Political trust: The glue that keeps democracies together

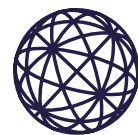**Susan Dodsworth and Nic Cheeseman**
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Political trust: the glue that keeps democracies together

Key findings

- Political trust is thought to play a critical role in democracies with many stressing the need to strengthen political trust to counter populism and constrain the spread of anti-system parties.
- Trust is essential for ensuring public compliance with health policies, such as lockdown measures required for fighting pandemics like COVID-19.
- Despite this, our understanding of the causes and consequences of political trust remains weak, and is hampered by the limits of existing research, which has overwhelmingly focussed on developed countries and Western democracies.
- Existing research has also tended to focus on the structural drivers of political trust, rather than what institutional actors – such as parliaments - can do to earn the public's trust.
- More research is needed to identify concrete strategies that political institutions can employ to demonstrate their trustworthiness.
- To generate this new knowledge, researchers will need to employ a greater variety of methodologies and study a much broader range of cases.

The COVID-19 pandemic is testing governance systems around the world. Where democratic systems were already straining under the pressure of post-financial crisis populism, this latest crisis is pushing political institutions and norms to breaking point. The variation in responses and results has again opened the debate as to the ability of democracies to deliver in moments of crisis. Through all this, one factor seems to dictate the extent to which governments have been able to respond successfully to the pandemic: political trust.

Trust in political institutions such as the legislature, executive branch, and courts, is commonly thought to shape both the stability and quality of democracy. In recent years, as populist leaders and anti-system parties have won high-profile electoral victories, some have presented falling levels of political trust as a crisis – both for established democracies and for their younger counterparts. As the map in Figure 1 shows, citizens report alarmingly low levels of trust in their governments in places as varied as Spain, Tunisia, Peru, Poland and Australia.

Percentage of respondents who indicate "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in "The Government."
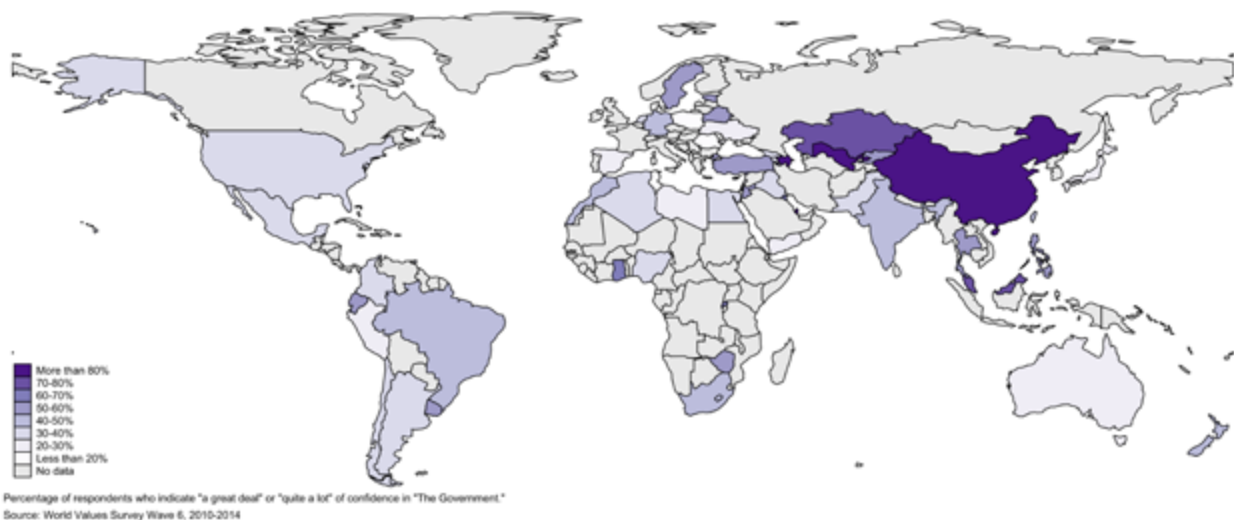Source: World Values Survey Wave 6, 2010-2014

