

Review of literature on political trust

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“The social science literature on trust has grown enormously in recent years, partly in response to the perception that political and social trust, deemed essential to a good society, are in decline.” (Levi and Stoker 2000: 475)

Main review articles and handbooks

Citrin, J., & Stoker, L. (2018). Political trust in a cynical age. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 21(1), 49–70. doi:10.1146/annurev-polisci-050316-092550

Levi, M., & Stoker, L. (2000). Political trust and trustworthiness. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 3(1), 475–507. doi:10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.475

Uslaner, E. M., editor. (2017). *The Oxford handbook of social and political trust*. Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274801.001.0001

Zmerli, S. & T. van der Meer, editors. (2017). *Handbook on political trust*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Devine, D. & M. Fairbrother, editors. *The macro-consequences of political trust*, Forthcoming in Edward Elgar Publishing.

Trust as evaluation

Trust as evaluation has been the dominant approach in research on political trust. “The underlying thread in every hypothesis or finding is that trust declines when governments and institutions fail to meet expected goals or follow prescribed norms.” (Citrin and Stoker 2018: 57)

Some authors chose different evaluated characteristics starting with “P”.

Citrin and Green (1986) examined policy preferences, economic performance, partisanship, and the persona (character traits of the political leaders, in this case, the president of the United States).

They used data from the 1980, 1982 and 1984 National Election Studies, and the main goal was to explain the recently observed increase in trust in government under President Reagan. The authors suggest, citing Bell (1973), that a long-term decline in political trust is caused by

growing aversion to hierarchical authority and deferential attitudes caused by modernization, but in the short term trust declines can be averted by creating an image of success.

“The conventional survey measures of political confidence thus assess the level of satisfaction with the state of the nation in domains for which government is generally held responsible.” (Citrin and Green 1986: 452)

In the longer term, however, “declining public confidence in government weakens the incumbent administration and improves the chances for reforms advocated by its antagonists.” (Citrin and Green 1986: 453)

To **Miller and Listhaug (1990, p. 358)**, political trust “reflects evaluations of whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with the normative expectations held by the public”.

They use survey data from Norway, Sweden and the United States to examine trends in political trust for the period 1964-1986. They conclude that “political discontent in Norway was reduced because new parties provided the disaffected with a means of representation, thus channelling dissatisfaction back into the electoral arena” (p. 357). At the same time, the more rigid party systems in Sweden and in the US lead to disaffection being targeted at the government, and to the perception that none of the existing party is a viable alternative.

To **Dougherty, Lindquist, and Bradbury (2006, p. 178)** trust is a “fiduciary concept involving whether the operate according to their normative expectations”. They examined the influence of people’s perceptions of judicial performance (judicial independence, efficiency, access, and information) on trust and confidence in the Georgia state judiciary (p. 176). Here, the authors distinguish between the concepts of trust and confidence, where the latter is more about competence.

Mizrahi et al. (2020) study trust in the judiciary with a survey from Israel to examine the relative importance of the evaluation of the process (procedural justice) and of the product (satisfaction with performance), concluding about the substantial role of the latter.

Hetherington & Rudolph (2015) focused on performance, processes, and probity and add two more, priming and polarization.

Hetherington (2005, p. 9) understands trust as “the degree to which people perceive that government is producing outcomes consistent with their expectations”.

Objective performance and subjective evaluations thereof consistently explain levels, changes, and differences in political trust (see Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Levi & Stoker, 2000 for a review).

Extensive empirical research focused on causes of political trust, including such traits as ability, integrity, benevolence, responsiveness, transparency, reliability, decisiveness, empathy, and charisma (cf. Aaldering & Vliegenthart, 2016; Bertson, 2019; Hamm, Smidt, & Mayer, 2019; PytlikZillig & Kimbrough, 2016; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).

Levi and Stoker (2000), in their Annual Review of Political Science piece, discuss the core themes in research on political trust since around 1960, including the role of performance and perceptions of performance in the evaluation of trustworthiness.

