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Political Psychology

“I trust you, but I'm scared!” Attitudinal and emotional drivers of support for restrictive interventions during crises

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Abstract

Under what conditions do citizens support restrictive and punitive measures to curb global crises? This article investigates the role of political trust in supporting different interventions across three types of crises—pandemics, climate change, and terrorism—both directly and in conjunction with issue-related anxiety. We test the hypothesis that political trust positively affects the likelihood of accepting restrictive measures during crisis, focusing on Italy as a relevant case study due to its comparatively low levels of political trust. According to affective intelligence theory, we also expect that individual anxiety moderates such a relationship: Political trust should have an effect primarily when people are not anxious. To examine this, we conducted a conjoint experiment administered to a nationally representative sample of 1000 Italian citizens. Respondents were presented with a “crisis vignette” where the nature of the crisis, its severity, and the state measures implemented to curb the threat were randomly allocated as attributes. They were then asked to rate their support for the proposed measure. Results confirm that political trust matters. Citizens with high levels of trust are generally more willing to accept restrictions. However, as predicted, political trust only influences non-anxious voters.

KEYWORDS

anxiety, conjoint experiment, COVID-19, crisis, state intervention, trust

INTRODUCTION

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine unfolded in early 2022, citizens in Europe and beyond were confronted with another international crisis requiring exceptional measures during a state of emergency. Although a large-scale war in Europe may have seemed extraordinary to younger generations, European citizens have faced actual or foreseen threats of many different crises in recent decades, from terrorism to climate change, and from pandemics to economic catastrophes. In response to these exceptional situations, governments across the world possess moral and strategic incentives to implement "curbing" measures to address the crises. These measures, such as lockdowns and the use of CCTV surveillance to enhance security, can result in increased governmental control over the population and can be perceived as invading the private sphere as well as, at times, limiting personal freedoms.

As shown by a long strand of philosophical and political science literature, government-imposed limitations on individual freedoms—even when aimed at protecting the population—highlight crucial trade-offs between personal rights and social welfare, significant issues regarding the limits of democratic rule, and fundamental questions of political ethics (Ackerman, 2006, Dahl, 1989, Posner, 2006, Sen, 2005). In other words, governmental interventions in response to urgent situations, which result in real or perceived infringements of individual liberties, are often hotly contested from a societal standpoint.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic provides many examples of this phenomenon (e.g., Egger et al., 2021; Plümper & Neumayer, 2022). The crisis prompted more than a hundred governments to declare a state of emergency, usually involving "the extension of executive powers that diminishes the powers of other branches of government, as well as to the civil liberties of individuals" (Bjørnskov & Voigt, 2022). For instance, the mandate to wear face masks quickly became a subject of heated debate between polarized segments of society. Similarly, restrictive and invasive measures, such as the famous Patriot Act in the United States following the 9/11 attacks, or the proposed limitations on personal freedoms related to climate change in response to growing environmental concerns (e.g., Jahn, 2005; Schmidt, 2021), have confronted citizens and elites with relevant issues of political legitimacy, trade-offs between security and freedom, and varying degrees of political and socioeconomic risks.

In general, evidence suggests that the average citizen tends to support restrictive governmental interventions during crises. For instance, Bol et al. (2021) have shown that recent pandemic-related lockdowns in Europe generally boosted trust in government and democracy. Similarly, Hartmann et al. (2022) argued that most citizens do indeed approve of limiting freedom in times of crisis.[1]

In this article, we focus on one factor that we argue plays a pivotal role in determining support for governmental interventions: *political trust*. Various studies focus on the role of trust from different perspectives. Within the framework of health crises such as the pandemic, Stecula et al. (2020) discuss survey evidence from the USA that identifies trust in medical experts, along with the consumption of traditional media versus social media, as a key factor influencing attitudes toward vaccination. Similarly, leveraging data from Turkish respondents, Erisen (2023) shows that fostering trust in experts, scientists, and health authorities can be instrumental in reducing the nefarious effects of conspiracy beliefs on compliance with anti-pandemic governmental interventions, echoing the role of trust for conspiracy beliefs discussed in Miller et al. (2016).

