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### Political trust: Pillar or peril for democracy

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

Ouattara, E.M.S.

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## English Summary

Democracies rely on trust to function effectively. In representative democracies we entrust elected leaders to make good decisions on our behalf. We trust that political institutions will operate fairly and justly. We trust political leaders to do the right thing, even when the decisions they face are tough or unpopular. We do not expect government agencies to solely rely on brute force to implement their decisions, but on their legitimacy and the trust we have in them. In short, political trust represents the oil that keeps democracy's gears functioning. It is perhaps for these reasons that a **lack of trust in politics** has consistently been cast as a peril to democracy.

But how concerned should we really be about low political trust? After all, democracies also rely on a healthy dose of skepticism to function effectively. This skepticism allows us to keep leaders and institutions accountable, replacing ineffective leaders or reforming ailing institutions. So which is it, is the absence of trust indicative of democracy's demise or a key pillar on which it stands?

Surprisingly, despite bold claims about the relevance of trust for democracy, the evidence provided to support those claims is scarce. Most research studies focus on identifying the causes of political trust or assessing whether political trust is rising or declining. However, little empirical work directly tests the consequences of declining trust for democracy. This dissertation addresses this gap by asking:

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

I studied this question by assessing how people form their trust attitudes and most importantly by investigating the relationship between political trust and three key outcomes commonly highlighted in academic literature. These include people's (1) political participation, (2) their support for both democratic and undemocratic decision-making reforms, (3) and their willingness to abide by and cooperate with government directives.

Existing research linking political trust to these outcomes suggests two plausible pathways with contrasting implications for the health of democracies. Low and declining political trust may lead to **disengaged citizens** whose attitudes and behaviors could deal a blow to the stability and quality of democracies. Alternatively, it could lead to **critical citizens** whose actions may boost the functioning of democracies by holding its leaders and institutions accountable. Accordingly, the dissertation aims to rigorously test the consequences of low and declining political trust against these diverging expectations.

## SUMMARY

In the process of answering this research question, this dissertation uncovers the complex nature of political trust attitudes. First, individuals' evaluations of political actors' trustworthiness are not straightforward. While scholars have long argued that political trust is primarily an evaluation of politics, I find that evaluations of political actors do not align with what people say is important to them. People do not consistently use their own normative benchmarks when judging the trustworthiness of political actors. Secondly, who we place our trust in matters. When assessing people's willingness to challenge the law, for example, I find that a lack of trust in government does not have the same consequences as a lack of trust in the courts and police. Lastly, the dissertation emphasizes the importance of time in the study of political trust. Expectations about the consequences of structurally low trust need not be the same as the consequences of short-term declines in trust. Teasing apart these two dynamics, I find that both low trust and declining trust independently influence preferences for reforming decision-making processes. These nuances are relevant for future scholarship to further refine claims about the relevance of political trust for democracy.

With regards to the research question, I find that political trust matters for democracy. It influences our appetite for (1) reforming decision-making processes. It alters our (2) willingness to participate in politics and how we choose to do so. And, it affects (3) our willingness to abide by government directives. I find that low and declining political trust does not necessarily lead to apathy or withdrawal from politics. Instead, it motivates citizens to (1) take control of decision-making processes by direct selection of leaders or support for referenda. It (2) incentivizes participation to make one's voice and grievances heard and (3) it induces a higher tolerance to challenge established laws. In a nutshell, low and declining political trust don't motivate people to just sit back and watch, but to move away from the status-quo.

But, what does this mean for the consequences of low and declining trust on the health of democracies? This dissertation shows that moving away from the status-quo does not necessarily entail a push toward a stronger democracy. Individuals with low and declining political trust express a desire for more political engagement, control of politics and openness to challenge authority; factors that would be considered important to a healthy democracy. However, individuals with low and declining trust do not explicitly reject authoritarian rule; thus posing a threat to democracy. Further, the fact that low and declining political trust increases the willingness to challenge authority is neither beneficial nor detrimental for democracy. Even more concerning, this dissertation highlights that our evaluations of political actors often diverge from our own normative benchmarks. This casts doubt on the theory that distrusting citizens may reinvigorate

## SUMMARY

democracy by upholding democratic ideals and evaluating politicians against such ideals.

