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Political trust: Pillar or peril for democracy

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

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Chapter 4. The Elusive Effect of Political Trust on Participation: Participatory Resource or (Dis)incentive? ³⁵ ³⁶

Abstract

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 article examines these diverging effects through a rational choice framework, with which we theorize and test whether political trust functions as a resource or a (dis)incentive to participate. Specifically, we assess the direct effects of political trust on intended participation and its moderating effects on outcome-related motivations and activity type. To this end, we use 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, our findings suggest that political trust operates as a (dis)incentive, rather than a resource spurring participation.

³⁵ This chapter is based on joint work with Dr. Eefje Steenvoorden. Accordingly, the main pronoun used is “we”. Ouattara, E., & Steenvoorden, E. (2023). The Elusive Effect of Political Trust on Participation: Participatory Resource or (Dis)incentive? *Political Studies*, 00323217231194820. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217231194820>

³⁶ Author Contributions - (1) Ouattara, E. : Conceptualization, theoretical and methodological design (lead); Writing – original draft (lead); Data collection, data analysis and visualization (lead); Writing – review and editing (equal). (2) Steenvoorden E: Conceptualization, theoretical and methodological design (supporting); Data collection and visualization (supporting); Writing – review and editing (equal)

Introduction

Despite the long-held view that political trust is “necessary to ensure the stability of democratic political systems” (Marien & Hooghe, 2011, p. 267), its consequences are far from clear. Its effects on political participation remain particularly elusive. Some scholars argue that political trust leads to more participation because it reflects a sense of civic attachment to the state (Almond & Verba, 1963). Others argue that political trust discourages participation because it reflects satisfaction with politics and reduces the need to make one’s voice heard (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). These alleged opposing effects of political trust on political participation makes one wonder about the mechanisms at play. However, the field is rather underdeveloped in that regard: theorizing on the role of political trust remained sporadic and rather implicit.

Theorization is further hampered by a tendency to focus on the characteristics of participants, while the specific conditions of the act at hand have remained out of sight. On one hand, this is perfectly understandable, given the dominant research design which employs cross-sectional data and standard participation measures to improve external validity. However, this does not help disentangle opposing expectations, as in the case of political trust.

In this paper, we apply one of the most established mechanisms of participation, namely rational choice theory (RCT), to contribute in various ways. First, we use the RCT framework to argue that previous assumptions on the effects of political trust fall in two categories. While some scholars expect political trust to function as a resource for participation (mainly in the case of institutional participation), the work of others instead treat it as a disincentive (mainly in the case of non-institutional participation). However, empirical findings are inconclusive. Some studies underline these accounts (Bäck & Christensen, 2016; Braun & Hutter, 2016; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Norris, 1999a), while others do not (Dalton et al., 2010; Hooghe & Quintelier, 2012; Norris et al., 2005; Parry et al., 1992; Smets & van Ham, 2013; Steenvoorden, 2018).

Second, we examine the explanatory value of RCT with regards to conditions of participation. Despite the scholarly consensus that cost and benefits affect participation, to our knowledge these mechanisms have only been studied indirectly by looking at the recourses of participants. In this paper, we examine two conditions of participatory acts that, in line with RCT, should affect peoples’ willingness to participate, namely material benefits of participation and success chance of participation.

Third, we examine the interplay between political trust and conditions of participatory acts. Teasing out these interactions is particularly relevant to examine whether trust functions as either a

resource or a (dis)incentive. People may concurrently weigh resources, (dis)incentives and various outcome-related motivations against each other when choosing to take part in politics. Hence, understanding whether trust primarily operates as a resource or a disincentive may boil down to specifying and testing expectations about its interaction with such motivations.

To examine the role of political trust, conditions of participatory acts, and their interactions, we employ a rather novel research design to this field, namely an experiment. The design allows us to better control for possible confounding factors, such as network or issue topic than retrospective, observational cross-sectional research designs that the overwhelming majority of previous studies use. It also enables us to directly compare the effect of political trust and conditions of participatory acts (material benefits and success chance) across types of participation.

We fielded our factorial survey experiment on intended participation in the Netherlands and the UK and manipulated the probability of influencing an outcome, outcome benefits and options of activity type. We assess the direct effects of trust on intended participation and its moderating effect on both outcome-related motivations and activity type. In the following sections we briefly review the role of resources and incentives in spurring political participation and discuss existing literature on political trust and political participation. We provide an overview of our research design, present our results and discuss the implications of these findings.

Theory

Political Participation: Costs and Benefits, Incentives and Resources

Although there is no “encompassing conceptualization” of political participation, it “can be loosely defined as citizens’ activities affecting politics” (van Deth, 2014, pp. 351–353). And of the variety of ways one may affect politics, “acts that aim at influencing governmental decisions” are among the most recognizable (Verba & Nie, 1987, p. 2)

According to rational choice theories, political participation is a function of the costs and benefits associated with political action (Downs 1957). People conduct a “calculus” of participation. They are most likely to get engaged in politics when the benefits of achieving an outcome, B , and the probability of influencing that outcome, P , outweigh the cost of participation, C (Downs 1957).

$$P*B > C$$

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Scholars have long debated the plausibility and rationality of this “calculus” (Olson 1965). Since any individual’s action is likely to be insignificant, individuals may gain more utility by free-riding off the participation of others.³⁷ On the one hand, this casts doubt on the relevance of outcome benefits (material or immaterial), the probability of influence and the costs of action as true determinants of participation. However, the “puzzle of participation” is more pronounced when participation is voluntary and benefits are collective. As Verba, Scholzman and Brady argue: “the respondent who seeks to clear up a tax problem or to get a pothole fixed does not have the option of free riding” (1995, 100). In various political contexts, the calculus of participation based on the probability of influence, the outcome benefits, and costs, remains relevant.