Figure 1 Trust in Governments Around the World

Partly as a result, many democracy assistance organisations, including the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), support programmes that aim to foster political trust. Sometimes this goal is explicit, but often it is implicit in programme designs and theories of change. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, WFD "invests in the development of MPs, councillors and officials, as well as improving engagement between citizens, institutions and decision-makers to improve trust in governance."[1] In Tunisia, the Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy has supported the Tunisian School of Politics as a means of building trust in the political process.[2]

A thorough understanding of the effects of political trust, and how it can be built, is essential to combat the rise of populism and anti-system parties, and would be valuable for democracy assistance more broadly. Despite this, political trust remains poorly understood. This paper reviews existing research on political trust, explaining why it is important, what we know about it, and – perhaps most importantly – what we don't. It argues that if practitioners, such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, are to foster greater levels of political trust, research into that phenomenon needs to become more innovative. Researchers will need to employ a great variety of methodologies, study a broader range of cases and ask more action-oriented questions to identify what institutional actors – such as parliaments – can do to earn the public's trust.

What is political trust and why does it matter?

Trust indicates a belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something. It is often described as a type of social and political 'glue'. *Political trust* refers to the trust that citizens place in political institutions, including parliaments, presidents, courts, political parties and police forces. Yet it is by no means a simple task to define political trust clearly and concisely. One reason for this is that there are discrepancies between what trust means to political scientists and what it means to political psychologists. Political scientists typically approach *trust* and *confidence* as synonymous, defining political trust as citizens' confidence in political institutions. Thus, for political scientists, the presence of political trust means that citizens "feel that their own interests would be attended to, even if the authorities were exposed to little supervision or scrutiny."[3] In contrast, political psychologists tend to see trust and confidence as distinct concepts. For them, political trust is an affective attitude – a relatively enduring set of feelings and emotions – that individuals adopt in environments where information is scarce; that is, when it is impossible for them to know whether or not political institutions will act consistently with their interests. By contrast, confidence exists in more certain, information rich environments – when an individual knows that a political institution will act in their interest.

Political trust is also hard to pin down because distinctions that can be made conceptually are often difficult to capture empirically. For example, at the conceptual level, political trust can be distinguished from both mistrust (the absence of trust) and distrust (negative trust). Yet survey questions that ask people how much they trust political institutions struggle to differentiate between mistrust and distrust. Though they are conceptually distinct, it is also very difficult to distinguish empirically between citizens' trust in political institutions, such as parliaments, and their trust in the individuals that make up those institutions, such as individual parliamentarians. Existing research tends to suggest that most citizens do not clearly distinguish between political institutions and the individuals that comprise them, making political trust 'sticky' and slow to change. Yet it is by no means clear that this is always or inevitably the case.

Political trust is commonly said to be critical for the functioning and survival of democracies. Some have blamed low levels of trust in political institutions for the rise of 'anti-system' parties and movements, including populist leaders and terrorist cells.[4] Others have linked a lack of trust in political institutions to deteriorations in inter-communal (most often ethnic) relations.[5] Destabilising electoral contests have also been attributed to low political trust, with communities' fears that

1. WFD, 'Where We Work: Kyrgyzstan', Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), 2019, https://www.wfd.org/network/kyrgyzstan/.
2. Democracy, 16 May 2018, https://nimd.org/tunisias-local-elections-how-to-build-trust-in-politics/.
3. David Easton, 'A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support', *British Journal of Political Science* 5, no. 4 (1975): 447, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400008309.
4. Peter Chalk et al., 'The Evolving Terrorist Threat to Southeast Asia: A Net Assessment' (Santa Monica / Sydney: RAND National Defense Research Institute & Centre for International Strategic Studies, 2009); Conrad Ziller and Thomas Schübel, '"The Pure People" versus "the Corrupt Elite"? Political Corruption, Political Trust and the Success of Radical Right Parties in Europe', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties* 25, no. 3 (2015): 368–86, https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2014.1002792.
5. Susanne D. Mueller, 'The Political Economy of Kenya's Crisis', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 2, no. 2 (2008): 185–210, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531050802058302.

electoral defeat will result in their exclusion from political and economic opportunities, driving instability and violence.[6] From a more philosophical perspective, it is also difficult to accept any system of government as legitimate if citizens do not trust the institutions that comprise it, or the norms on which it is based.

