

Political Trust and the “Crisis of Democracy” **FREE**

Tom W. G. van der Meer, Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.77>

Published online: 25 January 2017

Summary

For decades, scholarly inquiry into political trust has been motivated by concerns about declining levels of public trust in politics. Because political trust is considered a necessary precondition for democratic rule, a decline in trust is thought to fundamentally challenge the quality of representative democracy.

Fundamentally, political trust can be understood as citizens’ support for political institutions such as government and parliament in the face of uncertainty about or vulnerability to the actions of these institutions. While political trust is conventionally treated as a pro-democratic value, its absence is not evidently detrimental to democracy. Rather, skepticism stimulates political engagement and signals a willingness to judge political institutions by their own merits.

In cross-national comparisons political trust is consistently highest in countries that are not considered liberal democracies. Within the set of liberal democracies, the Nordic countries tend to have the highest trust rates, while the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe have the lowest. Despite evidence that political trust declines in many longstanding democracies in the 1960s and 1970s, the last few decades are characterized by trendless fluctuations in most countries.

While scholars have made great headway in understanding the sources of political trust—most notably corruption, procedural fairness, (economic) performance, inclusive institutions, and socialization—this article argues that knowledge about its consequences has remained remarkably scarce.

Keywords: political trust, confidence, procedural fairness, political support, trust in government

Subjects: Political Behavior

The Narrative of the Political Trust Crisis

In their 1975 report “The Crisis of Democracy” to the Trilateral Committee, Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki set off a debate on what they called “the increasing delegitimation of authority”: “In most of the Trilateral countries in the past decade there has been a decline in the confidence and trust which the people have in government, in their leaders” (Crozier et al., 1975, p. 162). These authors warned about the consequences from the rise of an anomic democracy: “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. (...) What is in short supply in democratic societies today is thus not consensus on the rules of the game but a sense of purpose as to what one should achieve by playing the game” (Crozier et al., 1975, pp. 158–159).

Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki were not the only ones in the mid-1970s suggesting an erosion of political trust. Nor were they the only ones relating trends in political trust to a broader systemic crisis of representative democracy in the Western world. Their narrative implicitly or explicitly motivated scholarly research for the next few decades (Citrin & Luks, 2001, p. 25) and appealed to politicians and opinion makers across the globe. The dominant view was that a high level of public trust in democratic governance and its institutions is integral to the functioning of democracy itself (Almond & Verba, 1963).

In many ways these concerns still echo to this day, as leading opinion makers and public officials are adamant that representative democracy is facing a crisis (Zmerli & Van der Meer, 2016). In January 2013, 40 years after the formation of the Trilateral Commission, *Foreign Affairs* signaled “widespread democratic malaise.” In December 2014, Juncker, the president of the European Committee, considered the “public negativity about politics and politicians, the resentment” as the biggest problem facing the European Union (*Volkskrant*, December 27, 2014). In the 40 years between the report and this review, the idea of a pervasive crisis in political trust has motivated prime ministers in countries as varied as Japan (Takeo Miki, 1974), the Netherlands (Jan Peter Balkenende, 2002), and the United Kingdom (David Cameron, 2010) to pledge to “restore” or “rebuild” the public trust in politics.

The narrative of a political trust crisis that leads into or signals a crisis of representative democracy is rooted in decades of scholarly debate (see Thomassen, 2015). Understood to be integral to the functioning of democracy, low and declining trust presumably has direct and severe consequences for the quality and stability of representative democracy, its institutions, and its actors. Dalton (2004, p. 157) writes about the supposed trends of increasing political distrust: “There are legitimate reasons to worry that such trends may erode the vitality of democracy, or eventually may undermine the democratic process itself. Indeed, the history of democracies seems to be punctuated by political analysts raising such concerns, even before there were public opinion surveys to provide supporting evidence.” At worst, a political trust crisis would invoke a full-fledged crisis of representative democracy by undermining the stability of the regime. At best, it would signal structural challenges that require transformation of democracy’s institutions and procedures. These concerns were raised prominently in the light of countries’ transitions to democracy, where public trust would be required to bolster the regime’s legitimacy even if it was faced with setbacks. Indeed, the relevance of political trust was first raised in the light of the Second Wave of democratization after 1945 (Almond & Verba, 1963) and regained prominence after the Third Wave of democratization in the 1970s (Southern Europe), 1980s (Latin America and Southeast Asia), and 1990s (Central and Eastern Europe) (e.g., Mishler & Rose, 1997).

Much research on political trust has been implicitly or explicitly framed to touch on the narrative of the political trust crisis. Yet this narrative has also been challenged. Scholars have debated the relevance of political trust on a more conceptual level, argued about the correct interpretation of longitudinal trends and cross-national differences, discussed the societal and political roots of

political trust, and studied its consequences. These debates and discussions have been valuable, bringing focus to the scholarly understanding of political trust and pushing the boundaries of our knowledge.

Three Variants of the Overarching Narrative

Analytically, we can distinguish between three variants of the overarching narrative that relates political trust crises to more general crises in democracy.

The first finds its origin in the 1970s, arguing that the very survival of democratic regimes or communities is at stake if political trust is low. “A democratic political system cannot survive for long without the support of a majority of its citizens” (Miller, 1974, p. 951). The expectation was formulated in times when political scientists were mainly concerned with the stability of democratic regimes. Although formulated less explicitly nowadays, allusions to the risk that representative democracy may not survive a trust crisis continue to be made in scholarly and public debates. This is most notable in the literature on new and transition democracies, where trust is required “to bolster regimes through economic crisis or external shocks” (Norris, 1999, p. 2) in the face of ongoing public support for alternatives to representative democracy.

However, since the 1990s scholars have increasingly realized that high levels of support for democratic principles and even the democratic performance of regime itself have gone hand in hand with low levels of trust in the institutions and actors that function in that regime. The crisis of democracy predicted in the 1970s had not occurred. Instead, it was argued, representative democracy itself need not be under threat in the face of low or declining political trust, but can rather undergo “far reaching systemic change within the general category of representative democracies” (Klingemann & Fuchs, 1995, p. 7). Major institutional reconfigurations happened quite often. Consider, for instance, the French transition from the Fourth to the Fifth republic, the implosion of the Italian party system in the 1990s, the shift from majoritarian to proportional institutions in New Zealand, and the realignment of the Dutch party system after 2002. Representative democracy is inherently responsive to challenges such as political trust crises: through democratic institutions critical citizens have able to reinvigorate representative democracy. “Instead of posing a challenge to democratic ideals, changing levels of political support are affecting the style of democratic politics” (Dalton, 2004, p. 200).

Finally, a third, more modest claim in the literature argues that low and declining levels of political trust do not necessarily cause a crisis of representative democracy and/or its institutions, but rather reflect democratic malaise like the canary in the coal mine that warns against gas leaks (Norris, 2011).

