elite trust perceptions remains in its inception and, as such, there is a great deal of ground to be covered. The FRQs offered throughout this chapter are intended as a catalyst for this work. Moving forward, scholars might start by seeking to *replicate and expand exploratory work on politicians' dyadic meta-accuracy* across different countries and regime types. Others may focus on much-needed research into *the predictors and consequences of elite trust perceptions in politics*. Here, researchers may investigate the relative importance of politicians' information environment versus individual differences, or seek to identify a range of political behaviours that are visible, measurable, and suitable for studying the impact of trust perceptions 'in the

field'. Others may consider the *meaning and measurement of trust perceptions* themselves. There is evidently more work to be done to hone the theoretical content of the felt trust concepts, and, in turn, qualitative research is needed to establish whether these concepts live in the minds of participants as well as the pages of academic texts.

There are, undoubtedly, FRQs that have not been considered in this chapter. For instance, this chapter has focused on vertical trust relationships between politicians and voters, but there are good reasons to believe that trust perceptions might hold as much or more importance for the outcomes of relationships *between politicians* (e.g. in parliamentary committees), *between politicians and civil servants* (e.g. in local, regional, or national departments), or even *between politicians and bureaucrats in multinational settings* (e.g. the EU, NATO, UN). Each of these relationships might, in and of itself, define a line of scholarly inquiry. Indeed, it is possible that the felt trust concepts can help to explain when elites do and do not successfully overcome the professional and personal vulnerabilities inherent in collaboration and compromise.

Finally, research into the felt trust concepts might offer *new perspectives on solutions to the current crisis of trust* documented in democracies around the world. Presupposing that elite perceptions of trust are out of step with public opinion, then how might we as researchers intercede to promote perceptual alignment (and when is that actually desirable)? Here there is enormous potential to think creatively about interventions at the micro level (e.g. street-level interactions between elites and citizens), the meso level (e.g. public engagement processes within political institutions), and the macro level (e.g. the application and regulation of new and old media) that might reduce the gap between actual trust and felt trust within a variety of vertical and horizontal relationships.

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11

Political trust, policy preferences, and the heuristic mechanism

Malcolm Fairbrother and Daniel Devine

There would be little research about political trust if scholars did not consider it important, in the sense of being consequential. Research on political trust often points to implications for outcomes from democratic stability to electoral participation and preferences over policy. Yet, compared to research on its causes, research on the effects of political trust is notably underdeveloped. As Zmerli and van der Meer (2017: 8) put it, "the empirical consequences of political trust are the biggest deficiency in the trust literature". In the face of this deficiency, this chapter discusses potential directions for future research on political trust's consequences, responding to the limitations of prior studies which we identify.

We focus in particular on the consequences of political trust for policy preferences and the theory that most empirical studies have evoked in articulating *why* people's political trust influences their attitudes towards different policies: that political trust operates as a *heuristic*. A heuristic is an informational shortcut, or a simple decision rule, and research in cognitive science has shown definitively that people rely on heuristic principles to "reduce the complex tasks of assessing probabilities and predicting values to simpler judgmental operations" (Tversky and Kahneman 1974: 1124). The core idea is that many of the opinions people hold, about public policies or anything else, are not based on full information, and so people rely on shortcuts to form their opinions. Political trust, a variety of scholars have suggested, is one such heuristic.

As we discuss below, however, the theory that political trust influences policy preferences by operating as a heuristic is significantly underspecified. Arguably, it is so vague that – at least so far – it should not be considered a theory at all. Yet many studies have found relationships – including when controlling for a wide variety of other variables – between individuals' political trust and their policy attitudes, and no convincing alternative theory has emerged to explain *how* political trust has such effects. The problem is not that the theory of political trust as a heuristic is implausible. Rather, the theory proposes a number of different plausible mechanisms, a diversity of possible things it may mean to say that political trust operates as a "heuristic". These are often contradictory, and it is because the theory is articulated in these very different ways that it is in urgent need of clarification.

The concern with political trust's consequences derives in part from the fact that, as we elaborate below, a deficit of public trust appears to be contributing to serious failings of contemporary governance. These include, perhaps most notably, a lack of policy measures for mitigating climate change and other types of environmental harm (e.g., Fairbrother et al. 2021). Studies have also suggested that political trust shapes attitudes towards trade policies (Macdonald 2024), immigration (Jeannet, Heidland, and Ruhs 2023; Macdonald 2021), and the welfare state (Garritzmann, Neimanns, and Busemeyer 2023; Goubin and Kumlin 2022). Looking back, variable levels of political trust in different societies, and in different institutions within societies, had substantial consequences for the management of the Covid-19 pandemic (Devine et al. 2021, 2024).

In this chapter, we therefore review the variety of ways that political trust has been said to operate as a heuristic, with consequences for public attitudes and policy support. We draw attention to the inconsistencies, point out why it matters which mechanism is in fact operating, and suggest ways that future research could test which proposed mechanism(s) are correct. If political trust is scarce, and political trust is necessary for governments to take action to address major contemporary social challenges, it would be extremely useful to know exactly how best to intervene in the process by which political trust shapes policy attitudes.

We illustrate what is at stake by discussing attitudes towards long-term policymaking. Some articulations of the "trust-as-heuristic theory" emphasise sacrifice, suggesting that (higher) political trust makes individuals more prepared to sacrifice for the benefit of others. If that is true, then political trust should clearly influence public actions and policies whose benefits will be enjoyed far in the future, by those who come after us. Our relationship to future generations is purely one-directional, with people today choosing how much to give to people in the future – with no possibility that they can pay us back. Other versions of the theory focus on risk, and some research suggests that people perceive policies as riskier insofar as they must wait longer for the policies' promised benefits – whether benefits for others or themselves – to materialise (and therefore increase the possibility that they'll never materialise at all). There is therefore a small but rapidly growing literature on the consequences of political trust for such long-term policy preferences. We discuss promising ways forward for this literature, particularly given our arguments about the ambiguity of how political trust operates as a heuristic.

Finally, in the latter part of the chapter, we also briefly argue for sharpening the methods used in studies of political trust's consequences. Causal identification could be improved, such as by exploiting longitudinal data and/or natural experiments.

Political trust as a heuristic

Many studies have suggested that differences in individuals' attitudes towards many kinds of public policies reflect their variable levels of political trust. Most often, studies suggest that political trust shapes policy attitudes by acting as a heuristic.

