**NEW DIRECTIONS IN POLITICAL TRUST RESEARCH WORKSHOP**

**How should we measure political trust?**

Ben Seyd, University of Kent

We typically measure political trust through survey questions worded along the following lines: ‘How much do you trust [institution]?’. Although surveys often ask about trust in a range of institutions (government/parliament/police/courts), these questions tend all to be asked in the same way. These single-item questions assume:

1. That trust is unidimensional; or at least that phrasing a question in terms of ‘trust’ enables all the key features of the concept to be measured.
2. That the meaning of ‘trust’ is intuitive to respondents and is answered in consistent ways across respondents.
3. That respondents can easily place themselves on a scale running from low-high trust (or, as per item [d], trust-distrust).
4. That suitable response options enable the measurement of relevant states of trust, notably trust and distrust.

Each of these assumptions is questionable:

On (a), many studies in political science and other disciplines suggest that trust is multidimensional.[[1]](#footnote-1) As two prominent analysts have recently argued, “The concept of political trust has many dimensions and it is likely that few of our ‘workhorse’ measures are sufficient to explain all of them” (Wilson & Eckel, 2017: 137).

On (b), there is evidence that complex concepts like ‘democracy’ are interpreted differently within the population (Canache et al, 2001; Carnaghan, 2010; Schaffer, 2010). Other studies find that survey measures of social trust – which are designed to gauge attitudes to strangers – are often interpreted by respondents as tapping attitudes to people they know (Bauer & Freitag, 2018: 22-23). It is likely that similar issues arise with general questions on ‘trust’; some respondents will find it difficult to answer such a general question, while respondents will interpret the question in different ways.

On (c), a single question on trust tends to supress ambivalence in respondent attitudes. Yet we know that many Americans (50-70%) manifest both positive and negative attitudes towards different features of key institutions like Congress and the Supreme Court; and thus show some ambivalence (McGraw & Bartels, 2005; also Gainous et al, 2008).

On (d), response options that run from ‘high trust’ to ‘low trust’ do not capture people who distrust (low trust ≠ distrust). Even when response scales contain a ‘distrust’ anchor, it is unclear that they really capture strong negative attitudes among respondents. In addition, response options don’t capture scepticism; individuals who don’t trust an agent but who don’t necessarily distrust them. Yet survey respondents often place themselves at the midpoint of ‘trust – distrust’ scales (Mishler & Rose, 1997; Cook and Gronke, 2005), suggesting either ambivalence (ie. [c]) or a sceptical position that fits neither trust nor distrust.

It is also noticeable that, in some cases, recorded levels of trust do not correlate strongly with the kind of behavioural outcomes that might be anticipated of distrustful individuals. In addition, when trust is measured in implicit rather than explicit form, levels of trust are found to be significantly higher (Intawan & Nicholson, 2018). Can we be sure that traditional survey-based measures of trust are thus accurately capturing the concept and distributions of its different states in a way we would want?

There are solid reasons for considering whether the traditional approach to measuring political trust is fit for purpose. The effort invested in exploring and devising measures of trust in other academic fields – notably in organisational studies (McEvily & Tortoriello, 2011) and risk management (Earle, 2010) – is striking, and marks a contrast with political science which continues to measure trust through a rather simplistic set of indicators.

**Improvements in the survey-based measurement of political trust**

Political scientists have not been very imaginative in using different methods to measure political trust. More use could be made of non survey-based measures (next section). But in terms of the survey ‘workhorse’, what improvements could be made to the way we measure trust?

1. ***Measuring trust as a multidimensional concept***

If trust is seen to contain different elements or dimensions (eg. ability, benevolence, integrity; ABI), measurement validity would be enhanced by devising indicators that explicitly tap each of these. It should be acknowledged, however, that the advantages in such an approach also come with downsides, notably:

* Use of multiple measurement indicators increases the space needed on surveys.
* Measuring trust in terms of the perceived qualities/traits of political actors (eg. ‘Most politicians deliver what they promise’) makes it impossible to *explain* trust in terms of these qualities. The advantage of measuring trust in either general terms (‘I trust X’) or behavioural terms (‘I am willing to make myself vulnerable to X’) is that these are not confounded with features/qualities of X that might be used to explain trust. Yet if trust in politicians is measured by a scale including an item on faithfulness to promises, we cannot also explain trust in terms of whether politicians are seen to be faithful in this way. This would confound the concept and its antecedents.