Should we be concerned about low and declining political trust? Yes and No. Low and declining political trust generates a desire for change among the public; an opportunity for political leaders to channel citizens' frustrations and grievances and to reshape the status quo. Whether such change strengthens representative democracy or weakens it, however, depends in large part on what political leaders make of this opportunity. On the one hand the absence of trust could strengthen democracy if it prompts leaders to rethink decision-making processes and reform institutions so as to more effectively channel and address citizens' grievances. On the other hand, populist leaders may cynically coopt this desire for change to gain power. In this sense, low and declining political trust constitutes both a pillar and peril for the health of democracies.



## SAMENVATTING

## Nederlandse samenvatting

Democratieën steunen op vertrouwen om effectief te functioneren. In representatieve democratieën vertrouwen we gekozen leiders toe om goede beslissingen namens ons te nemen. We vertrouwen erop dat politieke instellingen eerlijk en rechtvaardig zullen opereren. We vertrouwen erop dat politieke leiders het juiste doen, zelfs als de beslissingen waarmee ze worden geconfronteerd moeilijk of impopulair zijn. We verwachten niet dat overheidsinstanties hun beslissingen uitvoeren op basis van macht en dwang, maar rekenen op hun legitimiteit en het vertrouwen dat we in hen hebben. Kortom, politiek vertrouwen is als de olie die de raderen van de democratie laat werken. Het is wellicht om deze redenen dat een **gebrek aan vertrouwen in de politiek** consequent is afgeschilderd als een gevaar voor de democratie.

Maar hoeveel zorgen moeten we ons nu echt maken over een laag politiek vertrouwen? Democratieën vertrouwen immers ook op een gezonde dosis scepsis om effectief te kunnen functioneren. Deze scepsis stelt ons in staat om leiders en instellingen verantwoordelijk te houden, ineffectieve leiders te vervangen, of slecht functionerende instellingen te hervormen. Dus is het ontbreken van vertrouwen een teken van de ondergang van de democratie, of een belangrijke pijler waarop de democratie staat?

Verrassend genoeg is het bewijsmateriaal dat deze beweringen ondersteunt schaars, ondanks de vele sterke beweringen over de relevantie en het belang van vertrouwen voor democratie. De meeste onderzoeken richten zich op het identificeren van de oorzaken van politiek vertrouwen of op het beoordelen of politiek vertrouwen toeneemt of afneemt. Er is echter weinig empirisch werk dat de gevolgen van afnemend vertrouwen voor democratie rechtstreeks test. Dit proefschrift pakt deze kloof aan door de vraag te stellen:

Welke effecten heeft een laag en afnemend politiek vertrouwen op de houding en het gedrag van mensen ten opzichte van democratie?

Ik heb deze vraag onderzocht door te bestuderen hoe mensen hun vertrouwenshoudingen vormen en, nog belangrijker, door de relatie te onderzoeken tussen politiek vertrouwen en drie belangrijke uitkomsten daarvan die vaak worden benadrukt in de academische literatuur. Deze omvatten (1) de politieke participatie van mensen, (2) hun steun voor zowel democratische als ondemocratische hervormingen van besluitvorming, en (3) hun bereidheid om zich te houden aan en samen te werken met overheidsrichtlijnen.

Bestaand onderzoek dat politiek vertrouwen koppelt aan deze uitkomsten suggereert twee plausibele paden met contrasterende implicaties voor de gezondheid van democratieën. Laag en afnemend

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politiek vertrouwen kan leiden tot **niet-betrokken burgers** wiens houdingen en gedragingen een klap kunnen toebrengen aan de stabiliteit en kwaliteit van democratieën. Aan de andere kant kan het ook leiden tot **kritische burgers** wiens acties de werking van democratieën kunnen stimuleren door hun leiders en instellingen ter verantwoording te roepen. Daarom is het doel van het proefschrift om de gevolgen van laag en afnemend politiek vertrouwen rigoureus te testen tegen deze uiteenlopende verwachtingen.