While influential, however, this theory is unclear, if not contradictory, insofar as scholars have invoked it in a variety of inconsistent ways. In some versions, people who trust a given *messenger* are likelier to trust a given *message*. Other versions emphasise that political trust is specifically relevant for an individual's attitudes towards policies that entail a risk and/or sacrifice to them (as in the case of long-term policymaking that we discuss below). And still others suggest that the heuristic applies to the state as a set of agencies and institutions, and people's confidence in them as a policy "delivery system", with greater confidence in the system leading to support for widening the scope of its activity. These interpretations of the trust-as-heuristic theory lead to varying, potentially even contradictory empirical expectations. For instance, how should we expect individuals with higher political trust to assess a policy entailing higher public spending and public sector activity – if they are hearing from politicians they trust who call for less spending and activity?

We discuss these four perspectives, or interpretations, of the theory. We note examples of studies that have clearly invoked each interpretation, provide some elaboration of the thinking behind the perspective, and note their differing implications. After discussing the four perspectives, we specify the contradictions among them and point to ways of assessing them against each other.

(1) The first sense in which the literature suggests that political trust acts as a heuristic is that people trust a given political message insofar as they trust its source – the messenger. As a review by Rudolph (2017: 200) puts it, political trust "represents an expression of citizens' willingness to accept government promises about the future consequences of a policy". Or, in Hetherington's (2005: 51) words: "Other things equal, if people perceive the *architect* of policies as untrustworthy, they will reject its policies; if they consider it trustworthy, they will be more inclined to embrace them" (emphasis added). The focus, then, is a specific agent or set of agents advocating, making claims about, and/or designing policies. From this perspective, political trust is very much epistemic, focused on the credibility of information which people judge based on what they think of the actors providing it. Such an interpretation of theory is sensible given that in many areas of life, not just public affairs, people decide what to believe based on their perceptions of messengers' credibility (Brewer and Ley 2013). That the *source* of a message can influence whether the message is trusted is demonstrated, for example, by the fact that, after Democrats gained control of the US government during the Covid-19 pandemic, Republicans grew less trusting in statements from federal scientific institutions (Hatton et al. 2022: 94). Likewise, policy preferences have been shown to reflect party loyalties and the statements of prominent figures to whom people look for guidance in deciding their own preferences (Barber and Pope 2019; Swire et al. 2017).

(2) Particularly since "trusting" applies to situations or relationships with uncertain outcomes (as per the definition offered in the Introductory Chapter to this book), many articulations of the theory suggest that political trust is particularly relevant for people's attitudes towards policies that entail a risk to them and/or imply some kind of sacrifice. Rudolph (2017: 201) thus summarises that: "The trust-as-heuristic thesis anticipates that political trust will increase public support for risk-laden policies". Whether a person believes claims by a policy's advocate is therefore still relevant here, but the bigger question (or at least the dimension which this mechanism focuses on) is whether a given policy represents a risk or not. Risky policies are usually considered to be those with uncertain payoffs or consequences, and different policies present different degrees of risk to different people.

(3) Third, alternatively, some versions focus more on sacrifice. Hetherington and Husser (2012: 313) say: "The need for trust is particularly important theoretically when people are asked to make sacrifices for programs from which they do not perceive they benefit". Or, as Hetherington (2005: 4) says: "People do not need to trust the government much when they benefit from it. Instead, people need to trust the government when they pay the costs but do not receive the benefits." Garritzmann, Neimanns, and Busemeyer (2023: 199) similarly note that "trust matters when policy proposals affect citizens' self-interest, for example, imposing more costs than benefits on them".

There are at least two problems here. First, *sacrifice* is not the same as *risk*. The former may be certain (we may be guaranteed to lose something to benefit others) whereas the latter is about uncertainty (we may stand to benefit from a policy, but with some chance of not benefiting). Supporting a policy that one thinks will probably, but not certainly, benefit oneself is running a risk, but not (if one's expectations prove correct) sacrificing. Conversely, someone might support a policy that will beyond any reasonable doubt benefit others, though not themself. In that scenario, there is a sacrifice but no risk. In this reading, the politically trusting simply ascribe more value to policies that will benefit others, and political trust shapes support for policies which people expect will entail a net sacrifice for them – essentially, altruism.

The second issue is that perceptions, including of benefits, may also be relevant – not just the *real* costs and consequences of a given policy. Hetherington (2005: 10) says: "A key term in my definition [of political trust] is perceptions. People's view of government is far different than its actual performance would predict." From this perspective, the political trust-as-heuristic theory seems not to be only about policies that entail a risk or sacrifice: it's any policy whose net benefits or costs are or can be *perceived* differently depending on people's level of political trust. And the politically trusting "should foresee greater financial benefits to self and nation" (Rudolph 2017: 147). The theory may thus be that political trust shapes (accurate or inaccurate) perceptions, including of what is at stake for oneself, rather than reactions to objective policy attributes. If so, the key issue may be not just a person's willingness to make a sacrifice, but their very perception of whether something even is a sacrifice. Is the mechanism being willing to pay a price to benefit another? Being willing to pay a price to receive an eventual benefit to oneself (with the benefit being larger than the

cost)? Or about one's beliefs regarding what the price is? In the first case, we have a surprisingly non-selfish view of political preferences. In the second case, we're back to perceptions of risk. And in the fourth case, where do the beliefs come from?

(4) The fourth and final major interpretation of the theory is that political trust refers to beliefs about the capacity of the state to administer policies effectively. From this perspective, trust in political (and perhaps other) institutions shapes people's confidence that policies will "work". Even if people support the goals of certain policies, they may "not support the policies themselves because they do not believe that *the government is capable* of bringing about desired outcomes" (Hetherington 2005: 5, emphasis added). In other words, "individuals who are distrusting of governmental institutions are inclined to restrict the scope of the state's activities and spending" (Jeannet, Heidland, and Ruhs 2023: 428). The basic expectation is that individuals with higher political trust should be more positive about policies that expand the scope of government, whereas individuals with less trust are less likely to believe in the merits of the state as a policy "delivery system" (see also Hetherington and Husser 2012: 313). Whether people believe in the delivery system, and whether they think a policy will work, will shape what net benefits or sacrifice they anticipate for themselves from a policy, and so their probability of supporting it.

An implication of this is that individuals who would in fact benefit from a policy may, because of their low political trust, oppose the policy. Yet this is inconsistent with the third interpretation (that political trust is *only*, or at least *more*, relevant for policies that imply a sacrifice); it is also potentially at odds with the first interpretation, depending on who the policy messenger is and the relative levels of trust. Potentially, as discussed above, political trust shapes an individual's perception of whether a policy will entail a net sacrifice (in the sense of implying a larger cost than benefit for their household). As Hetherington and Husser (2012: 313) put it: "People must trust the government to think its programs will produce societal benefits and not waste resources". But that is not the same as saying, a priori, that the policy entails a sacrifice.

