Political distrust and preferences for regime type

Edmund Kelly*

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Abstract

Political trust is low and declining in many countries, and it has been argued that this constitutes a "crisis" for the stability and survival of democracies. This paper tests that claim by asking whether political distrust causes people to reject democratic governance in favor of authoritarian rule. Existing work on the consequences of political trust mostly uses cross-sectional observational approaches which cannot identify causal relationships. I combine panel and experimental evidence to demonstrate that political distrust causes people to lose support for democracy and increase support for authoritarian forms of rule. This suggests that political distrust threatens democratic legitimacy.

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*University of Oxford (email: edmund.kelly@politics.ox.ac.uk).

Political distrust is a substantial concern for social scientists, politicians, and the general public, and this concern has only been increasing in recent years (Citrin and Stoker 2018). Trust in politicians and political institutions is low and declining in many long-standing democracies (Valgarðsson et al. 2024) and has been for some time (Citrin 1974). In addition, this distrust is not just empty cynicism - it may have negative consequences. Political distrust is associated with declining electoral turnout (Hooghe and Marien 2013) and reduced political participation (Devine 2024a), less compliance with the law (Devine et al. 2024a; Marien and Hooghe 2011), and with the increasing electoral performance of the populist radical right (Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018). This paper asks whether political distrust causes people to turn their back on the principle of democratic governance.

Perhaps the most important potential consequence of political distrust is that it might threaten the stability and legitimacy of democracy. The recent increase in antidemocratic behaviour by political elites in consolidated democracies has increased concern about the health of democratic rule (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019). In addition, some have argued that the public is losing support for democracy (Claassen 2020b; Howe 2017) and that those who oppose democracy are now more open in their views (Valentim 2024). Perhaps the distrustful not only have lost faith in incumbent politicians and political institutions, but they now reject democracy in favour of authoritarian rule. This concern is a major motivating factor for research and public commentary on political distrust (Citrin and Stoker 2018). Nonetheless, the underlying empirical question remains largely untested.

As with most research on the consequences of political distrust, only a few studies have considered this question directly, and they tend to rely on designs that cannot convincingly identify causal relationships (Devine 2024a). While some studies consider public support for undemocratic elite behaviour, these focus on "democratic discounting" - whether people will trade off democracy for perceived elite competence (Frederiksen 2022) or partisan gain (Graham and Svolik 2020). By contrast, the direct link between political distrust and preferences for regime type is rarely tested, with existing work looking instead at whether distrust prompts people to seek alternative institutions within a democratic framework (Ouattara and Van der Meer 2023; Christensen 2018). Nonetheless, there is a reasonable correlation between political distrust and support for democratic governance (Kołczyńska 2020; Catterberg and Moreno 2006). Does this reflect political distrust causing people to

lose support for democracy, or does something else explain their connection?

In this paper, I test whether political distrust causes people to lose support for democratic rule and gain support for authoritarianism. By combining country-year and individual panel data, I show that political distrust and democratic support are strongly positively associated, while trust is strongly negatively associated with authoritarian support. These associations remain remarkably consistent across several conservative model specifications. In addition, with a survey experiment fielded in the United States ($N \approx 5,000$), I further show that these effects are likely to be causal in origin. In sum, it appears that political distrust causes people to turn their back on democratic rule in favour of authoritarianism..

In what follows, I first explain why political distrust might undermine support for democracy and increase support for authoritarian rule. I then explain how the data and methods I use allow me to overcome common issues with causal inference in the literature on the consequences of political distrust, before demonstrating that distrust likely causes people to change their preferences for regime type. I conclude that concern about widespread political distrust in democracies is justified and may be understated.

Political trust and support for democracy

Diffuse or generalized political trust is an attitude people hold about politicians and political institutions in general (Easton 1975). This differs from specific political trust, which describes people's attitudes toward specific named incumbents. One is politically trusting to the extent that one believes that, in general, politicians and political institutions are trustworthy. Someone with diffuse political trust may believe that while some politicians are bad apples, and some institutions are less reliable than others, most of the time, politicians and political institutions can be trusted to fulfill their core functions.

By contrast, diffuse democratic support is an attitude held about the concept of democratic rule, a system of government in which public officials are chosen in free and fair elections. One holds diffuse support for democracy to the extent that one supports the basic political rights and civil liberties necessary for free and fair political debate - for example, free and fair elections, freedoms of speech and association, the rule of law, and

sanctions against political violence (Møller and Skaaning 2013; Dahl 1971). Interest in democratic support is motivated by the observation that preferences for regime type are causally related to democratic backsliding (Luo and Przeworski 2023; Claassen 2020a; Foa and Mounk 2017), and diffuse democratic support, therefore, matters for the strength and survival of democracies[1]. This paper considers one factor which might cause this support.

It is a longstanding concern among scholars of political trust that political distrust might indicate not only a lack of support for incumbents, but a change in underlying support for democratic rule (Crozier et al. 1975). In this view, political trust is a precondition for democratic rule. As Warren (2017) argues, trust relationships (between citizens, and between citizens and the state) are both "essential and pervasive" in democracies. Zmerli and Van der Meer (2017, p. 1) put it starkly: "representative democracies all share one common concern: in order to maintain stability, viability and legitimacy, one pivotal source – political trust – may not run dry". The low and declining trust seen in the last half century could, therefore, be seen as a threat to democracy (Valgarðsson et al. 2024). Yet, despite this widespread concern, few studies directly consider whether political distrust affects democratic support or increases support for authoritarian rule (for exceptions, see Catterberg and Moreno 2006; Van der Meer and Janssen 2025; Kołczyńska 2020).

Why might political trust cause people to lose support for democracy? A motivating idea is that levels of political support can be arranged into a hierarchy, with the most specific at the bottom (for example, support for named incumbent politicians) and the most diffuse support at the top (for example, preferences for regime type), and generalized trust in politicians and institutions in the middle (Norris 2011; Easton 1975). I illustrate this hierarchy in Figure 1[2]. The core idea is that a fall in specific political support ultimately erodes diffuse political support and the legitimacy of the democratic state.

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[1]A change in preferences for regime type could manifest in several ways. While those lacking support for democracy may be tempted to commit antidemocratic acts, or to express an intent to commit these acts, for example by attempting to subvert democratic institutions or engaging in political violence, these acts tend to be very rare and difficult to measure (Westwood et al. 2022; Wike and Schumacher 2020). I therefore follow most previous work in focusing on support for democratic governance and norms rather than antidemocratic intentions or acts (Frederiksen 2022; Claassen 2020a).

[2]Adapted from Norris (2011) and Easton (1975).

Figure 1: The hierarchy of political support implies that political distrust causes diffuse democratic support
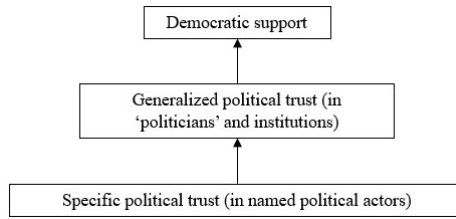
Building on this framework, it is assumed that people draw upon their more specific attitudes when forming more diffuse ones. Therefore, people consider their generalized political trust when deciding whether to support general democratic principles. A loss in generalized political trust would be expected to cause people to lose support for democratic rule. While a loss of trust in some specific actors might cause people to transfer their support to other political actors, a generalized loss of trust in most political actors and institutions is more likely to erode the legitimacy of the underlying democratic system.