Four Fields of Interest

Much research on political trust touches on its supposed relevance to the stability of representative democracy. The overarching narrative can be broken down analytically in four topics of debate. The first deals with the conceptual nature of political trust. The second topic is

descriptive, focusing on the longitudinal trends and cross-national differences in political trust empirically. The third topic of debate has revolved around the individual and contextual causes of political trust. The fourth topic is about the consequences of political trust at the micro, meso, and macro levels. Yet, surprisingly, this is the one that is the least developed empirically.

The remainder of this contribution deals with each of these four topics—conceptual, descriptive, determinants, and consequences—in relation to the overarching debate.

Conceptualizing Political Trust

Political Trust and Political Support

While I primarily use the term political trust in this article, many equivalents are used throughout the literature, including trust in government and confidence in political institutions. While we may distinguish conceptually between trust and confidence, empirically the two are hardly separable.

The relevance of political trust for representative democracy lies in the three ways in which trust has been distinguished from the more general concept of political support.

First, in Easton’s conventional distinction between specific and diffuse support, political trust is characterized as a typical expression of diffuse support (Easton, 1975, p. 447). Whereas specific support is content-dependent and relies on evaluations of output, diffuse support is more affective and does not depend on short-term satisfaction with specific outputs. According to Easton (1975, p. 447), “the presence of trust would mean that members would feel that their own interests would be attended to, even if the authorities were exposed to little supervision or scrutiny.” Yet, subsequent authors have applied the distinction between specific and diffuse support to discuss the level of abstraction of the objects, with political actors the most specific and democratic values as the most diffuse (e.g., Norris, 1999, 2011).

Second, political trust is considered to have a specific set of objects (Norris, 1999, 2011), most notably the regime’s political institutions (especially parliament and government) and the regime’s procedures (such as procedural rules). On the one hand, the definition of political trust by its objects excludes more abstract objects such as the community and democratic principles that are conventionally less contested and volatile. On the other hand, it also excludes the individual political actors that populate the institutions and the individual policies that are the output: actors and policies should not directly concern the stability of the regime and its institutions as long as citizens are enabled institutionally to “throw the rascals out.” Conceptually, political trust thus concerns the objects—institutions, procedures—that link overarching democratic principles to the everyday actors and policies (see Figure 1). Although conceptually distinct, empirically scholars find that political trust is related to support for principles as well as support for political actors.

The third unique feature of political trust compared to the more general label of political support is the relational and situational aspect that is inherent in trust. Trust relationships are defined by the subject’s degree of uncertainty and/or vulnerability about the future behavior of the object. Whereas support could also be expressed when one is perfectly certain about the outcomes or when the outcomes do not matter at all to the subject, trust is primarily relevant in times of uncertainty about the outcomes. The subject of political trust (the truster) is in one way or another vulnerable to the actions of the object (the trustee). The larger the risk, the more difficult it is to trust, yet the more relevant trust relationships are to prevent the constant, costly monitoring of government.

Trust is thus a relational concept that links the subject (who trusts) to the object (that is trusted). Indeed, we do not commonly argue that person A trusts without reference to a trust object. In daily use, trust is also conditional: expressed or withheld with reference to specific (type of) actions or environments. Trust is therefore expressed as “A trusts B to do X” (Hardin, 2000, p. 26).

Political Trust as a Relation

In this rational and relational approach, political trust has an evaluative character. *What* is being evaluated is a question that has driven scholars in the field for decades. In the evaluative approach, we can distinguish between four elements of trust: (a) trust in the object’s competence to act in the subject’s interest, (b) trust that the object is benign to the subject, (c) trust that the commitment of the object can be enforced by the subject or that the object can otherwise be held accountable, and (d) trust that the behavior of the object is predictable. Whether and how these elements can be applied to trust in political institutions and democratic procedures has been a matter of debate. It is difficult to argue that one can evaluate the nature or commitment of an impersonal institution in the same way as one evaluates the nature or commitment of persons such as one’s peers. Yet, indirectly, one can evaluate how institutions and procedures stimulate or constrain the persons that operate within them vis-à-vis the electorate: their competence (strong performance), care (proportionality, minority rights), enforceable commitment (accountability), and predictability (stability of regime institutions and actors; reliability of policy outcomes).

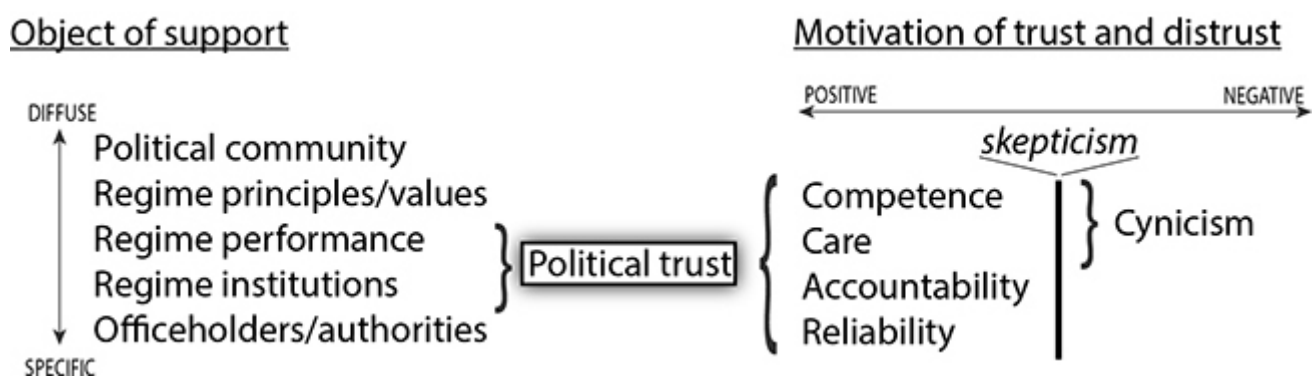


Figure 1. A conceptual map of political trust.

Trust, Skepticism, and Democracy

Whereas trust reflects the positive evaluation by the subjects of specific objects in a situation of uncertainty or vulnerability, the absence of trust should not simply be equated to the presence of distrust. A crucial middle category is made up by the category of skepticism, the attitude to suspend judgment awaiting additional information. Political cynicism, by contrast, is the attitude that assumes the worst of the nature of political objects (actors, institutions) as reflected in their perceived incompetence and selfishness.

Although political trust is often thought to be a desirable or even necessary democratic quality, vibrant democracies do not simply require political trust regardless of object and circumstances. While political trust would be desirable from an administrative point of view in democracies and non-democracies alike (as it implies a voluntary compliance to the law and stimulates the smooth top-down implementation of policies), from a liberal democratic perspective one would call for vigilant skepticism to keep citizens engaged and to monitor the actions of government.

