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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 6. Conclusion

### Consequences of Low and Declining Political Trust

Broad claims about the consequences of low and declining political trust for the stability and quality of democratic systems have long existed despite the absence of rigorous and systematic tests. While the wider literature tends to present low and declining levels of trust as either a cause for democratic gloom and doom or a sign of a reinvigorated and vibrant democracy, we still lack systematic and rigorous evidence of these competing expectations. To fill this gap, this dissertation sought to assess the extent to which low and declining political trust is consequential for the stability and quality of democratic systems. Its aim was to answer the question:

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

What do I find?

Political trust matters. It has an effect on a host of outcomes such as (1) people's preferences for decision-making reforms, (2) their willingness to participate and the types of participation they prefer as well as (3) their law-abidingness. And yet, the effects of low and declining political trust do not paint a simple clear-cut picture as to whether it constitutes a pillar for democracy or a peril to its quality and stability. On the contrary, these effects are much more complex than big claims on the consequences of trust for democracy would make of them.

The absence of trust in and of itself does not yield dire consequences for democratic quality and stability as scholars have long feared. Nor does it automatically entail a push for more democracy as theories of critical citizenship would suggest. First, this dissertation's findings make clear that low political trust does not simply result in apathy or a withdrawal from the political system. If the absence of trust poses a threat to the stability of democratic systems this threat is unlikely to stem from a disengaged and apathetic ethos. On the contrary, across the board I find that low and declining political trust yield a desire to take control of decision-making processes, incentivize participation to make one's voice heard, and induce a higher tolerance to challenge established laws.

However, it would be premature to conclude that this desire for more engagement, control of politics and openness to challenge authority constitutes an evident boon for democracy. While low and

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declining political trust are unrelated to authoritarian rule, they do not diminish it. Although individuals with low and declining political trust are more likely to tolerate legal permissiveness, this effect in and of itself is not necessarily positive for the quality and stability of democracy. Additionally, the fact that individuals' do not appear to use even simple normative benchmarks consistently in their evaluations of politicians challenges a one-to-one relationship between on the one hand low and declining political trust and on the other a willingness to uphold democratic ideals that hold politicians accountable. If low and declining political trust generate a push away from the status quo, it does not necessarily suggest a consistent push towards a stronger democracy.

Instead, an important take-away from this dissertation is that low and declining trust present an opportunity; an opportunity to reshape politics by bringing along individuals in political decision-making, an opportunity to rethink the status-quo. Whether or not this occurs in a democratic manner or not, may not be a consequence of trust itself as much as other factors such as ideology, party affiliation, and the behavior of political leaders. I return to this in the concluding remarks.

Moreover, the dissertation highlights an often overlooked element on the consequences of trust: trust itself is not a monolith and nor are its consequences. My findings emphasize the importance of teasing apart various dimensions of political trust – especially its longitudinal dynamics and the object of its interest. Throughout the dissertation I find that declining trust and low trust are not the same phenomena and can yield distinct outcomes. The distinction is theoretically implicit in existing scholarship, but had thus far remained untested. Yet, the findings from this dissertation show that this distinction matters for citizens' preferences and behaviors.

### **Reflection on Aims**

A number of conceptual, theoretical and methodological sub-goals underpinned this dissertation's overarching aims to assess the consequences of political trust on the stability and quality of democratic governments. Resolving my research puzzle depends, in part, on the quality of resolutions provided to these sub-aims.

### **Conceptual Aims**

The dissertation sought to provide a better understanding of the foundation of political trust by testing the limits of the trust-as-evaluation thesis. The thesis attributes a central role to cognitive evaluations and the normative benchmarks that underlie such evaluations in the formation of trust attitudes. In this vein, the findings from my dissertation suggest that political trust is in part evaluative, but they do not provide an explanation for how these evaluations come

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about. As shown in Chapter 2, Individuals are able to differentiate between trustworthy actors and less trustworthy actors, but they do not make their judgments based on some prior normative benchmarks that matter to them. On the one hand, the first set of findings largely aligns with previous research that shows the effects of, among others, economic conditions and political scandals on political trust (Bowler & Karp, 2004; van Erkel & van der Meer, 2016; Wroe, 2016). People's trust is a function of the judgments citizens make about politics (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). On the other hand, the second set of findings highlights the fact that the trust-as-evaluation thesis faces important limitations. To the extent that trust is evaluative, it is not based on evaluations set against normative benchmarks.