These four variants of the theory are not all contradictory, but they are in some cases, and they are at the very least inconsistent. And the theory lacks parsimony. In particular, the definition of "sacrifice" has been stretched very wide, to include even sacrifices that are "ideological" rather than material (e.g., Rudolph and Evans 2005). Policy changes can be ideologically costly in the sense that they might contravene individuals' ideological principles. Rudolph and Popp (2009) for example argue that the privatisation of pensions imposes "unbalanced ideological costs", which explains why (as they find) support for it among liberals is much stronger among those with high rather than low political trust, whereas among conservatives there is no such trust divide.

The theory that political trust matters because it makes people willing to sacrifice implies that policy preferences can be surprisingly altruistic. It implies that individuals may be highly other-oriented in their political preferences, quite at odds with more minimalistic conceptions of political actors as self-interested. Yet this implication has

scarcely been acknowledged, much less explored in depth. Moreover, what should we make of statements (such as by American conservatives from Ronald Reagan onwards) that "government is the problem"? In other words, what if one trusts a messenger whose message is *not* to trust public agencies and institutions? For example, individuals supporting George W. Bush when he enacted sweeping tax cuts likely trusted him, but not the state in another sense. What if we trust a messenger on a policy that entails sacrifice, but not risk, and implemented by a (perceived to be) competent delivery system? Similarly, American progressives advocating the abolishment of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency, or to defund the police, clearly hope the public will not trust these institutions – but to trust other public institutions, or the politicians calling for the abolition. The implications of such tensions are uncertain.

It would be useful for future research to unpack in more detail what exactly politically trusting and distrusting individuals believe about key political figures in their countries, prominent public institutions, and the likely costs and benefits of different past/ existing and potential/future policies. Survey experiments could also vary the messenger articulating a given message, to see what that does to the views of individuals with different background levels of political trust. Or they could manipulate the epistemological status of claims about the risks or sacrifices that a policy implies, in order to unpack the different impacts of changing the risks or sacrifices taken as given, versus the degree to which people with different levels of trust accept claims about risks and sacrifices. Above all, the theory that political trust operates as a heuristic needs (re)specifying. For example, it might be possible to save the theory by reformulating it as conditional, with different relationships operational in different contexts. Or it may be that some variants need to be discarded.

Political trust and long-term policy preferences

The ambiguity of extant claims that political trust acts as a heuristic can be seen when considering attitudes towards long-term policymaking. Given the different variants of the theory, how would we expect people's political trust to influence their views of policies or political reforms meant to improve the lives of people far in the future, potentially at some expense to people alive today?

Some challenges that governments need to confront, like climate change and population ageing, require policies that will impose immediate costs on people for the sake of future gains. (Expenditures on large infrastructure, for example, require a long-term perspective for them to be sensible.) In the small but rapidly growing literature on public attitudes towards long-term policymaking, studies have shown that individuals with higher political trust are more supportive of such policies (Jacobs and Matthews 2012; Fairbrother et al. 2021).

Many people's mixed feelings about such policies may reflect that people tend to be myopic and impatient, having a cognitive bias in favour of short-term benefits over

long-term consequences (Healy and Malhotra 2009). Yet political trust may also explain why people seem to have such biases: being confident about policies with longer-term payoffs presumes trust in policymakers' ability and intentions to fulfil their commitments (Jamróz-Dolińska et al. 2023). Conversely, Jacobs and Matthews (2012) argue, apparent biases towards short-term policies are largely due to low trust: people doubt that politicians will deliver on their long-term promises. And studies have shown that attitudes towards the distribution of benefits and costs in time are highly related to uncertainty about the achievement of promised benefits (e.g., Frederick 2003). If people are more confident in their government, they are more willing to pay a short-term price for the sake of longer-term benefits (Garritzmann, Neimanns, and Busemeyer 2023). Rapeli et al. (2021) also argue that individuals with more political trust are more future-oriented.

Future policy preferences are characterised by uncertainty regarding both processes of long-term policy causation and long-term policy commitments (Jacobs and Matthews 2012). In other words, long-term policy success often depends on future social and economic conditions, as well as the policy commitment of future office holders, neither of which is fully (if at all) knowable in advance. Political trust can help individuals cope with uncertainty and make them more likely to "take a leap of faith" when it comes to future policy support. As such, political trust lends political leaders greater temporal room to manoeuvre and affects citizens' willingness to accept short-term sacrifices for (promises of) long-term policy gains. Still, the literature is thus far just beginning to investigate the potential influence of political trust on long-term policy preferences, broadly focusing on climate change and social infrastructure.

Political trust may have such a strong impact on long-term policy preferences that people assess future-oriented policies very differently than economists think they should. Specifically, individuals who expect future living standards to rise – which is equivalent to saying that future generations will be better off than us – are more willing to sacrifice for those future generations compared to individuals who expect future living standards to fall (Fairbrother et al. 2021). Sacrificing for those wealthier than oneself makes little sense to economists, who recommend discounting future benefits to the wealthier. But individuals with greater political trust appear to be both more optimistic about future living standards and more convinced that a sacrifice will actually yield benefits.

A more comprehensive theoretical and empirical research endeavour is required to investigate the role of political trust for long-term policy preferences on a wider range of policy areas. A crucial step is to resolve, or at least more cleanly specify, the issues that we have detailed above regarding the trust-as-heuristic theory, before dealing with the specifics of *long-term* policymaking and the different policy areas (such as climate policy, infrastructure and social care). At the same time, how does the trust-as-heuristic theory – or one of its variants – relate to existing models determining policy preferences, such as a more basic cost–benefit approach, one rooted in altruism, or even a fear of crime (e.g., Rueda and Stegmueller 2019)? These issues are not purely academic but are core to potential interventions. If the core mechanism

is trust-in-messenger (the first potential interpretation of the heuristic theory), then bringing together a broad ideological base or several messengers is important for securing public support; if the mechanism is instead one about concerns about potential sacrifice, then a policy that spreads sacrifice unevenly (such as higher costs on the wealthier) may improve public support – and this returns again to the more established cost–benefit theory of policy support.

Empirically, such an endeavour would investigate the conditions under which political trust affects individual-level trade-offs in temporal policy preferences by diminishing the role of uncertainty – if we are to take that interpretation of the trust-as-heuristic theory as correct. More specifically, it would consider (at least) two types of factors. First, it should encompass *a wide spectrum of political trust objects*, both horizontally and vertically. This would range from incumbent office holders (legislators, party leaders, public officials); core institutions of liberal democracy and modern states (parliament, government, justice system, civil service, police, military); and democracy as a whole (Norris 2017). Vertically, one should also consider trust in *various levels of government and institutions*, including local, national and international institutions (such as the EU). It may well be the case that citizens' willingness to support long-term policies depends on who might be responsible for designing and/or implementing those policies, as well as the trade-offs between all of these (including decision-making complexity).