Indeed, early scholars of democratic consolidation took it as given that political distrust erodes the legitimacy of the democratic state. Linz and Stepan (1996, pp. 15–16), for example, argued that democratic consolidation requires "a strong majority of public opinion...[holding] the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern collective life" and that this in turn "requires that citizens develop an appreciation for the core institutions of a democratic political society—political parties, legislatures, elections, electoral rules, political leadership, and interparty alliances". In other words, distrust in democratic political institutions inexorably erodes diffuse democratic support and, in turn, leads to democratic deconsolidation.

In an earlier work, Linz and Stepan (1978, p. 17) were even more explicit about the link between democratic support and political trust, writing that democratic legitimacy requires "trust on the part of the citizenry in the government's commitment to uphold [the law]" and that "the loss of support for all political actors in a democratic regime is likely to lead to an erosion of legitimacy" (Linz and Stepan 1978, p. 17). Similarly, Dalton (2004, p. 157) wrote that "there are legitimate reasons to worry that [political distrust] may erode the vitality of democracy, or eventually may undermine the democratic process itself". That a loss of political trust would inevitably undermine public support for democracy was largely assumed (although generally left untested) by earlier work.

Many scholars acknowledge that political distrust may affect support for democratic rule. What specific mechanisms might explain this link? I argue that political distrust undermines support for democracy and increases support for authoritarianism because it reduces both the perceived and actual capacity of the democratic state to respond to pressing challenges. This causes people to lose faith in democratic processes to resolve major problems in their society, and to become increasingly open to authoritarian solutions.

A longstanding explanation for support for authoritarian rule is that people prefer autocratic governance when their economy or society are unstable. People turn to authoritarian rule because it is seen to provide predictability and stability, and to reduce the visible conflicts and compromise inherent to democracy (Miller 2017; Leotti et al. 2010; McCann 2008; Stenner 2005; Feldman and Stenner 1997)[3]. One reason that political distrust makes people more likely to accept this trade off is because it reduces the perceived competence and honesty of democratic governments when responding to pressing societal challenges (Devine et al. 2025). Therefore, we would expect the politically distrustful to trade off democracy for perceived security. Empirically, there is some support for this idea. Political anxiety is more strongly felt by those with low political trust and is in turn associated with support for restrictions on civil liberties (Albertson and Gadarian 2015).

Importantly, political distrust not only reduces the *perceived* ability of democratic governments to respond to pressing threats, it also reduces actual state capacity. Without institutional trust, democracies struggle to implement policy to tackle these challenges. In turn, "the lack of effectiveness weakens state authority and, as a result, its legitimacy" (Linz and Stepan 1978, p. 54). Ultimately, as the authority and capacity of the state erodes, people gradually lose faith in democratic processes to resolve pressing challenges to society.

One reason for this loss of state capacity is that widespread distrust reduces the ability of the state to secure mandates for its policies. Distrust prompts people to disengage from democratic politics. If one cannot trust politicians and political institutions to commit to the policies they propose, or to implement them successfully, why participate in the process of influencing their decisions? The politically distrustful are less likely to feel the sense of

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[3]One sign of this is that people now express more hostility toward the processes of bargaining and electioneering inherent to democratic rule (Bøggild 2020; Bøggild 2016; Theiss-Morse and Hibbing 2002).

civic duty which compels participation (Wang 2016). Accordingly, they are also less likely to vote in elections (Hooghe and Marien 2013; Grönlund and Setälä 2007), and less likely to engage in institutionalised forms of political participation (Devine 2024a). This political disengagement reduces the mandate of democratic governments to implement policy.

States experiencing widespread distrust also lose capacity because they struggle to enforce compliance among distrusters. Those who distrust authorities to implement policy fairly or competently are less likely to comply with those policies. Accordingly, political distrust is associated with generalized non-compliance with the law (Marien and Hooghe 2011). It is also associated with specific forms of non-compliance, for example tax morale (Scholz and Lubell 1998), reporting crime (Van Deth 2017), and following healthcare regulations during the pandemic (Devine et al. 2024a). This means that even when governments secure a mandate for their policies, their capacity to implement those policies is reduced.

This lack of capacity may become particularly acute when the required policies involve longer time horizons or collective action. For example, it has been argued that governments find it particularly difficult to secure mandates for policies tackling income inequality and climate change when political distrust is widespread (Ryan et al. 2022; Rudolph and Popp 2009; Rudolph and Evans 2005; Hetherington 1998, although see Peyton 2020; Devine 2024b; Devine et al. 2024b). This suggests that political distrust may particularly undermine governments' ability to tackle the most complex and damaging issues facing society.

In sum, political distrust changes reduces both the perceived and actual capacity of the democratic state. Importantly, this argument implies both a short and a longer run effect of political distrust on democratic support. In the short run, the politically distrustful anticipate a loss of government effectiveness which causes them to reduce their support for democracy. In addition, as the effectiveness of democracy actually declines, so does its underlying legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Acemoglu et al. 2025; Claassen and Magalhães 2022; Krishnarajan et al. 2023; Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Magalhães 2014; Neundorf 2010). This implies that political distrust erodes democratic support both immediately and over time as people anticipate and then experience reduced state capacity.

It appears, therefore, that there are strong reasons to think that political trust might

reduce diffuse democratic support. Accordingly, there is some correlational evidence that political trust is related to democratic support (Van der Meer and Janssen 2025; Kołczyńska 2020; Mounk 2018; Catterberg and Moreno 2006; Linz and Stepan 1978). Nonetheless, this evidence is mostly based on cross-sectional analyses of observational data, often from single country case studies. Existing evidence cannot determine whether the observed associations are causal in origin. Therefore, although there is a correlation between political trust and diffuse democratic support, there is also a need for causally rigorous evidence.

The positive association between political trust and support for democratic governance could be interpreted in several ways. One option is that, as previously argued, political trust causes people to support democratic rule. Nonetheless, another plausible option is that the association between trust and democratic support is confounded by common factors which predict both support for democracy and political trust. In this view, the correlation between trust and democratic support is explained by common aggregate causes, for example government performance, and common individual causes, for example the personality traits of those with low political trust and low democratic support.

Perhaps the most obvious candidate for a common cause is that government performance is also associated with political trust. As Van der Meer and Hakhverdian (2017) and Seyd (2015) demonstrate, dissatisfaction with the policy outputs of government is also an important cause of political distrust. Political trust is associated with economic performance (Van der Meer 2017; Kroknes et al. 2015; Hetherington and Rudolph 2008) and with political scandals (Ares and Hernández 2017; Larner et al. 2025). The (perceived) incidence of corruption is also highly detrimental to political trust (Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017; Uslaner 2017). We might therefore be concerned that any one of these factors could confound the association between political distrust and democratic support.

A further possibility is that the relationship is reversed, and that diffuse support for democracy causes political trust. This would invert the hierarchy of political support (Norris 2011; Easton 1975), implying that people draw on their more diffuse political attitudes when forming more specific political beliefs. In this view, people would decide whether they support democratic governance and then decide whether to trust politicians and political institutions on this basis. While this seems less likely in consolidated democracies,

it remains a possibility in the absence of causally identified evidence.