If we apply RCT to political participation, it gives ground to theorize about different conditions of participatory acts that matter, namely the B (benefit) and P (probability). While only the literature on electoral participation has empirically studied the effect of benefits (as candidate preferences), this B term might just as well affect any other type of participation. We assume that benefits may entail any policy fallout or gains with direct personal consequences. In this study, we focus on tax policy that impose threats to one’s personal material interest. Such policy fallout provides a clear benefit for action and a cost of inaction. Previous findings suggest that “hikes in local taxes are linked to increased municipal voter turnout” (Broms, 2021, p. 1). Following this logic, we hypothesize about the benefit (as lower taxes) that:

H1: Material benefits increase political participation

Furthermore, the probability P of influencing an outcome also serves as an important incentive for participation. Existing scholarship mostly discusses this concept in terms of internal and external efficacy (Craig & Maggionto, 1982; Niemi et al., 1991). Internal efficacy reflects individuals’ beliefs about their ability to understand and participate in politics and is associated with higher levels of participation (Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Valentino et al., 2008). External political efficacy refers to the perceived responsiveness of the state, and also enhances political participation (Karp & Banducci, 2008; Sjoberg et al., 2015)(de Moor 2016). People participate in politics when they believe that their action will be impactful either because they feel able to influence the system, or because the state is willing to hear their concerns and/or able to act on them (de Moor, 2016; Hooghe & Marien, 2014). This leads us to expect that:

³⁷ To resolve this puzzle scholars propose various changes to the rational-choice account of participation ranging from consideration of selective incentives (Olson 1965), considerations of various other social, collective and moral incentives under general incentives model (Whiteley 1995).

H2: The success chance of an action increases participation

Political Trust: Resource or (Dis)Incentive?

Not only B and P, but also R (resources) and I (incentives) play an important role in RCT on participation. Central in this function of participation are both (material and psychological) resources at peoples' disposal (Verba et al., 1995c), as well as (dis)incentives they have to participate (Pattie et al., 2004).³⁸ It is precisely because political participation is costly that it requires both material resources such as time, money and civic skills (Brady et. al 1995) and psychological resources such as political interest and political efficacy that fuel political engagement (Verba et al., 1995b). Without these resources (R) people are unable to respond to offset the costs that participation requires.

$$P*B + R > C$$

(Dis)incentives (I) also influence the "calculus". Because political participation is costly, people "must have a desire to take part" in politics (Teorell, 2006, p. 800). Indeed, scholars have long attempted to resolve the participatory puzzle by incorporating various incentives in the calculus (Olson 1965; Whiteley 1995).

$$P*B \pm I > C$$

Without incentives there is little reason for people to make use of the resources they have and to bear the costs of involvement in politics. These incentives can be ideological and/or material, such as incentives stemming from the value individuals place on achieving a certain policy outcome (Schlozman et al., 1995; Verba et al., 1995a), or out of one's own material interest (Olson, 1965). They can be grievance-based, as dissatisfaction spurs collective action (Opp, 1988; Shadmehr, 2014); expressive, purely reflecting the act and thrill of participation itself; or altruistic (Fowler & Kam, 2007; see Pattie et al., 2004, pp. 140–144 for an overview). The common thread is that people consider (dis)incentives when choosing whether or not to participate in politics.

It is with this framework of resource and incentives that we examine the role of political trust in political participation. Theoretically trust stands on the edge of a fence; neither fully recognized as a resource for participation nor as a disincentive to participate. While this juxtaposition of resource and disincentive is rarely discussed explicitly, it is implicit in many studies on political trust and in the contrasting role that scholars theoretically assign, and empirically show, political trust to have in the case of political participation.

³⁸ Scholars also highlight the importance of recruitment networks in which people are embedded (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

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On the one hand, scholars who hypothesize trust to increase participation seem to assume that it operates as a resource. An example is Almond and Verba's (1963) description of a civic culture, in which political participants expressed more positive orientations toward political authorities and fellow citizens (1963, pp. 253–257). Similarly, the civic voluntarism model (CV model) of political participation, which emphasizes the relevance of material and psychological resources (Verba et al., 1995c). Although this model does not incorporate trust in empirical tests political trust is theoretically aligned with psychological engagement factors they propose, such as political efficacy (Verba et al., 1995b). Together, these theories suggest both that trust reflects a sense of civic attachment and/or positive orientation to the state, and that it serves as a reservoir of goodwill to work with instead of against political actors.

Conversely, grievance theories posit that political discontent constitutes a powerful incentive spurring political participation (Gamson, 1968; Opp, 1988; Shadmehr, 2014). This implies that positive orientations such as political trust function not as resources, but as disincentives. As Citrin and Stoker (Citrin & Stoker, 2018) argue, “the trusting may be satisfied with government and view it as needing little monitoring, so trust could weaken the impulse to participate in politics” (2018, 62). Similarly, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue that “the more the public trusts elected officials to make unbiased decisions, the less the public participates in politics” (2002, p. 159). The case for trust as a disincentive is perhaps best made from the perspective of distrust. A long tradition in scholarship emphasizes the virtues of distrust in authorities (see Bertsou, 2019, pp. 215–218 for an overview; Norris, 1999b) and theoretical research emphasizes the relevance of distrust for participation and vertical accountability (Rosanvallon, 2008).

Political trust & The Type of Activity

The opposing views on the role of trust in participation dovetail with a dominant distinction between types of participation in the literature, namely between institutional and non-institutional participation. In this literature, “institutionalized participation refers to ... acts that are, directly, or indirectly, linked to the functioning of political institutions” (Hooghe & Marien, 2014, p. 538), while non-institutionalized forms of participation “have no direct relation with the electoral process or the functioning of the political institutions” (Hooghe & Marien, 2013, p. 134).