More recently, popular trust in the government has also been shown to be critical to the success of restrictive measures put in place to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. In Malawi, for example, the announcement of a planned lockdown to prevent the spread of the disease was met with spontaneous protests in urban areas. As well as arguing that the measures would push traders and ordinary citizens into poverty, some protestors claimed that the government lacked the legitimacy necessary to enforce such restrictions. These allegations were motivated by opposition distrust of the ruling party and its motivations, following the nullification of President Peter Mutharika's victory in the 2019 presidential election by the Constitutional Court. Picking up on these concerns, the Human Rights Defenders Coalition brought a legal challenge to the proposed lockdown on the grounds that it represented an infringement of Malawians' basic human rights. In a verdict delivered on 28 April 2020, the High Court agreed, indefinitely suspending the planned restrictions. As a result, the lack of public trust in the government undermined its ability to implement and secure public compliance with an important health policy.

Yet too much political trust may also be problematic.[7] Democracy relies on the consent and support of the governed, but is also premised on the notion of a critically engaged citizenship.[8] Voters who blindly follow leaders and are overly confident in institutions may fail to hold government accountable on key issues. This may happen, for example, when government supporters fail to take accusations of corruption seriously because they identify very strongly with the ruling party, for example because they share an ethnic or religious identity. Moreover, differing levels of trust in political institutions among government and opposition supporters has been interpreted as evidence of a lack of democratic consolidation.[9]

What we know – and don't know – about political trust

Research on political trust is typically framed by concerns about its decline.[10] Indeed, the narrative that political trust is in decline and signals (or poses) a systemic crisis in Western democracies has motivated most research on trust since the 1970s.[11] Despite this, political trust remains poorly understood. While we have made some progress in understanding the causes of political trust, we know surprisingly little about its consequences, and even less about how political trust might be created (on purpose) by different types of institutions. Research on political trust often focusses very heavily on structural factors, such as culture or macroeconomic conditions, leaving it curiously devoid of actors. Our understanding of political trust has also been limited by a lack of methodological innovation and a tendency to focus on a particular sub-set of cases: developed countries and Western democracies. Research on political trust in developing regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, remains very limited, as does research on political trust in authoritarian regimes.

The causes of political trust

A substantial body of research examines the causes of political trust.[12] This research shows that many factors influence levels of political trust, including corruption, macroeconomic performance, the inclusiveness of institutions, and social norms and values. However, the relative importance of these factors varies, as does the consistency of empirical evidence linking them to political trust.

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6. Nic Cheeseman and Brian Klaas, *How to Rig an Election* (London: Yale University Press, 2018).

7. William Mishler and Richard Rose, 'Trust, Distrust and Skepticism: Popular Evaluations of Civil and Political Institutions in Post-Communist Societies', *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 2 (1997): 418–51, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381600053512.

8. Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

9. Devr.a C. Moehler and Staffan I. Lindberg, 'Narrowing the Legitimacy Gap: Turnovers as a Cause of Democratic Consolidation', *The Journal of Politics* 71, no. 4 (2009): 1448–66, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381609990120.

10. Tom van der Meer, 'Political Trust and the "Crisis of Democracy"', in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2017, http://politics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-77.

11. Jack Citrin and Samantha Luks, 'Political Trust Revisited: Deja vu All over Again', in *What Is It about Government That Americans Dislike?*, ed. John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9–27.

12. van der Meer, 'Political Trust and the "Crisis of Democracy"'.