“A cumulative and positive research program has demonstrated that institutional arrangements play a significant role in making the commitments of public officials credible in the ways North & Weingast (1989), Root (1989), and Daunton (1998) stipulate. However, trustworthy government institutions must also be **fair, transparent** in their policy making, and **open to competing views**—propositions for which Tyler (1990), Levi (1997), and Daunton (1998) provide evidence in the domains of legal authorities, military service policy, and taxation.” (Levi and Stoker 2000: 485)

“One of the biggest puzzles for students of politics is the appropriate basis for citizens’ beliefs about when politicians are being trustworthy and acting in their interests or, at least, the public interest.” (Levi and Stoker 2000: 485)

Theories on the impact of generational value change on political trust (Inglehart, 1999).

The trust-as-evaluation approach has founded many longitudinal and cross-national studies into political trust (Bargsted, Somma, & Castillo, 2017; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012), particularly those that focus on macro-micro linkages (Mishler & Rose, 2001)

The approach is crucial to the understanding of political trust as a general mechanism of democratic accountability (Citrin & Green, 1986; Rosanvallon, 2008).

Declines in government performance (as well as increased detachment) explain the drop in political trust in Australia (Dassonneville and McAllister 2021).

Political trust corresponds to citizens’ evaluations as to “whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public” (Miller & Listhaug 1990: 358; see also Gabriel 1995: 361; Hetherington 2005: 9)

Critique of the evaluation approach

Ouattara et al. (2023) point to a gap in the literature on trust-as-evaluation and remind that this approach explicitly requires that political actors are evaluated against normative benchmarks (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 57; Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 481; Miller, 1974, p. 952).

The observed direct effects of various performance indicators on political trust found in numerous studies “are necessary, but do not provide sufficient evidence for the trust-as-evaluation” model (Van der Meer, 2018, p. 5). (cf. Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Rudolph, 2017).

Trust and diffuse or specific system support

Much of the literature on political trust was shaped by David Easton's (1965) influential distinction between diffuse system support and specific attitudes to incumbents.

While political trust itself is considered to be somewhere in the middle, or even closer to specific support, it is possible that an accumulation of long-held distrust may lead to withdrawal of support for the entire political system.

As Easton wrote (1975: 447) distrust of a specific authority can become generalized: "In time, disaffection may occur not because of what each succeeding set of authorities is perceived to have done but simply because they are perceived to be authorities—and authorities are no longer thought worthy of trust."

"People...lost confidence because time after time political authorities, Democrats and Republicans alike, demonstrated through their decisions and actions that they were not competent, not efficient, not honest, not fair, and certainly not to be trusted to make the right policy decisions." (Miller 1984: 840)

"Taken as a whole, research on trust and its relation to public opinion and voting suggests two major conclusions. First, judgments about the trustworthiness of government or of politicians are more than ideological or partisan reactions to specific incumbent administrations. They are generalized judgments that influence whether citizens endorse or reject existing authorities and public policy or institutional reforms. Second, general trust judgments about government or politicians are not the only trust judgments worthy of political study. Indeed, as we suggest toward the end of this essay, judgments about the trustworthiness of particular actors (in particular domains) may be of far greater consequence than the limited research to date would suggest." (Levi and Stoker 2000: 491)

Trust and legitimacy

Trust and legitimacy are often considered related, and their relationship often serves as a justification for pursuing research on political trust. But, often there is some theoretical confusion as to the relationship between the two concepts.

Examples:

"Courts' legitimacy and efficacy thus hinge in part on the public trust" (Dougherty et al. 2006, 177)

"political institutions must constantly try to amass and husband the goodwill of the public" (Caldiera and Gibson, 1992, 635)

"Courts must rely for enforcement of their decisions on retaining sufficient respect from individual citizens so that the vast majority will comply voluntarily" (Olson and Huth 1998, 53).

