**NEW DIRECTIONS IN POLITICAL TRUST RESEARCH WORKSHOP**

***How can we overcome ‘spirals of distrust’?* A reflection on the importance of trust perceptions.**

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**Topic outline: mapping a ‘gap’**

Over twenty years ago, Clarke 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. And the fourth breaks it down into content areas of individual perception regarding the ‘trustworthy’ characteristics of another in specific organisational settings.

The last of these traditions has dominated the scholarship on *political* trust. Put simply, in situations of uncertainty, judgements about the trustworthiness of a politician or a political institution – such as characteristics related to competence, integrity and benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995) – act as ‘psychological conduits’ (Hamm et al., 2019, p.2) that link our prior experiences and evaluations of information about said trustee with commensurate actions and attitudes typical of parent concepts such as trust, distrust or even mistrust. In sum, trust judgements entail a logical evaluation of the risk involved in making ourselves vulnerable to someone else in a situation of uncertainty.

A longstanding tranche of research has shown that not all trust judgements are cognitively evaluative or deliberative, and in most cases they rest on more affective, automatic or heuristic processes (e.g. Metzger & Flanagin 2013; Theiss-Morse & Barton, 2017; see also session 3 of this workshop). In this respect, the extant body of research on political trust suggests that the fourth ‘approach’ outlined by Clark and Payne cannot be taken in isolation of the other three. At the same time, the ‘messiness’ of political trust judgements documented in existing research suggests that *mis*perceptions of an actor’s trustworthiness are possible, commonplace, and lead to expressions of trust and distrust that are not objectively warranted (for a discussion, see Norris, 2022).

Yet despite the widespread acknowledgement that (a) political trust is relational and (b) its outcomes may depend on citizens’ flawed perceptions of trustworthiness, there has been a surprising dearth of research about the *objects* of people’s trust judgements in politics, primarily policy elites. Where research *has* focused on policy elites, it has been concerned with understanding the signals of trustworthiness that senior officials or policy elites might project to the public – consciously or not – through their actions, policy outputs or leadership styles (Green and Jennings, 2017; Haugsgjerd and Kumlin 2020; Legood et al., 2020). However, taking one step back, we know extremely little – if anything! – about how these ‘trustees’ actually intuit trust or perceive the levels of trust and distrust placed in them (cf. Weinberg, 2022, 2023).

For the purpose of stimulating new discussions about trust [research] in politics, I suggest that this black box demands more attention. Why? In essence, we might only rationally expect public trust to facilitate sound and responsive governance, or distrust to stimulate change, where policy elites accurately perceive levels of each. Where this does not occur, we might expect elite behaviour to be or remain 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.

The fundamental premise of this logic has its parallels in studies of public opinion and policy responsiveness. Since Miller and Stokes’ seminal 1963 article on the perceptual mechanism (cited 1000+ times), a small corpus of 15 studies (to my best count) has gathered self-report data from politicians showing their perceptual *in*accuracy about public policy preferences (a recent example being Walgrave et al., 2022). The general conclusion arising from this seam of research is, in essence, that the perceptual mechanism, whereby politicians hold the ‘right’ perceptions of public opinion, underpins successful democratic representation, and that such a condition is not presently being met.

Discounting mistrust for the moment (as the least valenced of the trust concepts), we might distil four simple states of perceptual alignment and divergence that are worthy of consideration.[[1]](#footnote-1)

* A trusts B, and B perceives they are trusted. *ALIGNMENT*
* A trusts B, but B perceives they are distrusted. *DIVERGENCE*
* A distrusts B, but B perceives they are trusted. *DIVERGENCE*
* A distrusts B, and B perceives they are distrusted. *ALIGNMENT*

Whether elite trust perceptions align or diverge with public trust judgements could have particularly important consequences for political behaviour. For example, policy elites may well misperceive the specific policy preferences of a nation or a specific subset of voters (as documented elsewhere), but they will rarely advance a policy unless they also feel in command of enough personal cachet to act. Therefore, in a theoretical claim-and-response model of governor-governed relations, whereby the former’s actions affect the latter’s responses and vice versa, *accurate perceptions of trust and distrust* should facilitate or stimulate appropriate and proportionate governing actions. Where trust perceptions diverge, then spirals of distrust may occur as elites make decisions that are neither appropriate or proportionate to levels of trust and distrust among the public they serve. Figure 1 attempts to summarise the ‘spiral’ inherent in this thesis.

**Figure 1.** The perceptual mechanism in political trust relationships.



**Moving forward: A research agenda**

The following five questions provide a starting point for a research agenda into political trust perceptions.

1. *How does the importance of the perceptual mechanism, and the outcomes it informs, vary across different political relationships?*
* Whilst the vast majority of existing studies into political trust focus on vertical trust relationships between politicians and voters, 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). Which of these relationships is most interesting/important? What would core research questions look like for studies of each?
1. *What are the processes that inform trust perceptions?*
* Just as public trust judgements are often grounded in heuristics and biases, we might expect politicians to make automatic appraisals of how much they are trusted or distrusted based on selective encounters with particular groups of citizens in certain contexts or atypical interactive situations. It is possible that the trustee’s individual characteristics also matter for how they interpret public trust or distrust (e.g. personality traits). Which variables should be prioritised and how would we study them? Do any working hypotheses raise additional questions that need to be considered (e.g. about the importance of elite perceptions for equal representation)?
1. *How should we measure trust perceptions?*
* In pilot research with politicians, I trialled self-report survey items that invert common trust judgement questions found in big survey studies (e.g. WVS etc.). However, there may be more innovative ways to measure trust perceptions using game- or situation-based experiments, or even physiological markers (see work by the Hot Politics Lab). There are, of course, trade-offs to be considered between validity and pragmatism when it comes to working with hard-to-access groups like politicians or civil servants. What are the options for measuring elite trust perceptions? Is it possible to create a robust comparative measure? Are different types of measurement needed for different trust relationships?
1. *Can we map hypothetical states of perceptual [in]accuracy onto different governing behaviours? If so, what are the criteria we should use to ground our predictions?*
* In the same way that public trust judgements help citizens to resolve uncertainty and make themselves vulnerable to particular politicians, parties or institutions, it is possible that elite trust perceptions are also activated in situations of risk. Put another way, trust perceptions may help elites to decide between different options in an occupational setting by providing a bellwether of anticipated reactions among relevant audiences. If this holds, then what are the different risk reference points that might heighten the saliency of trust perceptions in each of the trust-based relationships listed above? Which elite behaviours are more or less likely to be influenced by trust perceptions?
1. *If the perceptual mechanism in political trust-based relationships is broken, how can we intercede to halt spirals of distrust and promote more perceptual accuracy (and is that desirable?)?*
* The final question is solutions-focused and presupposes that elite perceptions of trust and distrust are indeed out-of-step with public opinion. What are the options available to us as researchers and what do these look like in practice? For example, are interventions best targeted at a local level by increasing the amount of political contact between elites and citizens (see prior work on the contact hypothesis in Psychology) or can meta-interventions be built into our political processes and institutions that encourage or incentivise elites to think more carefully about public trust?

**References**

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1. Please note that trust and distrust are treated as separate yet related concepts in this note. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)