A final possibility is that political distrust and support for democratic governance are, at least empirically, indistinguishable concepts. While conceptually distinct, it may be that most people do not differentiate their political trust attitudes from their diffuse democratic support. In this case, political trust and democratic support would fluctuate together without one meaningfully causing the other. Instead, people would hold a single attitude of generalized political support. However, this seems unlikely given that empirically, political trust is generally considered an invalid measure of principled support for democracy (Bratton et al. 2005; Linde and Ekman 2003; Canache et al. 2001).

One important additional concern is that low political trust might not cause people to lose support for democratic rule, but instead to support reforms within a democratic framework. Norris (2011) presents the politically distrustful as "critical citizens" who seek reform within a democratic framework. In this view, political distrust still changes preferences for regime type, but it changes preferences within democratic regime types rather than from democracy to authoritarianism. People with low political trust might therefore only lose support for representative democracy, rather than for democracy in all forms, and they might instead support, for example, more direct or technocratic democracy (Van der Meer and Janssen 2025; Goldberg et al. 2024).

However, the evidence for distrust causing support for alternative democratic regime types is mixed. While some studies find that distrust prompts support for direct democracy (Ouattara and Van der Meer 2023; Mohrenberg et al. 2021; Bedock and Pilet 2021; Bessen 2020; Christensen 2018; Bauer and Fatke 2014), others find no relationship (Coffé and Michels 2014; Bengtsson and Mattila 2009) or a negative relationship (Bowler et al. 2007). Likewise, evidence about political distrust affecting support for technocracy is mixed (Bertsou 2022; Bertsou and Pastorella 2017, cf. Ganuza and Font 2020; Chiru and Enyedi 2022). Most recently, Van der Meer and Janssen (2025) do not find any consistently preferred regime type among those with low levels of political trust.

In addition, there are measurement concerns with the existing literature connecting political trust with preferences for regime type. Most studies use direct questions about

"democracy" rather than asking about specific democratic principles. This presumes a common understanding of the term "democracy" and increases the likelihood of social desirability upwardly biasing stated democratic support (Claassen et al. 2025). Likewise, previous studies tend not to ask about specific alternatives to democracy. Instead, most use questions which do not explicitly require an end to democratic rule, for example, by asking about a strong leader who "bends the rules" or who operates "without interference" from parliament (Van der Meer and Janssen 2025; Ouattara and Van der Meer 2023). Studies suggesting that distrust causes support for alternative democratic regime types might, therefore, have underestimated levels of authoritarian support.

In summary, it seems likely that there is a connection between political trust and preferences for regime type, and there is some empirical evidence for this view. However, existing evidence is insufficient to determine whether distrust causes support for authoritarianism. In what follows, I attempt to clarify this uncertainty with panel and experimental evidence.

Hypotheses

My hypotheses follow straightforwardly from the preceding discussion. I first hypothesize that preferences for regime type and political trust are positively correlated.

H1. Political trust is positively correlated with diffuse democratic support.

Second, I use panel and experimental approaches to test for a causal relationship. I therefore hypothesize that the association between trust and democratic support could be causal in origin.

H2. Political trust causes democratic support.

In what follows, I explain the data and methods I use to test these hypotheses.

Data and method

I test the preceding hypotheses using three studies which provide different insights into the relationship between political trust and preferences for regime type.

Study 1: Country year panel

The first step is to establish whether political distrust causes preferences for regime type at the society level. For this purpose, I combine the latent variable estimates on democratic mood collected by Claassen (2020b) with data on political trust collected by Valgarðsson et al. (2024), from which I generated my own latent variable estimates for political trust. I restrict the sample to countries which are considered "Free" or "Partly free" by Freedom House to ensure that non-democracies are excluded. This is because political trust is likely to be conceptually distinct in non-democracies and is unlikely to be measured accurately in autocracies given widespread preference falsification. Overall, this yields a final sample of 1553 country years with latent variable estimates for both political trust and democratic support. To my knowledge, this is the most comprehensive currently available aggregated survey data on the two concepts.

The dependent variable is diffuse democratic support. I use the estimates of democratic mood from Claassen (2020b). These data used a Bayesian latent variable model to estimate a smooth country-year panel for democratic support, combining various indicators from national election studies and cross-national surveys[4]. These data are particularly useful because, unlike much previous research on preferences for regime type, they use questions which explicitly ask about support for democratic institutions and about support for alternative forms of government (for example army rule, theocracy, or one party rule)[5]. This avoids any concern that the measures do not adequately signal a rejection of democratic governance, as might be the case when using items about a strong leader who "bends the rules" or operates "without interference".

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[4]These indicators tend to be moderately correlated. See the Appendix for details.

[5]Specifically, Claassen (2020b) includes direct questions on diffuse democratic support, "Churchill" questions on qualified democratic support, questions on preferences for alternative regime types (army rule, a strong leader, one party rule and theocracy), questions on the suitability of democracy for your country, questions on the importance of democracy, and questions on whether your country should be governed by free and fair elections. No questions on diffuse or specific political trust are included. See the Appendix in Claassen (2020b) for more details.

The independent variable is political trust. I estimated trust with a Bayesian latent variable model using data from several cross-national surveys and national election studies. The underlying data were originally collected by Valgarðsson et al. (2024), and include measures on trust in parliament, trust in political parties and trust in national governments[6]. I use these to estimate a single political trust attitude for each country year using the Bayesian latent trait model[7].

The latent variable models developed by Claassen (2019) generate a "smooth panel" from an extensive but fractured time series of democratic support and trust measures. For both political trust and democratic support, the original data is fractured across different related measures and across gaps in the time series. The latent variable model treats each measure of democratic support and trust as a binomially distributed count and models probability parameters from the count of positive responses and the total number of valid responses in each survey-country-year. The model also includes item and item-country intercepts and slopes to account for heterogeneity in levels and trends in each item-country. The panels are generated using "model 5" and "model 6" from Claassen (2019), which perform strongest in validation tests[8].

The primary analysis is with regressions predicting support for democracy with political trust. Of course, causal inference is threatened by political trust and democratic support being possibly jointly determined by confounding variables, and potentially also reciprocally related. I therefore take steps to minimise these biases. In the first place, I

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[6]I compute a single trust attitude for each country year because latent variable estimates for trust in parliament, government and political parties tend to be highly correlated and are therefore likely to measure a single underlying attitude. Valgarðsson et al. (2024) show that latent variable estimates for the three trust measures correlate above 0.8 and that "trust in representative institutions" is a meaningful single factor. In the Appendix, I also show that excluding trust in government from my latent variable estimates (which tends to correlate slightly less strongly with trust in parties and in parliament than the latter do with one another and may also be contaminated by partisanship) does not meaningfully change the results. Devine (2024a) also shows in a recent meta-analysis that estimates of the consequences of political trust do not tend vary across measures of trust. See the Appendix of Valgarðsson et al. (2024) for full information about the included countries and data sources for the trust latent variable estimates, and the Appendix of Claassen (2020b) for similar information about the measures of preferences for regime type.