Second, it should allow for individual-level heterogeneity in the ability of political trust to overcome uncertainty for future policy preferences. In practice, this would mean that the role of political trust in shaping one's long-term policy preferences will vary across individuals and contexts, conditional on, for example, one's personal economic situation or the (personal) salience of a policy issue. Cognitive science research suggests that a scarcity of resources can limit people's attention to more immediate concerns, making them impatient and impulsive, and less able to set long-term goals (Mani et al. 2013). Hence, the role of political trust for long-term policy preferences might depend on a person's current situation. Being able to think about the long term may only be affordable and realistic for those with sufficient resources. In a different vein, one could imagine that having (grand)children affects one's investment in future policies (cf. Fairbrother et al. 2021). Such conditionality could be investigated through heterogeneous treatment effects in experimental designs on the role of trust for long-term policy preferences or with individual-level interaction effects in cross-national surveys. Alternatively, one could link register data to panel data to track changes in an individual personal (social or financial) situation and study its effect on the relationship between political trust and long-term policy support.

Methods for the study of political trust's consequences

Though distinct from what we have focused on thus far, another suggestion we would make for future work is to broaden methodologically. The issues discussed above are not only theoretical, but are also methodological, in the sense that, in the real world,

they are going to be very hard to isolate. Most studies of political trust's consequences for policy attitudes have employed cross-sectional survey data; a handful have used panel data (e.g., Goubin and Kumlin 2022; Devine and Valgarðsson 2024); more recently, some have moved to experimental methods (e.g., Fairbrother 2019; Peyton 2020; Devine et al. 2024; Macdonald 2021, 2024). This should be encouraged: it is not clear whether key relationships between trust and outcomes are causal, in the sense that changing trust would lead to changes in some other outcome, which is important for understanding the importance of trust and the necessity of increasing trust. For example, we should also acknowledge that it is also possible that political trust correlates with distinct beliefs about policies' costs and/or benefits, because they are both shaped by some underlying factor. The politically trusting may be more intelligent and/or educated (Hooghe, Marien, and de Vroome 2012), and so understand why apparent costs may not be real costs (e.g., taxes, rising cost to polluters), and apparent benefits may not be real benefits (e.g., subsidies). Similarly, trust and support for long-term policymaking may well be confounded by a more generally optimistic or altruistic disposition: those who are more optimistic are likely more trusting *and* more willing to think costs will be low and benefits high. Untangling these relationships is an important next step.

It would be useful to coordinate experimental analyses cross-nationally, organised by independent research teams, to provide a broader understanding of the (causal) consequences of trust. We can think of two types of experiments: ones that manipulate trust to study its downstream consequences and ones that manipulate the outcome variables of interest (such as the time horizon of a policy or its implied costs) to test how policy support is moderated by (non-manipulated) trust. These may yield similar or different results, and both are worth exploring. In the shorter term, it would also help to identify relevant experimental manipulations and outcomes of interest. Second, it would also be constructive to collaborate on the pooling and analysis of panel data. Put simply, whilst cross-sectional and correlational designs are still important and of fundamental use, we encourage researchers to dig deeper into understanding whether the many relationships found so far are causal or if temporal dynamics have been understudied.

Conclusions

This chapter has identified unresolved limitations in the literature on the consequences of political trust for policy attitudes and pointed to ways forward in light of them. We believe such research would be valuable: social scientists care about political trust in part because it has consequences, yet there has been relatively little theoretical and empirical research on some of those consequences. One partial exception is research on policy attitudes, but, as we have argued, the literature has been vague about how and why exactly political trust influences policy attitudes. Saying that political trust operates as a heuristic has been a common way of explaining why political trust shapes policy attitudes. But this theory, if it even is a theory, requires clarification and more precise specification. Is political trust about the perceived credibility

of policymakers articulating policy proposals for some change in the state's activities? Is it about people's sense of whether a sacrifice on their part will be worth it – whether for themselves or others? Is it about someone's sense of the degree to which a potential policy will even entail a sacrifice? Or is it about people's confidence that the state can, generally, do things well (competently, cost-effectively and without corruption)? Though these interpretations are not necessarily contradictory, in practice they can be. What would an individual with high or low political trust think, for example, if a policymaker were to advocate that the state do less in some area, on the grounds that the state's existing activity in that area is not yielding benefits that exceed the costs? (A particularly salient question in the age of Donald Trump's so-called Department of Government Efficiency.)

There are potentially significant practical implications for actors seeking to increase public support for potentially important policies, such as with respect to environmental protection. Should such actors focus on changing (a) public perceptions of the credibility of the policy's advocates, (b) perceptions of the policy's costs and benefits, (c) views about whether people should accept some sacrifice entailed by the policy, or (d) people's confidence in the abilities of state institutions to design and implement the policy?

In future research, since different theories of how political trust may operate as a heuristic have different testable implications, it would be useful to investigate experimentally what difference it makes if:

- The policy advocate/messenger varies. How much does someone's support for a policy differ if they hear an endorsement of it by a trusted source? (Alternatively, the trustworthiness of a given source could also be experimentally manipulated.)
- The level of sacrifice or cost entailed by a policy varies.
- Alternatively, insofar as individuals' political trust can itself be manipulated (as in the experiments by Macdonald 2021, 2024) what happens to individuals' assessments of a given policy's likely costs or benefits? (And from there, their support?)
- The riskiness of the policy, or the probability of it yielding benefits, varies. What difference does it make if the average expected payoffs remain the same, but the variance of actual payoffs increases?
- The delivery system varies. What difference does it make if different specific state institutions, or even non-state institutions, are said to be involved in a policy's implementation?

Norris (2022) has recently argued for taking more seriously the problem of excessive political trust. In some contexts, excessive trust in political authorities is facilitating undesirable state activities, whether mass surveillance in China, Putin's war on Ukraine, or Trump's challenges to the rule of law. (On the issue of trust in non-democratic states, see Mauk, Chapter 9 in this book.) But in much of the world, the problem is the opposite. People are very cynical about the operation of government, which may lead them not to support the expansion of government activities that experts would dearly like to see. To address some key challenges of contemporary governance, it

would be useful to intervene in the process by which such cynicism leads people not to support such activities. If people are excessively politically trusting, on the other hand, that may be a problem above all because people are placing their trust in politicians who are advocating against such activities.