Surely it is hard to imagine representative democracy if democratic principles and values are not deeply embedded in society. However, support for these democratic principles should not devolve into blind trust in the performance or institutions, let alone unconditional support for the officeholders. Lack of political trust need not be detrimental to representative democracy. Scholars have used labels such as skeptical, critical, vigilant, and assertive to describe non-trusting citizens who nevertheless strengthen democracy, if only because their lack of trust stimulates engagement: “Democracy requires trust but also presupposes an active and vigilant citizenry with a healthy skepticism of government and a willingness, should the need arise, to suspend trust and assert control over government—at a minimum by replacing the government of the day” (Mishler & Rose, 1997, p. 419).

The Reflection of Conceptual Considerations in Methods of Data Collection

Evidently, the conceptual fine-tuning of political trust is not necessarily reflected in the outcomes of empirical research on citizens’ understanding of political trust. In daily use, trust has remained a rather vague concept, which affects the setup and outcomes of empirical studies. Most empirical knowledge on political trust is derived from survey research. Many of the above-mentioned conceptual distinctions are not adopted in survey designs or in respondents’ answers. Typically, surveys tend to pose questions about the positive attitude (political trust). This is either compared to the absence of trust (i.e., mistrust) or compared to the negative attitude (i.e., distrust), but not to both. The former conflates skepticism and distrust, whereas the latter tends to overlook the potential middle ground of skepticism.

Similarly, despite conceptual distinctions between various objects of political trust, empirically the reported trust in various political institutions—parliament and government, police and the justice system—is strongly interrelated. While the levels of trust may differ at the aggregate level, many citizens do not make a strong distinction between various political institutions. Hence, political trust may not be as object-specific as the more evaluative approaches in the literature

heuristically assume. Indeed, in recent years various scholars have used advanced statistical methods to prove that trust in a wide range of political and even civic institutions can empirically be reduced to a single underlying factor, without losing much information in the process.

Political Trust Across the Globe

Figure 2 provides an overview of political trust (here defined as trust in government and trust in parliament) across the globe, based on the World Values Survey (WVS) of 2010–2014. What stands out first and foremost is that political trust is highest in illiberal regimes such as Uzbekistan, China, Azerbaijan, Qatar, Singapore, and Malaysia. These high scores are a consistent finding; nevertheless, it is unclear what they mean. They may be caused by methodological fallacies, such as an invalid measurement instrument (e.g., due to respondents’ fear to respond critically) or inequivalent meaning (see Shi, 2014, for a discussion). Or they may be caused by theoretical reasons, such as stronger feelings of loyalty (“allegiance”) to the regime (see Welzel & Dalton, 2015).

Political trust is relatively low in established democracies: in most of them only a minority of the respondents tends to trust parliament and/or government. In Figure 2, Sweden and Germany are exceptions. As Figure 3 suggests, the high trust rate in Sweden is quite typical for the other Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, Finland), just as the low trust rates in Poland, Romania, and Slovenia are rather typical for the post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

It is important to note, however, that the measurement of political trust rates depends strongly on the specific formulation of the question and the number and type of categories offered. Longitudinal trends and cross-national rankings are therefore more important sources of information than the absolute percentage in a single country.

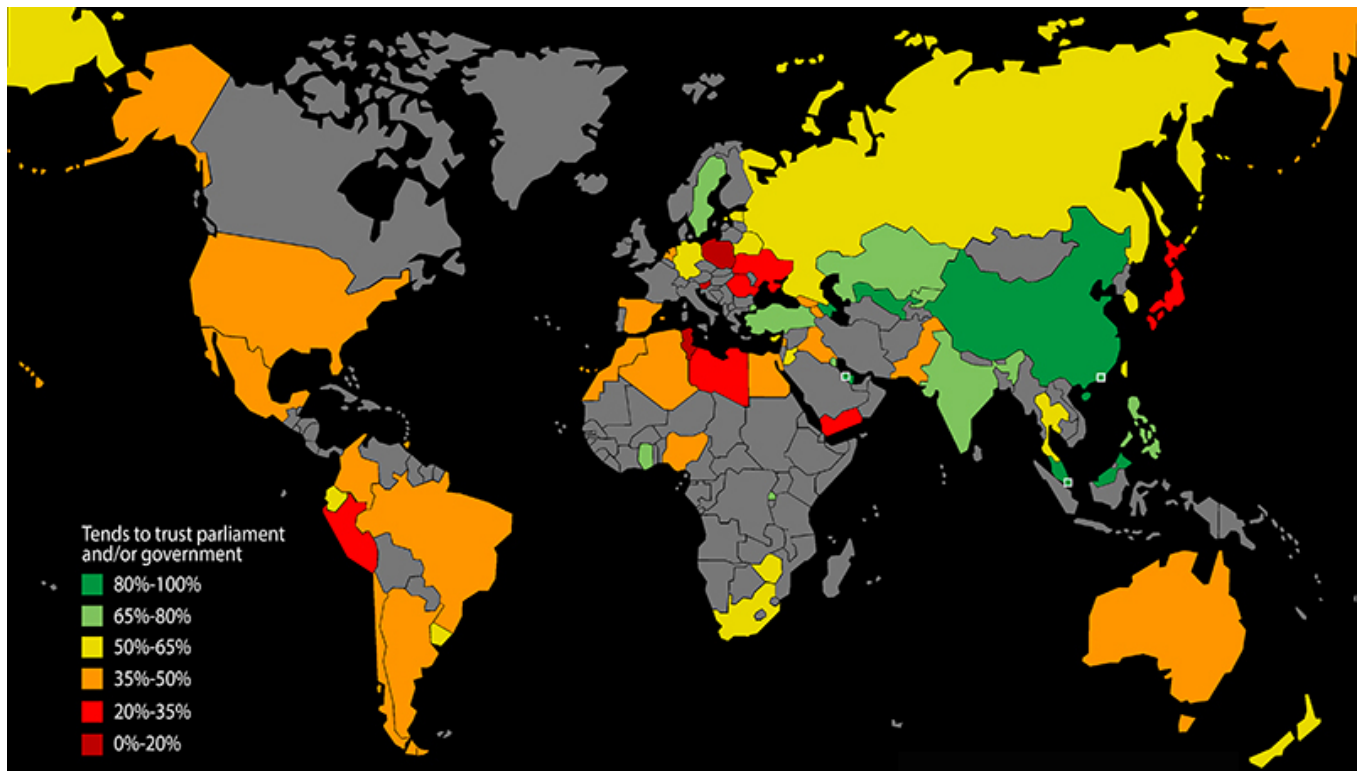


Figure 2. Political trust across the globe, WVS, 2010–2014.

Source: World Values Survey 2010–2014.