While I find that individuals do not rely on normative benchmarks in the manner theorized by proponents of the trust-as-evaluation framework, this doesn't mean that we should erase them from our models altogether. Individuals' trust judgments and the normative benchmarks that underlie them appear to be much more contextual and object-driven than theoretical expectations made them out to be. This largely aligns with extensive psychological research on cognitive biases in judgments which emphasizes the context-dependency of judgments and of the ways we rationalize them (Hetherington & Husser, 2012; Pedroni et al., 2017; Slovic, 1995). In my view, these findings call for more modesty in ongoing debates about the conceptualization of political trust and its formation. It also calls for a further refinement of our theories regarding the micro-level foundations of trust attitudes. Integrating political trust research with existing psychological theories on attitude formation and judgment may prove useful. Furthermore, relying on different research designs and methods including ethnographic research, unstructured interviews, and process-tracing may help us gain a better understanding of the formation of these attitudes.

The broader conceptual aim of the dissertation is to emphasize the fact that political trust is multifaceted. Political trust is not a monolith but varies along numerous sub-dimensions ranging from (1) the object towards whom trust is directed, (2) its longitudinal dynamics and (3) its diffuse vs. specific nature. First, political trust attitudes may vary based on the object of its attention. Existing research on the unidimensionality of political trust supports this view, suggesting that individuals are able to differentiate between distinct objects of trust, although they might not always do so (van der Meer & Ouattara, 2019). Likewise, research on the development of trust in times of crises shows that when necessary, individuals are able to hold distinct attitudes toward different political objects. In such times, they may rally around specific institutions more than others (Devine et al., 2023; Dinesen & Jæger, 2013; van der Meer et al., 2023) or entrust a leader in a given domain, but not all (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003). Yet, in other cases,

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trust in distinct objects is not differentiated but tends to cluster around distinct types of institutions with sub-dimensions for order institutions and political institutions (van der Meer et al., 2023; Zmerli & Newton, 2017). The dissertation elucidates this multifaceted nature of political trust by assessing how such distinctions matter for its consequences. One implication of our ability to differentiate between objects of trust is that the consequences of political trust may also depend on the object toward whom it is targeted. This hypothesis is corroborated in Chapter 5 of this dissertation which highlights the distinction between partial and impartial institutions. While increasing support for order institutions reduces tolerance for law-breaking, increasing support for partial institutions such as parliament has the opposite effect.

Secondly, the dissertation teases apart distinct longitudinal dynamics of political trust. It finds that *levels* of trust and *trends* in trust are distinct components with distinct effects on the consequences of trust. Chapter 3 of this dissertation illustrates this point by showing that both structurally low levels of trust and short-term declines in trust uniquely influence citizens' support for decision-making reforms. Both longitudinal components distinctly diminish support for delegation and increase support for referenda and citizen control of elections.

Thirdly the dissertation contributes to ongoing discussions about the diffuse vs. specific nature of political trust. In contrast to existing scholarship which primarily differentiated diffuse and specific support based on the object of one's support, I do so by providing an integrated approach that combines both objects of support and the longitudinal dynamics of support. Accordingly in Chapter 5, I operationalize diffuse support as long-term support toward more abstract objects (e.g. democracy) and specific support as short-term deviation in support toward more specific objects (e.g. institutions). My findings indicate that this distinction matters when assessing the consequences of support. Diffuse support reduces tolerance towards law-breaking while the effects of specific support are conditional on the types of institutions supported.

Overall, the dissertation suggests that individuals' political trust attitudes could be diffuse or specific; they may be targeted toward broader objects or based on judgments of more specific objects; they could also have distinct longitudinal components. The relevance of these components depends on the state of the theory. This variation has important implications for the conceptualization of political trust which has long sought to pin down its nature. The fact that individuals' attitudes reflect these distinct components means that discussions over a single conceptualization of trust resembles a shadow boxing exercise. Instead, particular attention should be paid to the conditions under which the determinants and effects of individuals' political trust attitudes may reflect specific judgments and more diffuse judgments.

Developing clearer theories on these topics is likely to influence our expectations about the consequences of political trust. The approach provided in this dissertation to differentiate diffuse and specific components of political trust and more broadly, political support, provides a fruitful stepping stone in this endeavor.

## Theoretical Aims

The dissertation also aimed to address two key theoretical gaps in the literature. It sought to (1) adjudicate between narratives of critical vs. disengaged citizens and to (2) provide an integrated and holistic overview of the consequences of political trust.