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12

The macro-consequences of political trust

Viktor Valgarðsson and Tom van der Meer

Political trust is widely regarded as essential for the survival and flourishing of democratic societies. Recent analyses of the political trust literature have consistently observed a "widespread conviction that a reservoir of political trust helps preserve fundamental democratic achievements in times of economic, social and political crises" (van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017: 1). Indeed, Jack Citrin and Laura Stoker (2018: 61) wrote that "interest in political trust rests largely on beliefs about its consequences for the effectiveness of government and democratic stability." It echoes arguments raised decades earlier that a "democratic political system cannot survive for long without the support of a majority of its citizens" (Miller, 1974: 951). The assumption that political trust is important to the quality and even survival of democracy is, in short, foundational to the field.

Paradoxically, this deeply engrained assumption has not been put to the test directly, at least not at the macro level. Of course, scholars have increasingly studied the effects of low and/or declining political trust on citizens' behaviors and norms (see Devine, 2024 for an overview) but the supposed *macro*-level consequences of political trust on regime performance and longevity have remained a lacuna at the heart of political trust research. Interestingly, that lacuna, too, is well described in the literature (see Dalton, 2004: 162; Norris, 1999: 25; Torcal and Lago, 2006: 308; van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017: 8; Citrin and Stoker, 2018: 61). It may therefore seem puzzling that it has never been filled; that the macro-level consequences of political trust have barely been tested empirically.

The answer to that puzzle is fairly straightforward: it is very difficult to reliably test these assumptions. As Citrin and Stoker (2018: 61) wrote: "Scholars who study macro-level outcomes with aggregated survey data face the usual challenges of too many rival explanatory variables and too few degrees of freedom." The main dependent variables of interest—those pertaining to the quality, effectiveness, and endurance of democratic governance—have very limited variance. That variance exists primarily between countries, less so within countries over time. We are left with relatively few observations that are prone to differ in many other, related features (e.g., in their economic development and equality, levels of corruption, welfare provision, and political culture). This combination complicates the identification of the potential effect

of political trust. However, Citrin and Stoker (2018: 61) added: "This problem will diminish, if not disappear, as time series lengthen and cross-national survey research expands." While time series have not lengthened greatly in the years since those words were published, resources and methods for harmonizing and analyzing survey data from multiple surveys, to maximize the number and variation of observations in such analyses, have expanded considerably. Models of latent dynamic (trust) moods in countries over time and time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) analyses of within-country variances also offer promising ways forward.

Now that the long-awaited data sources and methods that allow us to test the macro-level consequences of political trust are in reach, we take stock of the theoretical insights and methodological demands put forward in the political science literature. This chapter will review fundamental expectations about the likely macro-consequences of political trust, before turning to the practical challenges facing researchers who are interested in testing those expectations—and how recent advances might offer ways to overcome those challenges in future research.

In short, we argue that the literature has three rivaling sets of claims on the consequences of political trust that are ripe for systematic testing, but expectations have hardly crystallized into consensus on the relevance of different types of political trust, on the mechanisms that would relate trust to these outcomes, or on the time it takes for negative effects to arise. Methodologically, despite practical advances, this topic of study will likely always be plagued by the interplay of competing explanations for the quality of democratic governance.

1.   Theories, mechanisms, and conditions

1.1   What macro-consequences?

We agree with the editors of this book that political trust refers to an individual's positive orientation that institutions and/or actors governing their polity would produce preferred outcomes even if left unattended (Easton, 1975; Gamson, 1968). This orientation, or belief, is in turn likely to influence people's interactions with those actors, which can ultimately have consequences for the polity itself. By and large, we can see three main lines of argumentation about the consequences of political trust for democratic governance. Yet, remarkably, each line of argumentation has not been systematically developed into a series of expectations on outcomes and mechanisms.

The first argument finds its origin in the 1970s and argues that the very survival of democratic regimes is at stake when citizens lose trust in politics (e.g., Miller, 1974; Easton, 1975; Crozier et al., 1975). David Easton (1975: 447–448) wrote that: "no set of incumbent authorities in modern mass societies could for long assume the responsibilities of making and implementing day-to-day decisions in a political system except under conditions of trust." From this perspective, low trust is an indicator of disengagement or active alienation, depressing citizens' willingness to cooperate with the government, driving them away from the democratic regime and its values and

possibly into the arms of autocratic alternatives. This argument reflects concerns within political science in the post-World War II decades, in response to the breakdown of democracy during the interbellum and the rise of protest movements in the 1960s and 1970s. The argument that declining political trust is a precursor of institutional breakdown still resonates in public scholarship to this very day (e.g., Krastev, 2012; De Querol, 2016; Mounk, 2018: 102). This argument suggests that the most fundamental outcome of trust in politics is the survival and longevity of democracy itself.

A second argument gained prominence in the 1990s. The so-called Silent Revolution—the generational shift that supposedly increased emphasis on "post-materialist" quality-of-life issues and decreased respect for authorities in developed democracies (Inglehart, 1977)—had not led to a breakdown of democracy but rather to a push for more democracy, and as the totalitarian alternative of communism fell in Eastern Europe, scholars realized that widespread political distrust need not be antithetical to democracy. Representative democracy appeared to be resilient to low political trust. Rather, political distrust may indicate the growth of a critical citizenry, pushing for more democracy to overcome the shortcomings of their existing regimes (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999). In this line of reasoning, declining trust may ultimately induce "far-reaching systemic change within the general category of representative democracy" (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1995: 7). The macro-level effects of political trust should be witnessed in the transformation of political systems, through changing electoral and party systems and the rise of participatory and direct democracy. In line with this expectation, recent studies suggest that political distrust is strongly related to support for democratic reforms of various types (Bertsou and Caramani, 2022; Ouattara and van der Meer, 2023), although it remains to be seen whether that support for reform helps explain regime reform.

A third line of argument is that political trust functions as the canary in the coal mine: a symptom of democratic malaise, rather than its cause (van der Meer and Zmerli, 2017; Newton, 2024). Declining political trust, in this perspective, is perhaps not the root cause of democratic survival or institutional reform, but a signal of other underlying processes that themselves directly drive such outcomes, such as dissatisfaction with particular elements of governance and society. This debate is partly conceptual (as trust can be seen as the attitude that mediates a causal relationship between more particularized dissatisfaction and these outcomes) but can also be made empirical: if controlling for those more particular attitudes consistently removes any effects of trust, we might be inclined to conclude that the relationship between trust and those outcomes was spurious.

In sum, political trust is traditionally thought to be the foundation of democratic regime stability, but more recent theories suggest that low levels of trust may improve democratic governance instead of undermining it—and still others argue that trust is merely a symptom, not a cause.