Yet even the cross-national ranking ought to be taken with a grain of salt, as political trust rates tend to be quite volatile across time. In Western countries, political trust fluctuates within margins around a relatively stable mean. Yet these fluctuations do affect the ranking of countries described in Figure 2. This is well illustrated by Figure 3, where the left panel reflects political trust rates in Europe according to the WVS 2005–2009 and the right panel reflects political trust rates according to the European Values Survey (EVS) 2007–2009. Both surveys pose the same trust questions and ran rather concurrently, yet the trust rates differ. In the WVS political trust is lower in Germany than in the United Kingdom and lower in Sweden than in Finland, but that is inversed in the EVS. Countries such as the Netherlands, France, and Russia score higher on political trust in the EVS than in the WVS, whereas that is inversed in Ukraine and Bulgaria. This reflects at least in part the specific timing of the fieldwork in the two surveys.

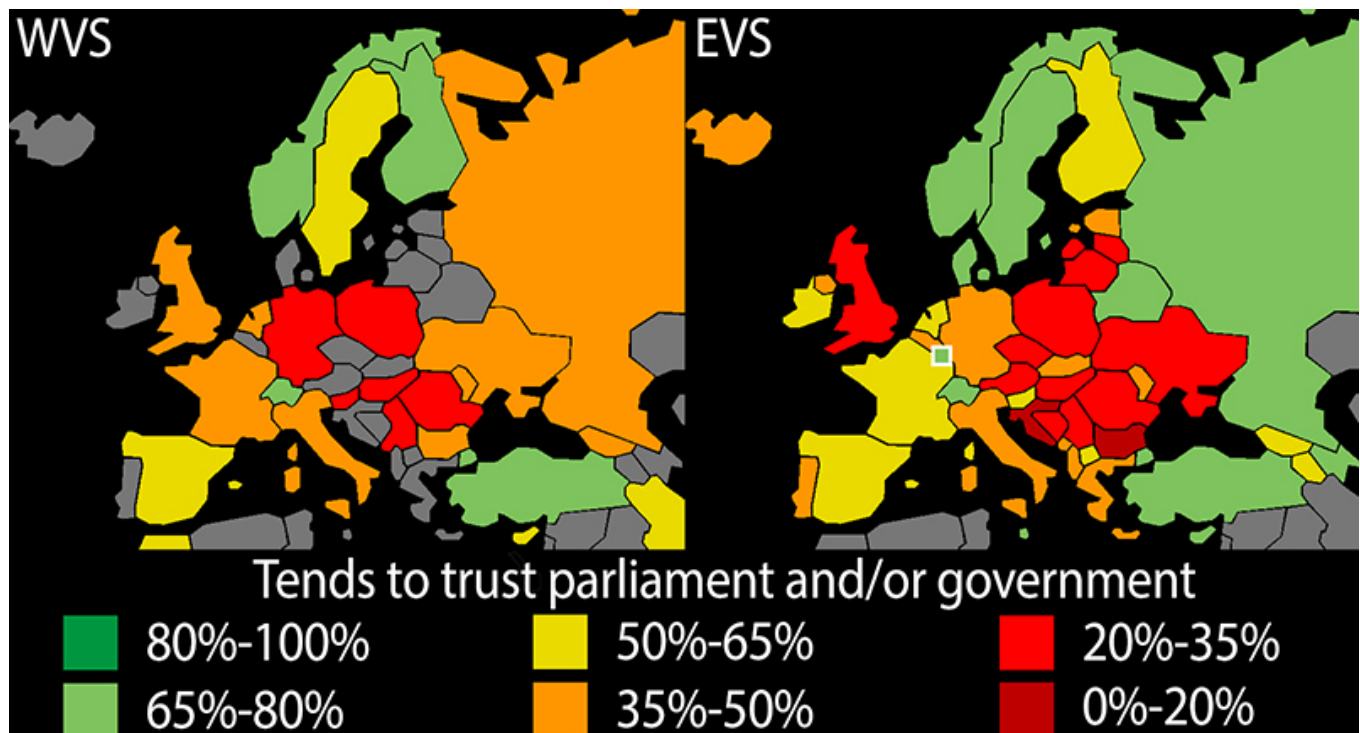


Figure 3. Political trust in Europe, 2005–2009, WVS and EVS.

Trends in Established Democracies

General Trends

The rising concern across the West about supposed decline in political trust in the 1970 coincided with two phenomena. First, representative democracy experienced a backlash in the West, ranging from the shootings of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy in the 1960s and the Watergate scandal in the 1970s to the resurgence of authoritarianism in Southern Europe. Second, the student revolts of the late 1960s challenged political and societal authorities, and with them the traditional setup of democratic rule.

Since then, there has been more or less uninterrupted debate about the trends in political trust. As more and longer time series data became available in the 1990s, the debate began to focus primarily on the nature of these trends. How should the changes in political trust be understood?

Many have argued that the trends in political trust represent a structural decline. Yet others suggest that political trust predominantly fluctuates in response to recurrent events of varying length and intensity: there are multiple short-term declines from which democracies tend to recover. The debate is still undecided to this day, depending on both the object of trust and the length of the time series.

When we break the debate down along these lines, we find that public support for democratic principles has remained very high throughout the years. Similarly, the satisfaction with the way democracy functions has increased in many European countries since the 1970s. Even though various surveys report an undercurrent of support for technocratic rule or for strong leaders, the same respondents also call for more direct democracy. Support for these alternate modes of government thus need not be seen as *undemocratic*. Rather, as John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (2002) suggest in *Stealth Democracy*, it may instead reflect support for a democratic model in which citizens leave politics to strong leadership who are expected to act in the public interest but can be overruled by the public when need be.

The trends in political trust show stronger fluctuations over time. These fluctuations make it more difficult to assess whether the long-term trend is stable or reflects a slow but fundamental decline. One could make the case that trust has declined in the long run, that is, since the 1950s or the 1970s in many Western countries. Dalton (2004) argues that there has been such a decline, even though it set in at different points in time in different countries. On the other hand, Norris (2011) argues that there has been no evidence for a structural downward trend in political trust since the 1990s.

North America

The United States stands out as an example of a country that has experienced a sharp decline in the decades since the Second World War. Trust in government declined sharply in the United States between 1958 (the Eisenhower presidency) and 1980 (the Carter presidency), when trust rates were more than cut in half (from above 70% to below 30%) according to the rolling averages computed by the Pew Research Center, based on a range of surveys and polls (see Figure 4). But while trust in government has fluctuated wildly since then (booming during the Reagan presidency, at the end of the Clinton presidency, and after 9/11), it no longer reflected a structural downward trend (see Citrin & Luks, 2001; Dalton, 2004). Canada experienced a less outspoken but visible decline in political trust between the 1960s and the early 1990s.