[7]These models are fitted using Bayesian Markov-Chain Monte-Carlo simulation. I estimated these models with the RStan package in R. The models all converged, with R-hat values between 0.95 and 1.05 for all parameters, and an adequate effective sample size for all parameters.

[8]The formal specification for this model is $\eta_{ikt} = \text{logit}^{-1}(\lambda_k + \delta_{ik} + \gamma_{ikt})$ in which η_{ikt} is the beta-binomial expectation parameter for the outcome in each country i, survey item k and year t, γ_k are the item effects, δ_{ik} are the country-item effects and γ_{ikt} is the item and item-country adjusted estimate in each model. The model is also dynamic to capture changes over time, so the current latent opinion is a function of the previous year's level plus random noise. Model 6 is identical to Model 5 except that it includes item slopes as well as intercepts, which allow me to estimate the item characteristic curves in the Appendix.

control for lagged economic and political factors known to correlate with both democratic support and political trust[9].

In addition, to account for possible reciprocal causation between trust and democratic support, and for serial correlation in both variables, I use lagged independent variables, and I include two lags of democratic support in all models. This generates an autoregressive distributed lag model predicting democratic support with political trust in the previous period. Stationarity tests reported in the Appendix indicate that both support for democracy and political trust are stationary time series and therefore an ADL model is suitable[10]. The primary ADL specification is summarized in Equation (1):

$$s_{it} = \alpha + \gamma_1 s_{i,t-1} + \gamma_2 s_{i,t-2} + \beta_1 p_{i,t-1} + Z_{i,t-1} + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{1}$$

In which s indicates democratic support, p indicates political trust, and Z is a matrix of covariates. In the ADL model, the contemporaneous coefficient on political trust represents the immediate, short-run effect of a change in trust on democratic support. I therefore also compute long-run multipliers which capture the persistent effect of a change in political trust on democratic support[11]. Generally, to minimise the threat of confounding, one would also include country fixed effects in a dynamic fixed effects estimator as in Equation (2):

$$s_{it} = \alpha + \gamma_1 s_{i,t-1} + \gamma_2 s_{i,t-2} + \beta_1 p_{i,t-1} + Z_{i,t-1} + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{it} \tag{2}$$

However, these models are less reliable when time series are short, as is the case for some countries within the data. In these cases, including fixed effects may bias the coefficient estimates (Nickell 1981). I therefore also run interactive fixed effects models (Bai 2009), and a system general methods of moments model (Blundell and Bond 1998). The latter uses lags of the dependent variable as instruments for the independent variable and is preferred when the time series are short within some countries and the dependent variable

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[9]The economic controls are: inflation, GDP per capita (PPP) and GDP per capita growth, and average years of education. The political controls are: Freedom House political rights and civil liberties scales, and the V-Dem index of corruption. All controls are from the World Bank or V-Dem.

[10]I run Im-Pesaran-Shin and Levin-Lin-Chu tests for stationarity in panel data.

[11]The formula for the long-run multiplier is $\frac{\beta_1}{(1-(\gamma_1+\gamma_2))}$, for $\gamma_1 + \gamma_2 \neq 1$.

is strongly persistent. In this case, I use the third through fifth lags of democratic support as instruments.

Finally, to account for trending in political trust and democratic support and to differentiate more clearly between short and long run effects of trust on democratic support, I also run a generalized error correction model (GECM) predicting changes in democratic support with changes and levels of political trust. I summarize the GECM model in Equation (3).

$$\Delta s_{it} = \alpha + \gamma_1 s_{i,t-1} + \gamma_2 s_{i,t-2} + \beta_1 \Delta p_{i,t-1} + \Delta Z_{i,t} + Z_{i,t-1} + \epsilon_{it} \qquad (3)$$

This model is a re-parameterization of the ADL model in Equation (1), but it allows me to more clearly differentiate between the short-run effect of a change in political trust in the previous period (represented by the coefficient β_1) and the long-run effect of a permanent change in political trust (represented by the coefficient γ). This gives an insight into the time taken for changes in political trust to filter into diffuse democratic support.

Study 2: Individual level panels

The preceding study considers the association between political trust and preferences for regime type at the country year level. However, it cannot say whether changes in trust cause changes in regime preferences within individuals. Study 2, therefore, uses British Election Study (2016-2024) and American National Election Study (2016-2020) panel data. These measure support for a "strong leader who doesn't bother with parliament or elections" (UK) or whether "having a strong leader in government is good for the United States even if the leader bends the rules to get things done" in several waves, alongside political trust[12]. Overall, there are five waves in the UK data, and two waves in the US data, in which both items appear simultaneously.

The primary models are two-way fixed effect models including individual and time fixed effects. Again, political trust is the independent variable, and support for a strong leader

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[12]In the BES, trust in politicians (MPs) is measured, while in the ANES, the relevant item asks respondents about their "trust in the government in Washington to do what is right".

is the dependent variable. This measures how within-person changes in trust relate to within-person changes in democratic support and eliminates any time-invariant, person-fixed confounders (for example, people's early life socialization) and any time trends affecting all respondents (for example, aggregate economic trends that affect all people roughly equally). All models control for age, gender, and respondents' highest level of education. In the Appendix, I also report models controlling for party identity and, in the British case, evaluations of the national economy and of one's personal finances.

The two-way fixed effect model cannot account for reverse causality, however. As a further test for a causal relationship, therefore, I also run (random intercept) cross-lagged panel models between political trust and democratic support[13]. These allow me to test simultaneously for a relationship in either direction. In the random intercept cross-lagged panel model, they also retain the causal precision of the fixed effects approach by including random intercepts for each person. Combining the two-way fixed effect and cross-lagged models therefore allows me to simultaneously rule out confounding and reverse causality as explanations for the association between political distrust and authoritarian support. In the baseline models, I again control for age, gender, and highest level of education. In follow-up models I add controls for party identity and economic evaluations as before.

Study 3: Experimental analysis

Using panel data is a substantial advantage in causal identification, but there are two remaining issues. The first is that confounders which vary within people and over time could still account for any remaining association between trust and support for democracy. The second is that the individual level panel data uses only one measure of support for democratic versus authoritarian governance. I therefore follow up with a pre-registered[14] survey experiment in which I prime political trust and then measure its consequences for democratic support.

The survey is a vignette experiment in which respondents are randomized into one of two treatment groups, or a control group. The treatment groups read a short passage de-

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[13]I run these models using the BES data only, because the ANES data contains fewer than the minimum three waves required for cross lagged panel models.

[14]The pre-registration can be found at the following link: https://osf.io/spkyb/overview?view_only=e278c012faca4133840a4eac3f96f6b6.

signed to change their political trust, based on the treatments designed by Faulkner et al. (2015) and used in several recent studies (for example, Peyton 2020; Devine 2024b). I use a treatment designed to raise trust, rather than the treatment designed to lower trust, to avoid a ceiling effect and because priming distrust might have negative consequences (for example, for the compliance with the law). The full text of the treatment is in Appendix C1. Those in the control group are asked to read a passage of similar length about an apolitical topic which is also in the Appendix[15]. Following the vignettes, members of each group are then asked an attention check question[16]. They are then asked about their preferences for regime type. As a manipulation check, the respondents are then asked the political trust questions[17]. I then compare marginal means across the different democratic support measures between the treatment and control groups. See Appendix C1 for the full question wordings and response levels.