While the literature on voter turnout and institutional activities views trust as a resource (Almond & Verba, 1963), scholars studying protest behavior and other non-institutional activities pointed to the role of distrust as an incentive and trust as a disincentive to participate (Gamson, 1968). The main rationale used to explain these diverging expectations is that trusting respondents prefer to participate in

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activities that are embedded within the current institutional framework and shun participation in activities that are outside the bounds of pre-existing structures or that serve an elite-challenging purpose.

Supporting evidence for both political trust as a resource and political trust as a disincentive remains mixed (see Gabriel, 2017, pp. 235–237 for an overview). Although various studies find the hypothesized positive link between political trust and institutional participation (Bäck & Christensen, 2016, pp. 187–189; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Mattila, 2020; Norris, 1999a; Steenvoorden, 2018), others find null and inconsistent results (Hooghe & Quintelier, 2012; Parry et al., 1992). Likewise, tests of the relationship between political trust and non-institutional activity have also led to inconsistent findings. While some scholars find the hypothesized negative relationship (Braun & Hutter, 2016; Christensen, 2018; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Hooghe & Quintelier, 2012; Kaase, 1999; Mattila, 2020; Norris, 1999a), others do not (Dalton et al., 2010; Norris et al., 2005). Additionally, when effects are found they tend to be weak and/or inconsistent across activity types (see Steenvoorden, 2018 who differentiates protest from consumerism). So the question remains whether the same attitude indeed works differently depending on the type of participation.

Based on the literature we propose three explanations as to why trust may have diverging effects on political participation. First, trust could (a) alter preferences for distinct types of action, leading some to prefer certain acts more than others. Secondly, trust could diminish the urge to participate by (b) raising one's tolerance for costly policy outcomes that would otherwise encourage participation. Third, trust could increase the urge to participate by (c) influencing one's beliefs about the effectiveness of one's action. And yet, due to common methodological limitations, few studies rigorously test these diverging yet plausible expectations about the effects of trust on participation. Specifically reliance on standard survey questions measuring retrospective political participation do not allow scholars to pull apart preferences for specific types of participation, the benefits to be gained by participating and the effectiveness of participation, which people perceive differently (Hooghe & Marien, 2014). In failing to disentangle such factors, current research designs are unable to examine whether trust operates as a participatory resource or as a disincentive.

Our research design not only allows us to disentangle these factors, it also does a better job at controlling for other, possible confounding factors such as network or issue topic correlated with both trust and participation. This means our research design enables us to test hypothesis that are not new to the literature, but about which we find inconclusive results. H3a specifies the CV model, which envisions trust as a resource which stimulates people to be focused on existing institutions, not to circumvent them through non-institutional

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participation. H3b also departs from the CV model, which does not provide clearcut expectations of how trust relates to non-institutional participation. In this model, a lack of trust can lead to apathy and abstention. Yet, while trusting individuals may prefer institutional activities, this does not imply that they partake less in non-institutional activities than their distrusting counterparts.

H3a: Political trust has a positive effect on institutional participation

H3b: The effect of political trust on participation is stronger for institutional participation, than for non-institutional participation.

In contrast, grievance theories do assume a link between political trust and non-institutional participation, namely that trust reduces the need to participate by making it easier to accept policies even when they are against one's personal benefit (Gamson, 1968; Hetherington, 2005). This implies that in the absence of trust, people are less likely to accept policy outcomes, and therefore more likely to engage in politics, whereas trusting people have little reason to do so. Moreover, distrusting individuals may be more willing to participate outside the bounds of pre-existing structures whereas such motives may be particularly weak among trusting individuals who have few reasons to get involved in politics (Hooghe & Marien, 2013). Hence, we would expect that:

H4: Political trust has a negative effect on non-institutional participation.

Does Political Trust Moderate Outcome Benefits and Success Chance?

We can further assess whether trust functions as a resource or a disincentive by looking at its interaction with other factors that influence participation: the B and the P. From the theories above, political trust can be assumed to have different effects on the extent to which benefits matter, and how much people are affected by success chance, depending on whether it acts as a resource or a disincentive.

Following the political trust as resource line of thought, we would expect it to reinforce the effect of benefits and success chance. The presence of these benefits / higher success probability among highly trusting respondents may yield more political participation than among less trusting respondents who lack the resources to respond to such incentives. Hence, if trust operates as a resource we expect that:

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H5a: Political trust increases the effect of material benefits on political participation.³⁹

H6a: Political trust increases the effect of success chance on political participation.

Grievance theory, on the other hand, suggests the exact opposite relationship, for two reasons. Trusting individuals may not only have weaker incentives reasons to become politically active, but they may also be more willing to bear both material and ideological costs of policy changes (Hetherington, 2005). This means that we would expect (lack of) benefits to play a stronger role among people who are aggrieved and distrustful and a weaker role among trusting respondents who are accepting the costs that decision-making elected officials ask of them.

And similarly, if trust operates as a disincentive that reflects a willingness to bear the costs of policy choices, it is likely to do so by moderating the effect of success chance on participation. People who are willing to bear the costs of policy change, don't need to consider their chance of influencing that outcome. Accordingly, we expect that:

H5b: Political trust reduces the effect of material benefits on political participation

H6b: Political trust reduces the effect of success chance on political participation.

³⁹ Note that H5a and H6a were not pre-registered

Data and Methods

Survey and Experimental Design

To test these expectations we need a research design that addresses three challenges. First, we need to measure individual-level participation across various political acts. Ideally our research design would allow us to disentangle levels of participation from both preference for distinct activities as well as the effectiveness of these activities. Given that these three factors are intertwined, our research design should simultaneously isolate the effect of activity type and activity effectiveness on levels of political participation while minimizing risks of spuriousness. A second challenge is the need to manipulate both outcome benefits and the probability of influencing an outcome independently of trust attitudes and to estimate their effects on political participation. Lastly, we need individual level measures of political trust to assess the effect of trust on participation across different activities and to estimate the moderating effect of political trust on outcome benefits and success chance.

