**The Consequences of Political Trust**

**A Discussion Note**

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In theory, the literature suggests that political trust is vital for representative democracy, having important consequences for societal cooperation and democratic legitimacy (e.g. Putnam et al. 1993; Rothstein & Uslaner 2015). Yet, empirical evidence on the *consequences* of political trust is scarce, partial and fragmented (cf. Devine 2022). This stands in sharp contrast with the rich body of literature on the *causes* of political trust (for an overview, cf. Van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). In this note, we present five possible research avenues to study the consequences of political trust.

*Political trust and distrust are quite different and have different consequences*

Empirical research on political trust relies heavily on survey items like: ‘How much trust do you have in Members of Parliament in general?’ (British Election Study); ‘Can you indicate, on a scale from 0 to 10, how much confidence you personally have in each of the following institutions?’ (LISS, Netherlands). Sometimes these items are presented and analysed as though they are measures of distrust as much as trust, with the one being just the absence, or opposite, of the other. But such suggestions ignore recent research, which has shown that distrust is not just the opposite of trust, and should not be conceptualised as such (Bertsou, [2019](https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S1755773919000080/type/journal_article); Devine et al, [2020](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c21090f8f5130d0f2e4dc24/t/5e995ec3f866cd1282cf57b1/1587109577707/TrustGov+-+Trust+mistrust+distrust+-+20.04.2020.pdf)). Distrust, rather, reflects a settled negative belief in the *untrustworthiness* of political actors, the expectation of negative outcomes (Bertsou, 2019), whereas trust is the generally positive belief in the trustworthiness and the expectation of positive consequences. Trust and distrust may have different consequences, and one may be more important for some outcomes than the other. For instance, a lack of trust may not drive citizens to the polls to vote for anti-system parties, but distrust (given that it is expected the current actors will produce some harm) may do. Whilst we have an enormous range of data on trends and levels of trust, we have almost nothing on the same for distrust.

It would therefore be useful for a future research project to: a) conceptualise and measure distrust cross-nationally (building on work by the authors cited above, particularly Bertsou); b) determine whether the consequences of trust and distrust differ; and c) take step towards establishing longitudinal trends in distrust in common repeated surveys (e.g., election studies or the Eurobarometer).

*How to research political trust/methods: more needs for causal identification, details about time*

Though there are notable exceptions that use survey experiments (e.g., Fairbrother, [2019](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/when-will-people-pay-to-pollute-environmental-taxes-political-trust-and-experimental-evidence-from-britain/B22E0009B1D961CB699FD662E1C44ED9?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=Social&utm_campaign=bjpols); Peyton, [2020](https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0003055420000076/type/journal_article); Macdonald, [2020](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/british-journal-of-political-science/article/abs/political-trust-and-support-for-immigration-in-the-american-mass-public/1118374133FDD8535D2061836F28A7C2), [2023](https://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11109-023-09858-x)) or panel methods (e.g., Goubin and Kumlin, [2022](https://academic.oup.com/esr/advance-article/doi/10.1093/esr/jcab061/6501568); Devine and Valgarðsson, [2023](https://osf.io/zxjcn)), most empirical work on (the consequences of) political trust has used cross-sectional, observational designs. Consequently, it is not clear whether key relationships 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. Whilst low trust may be normatively important, if it does not actually lead to support for undemocratic politics or extremist parties or less support for vital governmental actions, there is clearly less reason to worry and try to change it. Moreover, the lack of panel analyses means we don’t know much about the timing and permanence of any effects. Are changes in trust only relevant in the short term, or do they have long-term consequences? Do changes in trust matter only in the future rather than immediately? In most existing studies, even panel analyses, trust and outcomes are measured at the same time point, but it may be that the effect of (dis)trust evolve over time (consider the person who loses trust, subsequently votes for a radical-right party, who then moves their policy preferences in line with their new party). Fairbrother et al. (2022) found, using Chinese panel data, that individuals who said they had been treated unfairly by local officials subsequently had lower political and social trust; but, within two years, their trust had effectively returned to original levels. Likewise, Devine and Valgarðsson (2023) found in panel data of up to 19 years that scandals and elections impacted trust but levels returned to their long-term average within 2-3 years.

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 (dis)trust. (This could be similar to Breznau et al ([2022](https://doi.org/10.31222/osf.io/cd5j9)), which involved coordinated independent analyses subsequently pooled together.) 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. (NB: this is more of a paper than a broader research grant, though fielding new panels is also possible.)

*Social consequences (in addition to political consequences)*

There are not just political but also potentially important *social* consequences of political trust. That is, having (no) trust in a country’s core political institutions can also affect people on a more *social and personal level*. For example, one study found a strong correlation between life satisfaction and political trust, or more generally, the perceived quality of democracy (Esaiasson et al., 2020). Living in a country with trustworthy political institutions can foster social trust and, consequently, result in higher happiness (e.g. Dinesen et al. 2022). Yet, there is also an alternative pathway in which political trust can affect personal well-being that remains largely unexplored: political trust can help people cope with social and economic risks that they face on a personal level.