With respect to the first aim, the dissertation sought to establish testable hypotheses to assess whether the consequences of low and declining political trust primarily aligned with expectations stemming from either narratives. In the previous section, I argued that the findings from this dissertation are more in line with expectations drawn from the critical citizens narrative than those of the disengaged citizens narrative. However, these findings do not lend all-out support for critical citizenship theory either.

The dissertation arrives at these conclusions through a series of equally important theoretical contributions. One conclusion drawn from my reading of the literature is that existing theories are not developed enough to provide clear indications about the conditions, mechanisms and timing during which we can expect the effects of low and declining political trust to reflect processes of disengagement or criticism. Hence, the dissertation makes an important theoretical contribution to the existing literature by providing testable hypotheses about the conditions under which low and declining trust may influence citizens' behaviors and actions in a manner consistent with either of these narratives. It explores the distinct mechanisms at play in either narratives, the diverging expectations related to timing that remain implicit among proponents of these narratives and highlights the various outcomes likely to be influenced by low and declining trust under these distinct narratives.

Two key contributions are worth highlighting. First, the dissertation teases apart the dynamics of political trust to further refine and assess whether the consequences of political trust lend support to narratives of critical or disengaged citizenship. While the literature implicitly assumes that political support among critical and disengaged citizens may reflect distinct longitudinal dynamics, it has not specified hypotheses allowing researchers to test whether this is the case or how this distinction may be relevant for understanding the consequences of political trust. To address this gap, the dissertation further develops existing theories by explicitly linking low and declining trust to

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processes of disengagement vs. criticism. This is most evident in Chapter 3 in which I theorize that narratives of critical, stealth and alienated citizenship presuppose distinct consequences for decision-making reforms and distinct longitudinal dynamics. Doing so leads me to conclude that the consequences of low and declining political trust are less aligned with accounts of disengaged citizenry and instead lend support to theories of critical citizenship.

A second and equally important contribution is the dissertation's revisiting of longstanding theories about the nature of political trust as diffuse or specific. The distinction is particularly relevant as it is one of the few explicit conditions by which researchers can assess when low and declining political trust may be of consequence for the stability and quality of democracy. Narratives of critical and disengaged citizenship propose two claims about the consequences of diffuse and specific support. Diffuse forms of support are seen as more consequential for democratic stability and quality and, that among critical citizens, may serve as a buffer against temporary falls in specific support. Previous scholars have defined diffuse and specific support by their object (e.g., Norris 2011) and their dynamics (e.g., Easton 1975), which induced conceptual and theoretical unclarity (Thomassen et al. 2017). By integrating both objects of political support and longitudinal dynamics of support in Chapter 5, the dissertation contributes to a longstanding debate about the distinction between diffuse and specific elements of trust and simultaneously tests these components. In line with previous research, the results indicate that both diffuse support and high *levels* of political trust diminish tolerance for law-breaking. However, in contrast to previous expectations, our findings do not support the longstanding view that diffuse support operates as a buffer against shortfalls in specific support such as short-term fluctuations in political trust.

I hope future research draws on these contributions to further refine theories on the consequences of political trust and to develop more precise hypotheses to test.

The second theoretical gap identified read that most studies investigating the consequentiality of low and declining political trust on democratic stability and quality tend to focus on specific outcomes such as decision-making preferences, participation, legal compliance, norm-breaking behavior, and policy support. Few projects, however, provide a holistic view of these consequences. This is rather odd, given the plethora of consequences that low and declining political trust are theorized to influence. And yet, testing the relevance of political trust for such big and bold outcomes like democratic stability and quality requires us to not only look at a single outcome, but rather to assess a broader range of effects that political trust may have. Accordingly, a broader theoretical aim in this dissertation is to provide an integrated

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and holistic view of the consequences of low and declining political trust on the stability and quality of democracies.

The approach and findings of this dissertation, suggest that low and declining trust push individuals to want more control over decision-making processes, to participate more to ensure their voices are heard and to be more permissive of non-compliant behavior. On the one hand, such findings can suggest a significant challenge to the functioning of democratic stability and quality. On the other hand, individuals' desire for more involvement in politics, their hunger for control of decision-making processes and questioning of authority are also important aspects of a functioning democracy. Low and declining trust may pose a challenge for authorities' democratic decision-making, but whether it poses a threat to the stability and quality of democracies, depend in part on the ability of institutions and leaders to channel such discontent in part by adopting more "democratic" processes that enable individuals to be part of decision-making processes.