One of the most important determinants of political trust is corruption. Existing research shows that this has an almost universally corrosive effect on political trust.[13] Corruption scandals not only reduce political trust in the short term, they continue to have a negative effect on political trust even as perceptions of corruption revert back to 'pre-scandal' levels.[14]

While subjective perceptions of macroeconomic performance have been reliably shown to influence political trust, findings regarding objective macroeconomic outcomes have been less consistent.[15] Cross-national studies have found no relationship between macroeconomic performance and trust once corruption is controlled,[16] but longitudinal studies show that fluctuations in macroeconomic performance do help to explain variations in levels of political trust over time.[17]

Inclusive institutions, such as proportional electoral systems, have been linked to higher levels of political trust in several regions, including Europe[18] and Africa.[19] Research also shows that electoral systems mediate the impact of other factors, such as macroeconomic performance or electoral outcomes, on political trust.[20] Beyond electoral systems, other forms of institutional inclusivity, such as decentralisation, have been linked to political trust. However, the results here are mixed, suggesting that its impact on political trust is indirect, contingent on the particular form of decentralisation and, in some circumstances, negative rather than positive.[21]

In contrast to electoral systems, the nature of election campaigns, and the results they deliver, have received less attention in research despite growing concerns that highly contested elections and polarising campaign tactics might contribute to the erosion of political trust. The lack of attention given to elections (as events, and distinct from electoral systems) is due to an assumption that political trust is relatively stable and not easily influenced by short-term factors. Yet some research suggests that elections do matter: individuals express more trust in political institutions when they supported the winner of the last election.[22] Other research suggests that negative campaigns tend to lead to small declines in levels of political trust.[23]

Cultural norms and values, spread via socialisation, have long been referenced in explanations of the origins of political trust. Empirical studies conducted to date suggest that socialisation is less important than other factors but does play a role. Most notably, education (one form of socialisation) does appear to play a role by mediating the impact of corruption

13. Eric M. Uslaner, 'Political Trust, Corruption and Inequality', in *Handbook on Political Trust*, ed. Sonja Zmerli and Tom van der Meer (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017), 302–15.

14. Albert Solé-Ollé and Pilar Sorribas-Navarro, 'Trust No More? On the Lasting Effects of Corruption Scandals', *European Journal of Political Economy*, 55 (December 2018): 185-203, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2017.12.003.

15. van der Meer, 'Political Trust and the "Crisis of Democracy"'.

16. Tom van der Meer and Armen Hakhverdian, 'Political Trust as the Evaluation of Process and Performance: A Cross-National Study of 42 European Countries', *Political Studies* 65, no. 1 (2017): 81–102, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321715607514.

17. Patrick van Erkel and Tom van Meer, 'Macroeconomic Performance, Political Trust and the Great Recession: A Multilevel Analysis of the Effects of within-Country Fluctuations in Macroeconomic Performance on Political Trust in 15 EU Countries, 1999–2011', *European Journal of Political Research* 55, no. 1 (2016): 177–97, https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12115.

18. Sofie Marien, 'The Effect of Electoral Outcomes on Political Trust: A Multi-Level Analysis of 23 Countries', *Electoral Studies* 30, no. 4 (2011): 712–26, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2011.06.015.

19. Wonbin Cho, 'Accountability or Representation? How Electoral Systems Promote Public Trust in African Legislatures', *Governance* 25, no. 4 (2012): 617–37, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0491.2012.01598.x.

20. Christopher J. Anderson and Christine A. Guillory, 'Political Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy: A Cross-National Analysis of Consensus and Majoritarian Systems', *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 1 (1997): 66–81, https://doi.org/10.2307/2952259.

21. Min Tang and Narisong Huhe, 'Does Decentralisation Bring the People Back to the Government? An Empirical Analysis of the Effect of Decentralisation on Political Trust', *Policy And Politics* 44, no. 3 (2016): 403–426, https://doi.org/10.1332/030557315X14296993009874.

22. Susan A. Banducci and Jeffrey A. Karp, 'How Elections Change the Way Citizens View the Political System: Campaigns, Media Effects and Electoral Outcomes in Comparative Perspective', *British Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 3 (2003): 443–67, https://doi.org/10.1017/S000712340300019X.