To address these challenges, we embedded a factorial (vignette) experiment in a nationally-representative survey fielded in both the UK and the Netherlands among ~3200 respondents (1600 in each country). Fieldwork took place between late January and early February 2021. The experiment consists of a 2x3x4 design with 24 unique vignettes. Each respondent rated three distinct scenarios resulting in a cross-over design with a between-person and within-person component. The between-person element minimizes the risks of rationalization and benchmarking, while the within-person element allows for more robust measurement in which each person serves as their own control. As a robustness check, we disentangle these within and between elements, yet both effects point in the same direction.

Operationalization

The factorial experiment prompted respondents to consider a hypothetical policy proposal in their municipality and subsequently measured their willingness to take action in various political acts. Respondents rated *three* scenarios in which we randomly manipulated three factors (see Table 1 for an overview). The *outcome benefits* to be gained from participation had two variants, namely that the policy proposal would lead to personal material cost, or that this was unclear. The *activity type* through which respondents could voice their opinion had three variants, one for institutional participation (attending a meeting with the local council), and two for non-institutional participation (engaging in a demonstration, or signing a petition). The estimated *success chance* of the action had four variants, ranging from

an action that yields little chance of influence to an action leading to a good chance of influence. We included an attention check after the first vignette to ensure that respondents properly read the scenario. Approximately 74% of respondents responded correctly. Box 1 presents an example of an actual vignette.

Dependent Variable

Our dependent variable measures participatory intent on a 4-point scale. We asked respondent “How likely is it that you would join ... initiative?”. Response options varied from (1) I would not ... under any circumstances to (4) “I am quite certain I would join ...” Although participatory intent is distinct from actual participation, it is theoretically prior and empirically linked to actual behavior (Quintelier & Blais, 2016). If trust matters for participation, it is likely due to its effects in shaping willingness to participate in politics.

Political Trust

We operationalized political trust, our independent variable, as a pre-treatment covariate. The measure relies on a battery of items measuring trust in a set of representative institutions and actors (Parliament, Government, Political Parties and Politicians). Each item consists of a 5-point scale ranging from (1) strongly distrust to (5) strongly trust (we treat don't know responses as missing, which correspond to 1.1% , 0.8%, 0.7% and 0.6% for the four trust items respectively).⁴⁰ Political trust consists of the average value on these items. Operationalizing trust as a pre-treatment covariate allows us to estimate its effects on participation across the three different activities in the experiment as well as its moderating effect on outcome benefits and success chance.

Controls

Our models control for variance across various socio-demographic factors including age, gender, education levels and occupation. Levels of trust, considerations of outcome benefits and success chance and participation are likely to vary across education levels and type of occupation. Additionally, we also adjust for political interest and political efficacy (internal and external) when assessing the direct and moderating effects of political trust since these variables are known to influence political participation and are closely related to political trust (Boulianne, 2019; Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Norris, 1999a).

⁴⁰ We employed listwise deletion in our models.

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Table 1 - Operationalization of Vignette Dimensions

Dimension	Levels	Operationalization
Material Costs	Material Cost Uncertain	It is not clear whether your own household will be affected by these measures.
	Material Cost Certain	Your own household will certainly be affected by these measures.
Success Chance	(Blank)	Blank only provided in 1 st vignette.
	Failure Certain	There is little chance this action will affect the proposed taxes and charges. Similar actions have led to policy changes in only a few other local councils.
	Uncertainty	It is uncertain whether this action will affect the proposed taxes and charges. Although similar actions led to policy changes in some local councils, they were not effective in others.
	Success Certain	There is a good chance this action will affect the proposed taxes and charges. Similar actions have led to policy changes in many local councils.
Activity	Public Meeting	joining a public meeting to discuss these measures with your local council
	Petition	signing a petition
	Demonstration (Peaceful)	joining a peaceful demonstration

Box 1 - Vignette Example

Imagine the following scenario:

Various local councils across the UK, including yours, face large budget deficits this year.

To address this, local council members need to take drastic measures.

A majority of council members in your municipality prefer to increase taxes and charges, rather than to cut spending on public services (such as regulation and safety, housing, transportation and more).

The increase in taxes and charges will place a high financial burden on some households in the community. It is not clear whether your own household will be affected by these measures.

A group of neighbours invite you to voice your opinion on the matter. They suggest joining a public meeting to discuss these measures with your local council, once it is possible to do so, given the current corona circumstances.

There is little chance this action will affect the proposed taxes and charges. Similar actions have led to policy changes in only a few other local councils.

Methods Section

We rely on hierarchical varying intercept models to estimate both vignette effects as well as those of pre-treatment covariates and controls (Auspurg and Hinz 2015). As each individual rated three unique vignettes, we nest vignette effects (level 1) in individuals (level 2). We control for design factors, namely the effect of receiving subsequent vignettes and we also control for country-level differences. We limit our analytical sample to respondents who correctly answered the attention check (see appendix for models on the full sample). We visualize these results via marginal effects. Full regression models are included in the appendix.

Results

We discuss our findings in incremental manner. We first review the experiment's treatment effects, then discuss the direct and moderating effects of political trust. Overall, the experimental manipulations worked as expected. Figure 1 Plot A provides an overview of the average marginal effects for all vignette elements, as well as the political trust

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covariate and political attitudes controls (see Table 2 Model 1 for model coefficients).

First, both material costs and success chance increased intended participation (Figure 1 Plot A). In line with H1, respondents were more willing to participate when faced with personal material costs ensuing from the policy proposal. Given that the baseline scenario in all vignettes is that some household in the municipality would face financial difficulties, these effects can be interpreted as the effects of personal costs over and beyond collective costs. The threat of these personal material costs led to a 0.09 point increase in intended participation. Second, our results also align with H2. Success chance leads to higher levels of intended participation. Compared to respondents evaluating a scenario with little chance of success, those who received a vignette with an uncertain chance of success were more willing to participate (+0.11 point). Those who rated a vignette with a good chance to influence the policy expressed even higher willingness to participate (+ 0.2 point). Incidentally, in the absence of an explicit statement about the chance of success, respondents were just as willing to participate as those who were told the initiative had an uncertain chance of affecting the policy proposal.