An evident limitation inherent to the central question of the dissertation is its exclusive focus on individuals as the primary agents of change. This dissertation sought to contribute to answering the overarching question about the link between low and declining trust and democratic stability and quality, by assessing the relationship at the micro-level. The explored outcomes are some of the most recurring in the literature. They are, however, by no means a comprehensive list. As mentioned in the introduction, a plausible pathway by which the stability and quality of democracies may be tested is not as much through individuals' behaviors and preferences, but what political leaders do once in office (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Taking this pathway seriously, would lead us to ask a different set of questions, focusing less on the outcomes explored in this dissertation. If democratically elected leaders end up being the biggest threat to democratic stability and quality, then two types of questions may be worth further exploring. First, we may ask ourselves whether low and declining political trust influences individuals' willingness to accept non-democratic or norm-breaking behavior from such leaders. Secondly, we may ask ourselves whether low and declining political trust encourages individuals to elect leaders who may engage in these forms of behavior. The dissertation provides some answers to these questions. Neither low nor declining political trust were related to support for military rule in the Netherlands and UK. However, non-democratic and norm-breaking behaviors undertaken by opportunistic elected leaders, rarely resemble outright military rule.

I believe these questions are worth exploring. To date, existing research links partisan affiliation to higher tolerance of such norm-breaking behavior (Boas et al., 2019; Klačnja et al., 2021). Further, Voogd (2019) find that voters with low trust tend to vote for protest parties,



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including radical right wing parties in the Netherlands. Testing whether low and declining trust has an effect over and beyond partisan effects on acceptance of norm-breaking behavior or willingness to support politicians and parties who embrace such views and behaviors could enlighten us more about the consequentiality of low and declining trust for the stability and quality of democracies. Yet, doing so would also require the literature to move away from broad and sweeping narratives about the role of political trust and to instead specify more refined theories as to when and how trust may be consequential for democratic outcomes. To this end, we need to revisit the agents through which we expect political trust to influence democratic stability and quality, the outcomes we believe to matter, the mechanisms through which trust may be linked to such outcomes and a theory of time to test how long it takes for these effects to come about.

### Methodological Aims

The dissertation aimed to rigorously test the relationship between political trust and its consequences addressing various methodological gaps in the literature. First, it sought to address issues of endogeneity common in existing studies that rely on cross-sectional designs. Secondly, the dissertation aimed to differentiate between static and longitudinal components of political trust thereby pulling apart low political trust from declining levels of trust. Lastly, it also aimed to provide a systematic test by assessing the relationship between political trust and various distinct outcomes. How well did the dissertation realize these aims, and did those choices pay off?

The methodological approaches in this dissertation offer a few lessons for future research. First, to address endogeneity, I employed both experimental research designs and longitudinal panel designs. The findings in Chapter 2 highlight the difficulty of “manipulating” political trust attitudes using survey experiments to reliably assess its consequences. One reading of the literature is that the sweeping consequences of political trust on behavioral outcomes such as participation, compliance and decision-making preferences require a fundamental shift in individuals’ political trust attitudes. These outcomes are quite fundamental and unlikely to be influenced by a minor change in trust attitudes. This begets the question whether we can induce substantial changes in trust in an experimental context. My initial expectation was that focusing on normative benchmarks that individuals consider important would help induce sizeable shifts in trust attitudes in survey experiments. However, my findings highlight a number of challenges. While I was able to induce trust by presenting individuals with more or less trustworthy actors, the manipulation proved rather crude and in my view, of little use to assess the broad consequences of political trust explored in this dissertation. While the

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treatment helped induce more or less trust in general, it did not effectively alter levels of trust in a fine-grained way. Substantively, this is an interesting conclusion by itself, as I discussed above. But methodologically, the experimental setup was not able to isolate the individual-level effect of political trust very well.

This raises important questions about the usefulness of survey experiments to assess the consequences of political trust in isolation. To date the few studies employing these designs to test the consequences of political trust have primarily focused on specific consequences such as policy support (Fairbrother, 2019; Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015; Macdonald, 2021) while the majority of studies focus on understanding the causes/antecedents of trust (see Wilson & Eckel, 2017 for an overview). What remains unclear is whether at an individual-level, the small manipulations necessary to isolate effects can credibly be expected to alter outcomes related to behavioral change (participation and compliance) and democratic decision-making preferences. Undoubtedly, there are other ways to experimentally manipulate political trust attitudes through manipulation of trustworthiness (Fairbrother, 2019; Faulkner et al., 2015; van Dijk, 2023). Yet, a treatment strong enough to induce sizeable changes in political trust attitudes risks also altering closely related attitudes such as political efficacy. Additionally, the use of natural experiments to study the consequences of political trust is complicated by the fact that it may be difficult to tease apart the contribution of the event itself from that of political trust attitudes.