1.2   Who and what would drive these macro-changes?

Russell Dalton (2004: 200) wrote that "[c]itizens will act differently if they are skepti-
cal about their government, reporters will act differently, and politicians' behavior
will change if they confront a more skeptical public," illustrating the idea that macro-
level changes in democracy are ultimately driven by diverse political actors. We would
never expect levels of political trust to directly have any consequences on the macro
level: trust is an individual-level orientation that would always need to operate via
some change in behavior to have consequences for society. In this section, we review
the actors and actions that might relate political trust to democratic government.

A wide range of individual-level studies has focused on the implications of trust for
citizens' democratic behaviors (see Citrin and Stoker, 2018; Devine, 2024). First, dis-
trusting citizens are more likely to move toward new, radical, or even authoritarian
parties and candidates, such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the United
States (Dyck et al., 2018), third parties in Canada (Bélanger and Nadeau, 2005), the
UKIP party in the United Kingdom (Jennings et al., 2014), and populist parties in
the Netherlands (Rooduijn et al., 2016). This directly affects the composition of politi-
cal elites. Second, distrusting citizens are more likely to engage in elite-challenging
modes of participation such as demonstrations (Valgarðsson et al. 2022; Ouattara and
Steenvoorden, 2023), and to support direct-democratic modes of government such as
referendums (van der Meer and Janssen, 2025). Third, political distrust is associated
with less willingness to comply with the law and more tolerance of illegal activities
(Scholz and Lubell, 1998; Marien and Hooghe, 2011). In particular, political trust vis-
ibly affected citizens' compliance with public health rules and guidelines, including
willingness to be vaccinated, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Devine et al., 2024).
Distrust thereby makes the implementation of (new) policies more costly and less effec-
tive. Fourth, political trust is associated with important policy preferences, includ-
ing on redistributive policies (Rudolph and Evans, 2005), immigration (MacDonald,
2021), environmental policies (Fairbrother, 2017), racial policy (Hetherington and
Globetti, 2002), and foreign policy (Hetherington and Husser, 2012). Political trust
may facilitate progressive policies that rely on an interventionist state (Hetherington,
2005) and less progressive and interventionist policies can, in turn, undermine politi-
cal trust, risking a spiral of distrust (Haugsgjerd and Kumlin, 2020). In short, citizens
who lose trust in politics tend to challenge the status quo and resist government activ-
ity, thereby affecting the opportunity structures of elected politicians as well as the
capacity of the state.

The effects of trust may also be contextual: a society with high or low levels of politi-
cal trust may influence the actions of all citizens, regardless of whether their personal
levels of trust are high or low. A high trust polity is presumably an environment with
less antagonism and fewer transaction costs in dealing with the state and politics. This
potential contextual effect of political trust has to date found relatively little attention
in the political trust literature.

Alternatively, the macro-level impact of political trust may be driven by political elites who effectuate change via the policy process or set an example to the broader public. Politicians might *perceive* that citizens lack trust in them and adjust their decision-making accordingly: they might feel that they have less leeway to implement ambitious government policy and adjust their policies or even reform the policy process itself in response. Yet, despite firm attention in the literature to the relational nature of political trust, scholars have predominantly studied the subject (truster) and hardly studied the object (trustee). Only very recently, this gap has started to be filled: Weinberg (Chapter 10 in this book) interviewed politicians, showing that (perceptions of) political distrust affect politicians personally (raising stress levels) and publicly (blame avoidance). Steenvoorden et al. (2024) studied parliamentary debates in four countries between 1998 and 2018, concluding that distrust is hardly a substantial point of debate and mostly used strategically by politicians to praise their own platform and blame others. Both studies found evidence of elite misperceptions of mass trust, and little evidence that distrust induces elites to pursue far-reaching change. However, we are only beginning to understand how elite perceptions of trust might change their incentives and decision-making, whether consciously or not.

1.3   When is political (dis)trust consequential?

To the extent that political trust has an effect on political outcomes, these effects are likely to be conditional. We emphasize three such conditions.

First, effects are likely to depend on the extent to which democracy and democratic values are institutionally and culturally embedded (Mishler and Rose, 1997; Norris, 1999: 2). To the extent that democracies' institutions are firmly established, able to absorb societal transformation and difficult to dismantle, the effects of political distrust will likely be weaker. Similarly, to the extent that there is a reservoir of support for the democratic rules of the game, as well as the institutions that give shape to democracy, political distrust should be more likely to induce transformation within the system rather than of the system itself.

Second, the effects of low trust may depend on the type of untrusting orientation in question. We should not only distinguish between high and low trust, but also between (dis)trust that is dispositional (regardless of the performance of the trust object) and (dis)trust that is evaluative (an outcome of the object's performance). The former includes blind trust and blind (cynical) distrust, whereas the latter are better described as skepticism (cf. Norris, 2022) or "mistrust" (Jennings et al., 2021; Lenard, 2008). These may have different outcomes. Blind distrust is likely to harm the quality of democracy because it is unresponsive and does not truly incentivize trustworthy behavior. However, blind trust is not evidently a boon for democracy either: it would stimulate citizens' deference to political authorities and to far-reaching policy measures (Hetherington and Nelson, 2003), discouraging democratic accountability. Blind trust should reduce participation beyond ritualistic acts such as voting, because citizens would expect politicians to do what's right without their input. Blind distrust would also presumably reduce conventional participation, because politicians would be considered inherently corrupt and unresponsive. By contrast, skepticism is likely

to stimulate democracy, as it might keep citizens vigilant and boost political engage-ment (Lenard, 2008; Norris, 2022). Critical citizens' quest to set things right might also induce democratic reform (Dalton, 2004).

Third, the effects of trust are likely to depend on whether any declines are structural (and long-term) or sudden (and perhaps temporary). One problem with the political trust literature is its lack of a theory of time: we should expect different outcomes depending on the longevity of trust declines, but this conditionality has not been theorized in the literature. On the one hand, some effects of political trust may be visible swiftly. We may, for instance, consider that a short-term drop in political trust that coincides with elections may easily lead to a drop in electoral support for incum-bent (and perhaps other established) parties. Very sudden and substantial collapses of trust might also threaten the foundations of a political system; this has arguably hap-pened in Italy (Franklin and Van Spanje, 2012), Iceland (Önnudóttir et al., 2021), and Greece (Teperoglou and Tsatsanis, 2014), particularly after the 2008 financial crisis. However, barring such dramatic events, declining levels of trust are generally unlikely to immediately undermine any democratic regime or government: the mechanisms mentioned above would instead suggest that low trust would gradually erode the quality and robustness of government through increasing pressures such as citizen resistance to government laws and policies, increasing demands for political reform, recurring protest events, and growing electoral representation of more autocratic politicians. These consequences of trust for democratic governance should take many years to unfold, whereas the effects of trust on electoral outcomes and other discrete events (such as widespread protest and even rebellions) could be contemporaneous. To understand the effects of political trust, it will be important to pull conjunctural and structural trends apart, both in our theory and in empirical analyses.

