



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Political trust: Pillar or peril for democracy

*Empirical tests of the consequences of political trust on individuals' attitudes and behaviors*

Ouattara, E.M.S.

#### Publication date

2025

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Ouattara, E. M. S. (2025). *Political trust: Pillar or peril for democracy: Empirical tests of the consequences of political trust on individuals' attitudes and behaviors*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## Chapter 1. Introduction

### Political Trust and the Health of Democracies

Concerns about declining trust in government and parliament have long captured the attention of politicians, policy makers and scholars. As early as the end of the Second World War scholars and policymakers sought to understand why so many people had gravitated toward fascism and authoritarianism in the 1920s and 30s and how to build stable and long-lasting democracies. Addressing these concerns led to some of the most influential works linking political attitudes to democratic stability; with emphasis placed on the role of political support (Easton, 1965) and the civic culture (Almond & Verba, 1963). The underlying thesis in these works is that how people feel and what they believe about their elected leaders and government institutions has consequences for democracy. This is particularly true for attitudes of support such as political trust. Indeed, citizens' trust in government leaders and institutions is seen by many scholars as fundamentally linked to the stability and effectiveness of democratic regimes. One argument reads that political trust is part of the bedrock of legitimate democratic systems, enabling political leaders to govern effectively without solely relying on brute force (Braithwaite & Levi, 1998; Easton, 1975; Miller, 1974a; Newton, 2007; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Similarly, some scholars envision political trust as part of the very fabric of democratic systems in which citizens entrust leaders to make decisions on their behalf (Mishler & Rose, 2001, p. 30; Warren, 1999, 2017, 2018). Other claims suggest that political trust should be considered as the oil that keeps the gears of democratic institutions functioning because it bolsters the quality of government (Hetherington, 2005; van der Meer, 2010, p. 518). Without political trust voters would turn away from representative democracy, thereby inducing institutional breakdown (Crozier et al., 1975; King, 1975; Miller, 1974a) or reform (Dalton, 2004; Dalton et al., 2001, 2003). The arguments are numerous, yet the commonality across all of them is that political trust is consequential in democratic systems and low and declining levels of trust may lead to a crisis of democracy as democratic regimes would be unable to face threats from within or from without (Crozier et al., 1975; Miller, 1974a). In short, the core argument that political trust matters to democracy has featured time and time again in political trust literature (Van der Meer, 2017).

Despite these longstanding claims, rigorous evidence about the role of trust in affecting major democratic outcomes is scarce. The dominant theme across political trust research is a focus on its causes and dynamics, with only little and sporadic attention paid to its consequences (Dalton, 2004, p. 162; Hetherington, 1998, p. 792; Marien &

## INTRODUCTION

Hooghe, 2011, p. 268; Torcal & Lago, 2006, p. 308; Van der Meer, 2017, pp. 18–19). Although there appears to be a “scholarly conviction that these attitudes matter for the effectiveness of and durability of democratic governments” (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 50) there is sparse evidence to corroborate these claims. Rather, “this debate is being conducted in the absence of reliable knowledge about the possible social and political consequences of lower levels of political trust” (Marien & Hooghe, 2011, p. 268). Though, “interest in political trust rests largely on beliefs about its consequences for the effectiveness of government and democratic stability” (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 61), “most research accepts uncritically the assumption that trust is necessary for democracy’s survival and effective functioning” (Mishler & Rose, 2005, p. 1052). As a result the question of “whether and how political trust crises affect the stability and quality of democracy” remains unresolved (Van der Meer, 2017, p. 19).

The lack of rigorous and systematic tests of the hypothesized consequences of political trust on democratic stability and quality is striking given the bold claims made over the years. Over the past decades researchers linked political (dis)trust to a plethora of outcomes including democratic instability (King, 1975) and policy stasis when facing internal or external crises (Crozier et al., 1975), non-compliant behavior (Marien & Hooghe, 2011) as well as democratic deconsolidation (Mounk, 2018). Scholars also suggest that low political trust contributes to institutional and constitutional reforms and is relevant for the workings of democratic accountability (Rosanvallon, 2008). Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether these claims can be empirically substantiated.

One of the main reasons for this is that scholars who studied the consequences of political trust faced a number of barriers limiting their ability to systematically and rigorously test claims linking political trust to major democratic outcomes. Existing studies on the topic primarily rely on available survey data, which is cross-sectional and only provides correlational evidence that political trust is consequential<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, studies that do employ longitudinal or experimental designs tend to either focus on a single country or on a single outcome (Chanley et al., 2000; D’Attoma, 2020; Fairbrother, 2019; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Macdonald, 2021; Peyton, 2020; R. Voogd et al., 2019). Further, empirical effects of political trust across studies do not always point in the same direction. This combination of correlational effects, focus on single outcomes and at times conflicting findings in the literature, has led to a cacophony of results concerning the effects of political trust on democratic stability and government quality.

---

<sup>1</sup> Notable exceptions include Hetherington (2005); Hetherington and Rudolph (2015); Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn (2001); Fairbrother (2019).