Based on these considerations the dissertation primarily employed longitudinal panel designs to assess direct effect (see Chapters 3 and 5) and employed experimental designs to assess political trust attitudes as a conditioning element (see Chapter 4). The use of longitudinal panel designs proved particularly useful with regards to two aims: it helped (1) address endogeneity risks and (2) disentangle structurally low trust from declining levels of trust. The use of the Random-Effect Within-Between model (REWB) is ideal for these two aims as it allows researchers to estimate the effects of both time-invariant and varying components of political trust. Estimates of the “within” person variations in trust, approximate a fixed-effect regression in which endogeneity risks stemming from time-invariant differences such as gender, education-levels, or past vote-choice are minimized (Bell et al., 2019, p. 1059).

The use of the REWB model also aligns well with a key theoretical thesis in this dissertation, namely that structurally low levels of trust and declining levels of trust are not identical. Researchers have yet to pull apart both components of trust. The use of the REWB model enables us to assess the effects of structural levels of trust and the effects of deviations from this structural level, thus providing one way to

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simultaneously estimate the effects of low trust vs. declining political trust.

By disentangling these longitudinal dynamics the dissertation reintroduces an often forgotten dimension in the literature: time. Early scholars of political attitudes and more specifically political trust were mindful of the relevance of time and longitudinal dynamics in the development and consequences of political trust (Easton, 1975, p. 437; Miller, 1974a, p. 951; Muller & Williams, 1980). Yet, this element has tended to fall by the wayside. It shouldn't come as a surprise then, that the absence of a theory of time stands as an important limitation throughout these chapters. If trust is said to be of great importance for the individuals' behaviors and democratic decision-making preferences, the literature has yet to provide a clear indication or theory about the timing of these effects. We don't know how much time it takes for changes in trust attitudes to translate into behavioral changes or changes in decision-making preferences. Nor do we know whether these observed effects are temporary or long-lasting. This theoretical gap also limited my ability to apply statistical models to relate changes in trust to changes in different outcomes (i.e. Dynamic panel models or Cross-lagged panel models). In the absence of any theory of time, it remains unclear whether one can credibly link changes in an outcome to changes in trust attitudes in a previous time-period. The use of both a relatively short panel collected over a 7 month period (Chapter 5) and a longer panel spanning a 3 year period (Chapter 3) provides some indication that the observed effects may not dissipate quickly. However, to understand how quickly these effects are likely to emerge, additional research consisting of shorter intervals across a longer time span is required.

The conclusions in this dissertation are limited in scope. The dissertation primarily focuses on the functioning of political trust attitudes within well-established democracies with robust representative institutions. This set of countries enabled me to test the age-old claims that low and declining trust could pose a threat to the stability and quality of democracy. Yet, not all democracies are the same. To ensure the findings were generalizable across established democracies, the dissertation also aimed to focus on countries with different electoral systems (proportional and majoritarian) and baseline levels of trust in political institutions. While some of these aims were met, focusing on countries with diverging baseline in trust proved difficult. Delays in data collection due to the Covid-19 crisis made it difficult to further explore the heterogeneity in results. Where data collection was possible, I account for country-level differences (Chapters 4 and 5). Although this doesn't change the overall conclusions in this dissertation, it does remain a promising avenue for future research on the consequences of trust. The relationship between trust and participation, for example, may depend on the extent to which (various

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modes of) participation is institutionalized or not in a country. Likewise, whether trust begets more demand for citizen involvement in politics is likely to be influenced by existing decision-making structures. My approach in this dissertation was to gain a better understanding of the consequences of political trust at an individual-level *in spite of these differences*. Yet, this does not mean the *differences* don't matter. Assessing these differences in future research may shed light on the functioning of political trust and whether and when we should be concerned about its decline.

## **Concluding Remarks and Broader Implications**

A simple question animates this dissertation: How worried should we be about the stability and quality of democracies when we observe low or declining political trust among individuals? For decades, the underlying assumption has been that these attitudes could either yield a dire crisis of democracy (Crozier et al., 1975; King, 1975; Mounk, 2018) or beget democratic reinvigoration (Cain et al., 2003; Dalton, 2004; Norris, 1999b). So which is it? Should we be concerned about the demise of democracy or cheer its reinvigoration?