[1]Of course, governments do not receive blanket approval for such interventions. Ferwerda et al. (2023), for example, have shown that Italian citizens exhibited strong ideological biases when identifying those most likely to violate government-enforced measures and those who should be prioritized for vaccine distribution. This indicates the important role political attitudes play in shaping public responses to governmental interventions, including during crisis situations.

Overall, higher levels of political trust are typically associated with greater compliance with restrictions enforced by governmental interventions (Devine et al., 2021). However, assuming that the role of trust unfolds uniformly would be simplistic. Evidence from the USA suggests that motivated reasoning and partisan preferences influence dynamics of political trust. For instance, there is a negative association between trust and compliance with restrictions when political leaders from individuals' in-group vocally oppose government interventions (Goldstein & Wiedemann, 2022). This is not surprising, given strong evidence that political partisanship and ideology influenced various health behaviors and policy preferences related to COVID-19 among American voters (Gadarian et al., 2021; see also Collis et al., 2022).

Here, we extend the general intuition that trust has varied effects in different circumstances, and we focus on the intervening role of *issue-related anxiety*, building on the premise that political trust positively affects the probabilities of accepting restrictive measures in times of crisis. More specifically, according to the insights of affective intelligence theory, as we will discuss, we argue that anxiety moderates such a relationship: Political trust should have an effect when people are *not* anxious, whereas it should not have a substantive influence when they are anxious.

Results via a conjoint experiment conducted on a nationally representative sample of Italian citizens exhibit the significance of political trust. Citizens with higher levels of trust are more inclined to accept restrictions, especially in contexts involving crises related to climate change and pandemics. Importantly and in line with our expectation, trust influences only non-anxious voters.

Our article provides a robust set of contributions in different areas. First, our results extend the literature on the role of emotions in driving political attitudes and preferences, hence shifting the focus away from traditional explanations mostly centered on ideological predispositions. Moreover, complementing studies utilizing observational or quasi-experimental evidence to assess the role of political attitudes and emotions during crises (e.g., Filsinger et al., 2023; Magni, 2017), our novel approach relying on conjoint experimental data provides interesting insights for future studies on a vast array of similar issues. Finally, our findings, as we explain further, generate useful implications concerning public support for necessary measures during crises.

TRUST, ANXIETY, AND SUPPORT FOR STATE INTERVENTIONS

The recent COVID-19 pandemic provided a wealth of accounts about the role of individual predispositions when it comes to supporting state interventions. For instance, Conway et al. (2021) have shown that conservatives in the United States have been consistently less preoccupied by the spread of the pandemic than liberals, and hence less willing to accept restrictive measures. More broadly, liberals tend to emphasize "morality politics," such as the need to sacrifice something for the common good, compared to conservatives, who tend to prioritize individual freedoms (Budde et al., 2018). Conversely, conservative governments and voters have been shown to be less willing to enforce stricter measures to address climate change or pandemics, but they are more inclined to do so in the case of terrorism (Egger et al., 2021, Davis & Silver, 2004, Gadarian et al., 2021, McCright et al., 2016).

In this article, we focus on the driving effect of a central political attitude—*trust*—and how its impact varies depending on the presence of issue anxiety. There are compelling reasons to expect that political trust plays a crucial role in this context. First, the lack of trust in political elites—a central tenet of populist attitudes—has been associated with clear skepticism toward government interventions in times of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Casiraghi &

Bordignon, 2023; Eberl et al., 2021), among other instances. For example, Lockwood (2018) and Kulin and colleagues (2021) have claimed that populist leaders and supporters are more inclined to be "climate skeptics," as they interpret measures to combat climate change as part of a wrong, elitist, and cosmopolitan agenda. Similarly, evidence suggests that populists tend to be more supportive of restrictive measures to curb terrorism, but only targeting specific groups, typically immigrants or ethnic minorities (Choi, 2020). In addition, recent literature has connected political (dis)trust with extreme, especially far-right, voting, a pattern often influenced by mainstream and extreme parties' positions on immigration and those of the public in the Western world (Geese, 2024; Krouwel et al., 2017). Once again, trust has the potential to significantly impact sociopolitical crises, especially those related to immigration, and leveraging research on trust can therefore contribute as well to understanding support for extreme parties.