2.   Methodological problems and demands

2.1   Testing great expectations

The literature thus leaves us with several relatively straightforward and important empirical expectations about the effects of political trust on the macro level, but also a lack of theory on the mechanisms and conditions that may produce these effects. How can we know if these expectations hold in reality? Bivariate associations are insuffi-cient. Those relationships might be spurious, confounded by other variables that cause both, and the causal relationship might go both ways. The fundamental predicament is that when we see patterns on the aggregate level, we don't know whether it's high political trust or any other shared factors (such as economic development and growth, democratic longevity, or quality of government) that might explain our dependent variable of interest. This entanglement of trust with other democratic boons may even cause us to miss causal effects of political trust.

Problems such as these are less severe when our dependent variable varies over time within countries and when we have data measuring that variation across many coun-tries, that is, when we have time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) data. Such data allow

us to test whether higher trust at time *t* tends to lead to, for example, more effective government in *t+1* (or *t+10*), while holding other potential explanatory variables (particularly the stable features of a country) constant. Unfortunately, we do not always have the luxury of such cross-national, over-time data. We will return to this issue below, but first we will review what data sources we *do* have access to.

2.2   Data sources

Cross-national surveys with repeated waves measuring political trust (TSCS data) are the basis of data required to test macro-level consequences of political trust on democracy, where the independent variable is *the level (or rate) of political trust* in a society. The independent variable at the macro level is the *level or rate of political trust* in a society. Political trust rates are commonly simple aggregations (averages or share of trusters) of individual-level measures of trust, as derived from more or less representative surveys. In recent decades, such data have become increasingly available.

Most surveys measuring people's political trust simply ask them how much trust (or "confidence") they have in political actors and institutions (primarily government, parliament, and political parties). There are exceptions. The first standard survey measure of political trust was the "trust-in-government" battery, fielded originally in the American National Election Studies (ANES) in the 1950s and regularly since then. The main measure in this battery asks respondents whether they think the government "can be trusted to do what is right." Many more nuanced measures of trust have been developed in recent times (Jennings et al., 2021; Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies, 2017; Hamm et al., 2019).

These exceptions notwithstanding, a vast majority of available survey measures of political trust (especially those available over a long period) are replications or variations of the "confidence in institutions" measures used in the *World Values Survey* and *European Values Study* (WVS/EVS) survey projects: these ask survey respondents whether they have "a great deal" of confidence in the political institution or actor in question, "quite a lot" of confidence, "not very much" or "none at all." The *Eurobarometer* and its sibling projects take a similar but even more straightforward approach, simply asking whether respondents "tend to trust" or "tend not to trust" each institution.

The WVS/EVS first asked about confidence in parliament in 1981 and added government, political parties, and other institutions from the 1990s onwards; regional "barometer" survey projects (such as the *Eurobarometer* and the *Latinobarómetro*) and other international and regional survey projects (such as the *International Social Survey Programme* and the *European Social Survey*) followed suit in the 1990s and 2000s. Table 12.1 presents information for cross-national survey projects that have included measures of trust/confidence in either parliament, government, or political parties, for those projects that have included such measures in more than ten country-years at the time of writing. In addition, several national survey projects, such as national election studies and general social survey projects in various countries, have included variations of measures of political trust over a long period of time. Major

Table 12.1   Cross-national survey projects that have included measures of trust in parliament, government, or political parties in more than ten country-years

Survey Project	N	First year	Last year	Year N	Country N
Eurobarometer	657	1985	2023	25	39
Latinobarometro	408	1995	2023	23	19
World Values Survey	295	1981	2023	34	101
European Social Survey	271	2002	2024	23	36
International Social Survey Programme	255	1990	2023	23	35
AmericasBarometer	206	2004	2023	14	27
Afrobarometer	188	2002	2021	18	34
European Values Study	145	1981	2018	15	45
European Quality of Life Surveys	98	2007	2016	4	36
Life in Transition Survey	98	2006	2016	3	37
European Election Study	79	2004	2019	3	28
New Europe Barometer	79	1992	2007	13	15
Asian Barometer Survey	73	2001	2021	18	20
Arab Barometer	63	2006	2022	11	12
Candidate Countries Eurobarometer	52	2001	2004	4	13
EU Neighbourhood Barometer	47	2012	2014	3	16
AsiaBarometer	38	2003	2007	5	22
Integrated and United	35	2007	2009	3	18
Caucasus Barometer	27	2008	2021	11	3
Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe	26	1990	2001	7	14
International Social Justice Project	18	1991	1996	2	13
Asia Europe Survey	17	2000	2000	1	17
Eurasia Barometer	17	2001	2011	3	9
New Baltic Barometer	12	1993	2004	4	3
Political Action—Political Ideology	11	1974	1981	5	8

strides have been made toward harmonizing these sources in recent years by various researchers, including the "HUMAN Surveys" project (Klassen, 2020), the TrustGov research project (Valgarðsson et al., 2025), and the "Survey Data Recycling Project" (SDR) (Slomczynski et al., 2020).

As for the dependent variables, systematic cross-national repeated measures of potential trust outcomes have also become increasingly available.

On the institutional side of things, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project—primarily based on expert surveys—has gradually become the primary source of data for measures of the quality and nature of democratic and authoritarian governance, as well as other aspects of politics and society (Coppedge et al., 2016; Varieties of Democracy, 2023). The World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (World Bank, 2025a) also offer useful measures of the effectiveness and quality of governance, and their World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2025b) contain information on various government policies, such as education expenditure and tax revenue, since the 1970s.

On the behavioral side, the primary source for voter turnout is IDEA's Voter Turnout Database, which provides data for officially reported voter turnout in every national election for parliament and president around the world since 1945 (IDEA, 2024). The Mass Mobilization Project provides data for the occurrence and frequency of public protests by year in 166 countries since 1990 (Clark and Regan, 2024) and other measures of unconventional participation might be aggregated from self-reported measures in surveys such as the WVS/EVS. Electoral support for specific political parties can be accessed from the ParlGov project (Döring and Manow, 2016) and from V-Dem's "Varieties of Party Identity and Organization" (V-Party) project (Lührmann et al., 2020: 4). Particularly in combination with other data on political parties—such as from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES, 2025) or the Manifesto Project (2025)—these data may help characterize party system structure and organization.