## CHAPTER 1

Overall, the scholarship is marked by a wide chasm between on the one hand the multiplicity of theories about the relevance of trust, concerns over its decline, as well as the painstaking efforts undertaken to measure citizens' political trust attitudes, and on the other hand the scarcity of strict empirical tests of the consequences of low and declining trust. As a result, we do not know what happens when people lose trust in political representatives and in core institutions that undergird a democratic system? This is one of the most important questions scholars of political trust will need to answer as "new manifestations of distrust have" once again "surfaced to raise alarms about the solidity of liberal democracy" (Citrin & Stoker, 2018, p. 63). If we want to better understand the relevance of political trust for democratic regimes, we need to rigorously put our theories to the test (Dalton, 2004, p. 162; Marien & Hooghe, 2011, p. 268; Norris, 1999c, p. 25; Torcal & Lago, 2006, p. 308; Van der Meer, 2017, pp. 18–19). This is the focus of this dissertation.

### **Formulating a Theory of Change**

A rigorous and systematic test of these claims requires a clear theory of change, which begins with identifying the agents responsible for bringing about a given outcome. To this end, at least one of two processes must occur for political trust to influence the stability or quality of democratic regimes. Political trust could have a direct impact on citizens' political attitudes and behavior. Alternatively, political leaders could alter their decisions and actions as a result of the trust their citizens place in them. Both of these processes are likely to occur and jointly shape the stability and quality of democratic regimes. Yet, the existing empirical literature on the consequences of political trust is not explicit about which of these two processes is most likely to occur or how they jointly influence democratic outcomes (cf. Hetherington and Rudolph (2015)<sup>2</sup>). As a result, it remains unclear through which actors the consequences of political trust for democracy are likely to become manifest.

In the first process, the link between trust and democratic stability would be grounded in a bottom up process in which citizens' attitudes and behaviors alter the functioning of institutions and the decision-making processes of elites. In his book *The People versus Democracy* Mounk (2018) depicts an impending crisis of democracy that primarily resembles this bottom-up process. Inquiring whether "the

---

<sup>2</sup> In their latest book, *Why Washington Won't Work*, Hetherington and Rudolph provide empirical evidence showing that citizens' polarized distrust of government makes it harder for (citizens) to support policy proposal from political opponents and political leaders are less likely / willing to compromise with the other side when their electorate is distrusting (2015).

## INTRODUCTION

past stability of democracy” was “brought about by conditions that are no longer in place,” Mounk points to citizens’ trust in elected officials as an important condition that, in recent years, had supposedly evaporated (2018, p. 14). He also claims that these trends underlie the fact “that many young Americans simply don’t want to bother with politics” and that “across longstanding democracies” in Europe citizens “participate less in formal political institutions than they used to (2018, p. 100). In summary, political trust matters for democratic stability and quality mainly because of what citizens do.

The second process that relates trust to democracy emphasizes political elites as the main actors. It reflects a top-down process by which political trust is relevant for democracy not because it alters citizens’ political attitudes and actions, but because political leaders respond genuinely to or profit strategically from changing levels of trust. Hence, political trust, would have a direct effect on elites’ actions and decisions which are in turn consequential for democracy.

Implicitly, most of the literature hypothesizing about the consequences of political trust has adopted the view that individual citizens are the primary agents through which trust and distrust influence democracy. Virtually every prediction about the consequence of rising or declining levels of trust has assumed that political trust has an effect on citizens’ preferences and behavior. This led Chanley, Rudolph and Rahn to conclude that “the study of trust in government has been almost exclusively a micro-level enterprise” (2000, p. 241). If political trust is consequential for democratic outcomes, as has been argued by some of the most influential political scientists since the 1960s, it seems it is first and foremost because it influences what citizens believe, want and do. To be sure, political elites and leaders play a particularly important role in the maintenance and effectiveness of democracies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). However, the high percentage of studies dedicated to individual level consequences of trust stands as a testament to the fact that scholars believe political trust influences what citizens’ attitudes and behaviors.

Hence, despite the absence of an explicit theory and empirical studies detailing the agents through which political trust influences the workings of democracy, the implicit focus on citizens’ wants and behaviors stands as the most common denominator in the literature. This view does not disregard or minimize the importance of elites in the political process. Instead, it offers a most likely case scenario to rigorously test whether political trust is consequential for the stability and quality of democracy. The plethora of attitudinal and behavioral outcomes linked to citizens’ political trust suggest, in part, that if trust is consequential for democratic regimes, we should expect to find its imprints on citizens’ preferences and actions. Accordingly, the dissertation focuses on testing individuals’ preferences and behaviors.

## Rivaling Narratives (Critical vs. Disengaged Citizens)

Two rivaling narratives about the micro-level consequences of trust emerge from existing research. On the one hand, a decline in political trust can leave us worried that the demise of democratic systems is imminent. On the other hand, it can point to a hopeful future, as disgruntled citizens push for a stronger democracy. The first school of thought sees a decline of trust as begetting a disengaged citizenry that either withdraws from politics or completely rejects it (Crozier et al., 1975; Finifter, 1970, p. 197; Miller, 1974a, 1974c; Mounk, 2018). The second school of thought envisions declining trust as a catalyst for a critical citizenship that actively works to make its voice heard and pushes for democratic reform (Cain et al., 2003; Dalton, 2004; Klingemann, 1999; Norris, 1999c, p. 21; Rosanvallon, 2008). Scholarship on the consequences of political trust has yet to adjudicate between these rivaling narratives. To date it remains unclear which of them is most plausible.