On the other hand, evidence suggests that political trust is associated with general compliance with government interventions, such as taxation (Alm & Torgler, 2006; Rudolph, 2009), economic interventions (Popp & Rudolph, 2011), or social security privatizations (Rudolph & Popp, 2009). According to the trust-as-heuristic hypothesis (Hetherington, 2005; Rudolph & Evans, 2005), political trust is activated heuristically by voters to help them form evaluative judgments about their government and its actions. This is particularly the case under conditions of risk, that is, when there is "a certain degree of uncertainty about the likely outcomes of the policy [… and] some potential for the projected policy outcomes to be desirable or undesirable in nature" (Rudolph, 2017, p. 200).

Overall, "the more trustworthy citizens perceive governments to be, the more likely they are to comply with or even consent to their demands and regulations" (Levi & Stoker, 2000, p. 491). From a cognitive standpoint, furthermore, it is especially the lack of (political) trust that seems associated with greater risk aversion, as shown, for instance, in the aftermath of the Great Recession (Guiso, 2012). In this sense, the lack of trust seems logically associated with a more critical stance toward the government in general, and in particular against interventions that carry potential risks. Hence, we believe a case can be made that, beyond partisan considerations, political trust is positively associated with support for state interventions to curb crises.

> **H1.** Political trust is positively associated with support for state interventions in times of crisis.

The positive impact of political trust on support for government intervention during a crisis should not be surprising even to casual observers of contemporary political trends. However, previous studies have shown that the role of trust often works in conjunction with, moderates, or is moderated by other relevant political attitudes and preferences. For instance, scholars claimed that ideological biases significantly influence the role of social trust in determining perception of potential threats posed by ethnic out-groups, and that personal values such as contextual openness moderate the role of trust in explaining perception of growing migration flows (Thomsen & Rafiqi, 2020; Ziller et al., 2019).

In this article, we investigate the mediating role of individual issue-related anxiety on the impact of trust on support for government interventions. Essentially, we argue that the effect of trust is not universal, but rather contingent upon the specific affective state of respondents, most notably their level of issue-related anxiety.

We expect in particular that anxiety should exert an overriding role in determining the impact of political trust, resulting in diminished significance of trust among high-anxiety citizens. This is not because such citizens are inherently more likely to support government interventions (a claim we do not make), but rather because anxiety typically weakens the usually strong association between predispositions and attitudes. We unpack this relatively straightforward—perhaps surprising—argument below.

The role of anxiety in superseding political predispositions is a well-known concept and is one of the main tenets of affective intelligence theory (AIT; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993; Marcus et al., 2000;

but see Ladd & Lenz, 2008). AIT comprises a series of postulates that, broadly speaking, conceptualize the role of emotions, such as enthusiasm, joy, anger, or fear, in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Essentially, AIT posits that emotional "modules" within human brains exist to monitor habitual actions and reception of novel information, triggering a series of emotional responses based on their evaluation of such actions and information (Marcus et al., 2000). Specifically, the success of routine activities generates enthusiasm, whereas the umpteenth frustrating confirmation of expected negative trends can evoke rage and anger (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Webster, 2020)—both of which mobilize individuals by reinforcing their predispositions ("doubling down").

Conversely, when citizens encounter new and potentially threatening situations, the surveillance system triggers a state of *anxiety*. This anxiety, often experienced as fear or worry, has two key related consequences that are central for our argument. First, on the one hand, it uncouples individuals from their previously held predispositions. For instance, consistent evidence from an electoral standpoint indicates that anxious voters are less likely to vote for their preferred candidate (Marcus et al., 2000). Second, and partly explaining the first mechanism, anxiety prompts individuals to seek and process more information (Valentino et al., 2008), particularly in threatening circumstances (Redlawsk et al., 2007). As a result of both being less anchored to their predispositions and experiencing a greater drive to process information, anxious citizens have been shown to be more likely to be persuaded by counter-attitudinal information—that is, information they would typically reject due to its opposition to their predefined predispositions (e.g., Nai et al., 2017). In other words, anxiety should reduce the baseline effect of issue-related predispositions, making resulting attitudes less likely to be directly predicted from them.

The overriding effect of anxiety on predispositions extends well beyond ideological stances and affects all predispositions more broadly—political or otherwise. In investigating popular support for hawkish and assertive interventions during the U.S. "war on terror," Hetherington and Suhay (2011) show that, in situations of heightened perceived threat, even voters usually exhibiting lower levels of authoritarian traits become more susceptible to "authoritarian thinking." The intervening role of situational threat in increasing support for authoritarian policies has notably been documented in extreme situations, such as support for torture (Zugravu et al., 2023).