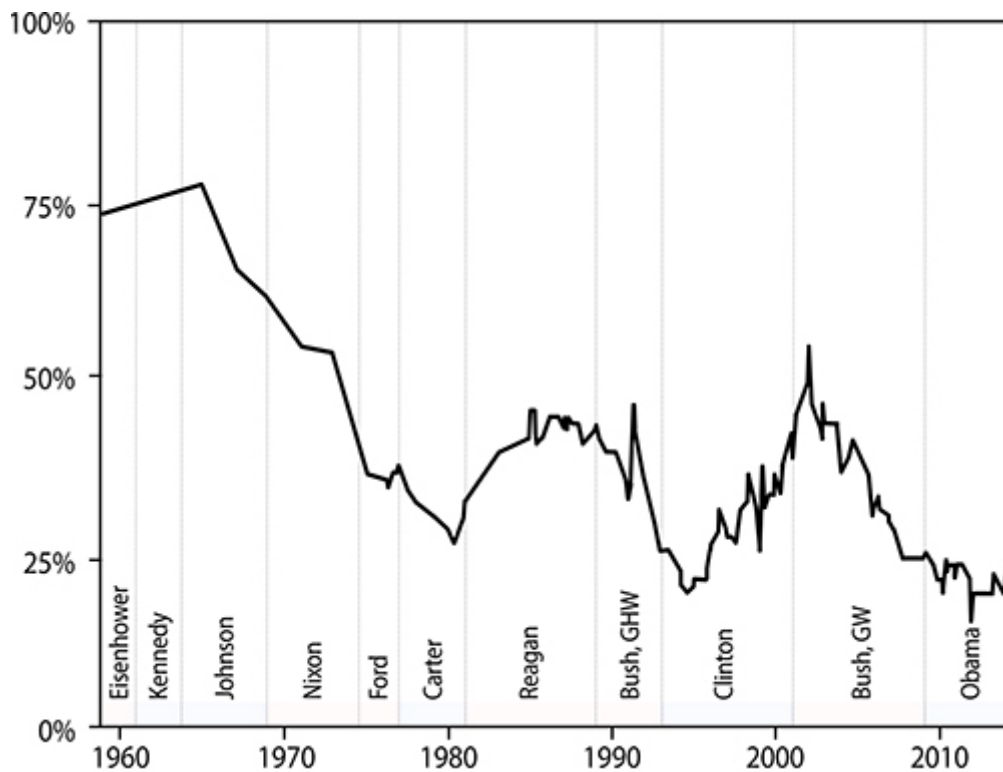


Figure 4. Trust in government in the United States, 1958–2014.

(Source: Pew Research Center)

Western and Southern Europe

Unfortunately, in the established democracies of Western and Southern Europe, such long-term trends are based on a scarcity of data with often many gaps or rather indirect measures of political trust. Any decline in political trust must have taken place predominantly during the 1960s and 1970s before leveling off in the 1990s and 2000s. Levels of trust have traditionally been highest in the Nordic countries, followed by the rest of Northwestern Europe. These countries share relatively long democratic traditions and low levels of corruption. Levels of trust are lower in Southern Europe, where many countries deal with the legacies of authoritarianism and/or widespread clientelism. These regional differences grew when the Southern European democracies were hit especially hard by the recession and the subsequent austerity policies after 2007: trust in government and satisfaction with democracy declined by more than 25 percentage points in Southern Europe, whereas they showed trendless fluctuations in the North according to the Eurobarometer data.

The Great Recession

The great recession that hit the West after 2007 is a particularly intriguing event in the study of political trust. It has led to a range of new studies that investigate the recession's effects on political trust. Especially in Europe, the recession invoked a sharp and rather long-lasting decline in political trust rates. Political trust dove more sharply in those countries that were hit most

harshly by the economic downturn, most notably in Greece and Spain (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014). The recession eroded not only trust in political institutions but also (in most countries to a slightly lesser extent) satisfaction with the way democracy functions.

The recession as an economic downturn coincided in Europe with various political and leadership crises (on international solidarity), repeated concerns with the breakdown of the European monetary union, and the implementation of austerity policies in countries like Ireland, Portugal, Italy, and Greece. It is hard to separate the impact of the economic downturn itself from the subsequent political response analytically. Nevertheless, the decline in political trust after the onset of the great recession is statistically explained by the downturn on three macroeconomic indicators (growth, unemployment rates, and to a lesser extent inflation) and does not require additional explanations (Van Erkel & Van der Meer, 2015).

Diverging Trends

In the 1990s various scholars noted the diverging trends of support for general democratic principles, on the one hand, and trust in political institutions, on the other (see Kaase & Newton, 1995; Klingemann & Fuchs, 1995). This combination of relatively high and stable support for democratic principles and the functioning of democracy and fluctuating or even declining trust in political institutions such as government and parliament suggests the rise of the critical citizen. Inglehart’s (1997) concept of postmaterialism offers an explanation for this slow change, as older cohorts are replaced by younger generations of citizens who are imbued with democratic principles but skeptical or even wary of authorities.

The narrative of an ongoing crisis in political trust in established democracies therefore remains contested. In recent decades high levels of support for democratic principles have coincided with low levels of trust in the political institutions. At least to date, these low trust rates have not spilled over into undermining support for the regime itself. Moreover, while relatively low, political trust has not been in structural decline in recent decades. Rather, trust rates responded to the behavior, (macroeconomic) performance, and scandals around those in power.

Political Trust in Other Regions of the Globe

While much of our understanding of determinants of political trust is based on established democracies in North America and Western Europe, in recent decades scholars have been able to study other regions more systematically (see Zmerli & Van der Meer, 2016). This has revealed remarkable parallels and differences.

The primary narrative in analyses of political trust in Central and Eastern Europe, meanwhile, has been about the transition from communism to liberal democracy after 1989 (Mishler & Rose, 1997). While political trust was close to the levels of established democracies at the outset—described as the so-called “honeymoon effect”—it declined slowly during the 1990s and 2000s. This decline seems to have bottomed out since. Remarkably, as Figures 2 and 3 show, trust is higher in partial and non-democracies than in the new democracies of Central and Eastern

Europe. According to the data of the European Values Survey 2007–2009, the countries with the highest trust rates in the region are Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia; Azerbaijan ranks highest on the continent. We can speculate on the reasons for this gap. Political trust may not have an equivalent meaning in non-democracies. It might be more difficult for survey research to tap validly into the attitude of citizens in non-democracies. Or the sources of political trust may simply be different in full democracies than in non-democracies: trust may be less the result of procedural fairness than of social stability, cultural conservatism, and political rigor.

Democracies in Latin America appear to be consolidating after a long history of aborted transitions and authoritarian rule. Over the last decades the region has provided fertile ground for new studies on political trust. Trust in government specifically has shown an upward trend in recent years, thereby narrowing the gap. Moreover, the comprehensive analysis by Bargsted, Somma, and Castillo (2016) shows that within-country fluctuations in political trust in Latin America correspond to changes in political performance, similar to what occurs in the established democracies of Western Europe and North America. Yet, simultaneously, Latin America has unique features: political trust is boosted when government takes a distinct left turn, as happened recurrently in the last decades.