Lastly, the third randomized factor, the type of activity respondents were asked to join, also had strong effects on participatory intent. Compared to those invited to join a public meeting, respondents were more willing to participate when invited to sign a petition and much less willing to attend a peaceful demonstration. This corresponds to a 0.28 point increase and a 0.35 point decrease respectively in participatory intent.

Political trust has a net negative effect on participatory intent (see Figure 1 Plot A and Table 2 Model 1). A unit increase in political trust on a 5-point scale is associated with a 0.05 point decrease in intended participation. This effect is sizeable as it implies a 0.25 point decline between the most distrusting respondents and the most trusting respondents in our sample. This remarkable finding is robust when controlling for other attitudinal resources such as political interest and internal efficacy, which show the commonly found positive effect on participation. But external efficacy also has a negative or an insignificant effect (see Table 2 Model 1).

The effect of political trust does differ across distinct forms of participation. Figure 1 Plot B shows both the average marginal effect and the conditional marginal effects of trust across activities. Our results challenge the expectations we specified in H3a and H3b. First, in contrast to H3a, political trust has a null effect on intended participation in the institutional activity (e.g. attending a public meeting with local officials). Moreover, in contrast to H3b, this null effect challenges the expectation that trust has stronger effects on participation in

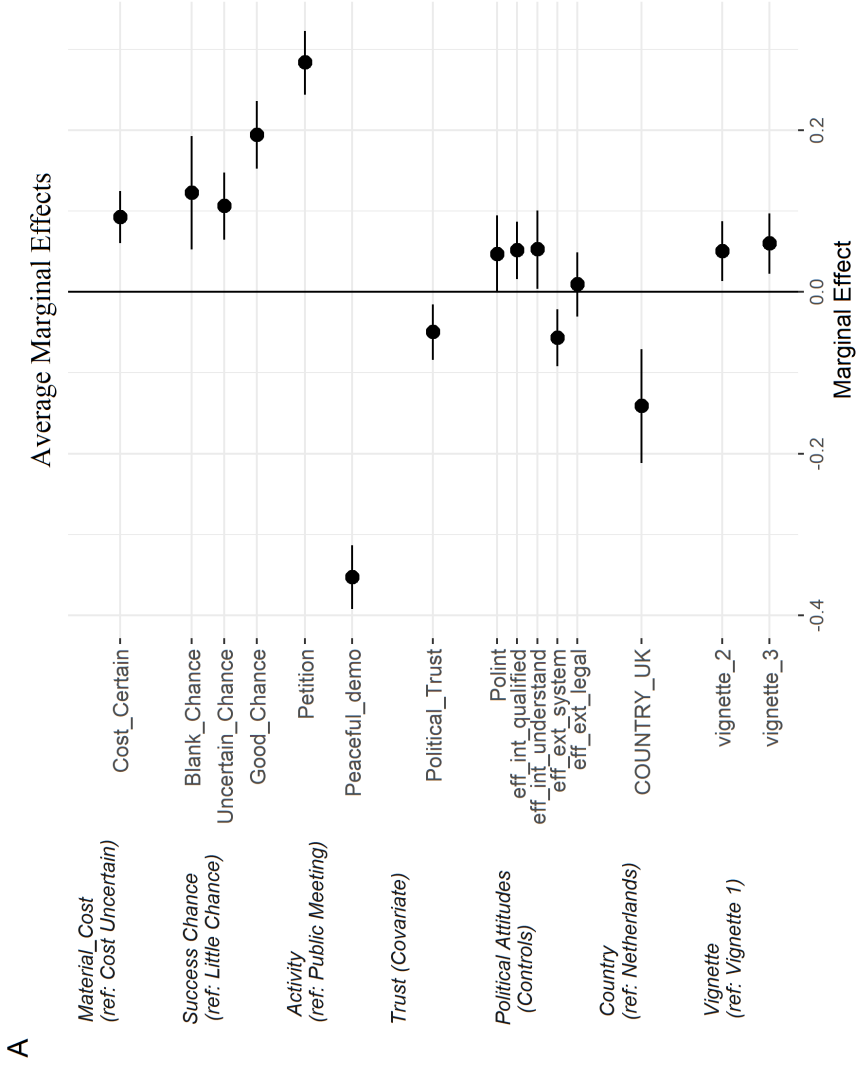
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institutional activities than in non-institutional ones. Instead, our results align with H4. Political trust has a strong negative effect on intended participation when respondents are asked to partake in non-institutional activities (e.g., signing a petition and joining a peaceful demonstration). Trust has a marginal effect of -0.05 among respondents invited to sign a petition and -0.09 among respondents invited to join a peaceful demonstration. These results are robust against various specifications including controlling for potential interactions between trust and closely related political attitudes.⁴¹ Furthermore, the results show that the effect of political trust is stronger for demonstrating than for signing petitions. Although we do not hypothesize about this, the result aligns with a RCT perspective in which more time consuming activities, like attending a public demonstration, are linked more strongly to incentives (i.e., distrust).

⁴¹ As part of various robustness checks we controlled for the interaction between trust and political interest, as well as internal and external political efficacy. Our substantive findings remained unchanged. Complete models are included in the appendix.