This attitude-overriding power of anxiety should render the direct effect of trust, as discussed earlier, largely irrelevant. In other words, among high-anxiety individuals, their level of trust in political institutions should not significantly influence their opinions on governmental interventions. Conversely, the positive effect of political trust on support for government interventions should be particularly evident among *non-anxious* citizens. To emphasize our previous point, our main argument is *not* whether anxious citizens are more or less likely to support governmental interventions when facing threats (see, e.g., Huddy et al., 2005; Vasilopoulos et al., 2019); rather, our point is that, for anxious citizens, trust in politics should have much less impact on their support for such interventions.

> **H2.** Political trust is positively associated with support for state interventions in times of crisis, particularly among non-anxious citizens (overriding hypothesis).

DATA AND METHODS

The sample

We test our hypotheses using a conjoint survey experiment administered by Demetra to a nationally representative sample of the Italian population in January 2022 ($N = 1000$).[2] In the

[2] Demetra is an Italian-based survey company operating since 1992. Previous studies have relied on Demetra to conduct their survey experiments in Italy (e.g., Casiraghi et al., 2024).

experiment, respondents were presented with a vignette describing a specific crisis the country is facing and some possible state interventions to curb it. Vignettes were created for three distinct crises: a new pandemic, the climate change crisis, and a terrorist attack. These topics represent salient and momentous crises that are likely to impact the entire country (and potentially beyond), typically requiring some form of governmental response or intervention.

These three crises differ in several important regards. Most notably, pandemics and terrorism are abrupt, short-term events requiring immediate action, whereas climate change unfolds as a long-term threat requiring more incremental policy interventions and associated policy preferences. Despite these differences, we believe these three crises offer a valuable basis for comparison, as citizens have had strong and often traumatic experiences with all of them in recent years. While climate change might seem a less urgent crisis, its salience has increased significantly, particularly in light of the recent waves of protests in Europe and beyond. This elevated salience strengthens the case for more urgent action on climate change, potentially even surpassing terrorism in perceived urgency (Pousther & Huang, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2024). Additionally, previous studies have produced engaging, insightful comparisons among similar crises, such as pandemics, refugees, and climate change (e.g., Lippold et al., 2020).

Regarding our choice of case study, Italy was one of the earliest Western countries severely affected by COVID-19, sparking intense and detailed discussions about the legitimacy of the exceptional measures implemented (Tipaldo et al., 2022). Similarly, terrorism and climate change are frequently debated topics in the country. Terrorism is linked to Italy's long history of far-right and far-left domestic terrorism during the Cold War and the more recent wave of attacks in Europe, whereas climate change discussions are mostly associated with recent natural disasters.

Hence, we believe Italy to be an insightful case study for understanding the role of trust and anxiety during crises. Moreover, according to Eurobarometer 94.3 (March 2021), Italy's level of political trust, operationalized as "Trust in National Parliament," is 11 points lower than the European average and the lowest one among all Western European countries, alongside Greece and Spain. Therefore, any effect that we find regarding the role of political trust in explaining support for curbing measures during crises, whether moderated by anxiety or not, could be reasonably expected to be more pronounced in other Western democracies where trust is greater.

Experimental design

In our survey, respondents were shown a fully randomized conjoint vignette in which we varied different aspects of the crisis and the responses associated with it. We chose a conjoint design, as this allowed us to investigate the independent effects of different features of multidimensional, complex objects—such as a political crisis—on respondents' preferences (Hainmueller et al., 2014). In addition, this design is well apt for exploring whether different subgroup characteristics (e.g., political trust) generate any systematic heterogeneity in their preferences. Respondents were presented with two crisis vignettes side by side, where the nature of the crisis (terrorism, climate change, pandemic), its severity (high, low), the state measures implemented to curb the threat, and whether such measures were implemented in other European Union (EU) countries (uniqueness) were randomly allocated as attributes (see Table 1).