Empirical research assessing individual-level consequences of political trust primarily evolved under these two distinct narratives. Concerns over low and declining political trust led scholars to interpret these developments as a sign of an increasingly disengaged and uncooperative public (Miller, 1974a, 1974c; Mounk, 2018) or as the emergence of critical citizens seeking to close the gap between democratic ideals and performance (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999b). Hereafter, I will refer to these competing views as the **disengaged citizens** narrative and the **critical citizens** narrative respectively. The disengaged citizens narrative depicts low and declining political trust as a cause of political disengagement because distrusting citizens will eventually grow disillusioned with political leaders, institutions and systems. These disengaged citizens are likely to withdraw their support from the political system in times of crisis and leave democratic regimes more vulnerable (Crozier et al., 1975). On the other hand, scholars in favor of the critical citizens narrative argue that low and declining levels of trust may not necessarily lead to disengaged citizens, but instead to critical citizens or 'dissatisfied democrats' whose distrust in political leaders and institutions leads them to demand more 'democratic' reforms promoting transparency, accountability and voice. These critical citizens, scholars argue, play an important role in monitoring their leaders and institutions and are key for the proper functioning of democratic oversight and accountability (Cain et al., 2003; Norris, 2011; Rosanvallon, 2008).

Pitting these narratives against one another is important because they provide different expectations as to how and why political trust matters for citizens' preferences and actions and ultimately the stability and quality of democracy. However, the lack of systematic tests

## INTRODUCTION

limits our ability to discern which of these theories is likely to be true, the conditions under which they are likely to be true, and the reasons why they are likely to hold. We can begin resolving this puzzle by rigorously testing a number of most likely scenarios for each of these competing narratives. Juxtaposing a set of rivaling expectations derived from each narrative, provides a framework to assess whether the most hypothesized outcomes linked to political trust reflect a process of political disengagement or primarily confirms the critical citizens narrative.

It is worth noting that the disengaged citizen and critical citizen narratives need not necessarily contradict one another. Political trust could very much lead to different outcomes depending on the context. It could motivate some citizens to reach for more democracy, lead others to disengage from the political system or discourage them from using institutional forms of participation to voice their frustration and dissatisfaction. In fact, scholars have long theorized that a host of additional attitudes and norms could help explain these differentiated outcomes. For example, Norris suggests that distrust of institutions coupled with support for democracy leads citizen to demand more electoral and institutional reforms (Norris, 1999a, p. 265). Additionally, scholars also suggest that skepticism, not complete distrust is most likely to lead to yield a critical citizenry (Mishler & Rose, 1997; Warren, 2017). Nevertheless, both approaches remain distinct in their interpretation of the role of low and declining political trust for the stability and quality of democracy. While the disengaged citizens theory frames low and declining levels of trust as a negative development for the preferences and behaviors of citizens toward government, the critical citizens approach interprets low levels of trust as crucial for a healthy and active democracy.

The plausibility of either narrative is likely to shape our view of the consequentiality of political trust for representative democracy. If the absence of political trust is primarily a precursor of disenchantment with or withdrawal from the state, then it is likely to be a concern for the effective functioning of democracy. If, on the other hand, political trust leads to a more critical and vigilant citizenry, then democracy is not necessarily at stake when trust is low. It may face challenges, as many have argued, but not a crisis (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1995; Kaase & Newton, 1995). Unless we are able to pull apart these competing narratives about the relevance of trust for democratic stability and quality; unless we develop a better understanding of what exactly political trust does and how and why it influences citizens' attitudes and behaviors toward government, we will continue to debate the proper interpretation of declining political trust without much empirical evidence to support our positions. To this end, a substantial part of my dissertation will focus on rigorously testing rivaling expectations derived

from both of these narratives. Doing so, will lead us one step closer to understanding the consequences of political (dis)trust.

## **Research Question**

In short, the dominant claim in the literature is that political trust matters. However, it remains unclear how it does so. While scholars put forward rivaling theoretical arguments on the consequences of political trust at the micro level, there is little systematic analysis to adjudicate between them. Given these considerations the central research I pose is:

Which effects do low and declining political trust have on people's attitudes and behaviors toward democracy?

My aim in this dissertation is to better understand what exactly people do when they lack or lose trust in political representatives and in core institutions that undergird a democratic system. Throughout the dissertation, I will apply the two rivaling narratives previously discussed and will focus on three types of individual-level outcomes commonly linked to political trust: (1) citizens' political participation and monitoring behavior, (2) support for (un)democratic reforms, and (3) compliance and cooperation with authorities. I argue that the two narratives offer rivaling expectations that allow us to evaluate which of them provides a more plausible interpretation of political trust and its effects on the stability and quality of democracy.