However, some strongly argue for an analytical separation of these terms. This is the argument laid out by **Kaina (2008)** in an extensive quote:

“Like many other concepts in political science, the notion of ‘legitimacy’ – more precisely ‘political legitimacy’ – eludes a definitive definition (Kaina 2002a:32ff). Most political scientists would nonetheless agree that the analytical content of the term aims at the reasons for justifying political rule. Such reasons are attributed to specific norms and certain procedures in order to enforce those norms. However, the legitimacy of any political order is based not only on the fundamental norms of the polity and its constitutive procedures, but also on people’s belief in legitimacy – what Max Weber once called ‘Legitimitätsglaube’ (Weber 1980 [1921]:19ff,153,516). Seymour Martin Lipset (1983 [1959]:64) accordingly described (political) legitimacy as ‘the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society’. And in the words of David Easton (1979: 278), someone’s belief in legitimacy indicates his conviction ‘that it is right and proper for him to accept and obey the authorities and to abide by the requirements of the regime [because] in some vague or explicit way he sees these objects as conforming to his own moral principles, his own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere’. Citizens’ beliefs in legitimacy therefore guarantee that people willingly accept political decisions by which they are affected, even though such decisions are in contrast to their own wants. Legitimacy shortfalls, in turn, would be expressed by the people’s refusal to accept the authority of political actors or institutions to make generally binding decisions or the outputs of political decision processes (Kielmansegg 1994: 31).” (Kaina 2008)

Kaina (2008) argues that trust in institutions and institutional legitimacy are not the same, and that trust should not be treated as a component of legitimacy (p. 513). Rather, the author argues that “institutional legitimacy becomes a precondition of institutional trust because beliefs of institutional legitimacy define specific behavioural expectations of how representatives of those institutions are supposed to act, as well as the benchmarks for the trustworthiness of these representatives” (p. 514-515).

The model of conversion of trust into legitimacy and vice versa resembles Easton’s model of system support where more diffuse forms of support can for a while buffer against losses in specific forms of support, and vice versa: if a specific form of support lingers for a longer time, it can hurt the more diffuse form of support. Kaina (2008) writes: “it is also possible that, in the long run, lasting disappointments of normative expectations eventually will demolish people’s beliefs in institutional legitimacy ... In this way, institutional trust becomes a precondition for institutional legitimacy in that someone’s own experiences confirm that the given institution functions in accordance with his or her own normative expectations. From this it follows that institutional trust can be seen as an explanatory variable rather than a component or dimension of institutional legitimacy since shrinking institutional trust is – among other causes – one possible reason for eroding beliefs in institutional legitimacy.” (p. 515).

Dalton & Weldon (2005) write that low political trust need not imply lack of legitimacy. For example, trust in political parties tends to be very low, but citizens in these countries may still think that political parties are necessary.

Similarly, Easton highlights the differences between both concepts: “There is likely to be a wide abyss between feeling distrustful or cynical about authorities in general and refusing to accept outputs as binding. Yet both sentiments - trust and legitimacy - are alike in that they represent a kind of support which it is theoretically important to view as independent of attitudes towards immediate outputs.” (Easton 1975: 453).

Trust and democracy

Research on political trust originated in discussions of political support and legitimacy as a source of regime stability in democracies. **Van der Meer and Zmerli (2017)** provide an overview of the origins of the “decline of political trust” narrative in their introductory chapter to the Handbook on Political Trust.