The specific measures implemented were categorized into three main types: (1) *control* measures aimed at enhancing surveillance on citizens, such as use of CCTVs in public spaces or monitoring private messages on social media; (2) *restrictive* measures limiting the freedom of movement, for example, by enforcing lockdowns or reducing car usage, and restricting specific private behaviors, such as internet usage; and (3) *punitive* measures, namely, sanctioning

TABLE 1 Conjoint attributes and levels.

Attribute	Levels
Type of crisis	Climate change: "…on climate change and its effects on the weather and natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, or droughts" Pandemic: "…on the potential appearance of new global viral or bacterial pandemics" Terrorism: "…on the risk of terrorist attacks performed by national or international actors"
Crisis severity	High: "…extremely alarming, much more dramatic than what we could expect" Medium: "…slightly alarming, in line with what we expected"
Type of measures	Control: "…a substantial increase of measures to control the population—through, for instance, the placement of CCTV cameras in public spaces or the control of text messages on social media" Restrictions: "…a substantial increase of restrictions to the freedom of movement of the population—through, for instance, measures to reduce mobility among cities or during busy hours, limitations to the access to public or crowded places, to acceptable behavior in private life, or restrictions to the use of internet or social media" Punishments: "…a substantial increase of punitive measures on misbehaviors—through, for instance, the creation of a public list that determines a limited access to public services, mobility, or access to financial services for individuals who were responsible for dangerous behaviors (online or offline)"
Shared measures	Shared: "…already implemented in many other European countries" Not shared: "…unique for now in Europe"

specific behaviors, such as imposing fines for noncompliance with exceptional measures in times of crises.

The levels of each attribute were uniformly randomized, ensuring that all levels within each attribute had equal probabilities and were independent (Bansak et al., 2019). To present a realistic scenario, we framed the vignette as a report by independent experts describing the crisis and recommending specific measures. Unlike the typical conjoint vignette that uses a table with specific data/numbers on two different profiles, we decided to provide respondents with a short textual vignette (see an example in Table 2). This approach resulted in a "social media–like" news feature, which respondents would find familiar. Indeed, citizens typically read news and form their preferences through such short articles, rather than by comparing different data in tables (Dafoe et al., 2018).

Respondents were then asked to rate each scenario in terms of how "legitimate" they perceived the suggested measures to be (0 = *not legitimate at all*; 10 = *perfectly legitimate*; then rescaled as a 0-to-1 variable).

Trust and anxiety

Prior to the experiment, we measured respondents' trust in the Italian Parliament as a proxy for general political trust (0 = *low trust*, 10 = *high trust*). This variable was then rescaled to 1 for any value higher than 5 and 0 otherwise. Overall, 37% of respondents presented a value of 1 in the political trust variable.[3]

[3]As a robustness check, we explored different operationalizations of the political trust variable. This included rescaling the trust in the Italian Parliament variable to 1 for any value higher than its mean value in our database (4.3) and employing three—low, intermediate, and high trust—rather than two. Our results remain unaffected (see Table 4A and Figure 8A in the appendix).

TABLE 2 Conjoint vignette: Example.

Crisis 1	Crisis 2
A group of independent experts has published in early January a report on climate change and its effects on the weather and natural disasters such as hurricanes, floods, or droughts. The report describes for Italy a situation in the short term which is extremely alarming, much more dramatic than what we could expect.	A group of independent experts has published in early January a report on the risk of terrorist attacks performed by national or international actors. The report describes for Italy a situation in the short term which is slightly alarming, in line with what we expected.
In order to contrast such imminent crisis, the report recommends the implementation of additional measures, in particular a substantial increase of measures to control the population—through, for instance, the placement of CCTV cameras in public spaces or the control of text messages on social media.	In order to contrast such imminent crisis, the report recommends the implementation of additional measures, in particular a substantial increase of restrictions to the freedom of movement of the population—through, for instance, measures to reduce mobility among cities or during busy hours, limitations to the access to public or crowded places, to acceptable behavior in private life, or restrictions to the use of internet or social media.
Such measures have been already implemented in many other European countries.	Such measures are unique for now in Europe.

Issue-related anxiety was measured after the experimental component, using a standard 0 (*low anxiety*) to 10 (*high anxiety*) scale.[4] The average value of anxiety in our sample was 6.4 ($SD = 2.55$), indicating substantial variance, skewed toward higher anxiety. Measuring anxiety post-treatment might be seen as problematic, particularly because exposure to certain vignettes (i.e., crises) could potentially affect respondents' anxiety levels toward those issues. However, we believe that this is not a major issue in our case for four complementary reasons.