The dependent variable is support for democratic governance. Following the observational analysis and the classic literature on measuring support for democracy, I first ask directly about nondemocratic regime types. Respondents rated on a scale from 0 (a very bad way of governing their country) to 10 (a very good way of governing their country) the following regime types, based on the commonly asked questions in the literature identified by Claassen (2020b):

- Having a strong leader who gets rid of Congress or elections?

- Having the army rule?

- Having only one political party allowed to stand for election and hold office?

- Having a single non-elected president decide what's best for the country?

These questions directly measure support for democratic versus authoritarian rule and are directly comparable to the preceding observational analyses. Nonetheless, there is a longstanding concern that many survey respondents are "questionnaire democrats" who pay lip service to direct questions about regime type (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007; Inglehart 2003; Dalton 1994). I therefore ask a second battery of questions which follow the recent

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[15]I opted for an apolitical control rather than a placebo control because any political text might have encouraged respondents to remember their pre-existing political trust attitudes, or to recall reasons to (not) trust politicians and political institutions and thereby unintentionally prime political (dis)trust.

[16]See the Appendix for full details and a comparison of results when including or excluding those who failed the attention checks.

[17]The independent variable, political trust, is measured with three questions, covering trust in politicians, trust in political parties, and trust in the legislature.

literature. These are remaining questions[18] from the full measure of support for democracy developed by Claassen et al. (2025). Respondents rate on a scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" their support for each of the following statements:

- People should be free to criticize the government even in times of great crisis. (1)

- The government should be able to censor media sources that are too critical. (1)

- The right to protest should be protected even when protesters inconvenience others. (2)

- The government should have the power to ban organizations that promote subversive values. (2)

- The universal right to vote must be questioned when so many voters are poorly informed and easily misled. (3)

- All adult American citizens should have the right to vote, even individuals holding extreme views. (3)

- Our government would run better if decisions were left up to non-elected independent experts rather than politicians or the people. (4)

- Non-political authorities, such as the military, should never be able to overrule elected politicians. (4)

- We should respect the results of elections, no matter who wins. (5)

- Governments are justified in bending electoral rules in their favour when their opponents have done so in the past. (5)

- American courts should be able to overrule the president when policies are judged to be illegal. (6)

- The government should be able to ignore court rulings that are regarded as politically biased. (6)

- If Congress hinders the work of the government, it should be ignored. (7)

- Members of Congress should be able to question and oversee political decisions taken by the government, even when this slows down progress. (7)

- All Americans should enjoy the same legal rights, regardless of their political beliefs. (8)

- The government should be able to bend the law to solve pressing social and political problems. (8)

This battery has been extensively validated across many democracies, including the United Kingdom and the United States, and it covers all of the core components of liberal democracy identified by the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al. 2025): 1) freedom of expression, 2) freedom of association, 3) universal suffrage, 4) key decision-makers being elected, 5) free and fair elections, 6) judicial constraints on the executive, 7) legislative constraints on the executive and 8) equality before the law. As robustness tests, I also use the concise 7-item scale proposed by Claassen et al. (2025), and the separate liberal democracy scale (items relating to concepts 6-8) and electoral democracy scale (items relating to concepts 1-5).

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[18]The other question in the battery asks respondents about support for a system with only one political party, which is included in the previous battery.

Analysis

Study 1: Aggregate level panel

I first test whether political distrust causes support for democracy at the society level. As a preliminary step, I plot the time series for aggregated political trust and democratic support for the sample window 1990-2020. In line with Valgarðsson et al. (2024) and Claassen (2020b), there appears to be a downward trend in both political trust and democratic support since 1990[19]. The two series are quite closely related (the country-year variables are correlated at r = 0.30) and so it appears, prima facie, that political trust may be related to democratic support.

Figure 2: Time series of yearly aggregated political trust and democratic support, 1990-2020
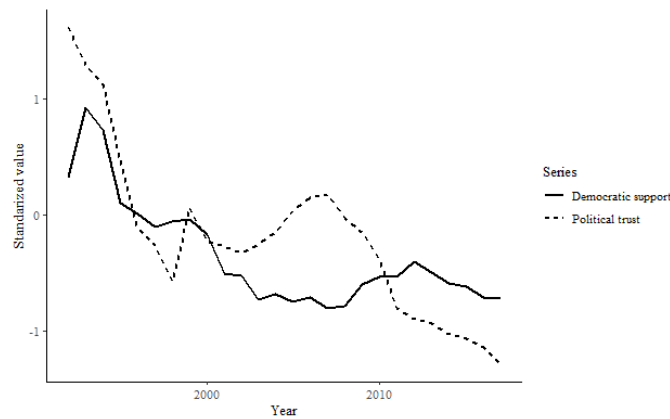
Note. Mean levels of the political trust and democratic support scales across all "Free" and "Partly free" countries, 1990-2020. Excludes years with fewer than 20 observations. Both scales are standardized in terms of standard deviation changes, and both underlying variables are the output of Bayesian latent trend models. For political trust, I ran latent trend models using the underlying data on trust in parliament, trust in political parties and trust in national governments collected by Valgarðsson et al. (2024). For democratic support, I use the estimates for democratic mood from Claassen (2019). See the Appendix for more details about the latent trend estimates.

Table 2 presents regression models predicting democratic support with political trust in the previous period. In the baseline ADL model, a one standard deviation increase in political trust in period t-1 is associated with a 0.22 point increase in democratic support in the subsequent period, net of the controls, and this association is statistically significant. It appears therefore that political trust is associated with democratic support, supporting Hypothesis 1.

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[19]As detailed in the Appendix, Levin-Lin-Chu and Im-Pesaran-Shin tests indicate stationarity in both series at the country-year level and so ADL and GECM specifications are appropriate. In the Appendix, I also report additional models with a deterministic time trend and the results are very similar to those in the main text.

However, a possible explanation is that there are confounding variables which simultaneously cause both political trust and support for democratic governance. To test this possibility, in Model 2, I use a system GMM estimator, and in Models 3 and 4 I use an interactive and then a dynamic fixed effects estimator to eliminate unobserved country-specific and time-invariant confounders. In all cases, there remains a modest statistically significant association between political trust and support for democratic governance. It appears therefore that political distrust erodes support for democratic governance and that this is not driven by reverse causation or joint determination between trust and democratic support, supporting Hypothesis 2.