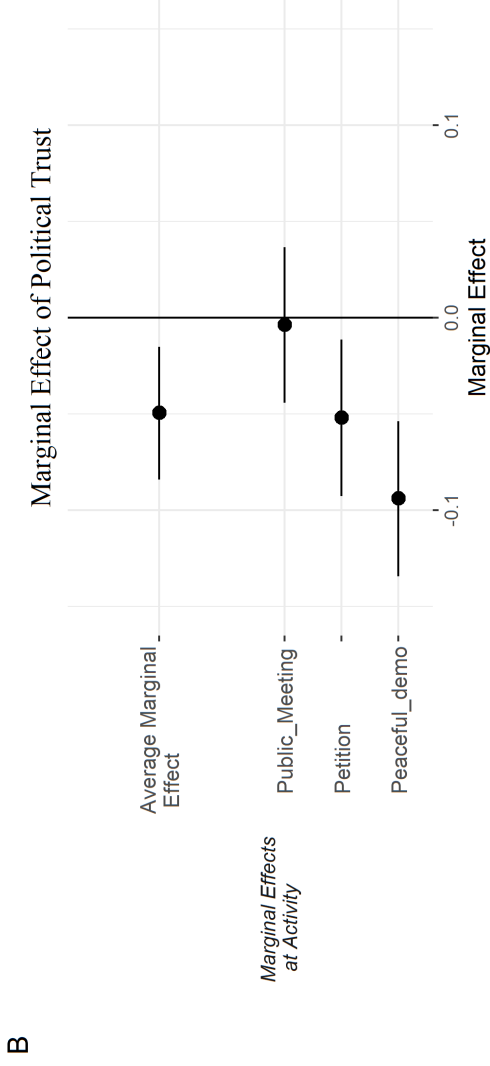
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Figure 1A: Average Marginal Effects



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Figure 1B: Average Marginal Effects



Note: All models control for gender, age, education level, occupation and political attitudes

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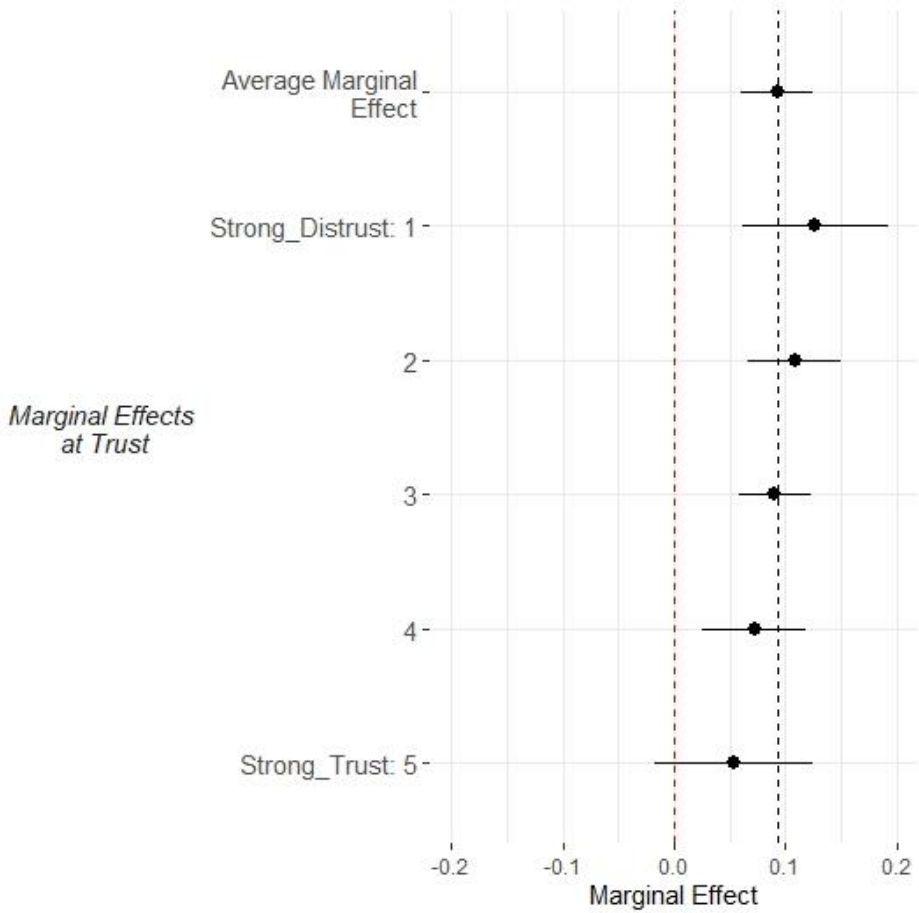
Table 2. Hierarchical Model Explaining Intended Participation				
	M1: Standard Model		M2: Interaction Model	
Predictors	<i>coef.</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>coef.</i>	<i>se</i>
(Intercept)	2.37 ***	0.17	2.24 ***	0.18
Material Cost (ref: Uncertain)				
Cost Certain	0.09 ***	0.02	0.15 **	0.05
Activity Type (ref: Public Meeting)				
Petition	0.28 ***	0.02	0.42 ***	0.06
Peaceful demo	-0.35 ***	0.02	-0.09	0.06
Success Chance (ref: Little Chance)				
Uncertain Chance	0.11 ***	0.02	0.08	0.06
Good Chance	0.20 ***	0.02	0.14 *	0.06
Blank	0.12 ***	0.04	0.02	0.09
Vignette Sequence (ref: 1st Vignette)				
Vignette 2	0.05 **	0.02	0.05 **	0.02
Vignette 3	0.06 **	0.02	0.06 **	0.02
Respondent Characteristics				
Country (ref: Netherlands)				
United Kingdom	-0.14 ***	0.04	-0.14 ***	0.04
Political Attitudes				
Political Trust	-0.05 **	0.02	-0.01	0.02
Political Interest	0.05	0.02	0.05	0.02
Internal Efficacy (Understand)	0.05 *	0.02	0.05 *	0.02
Internal Efficacy (Qualified)	0.05 **	0.02	0.05 **	0.02
External Efficacy (Legal Options)	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02
External Efficacy (System Options)	-0.06 **	0.02	-0.06 **	0.02