## **Deepening the Research Problem**

### **Conceptualizing Political Trust**

Debates over the definition of political trust are as old as the literature on political trust itself. While not the core aim of this dissertation, we need some form of understanding of what trust is if we want to study its consequences. A few key elements are present in the literature. Political trust (1) implies some type of risk or vulnerability (Hamm et al., 2019; Mayer et al., 1995); (2) it is relational meaning it involves at least a trustee and a truster (Hardin, 1999); (3) it entails uncertainty (Van der Meer, 2017); and (4) it is targeted toward a specific set of objects, namely political institutions, with representative institutions at their core (Norris, 2011). Overall, I view political trust as a judgment characterized by individuals' (trustees') willing acceptance of vulnerability vis-à-vis political actors (trusters) in a given domain of action (X). It is relational, depending on a subject (who trusts) and an object (that is trusted). It is primarily aimed at specific set of political actors and institutions and it entails uncertainty. Without risk or uncertainty, there is little need to trust or distrust.



## INTRODUCTION

This definition is in line with Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, who define trust as a “willingness to be vulnerable” or a “willingness to assume risk” (1995, pp. 724–726). However, it purposefully differs from Hardin’s commonly accepted but narrow definition of political trust as encapsulated interest (Hardin, 1999, pp. 24–29). It is also distinct from discretionary conceptualizations of political trust which define trustworthiness as an object’s competence and motivation to act in the interest of the subject in the absence of monitoring or overseeing (Warren, 2017). Hardin’s encapsulated interest definition limits citizens’ political trust attitudes to a calculative judgment as the main motivation to trust while the latter definition makes a subject’s trust conditional on what many would see as one of its consequences, namely, monitoring and oversight. Conceptualizing political trust as a willing acceptance of vulnerability provides an encompassing definition that can account for multiple motivations citizens may have to trust. It also emphasizes the importance of risk and uncertainty which distinguishes trust attitudes from expectations (Van der Meer, 2017). Lastly, it enables us to maintain a distinction between trust as a cause and its consequences.

The conceptualization employed in this dissertation aims to shed light on the fact that trust is not homogeneous. Instead, it may vary depending on the object of one’s political trust and the longitudinal dynamics of the subject’s attitudes. With regards to the first, the dissertation adopts a narrow operationalization of political trust by primarily focusing on trust in political parties, legislative bodies such as parliament, and the executive branch of government. The approach aligns with previous research challenging a broad unidimensionality of political trust attitudes (Marien, 2011; Schnaudt, 2019; Schneider, 2017; van der Meer & Ouattara, 2019; Zmerli & Newton, 2017). While institutions of public order and legal institutions undeniably play an important role in the lives of citizens, political scientists have with few exceptions alluded to declining levels of trust in representative political institutions as a sign of democratic malaise<sup>3</sup>. With this in mind, I view political trust primarily as an attitude aimed at the political. Secondly, scholars also suggest that a subject’s trust attitudes may have distinct sub-

---

<sup>3</sup> My aim is not to downplay the importance of legal and order institutions or that of administrative bodies. Citizens’ attitudes toward these institutions is likely to play an important role in their attitudes toward the national government and national institutions as argued by Weaver and Lerman (2010) & Soss and Weaver (2017). These scholars have in recent years noted the importance of the police and order institutions in the shaping of broader political attitudes. Likewise, Levi and Stoker’s review of political trust also urges political scientists to pay closer attention to local institutions (2000, 495). My focus on ‘political’ institutions throughout this project, rather reflects the long standing scholarly focus on national representative institutions. Given that my primary aim is to provide a rigorous test of these theories, I find it important to focus on institutions that have long occupied scholarly attention.

## CHAPTER 1

components (mistrust, skepticism, distrust) (Bertsou, 2019; Cook & Gronke, 2005; Mishler & Rose, 1997; Walle & Six, 2014). Yet, one important and unexplored distinction is the one between structurally low trust and declining levels of trust. Although scholars have long recognized theoretically that these distinct longitudinal components may have different consequences (Easton, 1975; Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 489; Miller, 1974a, p. 971; Norris, 2011, p. 22), it remains unclear whether low trust and declining trust are empirically distinct. Accordingly, the dissertation explores whether these sub-components can be disentangled and whether they have distinct consequences.

By focusing on both the subject who trusts and the “political” object(s) trusted, this conceptualization integrates two longstanding theoretical explanations of the foundations of trust: socialization of the subject and performance of the object. According to the former, political trust attitudes stem from factors specific to the individual who trusts; their upbringing, educational background and life-experiences (Almond & Verba, 1963; Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Inglehart, 1997; Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977; Tyler, 2015). The performance approach, on the other hand, views trust attitudes as a reflection of political performance and outputs (Hetherington, 1998; Mishler & Rose, 2001; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016; Wroe, 2016). While previous studies sought to differentiate which of the two explanations proved true, existing scholarship suggests they need not be mutually exclusive. As the dominant trust-as-evaluation model theorizes, political trust may reflect an evaluation of political performance made against socialized norms and evaluative benchmarks (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Levi & Stoker, 2000; Mayne & Hakhverdian, 2017; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).

Surprisingly, this dominant explanatory model has yet to be directly tested at the micro-level. Although the model assumes that individuals make judgments of political actors against subjectively-held normative benchmarks, existing research has yet to assess whether this is the case. For the purpose of this dissertation, it is crucial to assess the extent to which political trust attitudes are indeed based on cognitive evaluations of political actors set against individually-held normative benchmarks. The answer to this question is not only theoretically relevant, as we will discuss in subsequent sections, but also has important methodological implications. To the extent that political trust primarily reflects a cognitive evaluation of political life as described by this dominant model, it can be induced in isolation in experimental designs. If, however, political trust primarily stems from processes of socialization or more complex judgments it may prove hard to effectively manipulate and draw relevant conclusions about its consequences in experimental settings. We return to this topic later in this introduction.