“Representative democracies all share a common concern: in order to maintain stability, viability and legitimacy, one pivotal source – political trust – may not run dry. There is widespread conviction that a reservoir of political trust helps preserve fundamental democratic achievements in times of economic, social and political crises. Similarly, a citizenry that puts trust in the competence and commitment of its elected representatives as well as in the effectiveness of political institutions facilitates the implementation of policies even when disagreeing with them. Political trust thus functions as the glue that keeps the system together and as the oil that lubricates the policy machine.” (Van der Meer and Zmerli 2017: 1)

Cited after Van der Meer and Zmerli (2017: 1):

“Dissatisfaction with and lack of confidence in the functioning of the institutions of democratic government have thus now become widespread in Trilateral countries. Yet with all this dissatisfaction, no significant support has yet developed for any alternative image of how to organize the politics of a highly industrialized society. (Crozier et al., 1975, pp. 158–9)”

Early research on political trust focused primarily on consolidated democracies (due to this focus of interest and also likely data availability and feasibility of public opinion research). Extending this research to new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s showed that in those countries, in which modest democratic experience combined with poor institutional performance and economic turbulence, political trust was lower than in Western democracies.

Still thirty years on, political trust in the post-communist EU member states is on average lower than in the “old” EU member states (Kołczyńska 2021).

In authoritarian countries, from which survey data became increasingly available starting in the 2000s, political trust was found to be unexpectedly high.

Rivetti and Cavatorta (2017) suggest that political trust in authoritarian contexts may have different sources than in democracies. In authoritarian contexts, political trust would be more strongly related to economic performance and the predictability of political actors.

It is likely that **predictability** boosts trust in all types of regimes. Predictability is an element of good governance (Gisselquist 2012). Predictability is also sometimes considered an aspect of the trust relationship itself (Van der Meer 2017). The difference between democratic and authoritarian countries may be in that in the former, predictability is founded on transparency and the rule of law, while in the latter, in the predictability of institutions not related on the rule of law, but e.g. on bribery.

Welzel and Dalton (2015) propose that the difference is between **allegiant and assertive orientations**, which are linked to distinct aspects of institutional performance: effectiveness and accountability. As measures of allegiant orientations, they use, among others, trust in the courts, police, and the army. They measure accountable governance with the “Voice and accountability” index of the World Bank’s Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), and use the “Control of corruption” and “Rule of law” indices to measure effective governance¹. They find that the presence of assertive cultural orientations predicts future accountable and effective governance, while allegiant cultural orientations are largely shaped by effective governance.

Trust and distrust

Compared to the volume of research on political trust, the opposite of trust has attracted little analytical attention.

Bertsou (2019) in her thorough treatment of political distrust mentions important similarities between trust and distrust in that both “are relational and represent a calculation of the probability of benefit, or harm, from interactions with the political system and its agents” and both “are relevant in motivating subsequent action and both are cyclical and self-reinforcing, leading either to a vicious circle of hostility and suspicion or to a virtuous circle of reliance and cooperation” (p. 224).

At the same time, the analysis proposes a separate treatment of distrust and lack of trust arguing that distrust represents an expectation of harm, while lack of trust merely signifies the lack of an expectation of benefit. Support for treating the two situations differently comes from social psychology and behavioral economics (Kahneman and Tversky 1979).

Bertsou, Brutter and Harisson (2020) propose a conceptual model where political distrust emerges from “technical, moral, and interest-based evaluations” of political agents and test this model with original survey data from the United Kingdom (p. 1). They compare the resulting index of political distrust with the standard single-item measure of trust in the national parliament, which is by far the most frequently included trust-related item in surveys, and – consequently – the most commonly used indicator of political trust in empirical studies. Validation tests suggest that the political distrust index performs similarly to the (reversed) trust in parliament item.

¹ Note the criticism of the WGI discussed e.g. in Kolczyńska and Bürkner (2021).

Bertsou (2019) also makes another point that is relevant to studying political trust. She argues for a distinction between “liberal distrust” and “political distrust”. According to Bertsou, “liberal distrust” is an attitude of caution and suspicion in interactions with institutions due to the inherent power imbalance in contexts without checks and balances, and watchdogs and institutional oversight. Liberal distrust then puts checks on the system and reduces opportunities for abuse of power.