In het proces van het beantwoorden van deze onderzoeksvraag, onthult dit proefschrift de complexe aard van politieke vertrouwensattitudes. Ten eerste zijn de evaluaties van de betrouwbaarheid van politieke actoren door individuen niet eenvoudig. Hoewel wetenschappers al lang beweren dat politiek vertrouwen primair een evaluatie van politiek is, vind ik dat evaluaties van politieke actoren niet overeenkomen met wat mensen zeggen dat belangrijk voor hen is. Mensen gebruiken niet consequent hun eigen normatieve benchmarks bij het beoordelen van de betrouwbaarheid van politieke actoren. Ten tweede, wie we wel en niet vertrouwen doet ertoe. Bij het beoordelen van de bereidheid van mensen om de wet aan te vechten, viel mij bijvoorbeeld op dat een gebrek aan vertrouwen in de overheid niet dezelfde gevolgen heeft als een gebrek aan vertrouwen in de rechtbanken en de politie. Ten slotte benadrukt dit proefschrift het belang van tijd in de studie van politiek vertrouwen. Verwachtingen over de gevolgen van structureel laag vertrouwen hoeven niet hetzelfde te zijn als die met betrekking tot de gevolgen van kortetermijndalingen in vertrouwen. Door deze twee dynamieken uit elkaar te halen, laat ik zien dat zowel laag vertrouwen als afnemend vertrouwen onafhankelijk van elkaar de voorkeuren voor het hervormen van besluitvormingsprocessen beïnvloeden. Deze nuances zijn relevant voor toekomstig onderzoek, zodat beweringen over de relevantie van politiek vertrouwen voor democratie verder verfijnd kunnen worden.

Met betrekking tot de onderzoeksvraag zijn mijn bevindingen dat politiek vertrouwen belangrijk is voor democratie. Het beïnvloedt (1) de mate waarin we ons geroepen voelen om besluitvormingsprocessen te hervormen. Het verandert (2) onze bereidheid om deel te nemen aan politiek en hoe we ervoor kiezen om dat te doen. Daarnaast beïnvloedt het (3) onze bereidheid om ons te houden aan overheidsrichtlijnen. Mijn studie laat zien dat een laag en afnemend politiek vertrouwen niet noodzakelijkerwijs leidt tot apathie of terugtrekking uit de politiek. In plaats daarvan motiveert het burgers om (1) de controle over besluitvormingsprocessen te nemen door directe selectie van leiders of steun voor referenda. (2) Het stimuleert deelname om iemands stem en frustraties te laten horen en (3) het wekt een hogere tolerantie op om bestaande wetten aan te vechten. Kortom, laag en afnemend politiek vertrouwen leidt er niet toe dat mensen gewoon achterover leunen en toekijken, maar dat ze afstand nemen van de status-quo.

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Maar wat betekent dit voor de gevolgen van laag en afnemend vertrouwen op de gezondheid van democratieën? Dit proefschrift laat zien dat het afstand nemen van de status-quo niet noodzakelijkerwijs een duw is in de richting van een sterkere democratie. Personen met laag en afnemend politiek vertrouwen uiten een verlangen naar meer politieke betrokkenheid, controle over de politiek en openheid om autoriteit uit te dagen; factoren die als belangrijk zouden worden beschouwd voor een gezonde democratie. Personen met laag en afnemend vertrouwen verwerpen echter niet expliciet autoritair bestuur; en vormen zo een bedreiging voor de democratie. Bovendien is het feit dat laag en afnemend politiek vertrouwen de bereidheid vergroot om autoriteit uit te dagen noch gunstig noch nadelig voor de democratie. Nog zorgwekkender is dat dit proefschrift benadrukt dat onze evaluaties van politieke actoren vaak afwijken van onze eigen normatieve maatstaven. Dit werpt twijfel op de theorie dat het wantrouwen van burgers de democratie nieuw leven kan inblazen door democratische idealen hoog te houden en politici te evalueren op basis van dergelijke idealen.

Moeten we ons zorgen maken over laag en afnemend politiek vertrouwen? Ja en nee. Laag en afnemend politiek vertrouwen wekt een verlangen naar verandering op bij het publiek; een kans voor politieke leiders om de frustraties en onvrede van burgers te kanaliseren en de status quo te veranderen. Of een dergelijke verandering de representatieve democratie versterkt of verzwakt, hangt echter grotendeels af van wat politieke leiders van deze kans maken. Enerzijds kan het gebrek aan vertrouwen de democratie versterken als het leiders ertoe aanzet om besluitvormingsprocessen te heroverwegen en instellingen te hervormen om de onvrede van burgers effectiever te kanaliseren en aan te pakken. Anderzijds kunnen populistische leiders cynisch gebruikmaken van dit verlangen naar verandering om macht te verwerven. In die zin vormt laag en afnemend politiek vertrouwen zowel een pijler als een gevaar voor de gezondheid van democratieën.