Table 1: Political distrust erodes support for democratic governance

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Dependent variable		Support for democratic governance (t)			Δ Democratic support
Model	ADL	System GMM	Interactive FE	Dynamic FE	GECM
Political trust (t-1)	0.22*	0.38*	0.34*	0.67*	0.18*
	(0.07)	(0.12)	(0.06)	(0.16)	(0.06)
Δ Political trust	-	-	-	-	2.61*
					(0.57)
Democratic support (t-1)	1.43*	1.41*	0.95*	1.27*	0.40*
	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.02)	(0.06)	(0.04)
Democratic support (t-2)	-0.45*	-0.45*	-0.06*	-0.42*	-0.42*
	(0.06)	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.06)	(0.04)
N observations	1553	1553	1553	1553	1553
N countries	83	83	83	83	83
T	27	27	27	27	27
N instruments	-	124	-	-	-
Adjusted R squared	0.99	-	-	0.99	0.26
Woolridge AR(1) p-value	0.45	-	-	0.10	0.53
Arellano-Bond AR(2) p-value	-	0.95	-	-	-
Hansen p-value	-	1.00	-	-	-
N factors	-	-	4	-	-

Note. *$p<0.05$. Support for democracy measures are Bayesian latent trait estimates from Claassen (2019) and measured on a 0-100 scale. The political trust data was collected by Valgarðsson et al. (2024), which I aggregated with a Bayesian latent trait model, with the output measured in standard deviation changes. Economic controls are one period lags of: inflation, logged GDP per capita (PPP) and GDP per capita growth, and average years of education. Political controls are one period lags of the V-Dem indices of corruption and liberal democracy. All controls are from the World Bank or V-Dem. OLS models include Beck-Katz panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. Standard errors for the system GMM model incorporate the Windmeijer correction. Arellano-White standard errors for the GECM models are robust to cross-sectional correlation and heteroscedasticity. See Appendix for the full table with all covariates reported.

These results are also quite robust, and I present some robustness tests in Appendix A. The most important test is to guard against an ecological fallacy. While a society-level association between political trust and support for democracy is a necessary condition for a causal relationship, it is not sufficient. Any causal claim relies on people deciding whether to support democracy with reference to their political trust, and this implies the existence

of an individual-level relationship between political trust and support for democracy. I therefore demonstrate using data from three large individual-level cross-national studies that the association between trust and preferences for regime type is also present at the individual level[20].

Another key test is whether the effect is reciprocal in nature. In models which I present in the Appendix, I demonstrate that this is unlikely. When re-running the models with political trust as the dependent variable and democratic support as the independent variable, the effects of democratic support tend to be small and statistically insignificant across all the model specifications used in Table 1. It appears therefore that the association between trust and democratic support is primarily due to trust affecting democratic support, and not vice-versa. In other words, specific support correlates with diffuse support because specific support causes diffuse support.

In Model 5, I present a generalized error-correction model predicting changes in democratic support with changes and levels of political trust (and changes and levels of the other independent variables). This is a re-parametrization of the ADL Model 1, but crucially it allows me to more clearly differentiate between short and long run relationships between political trust and democratic support. The coefficient on lagged levels of political trust tends to accumulate over time, while the coefficient on lagged changes in political trust tends to dissipate over time (Claassen 2020b). As expected, both coefficients are modest and statistically significant[21]. A one standard deviation change in political trust leads to an immediate response of 2.6 points on the 0-100 democratic support scale, but over time this accumulates into an approximately 12 point change in democratic support for a permanent one standard deviation change in trust. It appears therefore that while the short-run effect of changes in political trust on democratic support is modest, they accumulate over time and erode democratic support.

Nonetheless, although their effects tend to accumulate over time, the coefficients on lagged levels of political trust in Table 2 represent the instantaneous effect of a one stan-

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[20]I also present some other robustness tests in Appendix A which are: re-running the with additional control variables, excluding countries coded as "Partly Free" by Freedom House, and including an additional lag of political trust to test for a longer-run relationship between political trust and democratic support.

[21]Additional specifications using first differences models and Mundlak within-between models indicate the same result. See the Appendix for details.

dard deviation change in political trust on democratic support and so cannot be interpreted as is. While the coefficients on political trust are modest in the short-term, these effects accumulate into a substantial long-run effect of political distrust on democratic support. In the OLS model, the estimated long-run effect of a permanent one standard deviation fall in political trust is a drop of 11 points on the 100 point support for democratic governance scale, which is about 60 per cent of a standard deviation change in democratic support (standard deviation = 18.5)[22]. Therefore, while the short-run impact of changes in political trust on democratic support is modest, the medium and long-run impact of this distrust is large.

To further illustrate this long-run effect, I plot simulated effects of a one standard deviation fall in political trust in Figure 3, following the method proposed by Williams and Whitten (2012) and used by Claassen (2020b). I set all independent variables at a moderate value (usually their mean) and then simulate the level of democratic support until it reaches a stable long run mean. After 200 years, I decrease political trust by one standard deviation and allow the system to run for an additional 30 years. Following this fall in political trust, within 30 years, we observe a fall of around 7 points on the 100 point support for democracy scale, around 60 per cent of the total long run effect of a permanent one standard deviation fall in political trust.

Figure 3: The simulated long-run effect of a permanent one standard deviation decrease in political trust on support for democratic governance

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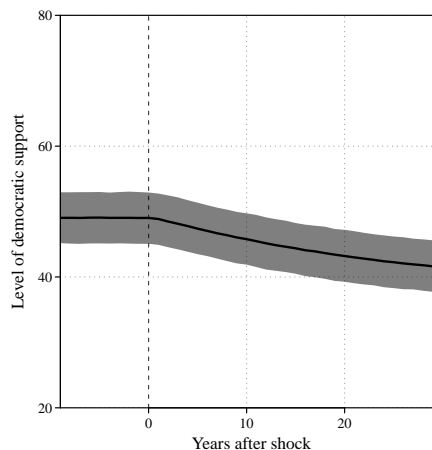
[22]95 per cent confidence interval [06, 23]. The long-run effect is calculated using the method developed by De Boef and Keele (2008) and used by Claassen (2020b), the formula for the long-run effect is $\beta(1 - (\phi_1 + \phi_2))$, and the estimate is generated by simulating 10,000 multivariate normal distributions with their expectation being the model coefficients and the variance being the Beck-Katz panel-corrected standard errors.

Of course, this exercise abstracts from the reality that the other aspects of a political system would not remain constant. Nonetheless, it illustrates that while a fall in political trust would not immediately represent a crisis of democratic support, in the medium to long-run, a permanent fall in political trust could entail such a crisis. It appears therefore that a permanent fall in political trust, such as we have seen in many democracies over the past 50 years (Valgarðsson et al. 2024) is likely to undermine support for democratic governance.

Additionally, in Table 2 I show the rate of decay of the lagged effect of political trust on democratic support, by varying the lag length of political trust across variations of Model (1) from Table 1. This exercise suggests that political trust matters both in the short and the medium run. Lags of political trust affect democratic support for up to 8 years, although the strength of the effect decays fairly linearly over time.

Table 2: The lagged effects of political trust on democratic support

Lag length	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Effect on democratic support	0.22*	0.20*	0.19*	0.17*	0.15*	0.14*	0.14*	0.14*	0.12	0.11
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)

Note. Lagged effects of political trust on democratic support taken from models replicating Model (1) in Table 1 with varying lag lengths. All models control for two lags of democratic support, and one lag of inflation, GDP per capita (PPP), GDP per capita growth, average years of education, and the V-Dem indices of corruption and liberal democracy. Beck-Katz panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. See Appendix for full tables.