### Theoretical Considerations

Two questions come to mind when considering the effects of low and declining political trust on the stability and quality of democratic systems. First, has trust structurally declined and/or is trust structurally low? And secondly, if trust is structurally low or has declined, what effects does it have on citizens' preferences and behaviors? Scholars have long grappled with the first question concerning the dynamics or levels of trust. While some studies argued that political trust has structurally declined over time (Crozier et al., 1975; Dalton, 2004, 2005; Pharr et al., 2000), others posit that levels of trust temporarily fluctuate but no clear longitudinal pattern exists to support claims of a structural decline (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024; Marien, 2011; Miller & Listhaug, 1999; Newton, 1999; Van der Brug & Van Praag, 2007; van Ham & Thomassen, 2017). In this dissertation, I remain agnostic about the exact nature of these dynamics when answering the second question. Whether levels of trust have structurally declined or simply fluctuate over time, it is clear that levels of trust are not immutable. At the macro-level, existing research suggests that trust is a function of politics (see Citrin & Stoker, 2018 for an overview). Moreover, individuals' political trust attitudes consist of both a long-term trend and short-term fluctuations (Devine & Valgarðsson, 2024). Political trust is not static and that in itself is reason enough to investigate its effects in circumstances when it is low or declining. This heated debate over the dynamics of trust only emphasizes just how important it is to better understand what individuals do when their trust in political institutions declines or is low and what implications this has on the stability and quality of democracies.

### Which Outcomes Matter to Adjudicate Theories of Critical vs. Disengaged Citizenship?

Assessing the consequences of low and declining political trust on the stability and quality of democracy, requires us to first determine what exactly citizens do and believe for these macro-level outcomes to come about. Three types of attitudes and behaviors prove particularly helpful in this endeavor: (i) citizens' political participation, (ii) citizens' support for democratic reforms, and (iii) citizens' willingness to comply and cooperate with authorities. Together, these three individual-level outcomes are at the heart of scholars' expectations about the state of democracy.

First, citizens' political participation is at the heart of democracy; it reflects the vibrancy of democratic regimes. By participating in political life citizens are able to express their wishes or concerns and provide input into the political system. Political participation also serves as an important mechanism for vertical accountability, allowing citizens

## CHAPTER 1

to monitor and scrutinize government actions and institutions (Verba et al., 1995c). It is for this very reason that scholars have long sought to pin down the effects of low and declining political trust on citizens' political participation (Braun & Hutter, 2016; Christensen, 2018; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Kaase, 1999; Seligson, 1980) (see Gabriel, 2017 for an overview). Understanding the consequences of low and declining political trust on democratic stability and quality requires that we revisit the relationship between political trust and political participation.

Secondly, support for democratic reforms, namely electoral, institutional and constitutional reforms, is considered a necessary condition for democratic change (Dalton, 2004). This is particularly important because the notion that institutions change and adapt to cope with increasing levels of dissatisfaction is perhaps one of the most important lessons drawn in the aftermath of scholars' unfulfilled predictions about an ensuing crisis of democracy (Cain et al., 2003; Kaase & Newton, 1995; Seyd et al., 2018). Assessing the extent to which low and declining political trust among citizens begets support for such institutional changes is key if we want to understand the broader impact of political trust on institutional and democratic reform. Existing research points to such a link between citizens' attitudes and their support of decision-making reforms (Coffé & Michels, 2014; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015). Indeed, it is difficult to envision lawmakers changing the rules of the game without popular support for such actions. Democratic institutions' ability to adapt in order to avoid crises in part depends on an active citizenry pushing for reforms (Klingemann, 1999; Norris, 2011).

Lastly, citizens' law-abidingness can be understood as a key element for the effective functioning of democratic regimes (Marien and Hooghe 2011). Absent trust, citizens may be unwilling to pay their taxes (Scholz & Lubell, 1998) and refuse to cooperate with government institutions (Marien & Werner, 2018; Tyler, 2011) or to support necessary and costly policies such as the imposition of environmental taxes (Fairbrother, 2019). Without citizens' willing compliance with the law democratic regimes will struggle to function effectively. The body of work linking trust attitudes to this willing compliance suggests that citizens' law-abiding behaviors may be a key pathway through which low and declining political trust influence the stability and quality of democratic governments.

Focusing on these three outcomes also helps us adjudicate between the two dominant theses about the effects of low and declining political trust at the core of this dissertation: disengaged vs. critical citizenship. Both narratives provide divergent expectations as to how low and declining trust influence these outcomes. According to the disengaged citizens narrative, low and declining political trust begets apathy in the form of lower political participation, withdrawal from

## INTRODUCTION

political decision-making and lower support for democratic decision-making arrangements and lower law-abidingness (Crozier et al., 1975; Finifter, 1970; Krastev, 2016; Mair, 2013; Miller, 1974a). Critical Citizenship on the other hand suggests that low and declining trust may indeed yield non-compliance and lower cooperation with political authorities not out of apathy but a desire for more democracy (Norris, 1999a, 2011). This desire manifests itself in the forms of higher levels of (especially non-institutional) participation (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1995, pp. 431–432; Hooghe & Marien, 2013, p. 134) and support for more citizens involvement in decision-making processes (Dalton, 2004; Dalton et al., 2001). Accordingly, this dissertation aims to assess whether the relationship between trust and these three outcomes largely align with expectations drawn from the disengaged citizens narrative or the critical citizen narrative.