Political scientists have long fretted over this question. The unequivocal response from Crozier et al.'s (1975) "Crisis of Democracy" was a resounding alarm. They believed discontent and dissatisfaction would ultimately lead to a disengaged citizenry that fails to buttress the system in times of crisis. Yet, 25 years after their warnings "even where public discontent with the performance of particular democratic governments [was] so acute as to overturn the party system (as in Japan and Italy in 1993–95), these changes [did] not include any serious threat to fundamental democratic principles and institutions" (Pharr, Putnam and Dalton 2000, 9). Nevertheless, a growing disconnect between citizens and their political leaders and institutions can hardly be dismissed and may indeed constitute a threat to liberal democracy (Mair 2013). "To say that democracy per se is not at risk is far from saying that all is well" (Pharr, Putnam and Dalton 2000, 9). These concerns and the diverging narratives offered by political trust literature make this question all the more timely.

So, what insights does this dissertation provide to this longstanding debate? What should we make of these findings? In my view, the consequences of low and declining political trust are neither directionally oriented toward crisis narratives nor towards narratives of democratic reinvigoration. Instead, these attitudes provide an opportunity to reshape the status-quo in representative democracies and to channel citizens' frustrations and grievances (Bélanger, 2017; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Kriesi & Schulte-Cloos, 2020). Whether this opportunity materializes as a pillar or a peril for democratic wellbeing depends in part on the political actors making use of this opportunity. The strong desire to challenge the status quo, to actively participate in politics and to influence decision-making processes is not necessarily good or bad. It may strengthen democracy if it prompts political leaders to rethink decision-making processes, but it could also be coopted by populist actors riding this wave to power.

This conclusion is by no means a call for political leaders to remain idle in the face of citizen disaffection. While low and declining political trust can neither be considered as pillar nor peril for democratic stability and quality, they do pose a clear challenge to governance. It is

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undoubtedly harder to effectively govern when citizens are more willing to challenge government orders and legal directives. Further, these challenges may be exacerbated in polarized contexts in which the public is less willing to support policies that require compromise, or entrust elected representatives to make decisions on their behalf (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2015). Low and declining trust may not necessarily entail a “Crisis of Democracy” , but could indeed yield a “Challenge to Governance”.

So what exactly can or should be done in the face of low and declining levels of political trust among the public? The frank answer is: I do not have an answer. Such solutions are, as one says, beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nevertheless, the preceding chapters and existing research do provide some helpful suggestions to political actors concerned about this issue. A good starting point is, perhaps, to differentiate between “raising” trust in politics and raising the trustworthiness of government. The latter – trustworthiness – is the lever available to policy-makers, while the former may simultaneously be outside their control and can even be cynical: Is it morally acceptable to stimulate political trust without stimulating government’s trustworthiness? As highlighted in this dissertation, individuals’ trust attitudes are consequential, but people aren’t perfect evaluators of politics. Political judgments can be subject to various psychological effects. And yet, trustworthy governance remains the best strategy available to political leaders. Attempts to “raise” levels of trust without (re)building the fundamentals of trustworthiness are not unlike a company’s leadership actively attempting to reassure its shareholders while its stock value plummets. Short-term attempts to reassure the market can be effective. However, the most useful approach may be for these executives to pull on the levers that lie within their control: providing shareholders with a clear plan to improve the company’s bottom line and bringing these plans to fruition. Likewise levels of trust may not always reflect performance. Citizens may misjudge political leaders’ performance and/or qualities in the short run. But, in the long-term political leaders’ best strategy is to govern in a trustworthy manner even while attitudes fluctuate.

The dissertation emphasizes the desire for more voice and control over decision-making present among low and distrusting parts of the public. What can be done about low and declining levels of trust, and their consequences? Responsiveness to citizens’ preferences may provide a good starting point. Low and declining political trust provides political leaders with an opportunity to either strengthen democratic wellbeing or weaken it, depending on how citizens’ discontent is channeled. Research on deliberative decision-making processes provides promising avenues for political leaders to channel citizens’ voices in decision-making (Germann et al., 2022; Van Dijk et al., 2024). Existing research points to deliberative processes as useful tools to

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productively incorporate citizen input in political decision-making (Beauvais & Warren, 2019; Dryzek et al., 2019; Jacquet, 2019). Adopting such processes may not only strengthen existing democratic processes, but if properly implemented, they may also signal to citizens a sense of fairness that contributes to raising their levels of trust.