Finally, in Table 3 I test the effects of increasingly long periods of rising or falling political trust on democratic support. This exercise has two main implications. The first is to demonstrate that, as expected, countries experiencing consistent declines in trust tend to experience a stronger fall in democratic support (and vice-versa for countries experiencing rising trust). The second is to demonstrate that, in general, experiencing rising trust tends to have a slightly stronger effect on democratic support than the reverse. This suggests that the effects of trust on democratic support are valid in both directions, and that democratic support can be both eroded and rebuilt by changes in political trust.

Table 3: The lagged effects of continuous changes in political trust on democratic support

Interval length	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Effect of rising trust	0.27	0.28*	0.30*	0.33*	0.40*	0.42*	0.42*	0.48*	0.56*	0.63*
	(0.16)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.16)
Effect of falling trust	-0.26	-0.22*	-0.18	-0.19	-0.28*	-0.31*	-0.42*	-0.34*	-0.34*	-0.43*
	(0.15)	(0.11)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.16)

Note. Lagged effects of political trust on democratic support taken from models replicating Model (1) in Table 1 with varying lag lengths. All models control for two lags of democratic support, and one lag of inflation, GDP per capita (PPP), GDP per capita growth, average years of education, and the V-Dem indices of corruption and liberal democracy. Beck-Katz panel-corrected standard errors in parentheses. See Appendix for full tables.

One final consideration is that it could be argued that political distrust and support for democratic governance are empirically indistinguishable, and the associations reported here reflect this joint determination rather than a genuine causal relationship. However, this interpretation is not supported by the data. The raw correlation between lagged political trust and support for democracy is only around 0.1, reflecting previous literature which suggests that political trust is conceptually distinct from diffuse democratic support (Claassen 2020b, p. 122).

Study 2: Individual level panel

The next step is to test whether changes in political trust within people are associated with changes in their regime preferences. Although there are also aggregate mechanisms which may explain the link between political trust and regime preferences, one plausible reason for their connection is that there is also an individual-level causal relationship with political trust causing people to change their regime support. One possible explanation for the strong correlation between political trust and democratic support is that there are common causal factors which predict both. I check whether this is the case using individual and time fixed effects, which allow me to isolate within-person changes in political trust and democratic support, thereby ruling out the common cause explanation and acting as a test for a causal relationship.

I test this using British Election Study and American National Election Study panel data. In Table 3, I present the results of a two-way fixed effect model predicting support for a "strong leader" with trust in politicians as the independent variable, using the complete waves in which both variables were included simultaneously. There is a statistically

significant and negative association between trust in politicians and support for a strong leader, even when accounting for individual and time fixed effects. While the magnitude of the association is modest, it suggests that any association between political trust and support for democracy may be causal in nature. I therefore find support for Hypotheses 1 and 2 in the BES and ANES data, and I find evidence against Hypothesis 3[23].

Table 4: Political distrust predicts support for a strong leader in Britain and the United States

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dependent variable	Support for strong leader					
Country		Britain			United States	
Political trust	-0.040*	-0.023*	-0.030*	-0.056*	-0.067*	-0.075*
	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Individual FE	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y
Time FE	N	N	Y	N	N	Y
N observations	101,318	101,318	101,318	5,466	5,466	5,466
N people	59,366	59,366	59,366	2,839	2,839	2,839
N waves	5	5	5	2	2	2

Note: * $p < 0.05$. All models use data from the BES internet panel 2014-2024 or the American National Election Study panel 2016-2020. The political trust question runs on a 1-7 scale and the support for a strong leader question runs on a 1-5 scale. All models control for age, gender, and highest level of education.

Nonetheless, while the fixed effects rule out most confounding, it is still possible that reverse causation explains this relationship. Therefore, in Table 4, I present cross-lagged panel models between political trust and support for a strong leader using the same BES data. Model 1 is a CLPM while Model 2 is a Random Intercept CLPM (RI-CLPM). The second model includes random intercepts for each person in the data, which accounts for any confounding due to stable, unobserved factors which create between-person differences in trust or support for a strong leader. The RI-CLPM therefore relies only on within-person variation and is accordingly considered a more rigorous causal test. I do not use the US data for these models because it contains insufficient waves (under 3) for a (RI-)CLPM to be reliably identified.

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[23]In Appendix D, I give full descriptive statistics for the panel data and demonstrate that the results are also robust to an individual random effects specification.

Table 5: Cross lagged panel models for political trust and support for a strong leader in Britain

	Model (1)		Model (2)	
DV	Strong leader (t)	Trust in MPs (t)	Strong leader (t)	Trust in MPs (t)
Trust in MPs (t-1)	-0.046*	–	-0.038*	–
	(0.016)	–	(0.021)	–
Strong leader (t-1)	–	0.008	–	0.020
	–	(0.015)	–	(0.021)
Model type	CLPM		RI-CLPM	
N observations	101,318		101,318	
N people	59,366		59,366	
N waves	5		5	

Note. *p<0.05. All models use data from the BES internet panel 2014-2024. All variables have been re-scaled to run from $0 - 1$. CLPM controls for age, gender, and highest level of education.

In both the CLPM and RI-CLPM, lagged trust in politicians is negatively associated with support for a strong leader, and this association is statistically significant at conventional levels. By contrast, lagged support for a strong leader is not associated with political trust. In Model 1, the association is very close to zero, and in Model 2, the association is approximately halved compared to the effect of lagged political trust, and in neither case is the association statistically significant. It appears that political trust causes diffuse democratic support, and the cross-lagged approach suggests that this relationship is due to political trust affecting preferences for regime type and not vice versa. I therefore find support for Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Additionally, in Table 6 I define two new variables, one which indicates whether a person's trust level rose since the previous period, and one indicating whether it fell since the previous period. While I cannot test the effects of sustained peaks and troughs in political trust given the relatively few waves of the BES and ANES panels, the results suggest that the individual-level effect is primarily driven by falls in political trust prompting increases in anti-democratic attitudes, rather than the other way around.

Table 6: The individual effects of rises and falls in political trust on support for democracy

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable	Support for strong leader			
Country	Britain		United States	
Rising trust	-0.003	–	-0.082*	–
	(0.003)	–	(0.014)	–
Falling trust	–	0.008*	–	0.052*
	–	(0.004)	–	(0.014)
Individual FE	Y	Y	N	N
Time FE	Y	Y	N	N
N observations	101,318	101,318	2,683	2,683
N people	59,366	59,366	2,683	2,683
N waves	5	5	2	2

Note: * $p < 0.05$. All models use data from the BES internet panel 2014-2024. The political trust question runs on a 1-7 scale and the support for a strong leader question runs on a 1-5 scale. Model 4 includes individual and time random effects to compensate for the smaller sample size. All models control for age, gender, and highest level of education.

The panel models are again reasonably robust. In the Appendix, I demonstrate that the results remain similar when additionally controlling for party identity, when using random effects specifications, and in the British case, when additionally controlling for evaluations of the national economy and one's personal finances[24]. In sum, these results suggest that the aggregate level relationship identified in the country-year panel models is at least in part explained by individual-level changes in political trust causing people to update their views to become less supportive of democracy and more supportive of authoritarian rule.

Study 3: Experimental analysis

The previous analyses find an association between political trust and support for democracy and suggest that this is not explained by confounding or reverse causality. The final step is to conduct a randomized survey experiment to definitively test whether the relationship is causal, and to test whether it holds when using a behavioural measure of preferences for regime type. Table 7 shows the pooled results of the survey experiment.