The presence of safeguards, as is the case in contemporary democracies, corrects the power imbalance and reduces the need for liberal distrust. Hence, what we currently observe in these contexts cannot be attributed to the “healthy scepticism”, as some authors claim. In settings with built-in protections, distrust either signifies (1) perceptions of untrustworthiness of incumbents or inadequacy of performance, which can be corrected with the mentioned protective mechanisms, or (2) perceptions of untrustworthiness of these protective mechanisms themselves.

Also see: Jennings et al. (2021), Devine et al. (2020)

Trust as a relational characteristic and value congruence

Political trust reflects a relationship - A trusts B to do X (**Hardin 2002**) - in which citizens evaluate political actors’ performance. Political trust depends on individual preferences regarding the expected characteristics of political actors, where characteristics of political actors are often measured as characteristics of the political context (on the macro level) or individuals’ perceptions of the actors’ characteristics (on the individual level).

Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) focus on education as a predictor of political trust. They propose to distinguish between then non-inducing and the accuracy-inducing function of education to explain why the correlation between education and political trust depends on the country’s level of corruption. They use data from the European Social Survey Round 4 from 21 European countries.

Noordzij et al. (2021) tested whether political trust depends on congruence in terms of preferences about corruption and substantive representation. They used data from the European Social Survey, Rounds 3-5. “We found support for the micro–macro level interactions theorised by the evaluation based on the quality of representation approach (with higher levels of trust among more-educated citizens in less corrupt countries), as well as for evaluation based on substantive representation in relation to cultural issues (with higher levels of trust among more culturally liberal citizens in countries with more culturally liberal governing cabinets).” (Noordzij et al. 2021: 954)

According to **Kolczyńska (2020)**, political trust reflects the congruence between individual values and values of the institutions, or the political system. Using data from the World Values Survey and the European Values Study, the analysis shows that the level of trust in parliament is positively correlated with democratic values in democratic countries, and negatively correlated with democratic values in non-democratic countries.

Mauk (2020) observes that people may not have an accurate assessment of the country's level of democracy, and conceptualizes political trust as a matter of congruence between democratic values and the perception of quality of democracy in the country (instead its "absolute" level measured with country-level indicators). This paper uses data from the World Values , Afrobarometer, Arab Barometer, Latinobarometer, Americas Barometer and Asian Barometer.

Trust: winner-loser gaps and losers' consent

One of the predictable properties of political trust is that trust is higher among political winners than among losers. Political winners are typically defined as those people who voted or sympathize with one of the parties in government, while losers are those people who support one of the parties in the opposition. The third group are non-voters or people who do not support any political party or group, but even though such people typically account for a sizeable proportion of the society, they are often left out of winner-loser analyses.

Most studies on winner-loser trust gaps reference the work by Christian J. Anderson and co-authors (Anderson and Guillory 1997, Anderson and LoTempio 2002, Anderson et al. 2005) as the founding texts of this area of study. To Anderson and colleagues we also trace back the concept of "losers' consent", i.e. the idea that the foundation of democracy is the acceptance of electoral loss.

Anderson and Guillory (1997) found that electoral losers are more satisfied with democracy in consensual democracies than in majoritarian democracies, arguably because consensual democracies ensure better representation of losers than majoritarian systems.

Anderson and LoTempio (2002) analyze the effects of winning congressional and presidential elections on political trust in the United States. They find that victory in presidential elections has a stronger positive effect on political trust than winning in congressional elections.

Anderson et al. (2005) examine contextual and individual-level factors that shape the size of winner-loser gaps. Individual-level factors include ideology and party attachment. Regarding macro-level effects, the authors examine differences between the so called new and old democracies and identify consequences of elections in new democracies and political culture as the primary driver of the wider winner-loser gap in political trust or democratic satisfaction in these countries. Additionally, party systems and the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of political institutions affect the size of the winner/loser gap in political support, including political trust.