***(b) Distinguishing states of trust***

Measuring trust through multiple items rather than through a single item might also allow us to distinguish more clearly between individuals who are *trusting*, *distrusting* (ie. negative evaluations of politicians’ ABI) and *mistrusting/sceptical*. The latter group might be defined as people who are not necessarily ambivalent (although multi-item trust measures would also help to identify such a state), but who either lack sufficient information to reach a conclusion of trustworthiness or untrustworthiness, or who occupy a cautious/wary position. This is particularly important if we are going to capture the ‘sceptical trust’ commended recently by Pippa Norris (2022).

***(c) Setting trust alongside other forms of political support***

One key task is to measure gradations of citizen discontent more effectively. This would require the measurement of different states of discontent (each measured through multi-item scales), ranging from a mild discontent (which is unlikely to have any serious consequences beyond complaints/anti-incumbent voting) to serious negativism (which potentially might induce protest/support for anti-system measures and parties/violence).

Strong negativism

Mild discontent

*Cynicism*

*Distrust*

*Scepticism*

*Dissatisfaction*

Including measures of concepts associated with trust (like dissatisfaction, scepticism and cynicism) would, of course, increase the space needed on surveys. But it would allow us to address a particular criticism of the focus on single-item trust indicators; that these don’t allow us to distinguish between routine expressions of discontent (which are unlikely to be consequential; Jack Citrin’s point back in 1974), and deeper negative orientations (which are likely to have clearer knock-on effects on consequences for political and democratic health).

**Beyond survey-based measures of political trust**

There is plenty of scope for more extensive use of non survey-based measures of trust, particularly in cases where the research question about trust is specific to a particular context or behaviour, for example:

* How are different dimensions of trust affected by violations of one dimension? Thus, if a politician behaves unethically (ie. integrity violation), how does this affect perceptions of that politician’s ability and benevolence?
* How might individuals draw on the institutional context of politics (Pippa Norris’ ‘guardrails’) to appraise the trustworthiness of unfamiliar political actors? This would enable us to move beyond analysis the bases of trust to more explicitly consider how contextual features shape judgements of actor trustworthiness.
* How might individual trust be responsive to particular ‘interventions’ designed to re-build trust?

In such cases, experimental treatments of trust would be particularly appropriate to identify the presence of effects, even if (in the form of lab experiments/experiments on student samples) these could not necessarily be generalised in scope and size.

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Carnaghan, Ellen (2011) ‘The Difficulty of Measuring Support for Democracy in a Changing Society: Evidence from Russia’, *Democratization*, 18:3, 682-706.

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Intawan, Chanita and Stephen P Nicholson (2018) ‘My Trust in Government Is Implicit: Automatic Trust in Government and System Support’, *Journal of Politics*, 80:2, 601-614

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McGraw, Kathleen M and Brandon Bartels (2005) ‘Ambivalence toward American Political Institutions: Sources and Consequences’, in Stephen C. Craig and Michael D. Martinez, eds, *Ambivalence and the Structure of Political Opinion*, Palgrave Macmillan

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Nadelson, Louis et al (2014) ‘I Just Don’t Trust Them: The Development and Validation of an Assessment Instrument to Measure Trust in Science and Scientists’, *School Science and Mathematics*, 114:2, 76-86

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Schaffer, Frederick Charles (2010) *Thin Descriptions: The Limits of Survey Research on the Meaning of Democracy*, Political Concepts Working Paper 45, International Political Science Association Committee on Concepts and Methods

Smith, Jordan W et al (2013) ‘Community/Agency Trust: A Measurement Instrument’, *Society and Natural Resources*, 26:4, 472-77.

Wilson, Rick K. and Catherine C. Eckel (2017) ‘Political Trust in Experimental Designs’, in Sonja Zmerli ad Tom W.G. van der Meer, eds, *Handbook on Political Trust*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar

1. To list a few examples: trust in risk management (Poortinga & Pidgeon, 2003; Allum, 2007), trust in the healthcare system (Egede and Ellis, 2008), trust in scientists (Nadelson et al, 2014), trust in natural resource management agencies (Hamm et al, 2013; Smith et al, 2013), and trust in the media (Kohring & Mattes, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)