Welzel and Dalton (2015) show that the new democracies of Latin America and post-communist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe are characterized by a political culture of low citizen allegiance, that is, “orientations that tie citizens loyally to their society and its institutional order” (p. 291). This makes them most distinct from three other regions—South and East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Arab region—that by contrast score high on citizens’ allegiance to the state and its institutions. This implies that political trust in the latter regions is an expression of loyalty rather than skepticism.

South and East Asia are particularly interesting regions in which to study political trust, as they cover democracies, authoritarian regimes, and hybrid systems. Two fundamental points of contention are whether political trust has the same meaning in such diverse systems, and, if so, whether it can be measured in a valid and reliable way in less democratic systems (see Shi, 2014, pp. 239–245). Political trust rates were higher in well-performing authoritarian regimes than in the democratic regimes of the region (Park, 2016). Yet the standards seem to differ. Authoritarian regimes are judged mainly on their (economic) performance, whereas democratic regimes are evaluated on the basis of democratic principles. This suggests that maintaining high levels of trust in non-democratic societies depends on continuous economic growth. By contrast, perceptions of corruption strongly and consistently undermine political trust in democratic regimes in East Asia (Chang & Chu, 2006), similar to the established democracies in North America and Western Europe.

Africa and the Arab region, finally, have remained the most understudied regions in the world when it comes to trust research. Evidently, data limitations have been the main culprit. Nevertheless, this oversight is surprising from a theoretical point of view, given the fundamental and divergent events that occurred across both regions. The Arab Spring revolts are just one of many recent examples. Hutchison and Johnson (2016) show that especially sub-Saharan African countries face stiff challenges to obtain and retain political trust: political trust is warranted

when regimes are able to support state integrity (against external threats, and when there is an efficient government to tax its citizenry). These demands are more basic than the demands for economic performance and good governance that governments have to meet in representative democracies. Yet Hutchison and Johnson also show that despite these important contextual differences, citizens in African countries are not dissimilar to citizens in more traditional democracies: to the extent that there is an African exceptionalism, it is due to context and not due to the citizens themselves.

All in all, representative democracies across the globe face a similar combination of relatively high support for democracy and relatively low levels of trust in political institutions. Yet to the extent that time series data have been available for a longer time span, there is only evidence for a slow decline of political trust in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe in recent decades.

Determinants of Political Trust

The most extensive subfield in the political trust literature focuses on its determinants. The breadth and depth of this vast subfield cannot easily be summarized in a single article (for a more extensive overview, see Zmerli & Van der Meer, 2016). It covers studies on the micro level (individuals), meso level (organizations), and macro level (countries). Research examines subject characteristics (i.e., the truster) and object characteristics (i.e., the trusted political objects) to explain the trust relationship. In recent years these various approaches have become increasingly integrated, in line with the idea that political trust is conceptually a relationship characteristic between subject and object. The trust-as-evaluation approach is moving beyond the focus on effects toward modeling mechanisms that ought to explain these effects.

To the extent that political trust is indeed an evaluation of the object by the subject, there is a missing link. That missing link is the benchmark or standard to which politics is held. This benchmark may be induced by subjective or shared values, by comparisons to other communities/countries, or by expectations raised from past performance. Widespread corruption is more likely to undermine political trust among those who more strongly value a neutral government. Low expectations are likely to boost evaluations. The relevance of benchmarks and standards is only rarely taken up in the literature on political trust. However, that does not mean they are not present implicitly. Cross-national studies on determinants of political trust, for instance, implicitly assume that trust is the result of a comparison to other countries (or at least to a cross-nationally equivalent standard). Similarly, longitudinal studies implicitly assume that trust is the result of a historical comparison (or held to a longitudinally equivalent standard). This may explain why cross-sectional and longitudinal studies sometimes reach different conclusions.

Corruption and Perceptions of Fairness

In many ways corrupt practices are antithetical to political trust. Widespread corruption undermines efficiency and effectiveness. It implies an absence of moral scruples. It thrives on an institutionalized lack of accountability. And corruption invokes uncertainty and inequality both at

the macro level (policies that are agreed upon by government) and at the micro level (the implementation of these policies in daily life). As such, corruption is the epitome of bad-quality government.

It is therefore not surprising that corruption is *the* major explanation of cross-national differences in political trust. Trust rates are substantially lower in countries where corruption is high. This negative effect of corruption differs with citizens' level of education: Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) find that corruption strongly undermines political trust among the most educated but does not have a significant effect among the lowest educated.

Within countries, citizens' experiences with and perceptions of corruption are also closely related to political distrust. Those who have had to pay bribes to the justice system, who perceive government as corrupt, or who perceive government as incapable as dealing with corruption are more likely to distrust politics. Uslaner (2016) provides an overview of the effects of corruption perceptions and experiences across a wide variety of regions and—democratic and non-democratic—regimes across the globe, concluding that the relationship between corruption and distrust tends to be universal.

The quality of government is also assessed via (perceptions of) procedural fairness. Direct interactions with decision-makers or civil servants are relevant for political trust. This is not simply because citizens are affected by the outcomes of these interactions, but also because the fairness of the process affects citizens' willingness to accept decisions and ultimately trust politics. Grimes (2016) provides an overview of this booming literature, showing that the quality of government matters. One element of this procedural fairness, however, may be a double-edged sword. While transparency is an important democratic value in itself, it does not have an unconditional positive effect on political trust: it is inherent to transparency that it also brings to light the shortcomings of the political system.

All in all, corruption and procedural fairness are consistent explanations of political trust, in both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.

Macroeconomic Performance

Governmental performance has long been considered a relevant cause of political trust. Surprisingly, though, empirical analyses largely restricted themselves to one specific set of performance indicators, namely macroeconomic outcomes. Surely, macroeconomic performance is a consistently salient issue among citizens. Yet while governments are held accountable for the state of the economy by their citizens, their options to affect macroeconomic outcomes via national policies have steadily declined over the last few decades.

While *subjective perceptions* of macroeconomic outcomes are consistently related to political trust at the micro level and political trust fluctuates parallel to consumer confidence at the macro level, scholars have not been able to find consistent effects *objective* macroeconomic outcomes on

political trust. Regardless of the macroeconomic performance indicator under study, findings have remained mixed at best. Some find significant effects, others find none, or even see evidence for inverse effects.

There are various reasons for the disparity of findings. First, while cluster correction and multilevel models have become common over the last decade, earlier studies often relied on less strict methodological designs that underestimated standard errors or conflated individual and contextual effects. Second, corruption is a major rival explanation of cross-national differences in political trust. Indeed, studies that employ a cross-national, multilevel design and simultaneously take corruption into account find no effect of macroeconomic performance on political trust (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2016).

But that does not hold for studies that make a longitudinal comparison: recent evidence suggests that it does explain its longitudinal fluctuations (Bargsted et al., 2016; Van Erkel & Van der Meer, 2015). This would imply that performance matters mainly with reference to historical expectations rather than to a cross-national comparison. Economic performance is not the cork that keeps trust afloat, but rather the tide on which it floats.