### Methodological Considerations

As stated previously, the lack of rigorous and systematic tests remains one of the long-standing barriers in assessing the consequences of political trust. Previous efforts to test arguments from both of these narratives have been hindered by the fact that scholars primarily focused on testing specific outcomes and expectations in an isolated manner rather than pitting different expectations from both narratives against each other. Additionally previous studies' reliance on cross-sectional data and methods suffered from endogeneity issues. In this dissertation, I rely on quantitative methods and survey research to deductively test these expectations. The approach is well suited to address this research puzzle since the list of hypothesized effects of low and declining political trust on individuals' democratic preferences and behaviors is rather long. Indeed, research on political trust is marked by big claims about the relevance of trust for democratic stability and quality. We need to put these longstanding claims and assumptions to the test. That is ultimately the focus of my dissertation.

A crucial test of the consequences of low and declining trust must address existing methodological limitations in the literature. In this dissertation, I focus on three of these gaps. First, the majority of studies on the topic are primarily cross-sectional, meaning they at best provide correlational evidence and may suffer from endogeneity issues. Secondly, empirical studies tend to conflate levels of trust with its dynamics, although both may have distinct and theoretically relevant consequences. Lastly, existing research tends to study distinct consequences of trust in an isolated manner, making it difficult to have a broader overview of the relevance of low and declining political trust.

With regards to the first gap, nearly two decades after Levi and Stoker encouraged political scientists to make use of experimental data and panel data to “enhance ... understanding of the causes and

## CHAPTER 1

consequences of political trust,” (2000, 501) this call has not yet been heeded in much empirical research on the consequences of trust. With few exceptions, “empirical studies on consequences of political trust have predominantly relied on correlational analyses at one point in time” (Van der Meer 2017, 18). This lack of rigorous research designs which are able to isolate the effects of trust continues to hinder our ability to test different theories about the consequentiality of political trust.

Two research designs prove particularly useful to address these endogeneity issues, namely, experimental and longitudinal panel designs. The promise and beauty of experimental designs is that they help isolate the effect of one variable on a given outcome through manipulation via a random treatment. In the context of political trust, such experimental designs could help isolate the effects of political trust within a controlled environment and thus limit the potential confounding effect of other factors that may influence both trust attitudes and key outcomes of interest. Chapter 4 of this dissertation draws on this approach to assess the link between political trust, measured as a covariate, and political participation. By randomly assigning respondents to assess different randomly constructed scenarios, the experiment provides a controlled environment in which the effects of trust attitudes are disentangled from the randomized features of the experiment.

We deliberately focus on survey experiments in Chapter 2 as they allow researchers to randomly assign a treatment embedded in a survey to alter citizens’ levels of trust and identify the short-term effects of such changes. However, a crucial first step in employing such designs is to assess whether we can effectively isolate and induce levels of trust through a random treatment. The majority of studies employing survey experiments focus on isolating the causes of trust; trust thus serves as a dependent variable in these studies (Wilson & Eckel, 2017). It remains unclear, however, whether one can randomly induce (dis)trust to assess its effects on a separate outcome.

Answering this question is needed to assess the usefulness of survey experiments for studying the consequences of political trust. Accordingly, Chapter 2 of this dissertation is dedicated to answering this question. Specifically, it assesses the cognitive judgments underlying individuals trust attitudes. If these evaluative judgments can reliably be manipulated in an experimental context, they could help us employ survey experiments in the study of the consequences of low and declining political trust.

Longitudinal designs, on the other hand, allow us to assess how changing levels of trust influence a given outcome over time. In doing so, these designs also help to minimize endogeneity risks from time-invariant factors. This approach draws on granger causality in which a

## INTRODUCTION

variable can be assumed to be causally prior to another if it changes or induces changes in another variable. In this dissertation, I mainly rely on longitudinal panel designs. While time-series-cross-sectional data are widely available at the country-level, few panel studies of individuals have tracked citizens' political trust over time. Fewer still have simultaneously tracked political attitudes and their expected consequences across more than two time points. This limits the ability to assess how a change in one variable, say political trust, may influence an outcome of interest. By tracking the same set of respondents over at least three time periods, we can assess whether and how changing levels of trust influence citizens' attitudes and behaviors over short periods of time and over longer time spans. Chapters 3 and 5 of this dissertation draw on this approach to assess citizens' attitudes toward reform and compliance with authorities.

