**NEW DIRECTIONS IN POLITICAL TRUST RESEARCH WORKSHOP**

**Inside the ‘black box’: Understanding the micro-foundations of political trust**

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**Project rationale**

Existing studies have provided us with a good picture about the distribution of political trust among and across national populations, and about the factors associated with trust, including contextual (ie. country/regional) variations in these associations. We thus know a good deal about *whether* people trust political and civic actors, and *why* they trust. We know less, however, about *how* people trust; the considerations and mechanisms by which individuals form trust judgements (Theiss-Morse & Barton 2017). There is a need to focus more squarely on trust as a process rather than as an outcome; to study trust as a verb rather than as a noun (Mollering, 2013: 300).

Trust arises in a relationship between A and B, where A lacks full knowledge of B. Trust judgements are thus made under conditions of uncertainty. Lacking certainty, A can therefore easily mistake B’s trustworthiness, leading either to unwarranted trust (in cases where B is in reality untrustworthy) or unwarranted distrust (in cases where B is in reality trustworthy). A’s task is to use information s/he has about B – including the signals transmitted by B – to assess whether B can be trusted (Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001). The question is how, or on what basis, does A make such a judgement?

The (implicit) assumption in much trust scholarship is that individuals’ trust judgements rest on purposive and deliberative evaluations of an object, and are thus largely cognitive in form (McAllister 1995; Metzger & Flanagin 2013; van der Meer 2018). If trust judgements are deliberative in this way, we might expect two consequences to arise:

1. Trust – measured at the individual level – will be highly dynamic, responding elastically to any changes in (perceptions of) an object’s performance and behaviour;
2. Trust – again among individuals – will be strongly correlated with a wider set of attitudes and behaviours. A’s deliberative evaluation of B’s trustworthiness should lead to distinctive attitudes and behaviours on A’s part.

On this account of how individuals form judgements, trust is thus responsive and consequential.

Yet copious research in social psychology shows that individuals economise on costs when forming judgements, and avoid evaluative or ‘systematic’ information processing in favour of cognitively simpler ‘peripheral’ or ‘heuristic’ routes to decisions (Chaiken, 1980; Chen & Chaiken 1999). Individuals may therefore form trust judgements based on cognitively simpler grounds (Ottati & Wyer 1990) using features such as actor traits (Funk 1996a), stereotypes (McCrae & Bodenhausen 2000; Quinn et al 2007; Johnson 2020), general characteristics (Johnson 1999; Walls et al 2004), roles or positions (Metzger & Flanagin 2013), social background (Salgado et al 2021) and identities/group-membership.

Existing studies suggest that individuals’ trust judgements manifest some cognitive elements. Levels of trust have been found responsive to an object’s performance (Porumbescu et al 2018). There are a host of studies pointing to the positive association between governments’ policy performance (eg. economic growth rates) and aggregate levels of trust. We can also point to the phenomenon of aggregate levels of trust falling when a country is hit by a major political scandal (although note that trust doesn’t necessarily adjust upwards when politicians behave well). Pippa Norris’ recent book (2022) claims to find evidence of ‘skeptical trust’; trust that reflects the performance and democratic qualities of the state and its officials.

Yet other examples suggest trust judgements are often only weakly based on such cognitive appraisals. For example, experimental studies have shown that providing people with information about government performance does little to change their levels of trust (James, 2011; James & Moseley, 2014). There is also evidence of individual trust judgements being shaped by affective (Lewis & Weigert 1985; Finucane et al 2000; Theiss-Morse & Barton, 2017), automatic (McEvily 2011) and heuristic (Metzger & Flanagin 2013) appraisals. Indeed, studies have shown that in situations where individuals face new issues or problems, trust judgements may rest more on feelings (affect) than on evaluations or beliefs (cognition) (Midden and Huijts, 2008).

Even if trust judgements primarily reflect deliberative or cognitive inputs, we need to understand more clearly what these inputs might be and how they are used or processed by individuals. One key issue concerns the types of considerations (or ‘criteria of trust’) on which individual judgements rest. Scholars are used to the ABI (ability/benevolence/integrity) model of trust. Yet, within political science at least, there is less understanding of how each of these criteria/elements are drawn on by individuals in forming trust judgements. Might a particular criterion be more/less integral to trust judgements than others in particular contexts (for example, might people tend to appraise politicians primarily against certain criteria, but other actors – such as judges or the police – primarily against others)? Might deficits of one criteria (eg. perceived benevolence among politicians) be ‘compensated’ for by surpluses of another (perceived benevolence among politicians)? It would also be worthwhile to explore how individuals process different forms of information in deliberating on trust. In particular, do individuals processes negatively-valenced information differently to positively-valenced information in the process of trust formation? Although many studies have pointed to a ‘negativity bias’ in public evaluations (Lau 1982; Soroka 2014), other studies suggest that trust can be boosted as much by positive information as undermined by negative information (White et al, 2011; Faulkner et al 2015; Martin et al 2020).