While the studies by Anderson and colleagues relied analyses of differences between countries, **Martini and Quaranta (2019)** examine effects of both between-country differences as well as within-country changes in various characteristics on winner-loser gaps in political support: satisfaction with democracy and trust in parliament. They find that the winner/loser gap in support is smaller in countries with consensual systems (between-country effect), but changes in the institutional structure do not result in changes of the gap. Additionally, within-country changes in the quality of process and economic performance do not lead to changes in the winner-loser gap, as they affect winners and losers in a similar way. Hence, from this analysis,

the winner-loser gap in political support emerges as a rather stable phenomenon that is a consequence of differences in country characteristics.

Kolczyńska (2022a) focuses on the role of populist parties in shaping the winner-loser gap in political trust. The paper analyses data from the European Social Survey to show that supporters of winning populist parties enjoy a higher “trust bonus” than supporters of non-populist winning parties. The winner-loser gap is greater in countries with low levels of democracy.

Mauk (2022) analyzes the role of perceived and actual electoral integrity on political trust in 45 countries worldwide, and finds that in countries where electoral integrity is high, electoral losers suffer a smaller trust disadvantage than in countries with high electoral integrity.

Kolczyńska and Sadowski (2022) analyze individual-level panel data from Poland to examine changes in trust in parliament between 2013 and 2018, taking advantage of the change in the parties in government following the 2015 parliamentary election. Building on the literature on motivated reasoning, they hypothesize that under higher political polarization, winner-loser gaps should be higher than under lower polarization. They find that, indeed, the gap in political trust increased in 2018 compared to 2013, largely to the increase in political trust among 2018 winners.

Political trust and electoral participation

Older research on trust and participation is reviewed in Levi and Stoker (2000).

Most generally, research suggests that higher political trust is associated with more likely institutional participation (most notably in elections), while lower trust is associated with more likely non-institutional participation, including demonstrations, signing petitions, etc.

Studies have demonstrated that the distrusting are more likely than the trusting to vote in an anti-incumbent fashion in two-party presidential races and to support third-party or Independent candidates when they emerge as serious contenders, as did Wallace in 1968, Anderson in 1980, and Perot in 1992 and 1996 (Aberbach 1969, Rosenstone et al 1984, Hetherington 1999).

Low confidence in the integrity of the electoral process reduces electoral participation (Alvarez, Hall, and Llewellyn 2008, Birch 2010).

Distrust of the entire political system explains the electoral success of extreme right parties (Rydgren 2007).

In the United States, distrustful voters tend to vote for contenders (Hetherington 1999).

In multi-party systems, distrust has been found to be associated with voting for reformist parties (Bélanger and Nadeau 2005). Distrustful voters are also more likely to cast invalid ballots (Power and Garard 2007).

Hooghe, Marien, and Pauwels (2011) analyze electoral behavior of distrustful voters and its electoral consequences in Belgium, where compulsory voting discourages from taking the exit

route. Using the 2009 Belgian Election Study, a panel survey conducted before and after the regional elections of 7 June 2009, they find that absent the “exit” option, distrustful voters more often opt for casting invalid ballots or voting for alternative political parties.

Political trust and non-institutional participation

Older research on trust and participation is reviewed in Levi and Stoker (2000).

Also see handbook chapter: Gabriel (2017).

“Recent research in the ‘contentious politics’ tradition also finds a link between activism and distrust of government. Tarrow (2000), for example, finds that activism is often a response to loss of confidence in government due to a protracted provision of misinformation; the British government’s handling of the “mad cow disease” issue is a case in point. Even so, Tarrow suggests that those engaged in contentious politics may actually be building an antagonistic but “working trust” with government officials.” (Levi and Stoker 2000)

Multiple authors have tried to identify categories of individuals with different combinations of attitudes towards the state - diffuse support, efficacy (Muller 1977); political interest (Luks 1988) or motivation (Shingles 1981) - to understand which of them would be more and which less likely to engage in different forms of participation.

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