A second significant gap that needs to be addressed is the conflation of low levels and declining levels of political trust. The reliance on cross-sectional research designs primarily means that both static and dynamic components of political trust remain conflated when we study its consequences. By focusing on differences between individuals at a single point in time, cross-sectional studies are only able to assess whether their level of trust is low or high, not its longitudinal dynamics. As a result, they implicitly attribute the same role and expectations to both low political trust and declining political trust, whereas this need not be the case. This conflation is particularly surprising since there are theoretical grounds to expect both components to yield distinct consequences. Individuals with structurally low trust need not behave the same way as those whose trust has declined, nor should we expect them to have the same views of political actors. And yet, methodologically, both components of trust remain intertwined and previous studies have yet to disentangle them to assess their distinct consequences. In this dissertation the use of longitudinal panel data allows me to pull apart both components of trust to study their respective effects on individuals' decision-making preferences (see Chapter 3) and willingness to comply with authorities (Chapter 5). In both chapters I employ a Random Effect Within-Between (REWB) model to disentangle between-person variance from within-person variance. In combination with longitudinal panel data, REWB models can simultaneously estimate the effects of average levels of trust between individuals (structurally low trust) and short-term deviations from an individual's average (declining trust).

The third methodological gap the dissertation addresses is the lack of systematic tests of the consequences of political trust. Existing research tends to explore distinct outcomes of interest in an isolated manner. Scholars have studied the link between political trust attitudes and various outcomes ranging from political participation (Gabriel, 2017; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Kaase, 1999), support for political reforms

## CHAPTER 1

(Bedock & Pilet, 2021; Dalton, 2004; Dalton et al., 2001; Gherghina & Geissel, 2019; Schuck & de Vreese, 2015), vote choice (Bélanger, 2017; Dalton & Weldon, 2005; Peterson & Wrighton, 1998; R. Voogd et al., 2019), compliance with legal directives (Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Marien & Werner, 2018; Norris, 1999a; Scholz & Lubell, 1998), and policy preferences (Fairbrother, 2019; Hetherington, 2005; Macdonald, 2021). While this body of work does provide insight into the effects of political trust, findings across these studies are not always consistent (e.g., trust and participation see Gabriel (2017) for a review). Furthermore, they do not give a holistic picture of the consequences of political trust or clear indications of whether these consequences warrant concern over the stability and quality of democracy or a hopeful outlook for change.

Given the cacophony of findings in the literature this dissertation focuses on various outcomes commonly linked to low and declining political trust rather than focusing on a single one. By assessing the effects of trust on individuals' support for political reforms, political participation, and compliance attitudes, the dissertation is able to provide a fuller picture of the consequences of low and declining trust for democratic stability and quality. Furthermore, each of the studies presented in this dissertation uses multiple indicators to assess these outcomes. Chapter 3, which focuses on political reforms focuses on multiple types of reforms, some of which aim to expand democratic input such as referenda, others that aim to reduce it such as authoritarianism and expert rule. In Chapter 4, I explore three different types of political participation - joining townhall meetings, signing petitions and attending demonstrations - that invoke different theoretical expectations. Chapter 5 draws on various indicators to operationalize voluntary compliance, ranging from misreporting income and recycling household goods to claiming unearned government benefits and avoiding public transport fares.

By addressing these important gaps in the literature, I am able to test micro-level theories about the roles of trust and distrust in citizens' lives. In doing so this dissertation provides important insights about the broader consequences of political trust for the stability and quality of democracy. In the event that trust has no import on citizens' democratic preferences and behaviors, political scientists should reconsider the importance we attribute to this attitude. Instead we would need to focus on political elites' decision-making as opposed to drawing conclusions about citizens' low and declining levels of trust for democratic stability and/or quality. However, doing so before testing the causal relevance of political trust on citizens' behaviors and preferences would be premature.



## Four Sub-Questions

This dissertation focuses on four sets of questions to assess the consequences of low and declining political trust on individuals' behaviors and preferences. First, we need to better understand the foundation of political trust by assessing how individuals form their trust attitudes. In this vein, Chapter 2 provides a direct test of the dominant trust-as-evaluative model according to which individuals' trust stems from a cognitive evaluation against personally salient criteria. Testing this model in Chapter 2, I ask:

To what extent do people form political trust judgments by evaluating political objects against normative benchmarks?

The answer to this question has important conceptual, theoretical and methodological implications which help define my approach in subsequent chapters. Theoretically, the dominant trust as evaluation model undergirds narratives of critical citizenship which assume that citizens' attitudes stem in part from their evaluation of politics. As such it provides a key foundation of vertical accountability by linking government performance to individual-level evaluations. Further, testing the dominant trust-as-evaluation model also provides insights about the malleability of political trust in experimental settings; an exploration that helps guide the methodological choices in the rest of this dissertation.

Chapters 3-5 focus on testing the consequences of trust across the three domains introduced in the previous section. In Chapter 3, I assess the relationship between political trust and decision-making reforms by asking:

To what extent do low and declining political trust have an effect citizens' support for democratic and undemocratic reform?

Chapter 4, focuses on the relationship between political trust and participation. Given numerous conflicting findings about this relationship, I ask:

To what extent does political trust function as a resource or (dis)incentive to participate?

Lastly, Chapter 5 tests the relationship between political trust and law-abidingness by asking:

To what extent do diffuse and specific support affect law-abidingness separately and in tandem?