Why do these issues matter? What benefits would arise from a more detailed understanding of the bases of individual trust judgements? I think new study in this area would have three main payoffs:

1. It would help us to understand more clearly the causes or bases of individuals’ trust. While – as noted above – these causes have been well-explored within political science, most studies have focused on identifying the general role of particular factors (manifested in correlations between variables), rather than on probing in detail how individuals use/process different forms of information (relating to different aspects or criteria of trust) to form summative judgements.
2. It would help us to understand the likely dynamics of trust [*→ Session 2 on ‘Dynamics of trust’*]. If trust is evaluative/cognitive, we would expect it to fluctuate (downward and upwards) in line with politicians’ performance and behaviour (although the direction of these fluctuations might be conditional on the presence of any ‘negativity bias’). Yet if trust rests on information involving stereotypes and actor traits, trust will be less responsive to any changes in performance, and instead be more ‘sticky’ and static. In turn, this has implications for our understanding of how and when trust can be changed, and of what role ‘trust-building’ interventions might play.
3. It would help us to understand the likely consequences of trust [*→ Session 4 on ‘Consequences of trust’*]. Deliberative or evaluative judgements are generally seen to be closely related to other beliefs and behaviours among individuals (Evans 2008). Evaluative judgements of a government, say, might thus be expected to shape individuals’ behaviour towards that authority (eg. their engagement and compliance with it). On the other hand, if trust reflects weakly deliberative, or heuristic, processes, we might anticipate it being less closely associated with other important attitudes and behaviours. Studying the formation of trust judgements would thus enable new light to be shed on a longstanding dispute (dating back to Citrin/Miller in the early 1970s) about how far expressions of low trust entail significant negative consequences for civic and democratic life, or alternatively – if low trust comprises a little more than a ritualised and shallow form of discontent – rather fewer such consequences.

Overall, our understanding of how people form trust judgements ‘in the real world’ would have major payoffs for our understanding of the nature, causes and consequences of trust.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Project outline**

There is therefore considerable potential payoff in a project that explores more closely than hitherto how individuals form trust judgements; the ‘micro-foundations’ of trust. Such a project would focus on the considerations and key processes that underpin individuals’ judgements. In turn, we should recognise that these considerations and processes are likely to vary between different types of individual (ie. trustors), different objects or actors being evaluated (ie. trustees), and judgements forged in different contexts. The project could therefore pose three central research questions:

RQ1: To what extent are individual trust judgements subject to evaluative/deliberative factors and processes and how far to heuristic factors and processes?

RQ2: Which features of the trustor, trustee and wider context determine how far evaluative and heuristic appraisals are used by individuals?

RQ3: How do individuals form evaluative trust judgements? In particular, how are core criteria of trust employed in such judgements, and how are these judgements affected by different types of information about the trustee?

RQ1 largely consists of identifying the *types* of information drawn on in situations where a trust judgement must be formed. RQ2 identifies various contextual factors likely to *condition* the types of information drawn on. In particular, we might anticipate and hypothesise that individual trust judgements will be systematically shaped by aspects and qualities of the trustee, the trustor and the context in which judgements are formed:

1. Trustor
* The level of existing information/knowledge that can be drawn on in appraising an object’s trustworthiness. For example, politically informed/engaged individuals more likely to base their trust judgements on evaluatory factors than on heuristic factors?
* The nature and strength of existing values/ideology/partisanship.
1. Trustee
* The degree of familiarity to the trustor, and thus the amount of information about the trustee already possessed by the trustor. Trust judgements in some objects may be dominated by existing perceptions and feelings (eg. the values/ideology/partisanship mentioned in (a)), and these might work to ‘filter’ any new information about the trustee. By contrast, where an object is unfamiliar, appraisals cannot draw on existing information. Faced with an unfamiliar object, individuals might engage in deliberative processes if the consequences of accurate trust judgements are high (thereby increasing individual motivation to accept the costs of information-searches and deliberative processes). Where those consequences are low, motivation is likely to be weaker, and evaluations are more likely to be based on low-cost reasoning (using heuristics).
* The significance of the actor: the importance of the trustee for the trustor’s welfare, and thus the likely motivation the trustor brings to the judgement-formation process.
* Identity of the trustee, notably partisanship.
1. Policy context
* Similar to the previous point, does the nature (salience, costs/benefits incurred) of the context/policy issue in which trust is assessed affect an individual’s motivation to engage in different forms of information-processing?

RQ3 involves identifying in detail how far individuals draw on different aspects or criteria of trust in forming judgements. For example, when a certain criterion of trust is particularly evident in a trustor, do individual judgements align with performance on that criterion or are other criteria also taken into account (Hendriks et al 2015; see also McGraw 2001)? When multiple criteria are used, how far can positive performance on one criterion ‘compensate’ for negative performance on others (Funk 1996b; Renn 2009: 90)?

The project is likely to involve a series of experiments, both (a) online, laboratory-based exercises, perhaps with participants selecting from different types of information about trustees (using some form of ‘information board’), and (b) conjoint experiments fielded on larger, representative samples of the population. These experiments will allow us to explore a range of factors involved in trust judgements, running from performance information (‘evaluatory’ model) to stereotypes (‘heuristic’ model). Experiments will also allow us to manipulate relevant features of the trustee (eg. their familiarity to a trustor) and the context of the trust judgement (eg. high importance v low importance decision) to identify key conditional effects on how individuals form trust judgements.

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1. There are also implications for the way we measure trust. It may be that generalised measures of trust (eg. “how much do you trust the national government?”) encourage more heuristic or impression-driven appraisals, while more specific measures of trust (eg. agreement with statements like “the government has my best interests are heart”) encourage more evaluative/deliberative appraisals. Identifying how individuals respond to different types of trust measures could therefore help in identifying ‘best practice’ in the type of indicators used to gauge trust. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)