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[24]Equivalent economic evaluation variables are not available in the US data.

Table 7: Political trust and support for democracy by treatment group

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Dependent variable	Political trust	Democratic support	Authoritarianism
Trust treatment	0.377*	0.117*	−0.163*
	(0.082)	(0.051)	(0.071)
Distrust treatment	−0.035	0.015	0.001
	(0.081)	(0.051)	(0.071)
(Intercept)	3.607*	7.043*	1.743*
	(0.286)	(0.178)	(0.249)
Num.Obs.	4796	4796	4796
R2	0.031	0.061	0.058

Note. * p <0.05. OLS estimates and their standard errors from models predicting political trust and democratic support scores with treatment group assignment as the independent variable. All continuous variables run on 0-10 scales. The control group is the base category. Models adjust for pre-treatment demographics: age, sex, ethnicity, educational attainment, work status, and country of birth. See Appendix for full results and question/vignette wordings.

The first noteworthy result is that the distrust treatment was unsuccessful in manipulating levels of trust. As we would expect, the subsequent effects on democratic support and authoritarianism are very close to zero and also statistically insignificant[25] .

By contrast, the political trust treatment significantly increased levels of political trust, by just under 0.4 points on the 0-10 scale. Manipulating political trust, in turn, affected attitudes toward democracy. The subsequent effects on both democratic support and authoritarianism are both positive and statistically different from both the control and the political distrust treatment groups. The effect sizes are modest, around 0.1 to 0.2 on the 0-10 scale. However, both political trust and democratic support are relatively stable within people, and these effect sizes are consistent with the modest short-run effects of trust on democratic attitudes in both the individual and aggregate panel analyses. I therefore find evidence in support of Hypothesis 1 - political trust does seem to cause higher support for democracy, and lower support for authoritarianism.

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[25]There are several reasons why this may have occurred. One is that baseline levels of political trust are already quite low in the United States (in my sample, around 3.5 on the 0-10 scale) and there may have been a floor effect. The treatment invoked a scientific adviser telling respondents that American politicians are (not) trustworthy. Given that those who are less trusting of politicians tend also to be less trusting of scientists, it is possible that those who were most likely to believe the treatment were already more trusting of politicians, while those who were less trusting did not believe the treatment. A final possibility is that the October 2025 US government shutdown may have contributed to the aforementioned floor effects in political trust.

These results are again robust and I report robustness tests in the Appendix. These include: excluding items from the scales with lower factor loadings, removing the demographic control variables, using the concise version of the democratic support scale, and excluding potentially inattentive respondents. In all cases, the effects of the trust treatment on democratic support and authoritarianism remained positive and statistically significant.

Table 8: Survey experiment - instrumental variable estimates

	Democratic support	Authoritarianism
Political trust	0.267*	−0.405*
	(0.132)	(0.192)
Intercept	6.123*	3.164*
	(0.538)	(0.779)
Num.Obs.	4858	4858
Weak instruments	15.86*	15.86*
Wu-Hausman	24.70*	18.45*

Note. * p <0.05. 2SLS estimates and standard errors from models predicting democratic support with political trust, and with treatment group assignment as the instrumental variable. All continuous variables run on 0-10 scales. Models adjust for pre-treatment demographics: age, sex, ethnicity, educational attainment, work status, and country of birth. See Appendix for full results and question/vignette wordings.

Finally, in Table 8 I present instrumental variable estimates of the relationship between political trust, democratic support, and authoritarianism, in which assignment to the treatment or control groups is the instrumental variable. These models are justified by the relatively large first-stage effect on trust in the trust treatment group (F>10) and the random assignment to the treatment and control groups. In both cases, there is a substantively large and statistically significant estimate on the outcome. A one unit increase in political trust on the 0 to 10 scale is associated with a 0.26 unit increase in democratic support, and a 0.41 unit decrease in authoritarianism. Again, this suggests that political trust causes support for democracy and opposition to authoritarianism. These results are again robust to excluding attention check fails, to alternative measures of democratic support, and to excluding the demographic control variables. They also suggest that the OLS estimates in Table 7 may underestimate the true magnitude of these effects. In sum, it appears that political trust causes people to gain support for democratic values and to

lose support for authoritarian forms of rule.

Conclusion

It is a longstanding debate whether political distrust constitutes a "crisis of democracy". The evidence presented in this paper suggests that, to an extent, it does. By triangulating evidence from an aggregated country-year panel dataset with individual-level panel and experimental data, I demonstrated a consistent relationship between political trust and support for democratic governance (rather than authoritarian rule). These results were robust across different methodologies and model specifications, and the long-run panel evidence suggest that the medium-run effects of trust on democratic attitudes could be quite large. It appears, therefore, that we should be quite concerned about the low and declining political trust that we see in many democracies today, especially given that declining support for democracy causes actual levels of democracy to fall (Claassen 2020a).

Of course, as with all research, there are caveats to my findings. For one thing, the experimental evidence only covers one country. The United States is a low-trust, high-polarization context, with majoritarian elections and a presidential system. It is possible that the effects uncovered are specific to this context. While the country-year and individual panel data suggest that the relationships are likely to apply in other contexts as well, further evidence will be needed to confirm this. A further caveat is that the relationship may well be reciprocal, with levels of democratic support in turn affecting political trust. While my aggregated panel data and cross-lagged panel models at the individual level suggested that this was not the case, I did not test this hypothesis experimentally. Therefore, while I believe it is unlikely that there is a strong reciprocal relationship in this case, I cannot rule out that the relationship is to some extent reciprocal.

A final caveat is that the short-run effects of trust on democratic support were generally modest, in most cases between 0.1 and 0.2 standard deviations for a standard deviation change in political trust. We would not, therefore, expect a fall in political trust to cause a sudden collapse in democratic support. While to some extent this reduces the concern prompted by low levels of political trust, the aggregated panel analysis in particular suggests that these effects are likely to accumulate over time. Political trust tends to be stable

in long-run panel data and may have a substantial component that is formed early in life. This implies that changes in political trust will be gradual, and potentially generational in nature. My results suggest that the effects of political distrust are modest in the short run but accumulate into larger negative impacts on democracy in the medium to long run. This might help to explain why previous research generally finds small to modest effects of political distrust on its various hypothesized outcomes (Devine 2024a). Further research into the consequences of distrust should look to long-run panel data to differentiate between the short and long run consequences of distrust.

All things considered, there are substantial implications to the finding that political distrust reduces diffuse democratic support. The literature on political distrust has long sought to diagnose the appropriate level of concern at the widespread political distrust we see in many democracies. However, empirical tests of the consequences of political trust have generally used designs which cannot capture causal relationships, and have rarely directed tested the implications of political distrust for democracy (Devine 2024a). In addition to dampening formal participation and limiting compliance with the law (for example, during the Covid-19 pandemic), it appears that political distrust also prompts people not only to reduce support for democratic government and increase support for authoritarian rule. The politically distrustful may not be 'critical citizens' who are fundamentally still committed democrats, but instead they appear to be somewhat skeptical of democracy as a regime type. This only underscores the importance of further research on how to resolve low and declining political trust.

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