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Table 2. Hierarchical Model Explaining Intended Participation		
	M1: Standard Model	M2: Interaction Model
Interactions: Political Trust & Vignette Dimensions		
Political Trust * Material Cost		
Political Trust * Cost Certain	-0.02	0.02
Political Trust * Activity Type		
Political Trust * Petition	-0.05 *	0.02
Political Trust * Peaceful Demonstration	-0.09 ***	0.02
Political Trust * Success Chance		
Political Trust * Uncertain Chance	0.01	0.02
Political Trust * Good Chance	0.02	0.02
Political Trust * Blank Chance	0.04	0.03
Random Effects		
σ^2	0.18	0.18
τ_{00}	0.13 vignette:id	0.13 vignette:id
	0.42 _{id}	0.42 _{id}
ICC	0.75	0.75
N	24 _{vignette}	24 _{vignette}
	2098 _{id}	2098 _{id}
Observations	6062	6062
Marginal R ² / Conditional R ²	0.119 / 0.783	0.122 / 0.785
* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$		
Note: All models control for gender, age, education level, and occupation		
Sample subset of respondents with successful attention check		
Model: Hierarchical Random Intercept Model w. vignettes nested in respondents		

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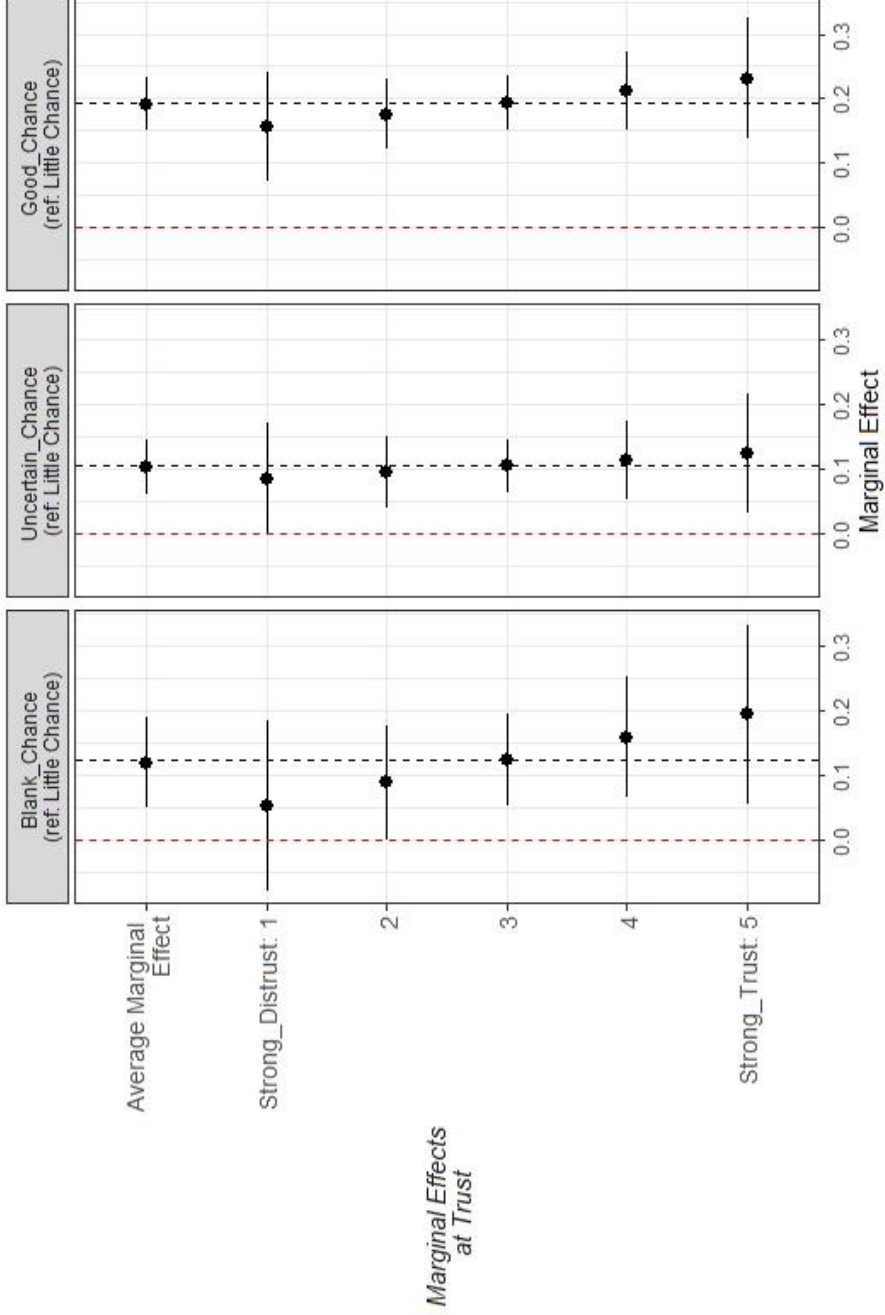
Figure 2A: Marginal Effects of Material Cost



Note: All models control for gender, age, education level, occupation and political attitudes

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Figure 2B: Marginal Effects of Success Chance



THE ELUSIVE EFFECT OF POLITICAL TRUST ON PARTICIPATION

Figures 2A and 2B visualize the interaction between political trust and both material costs and success chance via average marginal and conditional effects. Surprisingly we find little evidence that political trust moderates either of these factors. First, the interaction between trust and personal material cost is insignificant (see Table 2 Model 2 for interaction terms). As shown in Figure 2A the average marginal effect of material cost is positive. While this marginal effect varies slightly across trust levels, these variations are not significant. People respond to material costs in similar ways regardless of their political trust levels. These findings counter our expectations in H5a and H5b.

Our findings also challenge our expectations about success chance in H6a and H6b. Although success chance enhances intended participation, it does so independently of trust attitudes (see Table 2 Model 2). As shown in Figure 2B, the marginal effects of both an uncertain chance and a good chance do not vary significantly across levels of political trust. People express more willingness to participate when they have a high chance of success regardless of their trust levels. While material cost and success chance spur participation, we find little evidence that political trust attitudes moderates their effect.