23. Richard R. Lau, Lee Sigelman, and Ivy Brown Rovner, 'The Effects of Negative Political Campaigns: A Meta-Analytic Reassessment', *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 1176–1209, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00618.x.

on political trust.[24] Yet the precise mechanisms through which education influences political trust remain unclear, and there is debate about whether education is the true cause of the effects detected or merely a proxy for some underlying factor.[25] Research on inequality highlights the complex interactions between institutional performance and socialisation; the impact of vertical economic inequality on political trust depends on perceptions and values,[26] with inequality also mediating the impact of government performance on political trust.[27]

The consequences of political trust

While inroads have been made in understanding the sources of political trust, evidence about its consequences remains "remarkably scarce."[28] This is perplexing given that much of the justification for research on political trust has been framed in terms of its consequences, particularly the assertion that it is critical for the survival of democracy. Few have interrogated the causal mechanisms that might link political trust to the stability of democratic regimes, though evidence from Europe suggests that individuals with low political trust are more likely to view illegal behaviour (such as non-payment of taxes) as acceptable.[29]

More nuanced analyses acknowledge that the nature or type of trust may be more important, that is, 'healthy scepticism' among citizens, rather than blind trust, is what stable democracies require.[30] While this argument has intuitive appeal, there is little systematic empirical evidence to support it. Very recently, some steps were made in this direction. Cary Wu and Rima Wilkes[31] show that 'critical trusters' (individuals who report more variable trust in political institutions, demonstrating more specific assessments of the object of trust) are more prevalent in established democracies.

A lot of the evidence that we have so far suggests that the consequences of political trust depend on context. In more open political systems, low levels of political trust increase the likelihood of an individual engaging in boycotts, petitions and public demonstrations.[32] Individuals with low political trust are also more likely to vote for protest parties.[33] Distrusting voters are more likely to cast blank or invalid ballots, and more likely to support extreme right-wing or populist parties.[34] Indeed, the growth of such parties might well be driven by declining levels of political trust, though further research is required to untangle any 'feedback' effect. These effects do, however, depend on the availability of

24. Armen Hakhverdian and Quinton Mayne, 'Institutional Trust, Education, and Corruption: A Micro-Macro Interactive Approach', *The Journal of Politics* 74, no. 3 (2012): 739–50, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000412.

25. Quinton Mayne and Armen Hakhverdian, 'Education, Socialization, and Political Trust', in *Handbook on Political Trust*, ed. Sonia Zmerli and Tom van der Meer (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017), 176–96.

26. Eunju Chi and Hyeok Yong Kwon, 'The Trust-Eroding Effect of Perceived Inequality: Evidence from East Asian New Democracies', *The Social Science Journal* 53, no. 3 (2016): 318–328, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2016.02.008.

27. Abby Córdova and Matthew L. Layton, 'When Is "Delivering the Goods" Not Good Enough?: How Economic Disparities in Latin American Neighborhoods Shape Citizen Trust in Local Government', *World Politics* 68, no. 1 (2016): 74–110, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887115000441.

28. van der Meer, 'Political Trust and the "Crisis of Democracy"', 1.

29. Sofie Marien and Marc Hooghe, 'Does Political Trust Matter? An Empirical Investigation into the Relation between Political Trust and Support for Law Compliance', *European Journal of Political Research* 50, no. 2 (2011): 267–91, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2010.01930.x.

30. Mishler and Rose, 'Trust, Distrust and Skepticism'.

31. 'Finding Critical Trusters: A Response Pattern Model of Political Trust', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 59, no. 2 (2018): 110–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/0020715218761520.

32. Daniela Braun and Swen Hutter, 'Political Trust, Extra-Representational Participation and the Openness of Political Systems', *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 2 (2016): 151–65, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512114559108.

33. Marc Hooghe and Ruth Dassonneville, 'A Spiral of Distrust: A Panel Study on the Relation between Political Distrust and Protest Voting in Belgium', *Government and Opposition* 53, no. 1 (2018): 104–30, https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.18.

34. Ziller and Schübel, '"The Pure People" versus "the Corrupt Elite"?'; Marc Hooghe, Sofie Marien, and Teun Pauwels, 'Where Do Distrusting Voters Turn If There Is No Viable Exit or Voice Option? The Impact of Political Trust on Electoral Behaviour in the Belgian Regional Elections of June 2009 1', *Government and Opposition* 46, no. 2 (2011): 245–73, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2010.01338.x.

'challenger' parties, and thus on the electoral and party systems of a political regime.[35]   Yet – as will be discussed in more detail below – research on the consequences of political trust draws almost exclusively on data from Europe and North America. It therefore remains unclear whether political trust has the same consequences in other regions.