A vast body of psychology literature has demonstrated that humans have a fundamental need for safety and certainty (Kagan, 1972). Individuals have a strong preferences for a predictable and structured world, and usually experience uncertainty as highly aversive and threatening (Hogg, 2007). Studies on uncertainty and risk management demonstrate that social trust as well as trust in groups or organizations are effective mechanisms to reduce risk perception and manage uncertainty (cf. Janssen, 2010; Siegrist 2006). Interestingly, despite trust being broadly recognized as a coping mechanism within social psychology, the field has rarely considered the role of trust in political institutions for uncertainty management.

Theoretically, trust in institutions is an important factor for risk perception as it reflects people’s confidence in institutions’ ability to manage and mitigate future risk. Empirically, political trust has been linked to economic risk with people who have high political trust experiencing lower levels of economic threat compared to those with low trust when faced with the same economic risks (e.g. Wroe 2014) Here, political trust has primarily been considered as a consequence of risk experiences, despite the evidence being based on cross-sectional data. A recent study however suggests the causal pathway may actually run in the reversed direction, from risk to trust (Haugsgjerd and Kumlin 2020). In the same light, political trust has been linked to lower Covid-19 risk perceptions (Dryhurst et al., 2020) and to perceptions of cultural threat (Schlipphak 2022). Still, more systematic research is needed to study political trust as a determinant of risk perceptions, a possible mechanism to cope with uncertainty, that would entail both longitudinal and experimental designs.

*Better specifying the theory that political trust shapes policy attitudes 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. For recent examples, see Garritzmann et al. (2023) and Goubin and Kumlin (2022) on attitudes towards welfare states, or Fairbrother et al. (2021) on attitudes towards climate policies. But what, theoretically, is the reason that political trust shapes policy attitudes? The most influential explanation, in this regard, is that political trust acts as a "heuristic", in the sense of informational shortcut, or simple decision rule. While influential, however, the theory that political trust shapes policy attitudes as a heuristic is as yet unclear, if not contradictory, insofar as scholars have invoked it in ways that are inconsistent.

First, on the one hand, the literature suggests that political trust acts as a heuristic in that people who trust a given messenger are likelier to trust a given message. That is, it is trust in the advocates of a policy that leads to public support for that policy. Second, however, the literature also emphasizes that political trust is specifically relevant for an individual’s attitudes toward policies that entail a risk to them, and/or a sacrifice (e.g., Rudolph 2017). And third, some studies have suggested that the heuristic, rather, applies to the state as a set of agencies and institutions, and people’s overall and/or specific confidence in those agencies and institutions. Here “political trust” is about beliefs in the state’s capacity to administer policies effectively—the "delivery system"—and what people think about it.

These variants are not all contradictory, but they are at least inconsistent. The definition of “sacrifice” has been stretched to a suspiciously broad degree, and implies that policy preferences can be surprisingly altruistic. Moreover, what should we make of statements (such as by American conservatives from Ronald Reagan onwards) that “government is the problem”? That is, what if one trusts a messenger whose message is not to have confidence in public agencies and institutions? For example, analyses of surveys during the Covid-19 pandemic found that trust had heterogenous effects on relevant outcomes depending on the specific object of trust.

It would be useful for future research to unpack in more detail than previously 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 policies about which they have strong preferences. 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.

*The consequences of political trust for long-term policy preferences, and views of new institutions*

A last area in which political trust can be consequential is long-term policy-making. Some challenges that governments need to confront, like climate change and population ageing, require policies that will impose immediate costs on citizens for the sake of future policy gains. Yet, there is reliable empirical evidence that citizens tend to be myopic and impatient, having a cognitive bias in favour of short-term benefits over long-term consequences (Healy and Malhotra 2009, Jacobs and Matthews 2012, Copper et al. 1994). Future policy preferences are characterized 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 prevailing social and economic conditions, as well as the policy commitment of future office holders, which are both currently unknown. 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. (Some versions of the theory of political trust as a heuristic, such as that it is relevant for risk-laden policies, are especially relevant for long-term policy preferences.) 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. A number of studies have found evidence for a relationship (Jacobs and Matthew 2012; Fairbrother et al. 2021; Busemeyer 2023), though with at least one exception (Christensen and Rapeli 2020). Because political trust has such an impact on long-term policy preferences, laypeople do not discount the future according to expected changes in living standards, as do economists (Fairbrother et al. 2021)*.*

A more comprehensive research endeavour is required to investigate the role of political trust for long-term policy preferences on a wider range of policy areas. 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. 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 governments 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.

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; Shah et al. 2012). 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 heterogenous 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.

Political trust is likely also to shape individuals’ reactions to proposals for wholly new institutions, such as some that theorists have proposed for the better representation of the interests of future generations (González-Ricoy and Gosseries 2016). Individuals tend to transpose their institutional trust from one level to others, which explains why people’s trust in very different institutions tends to correlate (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2020). That is, people transpose their trust in familiar institutions to less familiar ones.

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