2.3   Aggregation and harmonization

To assess macro-level consequences of trust we need to aggregate survey data and derive estimates of aggregate trust levels over time from one or more of the sources listed above. This process presents several choices. First, should we dichotomize the variables or should we take the average value of responses instead? There are trade-offs here: using the full scales preserves more information, but dichotomization results in more directly interpretable results (as the percentage of trusting respondents). Valgarðsson et al. (2025) find that trends and between-country differences in trust are practically identical whichever route is taken (for an alternative view and review, see Durand et al., 2021) but robustness checks may be wise. Second, if we do decide to dichotomize, what do with "neutral" and scale mid-point responses: should these be coded as trusting, lacking trust, or neither? To complicate matters, the answer may depend on the survey source. In some surveys, coding mid-points as trusting appears to have the best equivalence with other sources, whereas in others the best equivalence is found when the mid-point is coded as missing or as lacking trust (see

Valgarðsson et al., 2025). Third, what should we do about "don't know" responses? One argument is that these should be treated as lack of trust, since these respondents do not offer a trusting response when given the chance. A rivaling argument, which we tend to favor, states that they should be treated as neither trusting nor lacking trust, as they are likely genuinely undecided or ambivalent about whether they trust or not (see Graham, 2021).

When we use data from more than one survey source, matters are more complicated still: different survey sources tend to use different measures of trust and these are usually irregularly distributed over time and across countries. In these cases, the data are often harmonized by estimating the "true" latent level of political trust in each year within each country. For such a purpose, James Stimson (1991) developed his "dyad-ratios algorithm" in the 1990s and even more sophisticated methods have been developed since then, using item response theory (Caughey and Warshaw, 2015; McGann, 2014) and Bayesian latent variable modeling (Claassen, 2019a; Solt, 2020). From these models, we get estimates of the true underlying value of trust in each country-year which can then be used in aggregate analyses of its consequences on the macro level.

2.4 Determining causal effects on the macro level

Finally, we need appropriate panel methods of analysis to model the TSCS data and limit the potential for confounders and reverse causation (Beck and Katz, 2011; Bell and Jones, 2015; Blackwell and Glynn, 2018) when trying to determine the macro-level consequences of trust.

The most basic approach to account for country-level confounders is to simply absorb all outcome variation that can be attributed to stable variation across countries by modeling fixed country effects. Yet, this eliminates a large part of the variation of interest. Random-effects models allow us to include more specific predictors that are constant within countries (Bell et al., 2019; Clarke et al., 2015). Traditional random-effects models, however, also effectively assume that the differences between countries are the *same* as those within countries, resulting in estimates that are in effect weighted averages of the two. Because of this, Bell et al. (2019) argue that so-called "random effects within–between" (REWB) models are more appropriate and increasingly common in political trust research, as these simultaneously but separately model the effects of differences in all independent variables *between* and *within* countries (see also Fairbrother, 2014; Mundlak, 1978). REWB models allow us to distinguish the effects of trust *levels* from those of longitudinal *changes*. This way, we can model our dependent variables on latent estimates of political trust levels across countries over time, investigating whether, for example, changes in democratic quality or performance can be reasonably attributed to changes in levels of political trust.

All of these methods, in their traditional form, assume *contemporaneous* effects of trust: they model the relationship between trust in time t and the outcome in time t. As discussed above, this assumption may not be tenable: in many cases, we expect the effects of trust to be gradual, rather than instant. In these cases, we should use time lags of trust. How many lags we should include, and how long they should be, depends

on our theory of time, which in turn depends on the outcome and mechanism that we are investigating. For instance, we might want longer lags when investigating democratic quality than when investigating electoral results. Yet, lacking firm theory, we should optimize the fit of the explanatory model to a range of theoretically reasonable time lags.

Ultimately, theory should be in the lead when modeling the effects of political trust. Above, we argued that these effects are likely to be conditional. This implies that we need to conduct models separately for different regime types, or include moderators such as democratic quality, democratic longevity, or the electoral system. Moreover, the distinction between *mistrust or skepticism* and *distrust* (cf. Jennings et al., 2021; Norris, 2022) has important methodological implications. Methodologically, we can equate mistrust with low levels of trust that are the result of low trustworthiness of the object, whereas distrust is detached cynicism (partly) regardless of the trustworthiness of the object. Theoretically, we expect different effects of the two. *Absolute* trust rates conflate mistrust and distrust. A promising approach might enable us to construct measures of political trust that separate them, via *expected trust scores* and *residuals to the model* (van der Meer and Van Erkel, 2024). The core of this idea is to first set up models of political trust on time-series cross-sectional data that aim to explain political trust by traits of the object of trust (such as output, quality of government, etc.). These models provide expected trust scores (levels of trust as expected from the trustworthiness of the object) as well as residuals (aberrations from these expected scores). The former indicate more or less object-driven trust rates (skepticism), the latter reveal disproportional (dis)trust. This may be a way to explore the distinction between mistrust and distrust, skepticism and trust, that is so central to the theoretical literature.

3.   Conclusion

Political trust research seems to be converging to finally answer decades-old scientific and political concerns about the supposedly detrimental consequences of distrust for the functioning of democracy. Although much political trust research is motivated by these theorized consequences, we have lacked the possibilities to put these assumptions to the test. Now, most building blocks for these tests are in place. Multiple theoretical approaches lead to rivaling expectations on the macro-level effects of political trust. The time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) data that are necessary to test these expectations have become increasingly available, and will become ever better suited to the task as long as survey projects continue to field consistent and regular measures of political trust. Methods are in place that allow us to model cross-national and longitudinal variation simultaneously. Techniques have been developed to harmonize measures derived from different data sources, and to separate skeptical mistrust from dispositional (dis)trust. From that perspective, we expect a boom of studies on the macro-level consequences of political (dis)trust over the next decade: on fundamental topics such as democratic quality and regime survival; party system structure; political participation and protest; and public policy.

However, that does not mean these tests will be easy or straightforward. To date, theories are insufficiently specific about the mechanisms that relate (dis)trust to macro-level outcomes, and the conditions under which any effect is likely to occur. These mechanisms and conditions need to be specified. We also lack firm theories of the time it takes before political (dis)trust affects macro-level outcomes. Finally, there are rivaling measurement models to aggregating individual-level data on political trust from different sources and rivaling methods for modeling tests of macro-level consequences using TSCS data. We hope that these theoretical and methodological differences will be made as explicit as possible, converge in the near future, and lead finally to some robust answers to the foundational questions in our field.

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