The creation of political trust

To date, research seeking to explain variations in political trust have focused overwhelmingly on the structural causes of political trust rather than its creation by institutional actors. The result is that while scholarship has advanced our understanding of how broad contextual factors, such as economic performance or electoral systems, influence political trust, it has generated little insight into how political institutions, as actors, can establish themselves as trustworthy. The small body of research that does exist in this area suggests that activities often considered 'best practice' (e.g. increasing the transparency of parliaments) can have unanticipated, negative effects on trust.[36]   Others suggest that the impact of transparency on trust is contingent on how new information is framed, and on its source.[37]

A handful of studies have examined how democratic innovations, such as public deliberations, affect political trust, but these have focussed on a small number of cases, and it is unclear whether their findings are generalisable. For example, Shelley Boulianne examines the impact of a series of deliberative events held by the City Council of Edmonton, Canada, concluding that there is some evidence that deliberative events can generate context-specific trust in government.[38] She warns that whether such events can address low trust in democratic systems more broadly remains an open question.
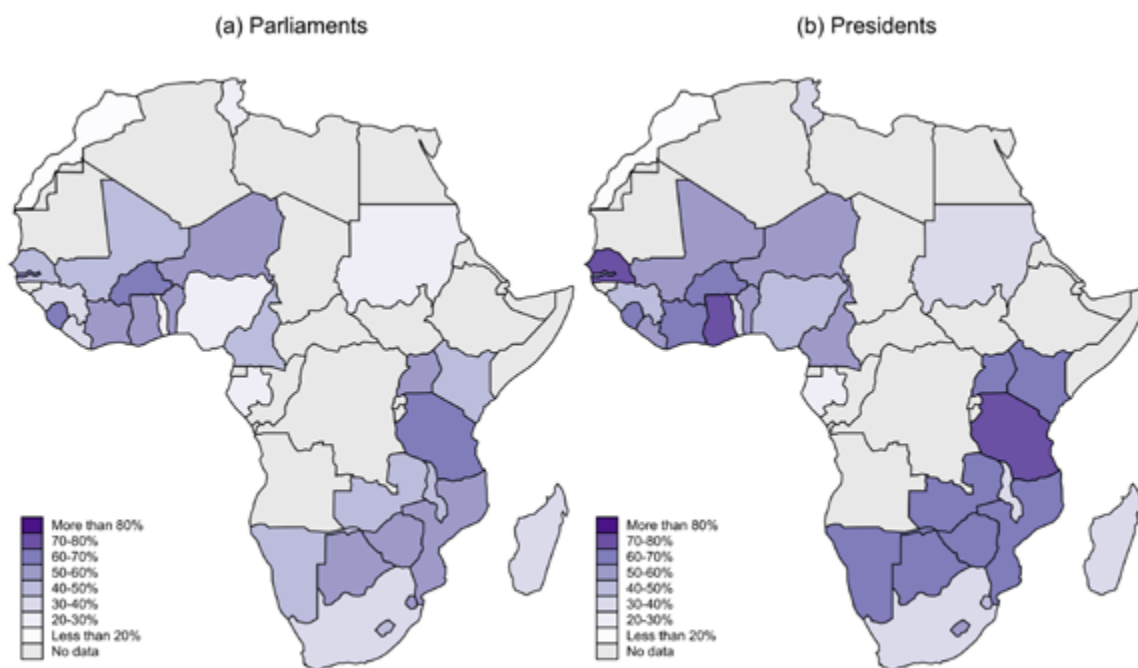
Percentage of respondents who express "somewhat" or "a lot" of trust in: (a) their national legislature; and (b) their President.
Source: Afrobarometer Round 7 (2016-2018)

Figure 2 Political Trust in Africa

35. Hooghe, Marien, and Pauwels, 'Where Do Distrusting Voters Turn If There Is No Viable Exit or Voice Option?'

36. Stephan Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 'The Effect of Transparency on Trust in Government: A Cross-National Comparative Experiment', *Public Administration Review* 73, no. 4 (2013): 575–86, https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12047.