Electoral Institutions

Besides the quality of government procedures and the quality of governmental output, scholars have studied the role that democratic input institutions play in boosting political trust. The debate positions representation and proportionality against accountability and majoritarianism. While both representative and accountable government are likely to benefit political trust from a theoretical point of view, electoral institutions tend to emphasize one over the other. Nationwide, proportional party-list systems allow political minorities to be represented in parliaments relatively smoothly, but tend to stimulate coalition government because political power is not concentrated in the party that holds a plurality of the votes. By contrast, first-past-the-post district systems tend to stimulate single-party government and thereby assign political accountabilities more clearly. However, political minorities—at least those who are not geographically clustered—are much less likely to be represented in parliament, let alone proportional to their electoral size.

Both proportionality and majoritarianism are thus likely to boost political trust theoretically. Empirically, the debate is quite unresolved. Some studies find evidence that political trust is higher in countries with more proportional systems, other studies that proportionality is detrimental to political trust, while a third group of studies finds no significant relationship at all. Ultimately, evidence for all remains rather weak.

Marien (2011) proposed a particularly intriguing way out of the theoretical and empirical deadlock. She argues that political trust should be highest in the most proportional and the most disproportional systems compared to those systems with more muddled electoral rules. She finds supporting evidence for such a curvilinear effect in a comparison of European democracies.

Although the effect is robust to the inclusion of various other contextual explanations, the interpretation of the curvilinear effect remains a matter of debate as the analysis contains only two truly disproportional countries: France and the United Kingdom.

Proportionalism and majoritarianism affect not only the average level of political trust but also its association with other factors. Emphasizing inclusiveness, Anderson and Guillory (1997) show that winning and losing elections matters more in countries with disproportional systems, as the largest party tends to obtain a full majority. Consequently, the gap in political trust between electoral winners (those who voted for subsequently governing parties) and losers (those who voted for subsequently non-governing parties) is larger in more disproportional systems. Emphasizing accountability, economic evaluations tend to have a stronger impact on political trust in majoritarian countries, where political responsibilities are more clearly attributed.

Finally, the organization and occurrence of elections tends to boost political trust for a short while. Elections prime democratic values and illustrate democratic practices such as accountability and peaceful transitions. Moreover, afterward new governments tend to start with a somewhat cleaner slate. Election outcomes affect voters differently: political trust is boosted among those groups of voters that voted for a party that won the elections and/or obtained governmental power and is decreased among those voters that did not. It is no surprise, therefore, that they boost trust and efficacy. Similarly, internal and external efficacy as well as political trust are higher in those U.S. regions and Swiss cantons that commonly host referenda.

Political Socialization

Other research traditions focus primarily on the nature of the subject as the basis for political trust. Some emphasize political socialization—the agencies through which (young or new) citizens obtain political values such as schools, families, etc. Especially intriguing are those socialization theories that interact with characteristics of the object. Here, I distinguish three.

First, various studies emphasize education as an important socializing agency for political trust. Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) argue and test the idea that education is both a source of democratic norms and a resource that enables citizens to acquire factual information. Their claim is not that education builds political trust but rather that the effect of level of education reflects the quality of democracy and its institution: the higher educated are more likely to trust politics than the lower educated when the level of corruption is low, yet they are less likely to trust politics when corruption is widespread.

Second, recent studies on the relatively high level of political trust among migrants show that these migrants take their expectations of political performance with them to their host country (e.g., Adman & Stromblad, 2013). Migrants from less democratic or more corrupt countries have lower expectations of political performance, resulting in more positive evaluations and higher levels of political trust. This legacy of low expectations fades away with generation as well as with years of residence in the host country, resulting in lower levels of political trust close to the mean of the native population.

Third, Inglehart’s (1997) influential theory of postmaterialism offers an explanation for why support for democratic procedures went up in the last half-century, while trust in political authorities has at best been volatile and at worst declined. It argues that more recent cohorts are simultaneously more democratic and less willing to defer to traditional authorities. This would reflect the lack of economic hardship experienced by more recent cohorts in their formative years: long stretches of peace and economic growth would allow cohorts to aim for freedom and self-expression. The idea of postmaterialism regained prominence in the political trust literature of the 1990s, when authors began to refer to the rise of critical citizens (e.g., Norris, 1999). Klingemann and Fuchs (1995, pp. 439–440) pose that after the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, “[c]itizens are likely to judge the reality of democracy as they experience it against general democratic values and norms, and through comparison with other Western democracies.” The rise of postmaterialism thus implies that political trust is replaced by skepticism: political institutions are increasingly judged on their own merits.

All three of these socialization theories argue that socialization affects the way in which citizens begin to trust or mistrust politics, i.e., the values or expectations by which they judge the performance of political institutions and authorities. These may be norms of good governance, previous experiences with corruption elsewhere, or values of freedom and self-expression. How political performance is evaluated seems to hinge on these earlier socialization processes.

Social and Political Trust

Finally, the level of political trust reflects in part the general (dis)trusting nature of individual citizens.

Those who trust politics are more likely to trust their family, their neighbors, and their fellow citizens as well (Zmerli & Newton, 2016). Yet the strength of this relationship remains a topic of debate. Some refer to a “syndrome of trust” in which trust is basically a personality characteristic or is shaped by the interplay between state and society. In that approach, political trust would hardly be object-specific, and a decline in political trust may reflect a broader decline in optimism, sociability, or interpersonal ties rather than a specifically political downturn. Zmerli and Newton (2016) argue and show that while there is a relationship between social and political trust, it should be understood in terms of a hierarchy: in general, social trust tends to function as a prerequisite for people to trust political institutions.

Yet despite the existence of a weak relationship, the trends and explanations of social and political trust differ. While it partly reflects the undirected trusting nature of the subject, there are many more defining features to political trust: “The foundations of trust in government, then, are largely political in nature” (Citrin & Luks, 2001).

Consequences of Political Trust

The consequences of political trust are surprisingly understudied, even though the relevance of political trust to the quality of representative democracy and the stability of its institutions has been a recurrent theme in the literature since the 1970s. With very few exceptions, systematic empirical knowledge about these consequences is strikingly absent.

Theoretically, the socio-political consequences of political trust are expected and likely to play out at different levels of representative democracy. There is considerable research on the correlates of political trust at the individual level, but very little that pulls them apart temporally. Even fewer studies have assessed these consequences at the meso (parties and party competition) and macro levels (institutions and regime). Methodologically, while crucial causal tests of any and all such consequences require longitudinal data, panel analyses, and experimental designs, the few empirical studies on consequences of political trust have predominantly relied on correlational analyses at one point in time.

There are a few noteworthy exceptions. Hetherington (2005) argues meticulously that political trust affects support for foreign aid and for policies that benefit disadvantaged minorities. As political trust declines, he shows, citizens tend to prefer smaller government: even though their values do not become less liberal, they simply trust government less. Rudolph and Evans (2005) build on this study by showing that the effects of political trust on support for government spending is moderated by ideology.