Robustness Checks

These substantive findings are robust against various checks and model specifications. First, carry-over effects from the vignette do not influence these results. While respondents rated the second and third vignettes more positively than the first they encountered, this pattern does not influence any of the effects presented in this paper (see appendix). Secondly, cross-country differences across the UK and the NL do not change the substantive conclusions we draw. Third, different modeling techniques such as the separation of between-person effects (based on the first vignette via OLS) and within-person effects (based on all vignettes via fixed effects models) do not change our conclusions.

Discussion and Conclusion

Existing research about the relevance of political trust for participation provides two plausible yet divergent expectations. Trust may either facilitate participation or diminish it. In this paper, we revisit these divergent expectations through the lens of a rational choice model in which trust may either serve as a resource to participate or a disincentive to get involved in politics. To this end our research design sought to tease out whether political trust attitudes function primarily as a participatory resource or (dis)incentive. We did so by assessing both the direct effects of trust on intended participation, its varying effects across different activities, and its moderating effect on material benefits and success chance.

Our findings cast doubt on the view that trust functions as a resource facilitating participation. First, in contrast to expectations drawn from the civic voluntarism model, trust has a net negative effect on intended participation in this scenario. Political trust can hardly be considered a participatory resource that reflects civic attachment if those who trust political actors are less engaged under conditions that encourage participation. This negative effect is all the more striking when considering the positive effect of other attitudes such as political interest, and internal political efficacy. While political interest (non-significant) and internal efficacy stimulate participation, in accordance with the civic-voluntarism model, political trust has the opposite effect (as does external efficacy). Both trusting respondents and respondents who believe the political system provides opportunities to make political actors listen were less willing to participate. In this sense, our findings seem to align with theories of stealth democracy which suggest that people do not necessarily want to be actively involved in politics, but primarily due so out of distrust of elected officials (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002, p. 159).

Second, the varying effects of political trust across different activities challenge the view that it functions as a participatory resource. The civic voluntarism model yields the expectation that trust enhances institutional participation, or at least, that the effects of trust are more pronounced for institutional activities than non-institutional ones. We find the opposite pattern. The negative effect of trust is primarily driven by the fact that trusting individuals are less likely to participate in non-institutional activities. Those who distrust are more willing to participate in non-institutional activities. Moreover, trust does not yield higher intended participation in the institutional activity in our experiment. Rather, it has a null effect. Trusting individuals were no more likely to attend a public meeting with local officials than distrusting individuals. Instead of a participatory resource, our findings align with the view that trust operates as a (dis)incentive as expected by grievance theories.

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When it comes to influencing policy outcomes, those with little political trust, are more likely to be engaged and appear willing to use a wider repertoire of actions to achieve their goals.

Thirdly, if at first sight our findings suggest that trust operates as a (dis)incentive, the mechanisms underlying this relationship remain unclear. Hetherington's trust-as-a-heuristic approach provides a plausible explanation as to why trust may operate as a disincentive for action: trusting individuals are more willing to bear the material costs of policy change (2005). Therefore, we expected the moderating effects of political trust on outcome benefits and success chance to shed light on whether trust reflects a resource or a (dis)incentive. However, despite both material cost and success chance increasing intended participation, political trust did not significantly moderate these effects. It neither amplified nor diminished the salience of material cost and success chance for intended participation, challenging both the trust-as-resource and trust-as-disincentive theories. Lower intended participation among trusting individuals cannot be attributed to their willingness to bear material costs or differences in perceiving the chance to influence outcomes. Instead, trust primarily moderates different types of activities. While the direct effects of trust imply that it primarily functions as a disincentive, further research is needed to replicate these findings and explore the underlying causal mechanism.

The innovative methodological set-up of this paper has two important theoretical implications for the literature. First, the survey experiment provides a better understanding of the effect of political trust by embedding participation within a specific context, and by fixing and controlling various factors known to influence participation, namely the issue at hand and the recruitment process leading to participation. Too often, research linking trust to levels of participation is disconnected from the context, aims and goals of individuals' action. While cross-sectional designs with broad retrospective measures of participation enable generalizability, they sacrifice information about the context in which participation occurs.

Second, the experimental framework narrows down possible explanations for the relationship between trust and distinct forms of political participation. Political trust may influence preferences for distinct forms of participation through various other pathways including preferences for collaboration (e.g. collective vs individual action), costs of involvement (little effort to more extensive involvement), and perceptions of activity effectiveness. While we are unable to pinpoint the exact mechanisms linking trust to distinct forms of participation, our findings suggests that trusting and distrusting respondents prefer distinct forms of participation even when we control for the success chance of their action. Future studies may adopt research designs to test the specific mechanisms underlying this relationship.

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Yet our findings face some limitations and raise a number of questions and promising avenues for future research. Our choice to use a rational choice framework, although well aligned with classic definitions of participation (Verba & Nie, 1987), does not fit forms of political participation with less instrumental aims (Fowler & Kam, 2007; Hamlin & Jennings, 2011; van Deth, 2014). While we find political trust to operate as a disincentive when respondents are faced with a choice to voice an opinion or to defer to political actors, it may operate differently when the context of participation and its goals are different. Future research is needed to assess heterogeneity in the effects of trust under these circumstances and to test the generalizability of these findings.

Lastly, the mechanisms linking political trust to participation remain underexplored in the literature. Our research design enables us to test diverging expectations about the role of trust, but it is not well suited to test the underlying mechanisms by which trust influences participation. Future studies may develop and test specific mechanisms by which political trust influences both levels and forms of political participation. Testing these mechanisms is all the more important given the body of research pointing to participation as a determinant and not a cause of political trust attitudes (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Quintelier & van Deth, 2014). Dissecting this causal chain may further clarify whether and why trust influences political participation.