37. Darren Hawkins et al., 'Do Citizens See Through Transparency? Evidence from Survey Experiments in Peru', *British Journal of Political Science*, 49, no. 1 (2019): 205-228, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000466.

38. 'Building Faith in Democracy: Deliberative Events, Political Trust and Efficacy', *Political Studies*, 67, no. 1 (2019): 4-30, https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321718761466.

Excessive focus on the 'Global North'

Existing research on political trust has disproportionately focussed on the 'Global North' – the developed, democratic countries found primarily in Europe and North America. Few studies examine other regions, with even fewer comparing across regions.[39] This represents a significant gap in our understanding given that existing research (discussed above) indicates quite clearly that both the causes and consequences of political trust depend heavily on context. The focus on the Global North means that most research on political trust has drawn on data from countries that are both relatively developed, and relatively democratic. This has limited our understanding of political trust in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, where some countries are far less developed, and some are far more authoritarian.

In fact, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa "have remained the most understudied regions in the world when it comes to trust research", a situation commonly blamed on data limitations.[40] Yet we may have a lot to learn from studying these regions. As Figure 2 illustrates – there is significant variation in levels of political trust both between countries within these regions, and between different political institutions within African countries. African citizens, for example, typically trust their presidents more than their parliaments. This sort of variation suggests that there may be valuable lessons to learn from research on political trust outside of the 'Global North'.

Conducting research in a broader range of regions, including Africa, might also allow us to better understand exactly what existing evidence is telling us. For example, previous studies focussing on Western countries have struggled to distinguish between the impact of ethnic diversity on political trust, and the impact of immigration – effectively conflating the two.[41] Emerging research on ethnic politics in sub-Saharan Africa suggests that entrenched ethnic and religious divisions, as distinct from immigration, may have important implications for political trust. In countries with a history of both ethnic and winner-takes-all politics, citizens that share an identity with the president can reasonably expect to receive better treatment from the state, and may therefore trust it more.[42] The strength of this effect, however, is likely to be dependent on political context: transfers of power have been shown to reduce the 'trust gap', bringing citizens from different communities and with different partisan leanings closer together in terms of their evaluation of the political system.[43]

Lack of methodological innovation

In addition to an excessive focus on certain kinds of countries, our understanding of political trust has been limited by a lack of methodological innovation. Specifically, existing research has tended to rely very heavily on surveys. The reasons for this overreliance on surveys are unclear, but the simple availability of data, as well as a strong preference for quantitative methods among some parts of the political science community, may have played a role. Regardless of reasons, the problem here is not simply the dominance of survey-based research, but rather the ways in which surveys have been used.

Widely used instruments, such as the World Values Survey, include relatively few questions about trust. Moreover, those questions do not reflect the conceptual nuances between (positive) trust, mistrust (the absence of trust) and distrust (negative trust). As a result, they cannot distinguish between cynics (who distrust 'the system' and thus all institutions in it, regardless of their quality and/or performance) and sceptics (who may distrust all political institutions in a system on the basis of their poor quality and/or performance, but nevertheless have faith in 'the system' as a whole).

Surveys also make assumptions about measurement equivalence in varying contexts: this means assuming that questions are reliable and have equivalent in meanings in different countries, in different languages, and in different communities within diverse or highly divided societies. These assumptions are highly questionable. Evidence suggests that both culture

39. For an exception, see: Robert Mattes and Alejandro Moreno, 'Social and Political Trust in Developing Countries: Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America', in *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*, ed. Eric M. Uslaner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), [online].
40. van der Meer, 'Political Trust and the "Crisis of Democracy"', 14.
41. Lauren McLaren, 'Immigration, Ethnic Diversity and Political Trust', in *Handbook on Political Trust*, ed. Sonja Zmerli and Tom van der Meer (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017), 316–37.
42. Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument* (Bloomington Indiana: International African Institute in association with Indiana University Press, 1999).
43. Moehler and Lindberg, 'Narrowing the Legitimacy Gap'.

and political context shape individuals' understandings of political trust[44], while fear of the government leads citizens of autocratic states to report inflated levels of trust.[45] This not only makes it important to conduct research on political trust in a variety of settings, it makes it imperative that researchers employ a wider variety of methodological tools to do so.