Wrapping Up

The public’s level of political trust has been vigorously debated for years. Starting out from 1970s concerns that decreased political trust could result in a more fundamental crisis of representative democracy, our scientific understanding of political trust has progressed immensely.

Despite declining trends between the 1960s and the 1980s (Dalton, 2004), there is little evidence for a further structural decline in political trust in Western societies in the last few decades (Norris, 2011). Even in the United States, where political trust declined sharply in the 1960s and 1970s, trust rates fluctuate wildly but without a structurally downward trend since the 1970s. In recent decades the developments are better understood as a series of recurrent booms and crises in political trust rather than as a steady decline. Moreover, for decades low levels of trust in political institutions have now gone hand in hand with relatively high levels of trust in the democratic system and even higher levels of support for democratic principles. This suggests that lack of trust in political authorities and institutions need not be detrimental to democracy. Rather, mistrust may well be inherent to vibrant democratic societies, as long as it takes the shape of vigilant skepticism rather than numbing cynicism.

Our understanding of the determinants of political trust has probably expanded the most. Political trust is much more than the outcome of a general pro-social, trusting outlook by the subjects that trust; it also reflects the qualities of the objects that are trusted. In the

representative democracies of North America, Latin America, Europe, and Oceania, political trust is high when institutions are clean from corruption, perform well, and are inclusive. Scholars are beginning to understand the sources of political trust in quasi- and non-democracies, which are only partially similar to those in established democracies. The study of political trust is moving toward integration subject- and object-based explanations via a focus on mechanisms, causal pathways, subjective perceptions, and benchmarks.

Yet the biggest gaps in our knowledge are about the institutional and behavioral consequences of political trust, high or low. Whether and how political trust crises affect the stability and quality of democracy remains, 40 years after the report for the Trilateral Committee, an open empirical question.

References

- Adman, P., & Stromblad, P. (2013). Political trust as modest expectations: Exploring immigrants' falling confidence in Swedish political institutions. Working paper 2013:6, Labour Market and Discrimination Studies. Linnaeus University.
- Almond, G., & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Anderson, C. J., & Guillory, C. A. (1997). Political institutions and satisfaction with democracy: A cross-national analysis of consensus and majoritarian systems. *American Political Science Review*, 91, 66–81.
- Armingeon, K., & Guthmann, K. (2014). Democracy in crisis: The declining support for national democracy in European countries, 2007–2011. *European Journal of Political Research*, 53(3), 423–442.
- Bargsted, M., Somma, N. M., & Castillo, J. C. (2016). Political trust in Latin America. In S. Zmerli & T.W.G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust*. Chelton, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Chang, E. C. C., & Chu, Y. (2006). Corruption and trust: Exceptionalism in Asian democracies? *Journal of Politics*, 68(2), 259–271.
- Citrin, J., & Luks, S. (2001). Political trust revisited: Déjà vu all over again. In J. R. Hibbing & E. Theiss-Morse (Eds.), *What is it about government that Americans dislike?* (pp. 9–27). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Crozier, M., Huntington, S., & Watanuki, J. (1975). *The crisis of democracy. Report on the governability of democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York: New York University Press.
- Dalton, R. J. (2004). *Democratic challenges, democratic choices: The erosion of political support in advanced industrial democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Easton, D. (1975). A re-assessment of the concept of political support. *British Journal of Political Science*, 5(4), 435–457.
- Grimes, M. (2016). Procedural fairness and political trust. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust*. Chelton, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Hakhverdian, A., & Mayne, Q. (2012). Institutional trust, education, and corruption: A micro-macro interactive approach. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(3), 739–750.

- Hardin, R. (2000). Do we want trust in government? In M. E. Warren (Ed.), *Democracy and trust* (pp. 22–41). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Hetherington, M. J. (2005). *Why trust matters: Declining political trust and the demise of American liberalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Hibbing, J. R., & Theiss-Morse, E. (2002). *Stealth democracy. Americans' beliefs about how government should work*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutchison, M., & Johnson, K. (2016). Political trust in sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab region. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust*. Chelton, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Inglehart, R. (1997). *Modernization and postmodernization*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kaase, M., & Newton, K. (1995). *Beliefs in government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klingemann H. D., & Fuchs, D. (Eds.). (1995). *Citizens and the state*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marien, S. (2011). The effect of electoral outcomes on political trust: A multi-level analysis of 23 countries. *Electoral Studies*, 30(4), 712–726.
- Miller, A. (1974). Political issues and trust in government: 1964–1970. *American Political Science Review*, 68, 951–972.
- Mishler, W., & Rose, R. (1997). Trust, distrust and skepticism: Popular evaluations of civil and political institutions in post-communist societies. *The Journal of Politics*, 59(2), 418–451.
- Norris, P. (Ed.). (1999). *Critical citizens: Global support for democratic government*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Norris, P. (2011). *Democratic deficit: Critical citizens revisited*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Park, C.-M. (2016). Political trust in the Asia-Pacific region. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust*. Chelton, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Pew Research Center. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/2014/11/13/public-trust-in-government/>
<<http://www.people-press.org/2014/11/13/public-trust-in-government/>>.
- Rudolph, T. J., & Evans, J. (2005). Political trust, ideology, and public support for government spending. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(3), 660–671.
- Shi, T. (2014). *The cultural logic of politics in Mainland China and Taiwan*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Uslaner, E. (2016). Corruption, inequality, and political trust. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust*. Chelton, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Thomassen, J. J. A. (2015). What's gone wrong with democracy, or with theories explaining why it has? In T. Poguntke, S. Rossteutscher, R. Schmitt-Beck, & S. Zmerli (Eds.), *Citizenship and democracy in an era of crisis*. London: Routledge.
- Van der Meer, T. W. G., & Hakhverdian, A. (2016). Political trust as the evaluation of process and performance: A cross-national study of 42 European countries. *Political Studies*.

Van Erkel, P., & Van der Meer, T. W. G. (2015). Macroeconomic performance, political trust, and the great recession: A multilevel analysis of the effects of within-country fluctuations in macro-economic performance on political trust in 15 EU countries, 1999–2011. *European Journal of Political Research*, 55(1), 177–197.

Welzel, C., & Dalton, R. J. (2015). From allegiant to assertive citizens. In R. J. Dalton & C. Welzel (Eds.), *The civic culture transformed: From allegiant to assertive citizens*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Zmerli, S., & Newton, K. (2016). Objects of political and social trust: Scales and hierarchies. In S. Zmerli & T. W. G. van der Meer (Eds.), *Handbook on political trust*. Chelton, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Zmerli, S., & Van der Meer, T. W. G. (Eds.). (2016). *Handbook on political trust*. Chelton, U.K.: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Related Articles

[Political Culture Paradigm](#)

[Popular Understanding of Democracy](#)

[Support for Democracy](#)