## Outlining the Four Empirical Chapters

Assessing how individuals form their trust attitudes is a helpful first step to understand the consequences of low and declining political trust. Narratives about the consequences of political trust stem in part from beliefs about its origins and formation. To the extent that trust attitudes are based on evaluations of political life, declining levels of trust are a useful indicator that government performance is lacking and must be improved. If political trust, however, is based on deeply held attachments that are acquired through socialization processes, then it is more difficult to view declining levels of trust across institutions as anything other than a signal of deep disengagement from the state.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation tests the micro-level foundations of the trust-as-evaluation model via an extensive two-wave survey experiment among 15,997 respondents from the EenVandaag Opinion Panel, a well-known Dutch current affairs program. I assess to what extent normative benchmarks of trustworthiness condition citizens' trust in politicians with 11 randomized traits. Our findings challenge the commonly held view of the role of normative benchmarks in the trust-as-evaluation model. While respondents clearly differentiate trustworthy politicians from untrustworthy ones and withdraw trust from politicians with negative traits, their normative benchmarks do not systematically influence this judgment. Overall, these findings suggest that people form their trust judgments based on some form of general evaluation, but normative benchmarks hardly factor into this evaluation. Our trust judgments may resemble more of a reflexive process than a purely reflective one based on cognitive calculations.

Chapter 3 tests the consequences of low and declining political trust on citizens' support for decision-making reforms. For decades, scholars have argued that low and declining political trust affect citizens' support for democratic and undemocratic reform. While some theorized that low political trust induces alienation and support for non-democratic decision making, others argued that it pushes critical citizens to support reforms aimed to reinvigorate democracy. Yet, empirical tests of these expectations remained sparse and inconclusive. The chapter employs panel data from the Dutch Parliamentary Election Study (DPES) fielded in the Netherlands covering 3 waves in 3 years to test these diverging theories simultaneously. I employ the random effects within-between (REWB) model to differentiate between the effects of structurally low and declining political trust. My results suggest that low and declining trust both diminish support for representative democracy, enhance support for direct democratic decision-making and do not affect support for authoritarianism. These findings cast doubt on the understanding of political distrust as a determinant of political alienation. Rather, they support theories of

## INTRODUCTION

critical citizenship and – albeit to a lesser extent – stealth democracy. People with low and declining trust are unlikely to simply withdraw from political decision-making or to accept the status quo of current decision-making. On the contrary, they want both; more control over decision-making processes and involvement in these decision-making processes.

In Chapter 4, I revisit the link between political trust and political participation. Although political trust has long been linked to political participation, its effects remain elusive. Trust in political institutions may either enhance levels of participation, diminish political engagement, or yield distinct effects depending on the activity. This chapter examines these diverging effects through a rational choice framework, with which I theorize and test whether political trust functions as a resource or a (dis)incentive to participate. Specifically, I assess the direct effects of political trust on intended participation and its moderating effects on outcome-related motivations and activity type. To do so, I set up a factorial survey experiment in the Netherlands and the UK to isolate the effects of outcome-related motivations and to disentangle participation from the effectiveness of action and the effect of activity type, factors that remain confounded in existing survey measures of participation. Overall, my findings suggest that political trust operates as a (dis)incentive to participate, rather than a resource spurring participation. When faced with policies that impose personal costs, individuals with high levels of political trust are less engaged than those who do not trust political actors. Individuals with little trust are not only more likely to participate to make their voices heard but are also willing to use different channels and ways of participation to do so. Low trust leads to more engagement and more varied forms of engagement in the face of costly policy.

Lastly, Chapter 5, tests the relationship between political trust and law-abidingness. The stability and performance of democratic systems rests in part on citizens' political support. Without a sense of legitimacy derived from political support, governments cannot rely on individuals' voluntary compliance but must resort to violence to enforce it. However, it remains unclear why people comply with government directives when they lose support for government authorities and institutions. The chapter aims to answer two questions. First, what distinct effects do diffuse and specific support have on law-abidingness? Second, does diffuse political support operate as a reservoir that buffers short-term declines in specific support? I take an innovative two-step approach to answer these questions. Theoretically, the chapter provides an operational distinction between diffuse and specific support by integrating both objects of support (Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999b) and the longitudinal dynamics of political attitudes. Empirically, I collected a 3-wave panel dataset across 3 countries (The Netherlands, the UK and Sweden) as well as a (REWB) Model to

30

## CHAPTER 1

disentangle diffuse support from specific support and to test their effects on law-abidingness. Overall the chapter makes three contributions to the literature. First, it adds to the evidence-base of the consequences of political support and political trust on law-abidingness. Secondly, it tests longstanding claims about distinct components of support. Lastly, the chapter provides a unique and innovative approach to disentangle diffuse support from specific support. The findings suggest that low political trust begets more legal permissiveness. However, this finding depends on the institution that is trusted. Low trust toward representative institutions yields weaker effects on law-abidingness than low trust toward legal and order institutions. Moreover, low diffuse support is more detrimental for law-abidingness than low specific support.

Together these four chapters challenge simple and straightforward narratives of critical or disengaged citizenship that link low and declining political trust to either democratic rejuvenation or democratic malaise. Low and declining political trust begets more engagement and a desire for control of decision-making. It challenges the status quo. However, as discussed in the conclusion, a rejection of the status quo does not automatically entail a boon or a detriment to democratic stability and quality.