Comparative analysis of survey data has also tended to accept the nation-state as the unit of analysis, providing an undifferentiated analysis that does not recognise important spatial variations. In other words, political trust has been analysed primarily at the national level, even though there are good reasons to believe it might vary in important ways at both the sub-national and supra-national level. For example, there are some signs of differences between rural and urban areas: rural Africans report higher levels of trust in government despite poorer evaluations of its performance compared to their urban counterparts.[46] There may also be important interactions between political trust at the sub-national, national and supra-national levels, especially in Europe. At the moment, we know very little about how trust in the political institutions at each of these different levels affects the others.

Finally, there has also been a failure to integrate quantitative analysis with in-depth qualitative research. As a result, it has often been extremely difficult to identify the causal relationships that drive survey findings. Many quantitative studies claim to present evidence of causal relationship, but without integrating experimental, longitudinal and qualitative methods into research, the causal mechanisms involved are generally assumed rather than demonstrated.

Producing the research we need

Political trust is important but poorly understood. Existing research suggests that political trust may well be the glue that holds democracies together – providing that it is the right type of political trust. A wide variety of structural factors are known to influence political trusts, yet their impact is clearly subject to context. As such, the tendency of existing research to focus on developed, Western democracies means our understanding of political trust in other parts of the world is questionable at best. The failure to recognise political institutions as actors, who might deliberately set out to create trust, rather than passive objects of trust, is also problematic. It leaves political institutions, like parliaments, poorly equipped to earn the trust of citizens, and makes it difficult for organisations like WFD to support them in that endeavour. Producing the kind of research that we need – more methodologically innovative, action-oriented research conducted in a broader range of countries – will not be easy. However, it is possible if academics, political institutions and practitioners work together to generate a new wave of research on political trust.

Arguably for organisations like WFD, which see political trust as central to their ability to support democracy, one of the most important areas for future research relates to the creation of political trust: how can political institutions – and the individuals that comprise them – demonstrate their trustworthiness? That is to say, what can political actors do to earn the public's trust? The answers to these questions are becoming more and more important, as populist and extremist figures actively discourage the public from trusting political institutions. At present, it is unclear what impact these leaders have on levels of political trust. Their efforts to promote distrust may be merely a symptom, rather than a cause, of low levels of political trust. Regardless, the current state of research leaves the democracy assistance community poorly placed to respond.

Another pressing question for organisations like WFD is the question of how to get the right kind of political trust. That is, how can political institutions, and their supporters, encourage people to become 'critical citizens'? Ultimately for the democracy assistance community, the ideal citizen is not one who trusts political institutions unquestioningly, but one who trusts where it is warranted. In light of this, lower levels of political trust are not always a sign of crisis. Instead, this may well be a sign that people are engaging in politics in a more sceptical – but more active – way. More innovative research may help us to better understand these distinctions, and could help practitioners identify more effective ways of strengthening democratic institutions.

44. Irena Schneider, 'Can We Trust Measures of Political Trust? Assessing Measurement Equivalence in Diverse Regime Types', *Social Indicators Research* 133, no. 3 (2017): 963–984, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-016-1400-8.

45. Marcus Tannenberg, 'The Autocratic Trust Bias: Politically Sensitive Survey Items and Self-Censorship', Working Paper (Accra: Afrobarometer, 2017), http://www.ssrn.com/abstract=2980727.

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About the project

Since 2017, Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) and University of Birmingham have partnered on the research programme "Political Economy of Democracy Promotion", co-led by Birmingham's Professor Nic Cheeseman and WFD's Dr Graeme Ramshaw.

The partnership takes a new and innovative approach by giving a research institution contemporary and direct access to the data, practice, people and beneficiaries of an international development organisation – WFD – which is working at the heart of politics in over 30 countries.

To date, five policy papers and numerous journal articles and blogs have been produced on issues of parliamentary strengthening, political party support, closing democratic space, and women's political leadership. The partnership has gained international recognition as a model for collaboration between academic researchers and democracy support practitioners, receiving the ESRC Impact Prize in 2019.