First, whether moderators should be measures before or after the experimental components remains an open question in the literature, with compelling arguments supporting the former (Montgomery et al., 2018; Sheagley & Clifford, 2024) or the latter approach (Geuens & De Pelsmacker, 2017). Second, our data suggest that respondents were *not* emotionally affected by the vignettes themselves. Respondents displaying either high or low levels of anxiety were exposed to very similar vignettes, as evidenced by our balance testing discussed below. Third, anxiety appears to be predominantly influenced by individual differences. The intraclass correlation for the anxiety variable is significantly high ($rho = .47$), indicating that approximately half of the total variance in this variable can be explained solely by differences between respondents. This suggests that anxiety is largely dependent on an individual's characteristics rather than the type of scenario presented for evaluation. Finally, our study focuses on the interplay between anxiety and trust, with the latter measured before the experiment and thus completely exogenous from it. Importantly, political trust and anxiety are almost completely independent constructs, as indicated by negligible correlation between the two variables in our sample (.06). Therefore, we do not believe that the post-treatment measurement of anxiety poses a significant concern in our case.[5]

[4]The question we asked was as follows: "To what extent do you feel anxious about the situation described in the scenario? Please use the following scale from 0 (very low anxiety) to 10 (very high anxiety)."

[5]Interestingly, neither trust nor anxiety were significantly or substantially related to a respondent's ideological position (see Figure 1C in the appendix). This finding suggests that ideology is unlikely to act as a major confounder on the association between trust and anxiety to drive support for governmental interventions.

Estimations

For the estimation of our results, we computed the marginal means (MM). As argued by Leeper et al. (2020), MM is particularly well suited for estimating the likelihood of a profile being selected when it includes a certain attribute level, averaged over all other attributes without specifying a reference category, as it is often done in the more widely used average marginal component effect. Moreover, MM allows more precise and easily interpretable comparisons of subgroup preferences. By reflecting the probability of a profile to be selected when it contains a certain attribute level, MM statistics does not depend on an arbitrary selected reference category. This makes MM particularly appropriate for our study, where the aim is to compare subgroup preferences, such as those based on level of political trust.

RESULTS

Figure 1 presents the results of the general conjoint analysis.[6] One clear result stands out: The marginal mean score for all attributes is never significantly different from the overall average mean in the ratings' answer (.472, vertical line). This finding suggests that respondents were generally skeptical on all proposed measures, irrespective of the specificities of the exposed crisis scenario. When we further compare the marginal mean score across the different set of attributes—namely, the nature of the crisis, its severity, its uniqueness, and the state measures implemented—the only significant result at the 95% confidence intervals is that, unsurprisingly, more severe crises led citizens to accept state-enforced measures more consistently compared to less severe crises (the difference between the MMs of high severity vs. medium severity produced a t-value of 2.35).

The role of political trust

Next, we investigated whether there is any systematic heterogeneity in the legitimacy ratings of the scenarios among respondents according to their level of political trust—first directly, and then as a function of respondents' issue anxiety. Following Leeper et al. (2020), we tested for group differences in preferences via F-tests. We set up nested model comparisons between a regression that includes interaction terms between a given subgrouping covariate (in our case, political trust) and all feature levels (type of crisis, its severity, etc.) and a model without such interactions. Nested model comparisons provide an omnibus test of subgroup differences via an F-test of the null hypothesis that all interaction terms are equal to zero (i.e., whether a model that accounts for group differences better fits the data than a model of support with only conjoint features as predictors). Table 3 reports the main findings of such tests. A series of F-tests shows significant results across the board for the direct effect of trust. Specifically, respondents' political trust shows a significant F-test overall and for each single feature of our vignette.

Figure 2 complements this finding by illustrating the directions of these effects. Specifically, it plots the comparison of preferences as differences in subgroup marginal means between the respondents with high versus low political trust for the different attributes included in our vignettes, with 95% confidence intervals. No significant differences emerge in the case of

[6]Note that all the results reported below utilize survey weights constructed using a ranking method, whereby cell counts are adjusted to ensure that the marginal totals match the control totals. Our results remain substantially the same if we replicate the analysis without any weights.

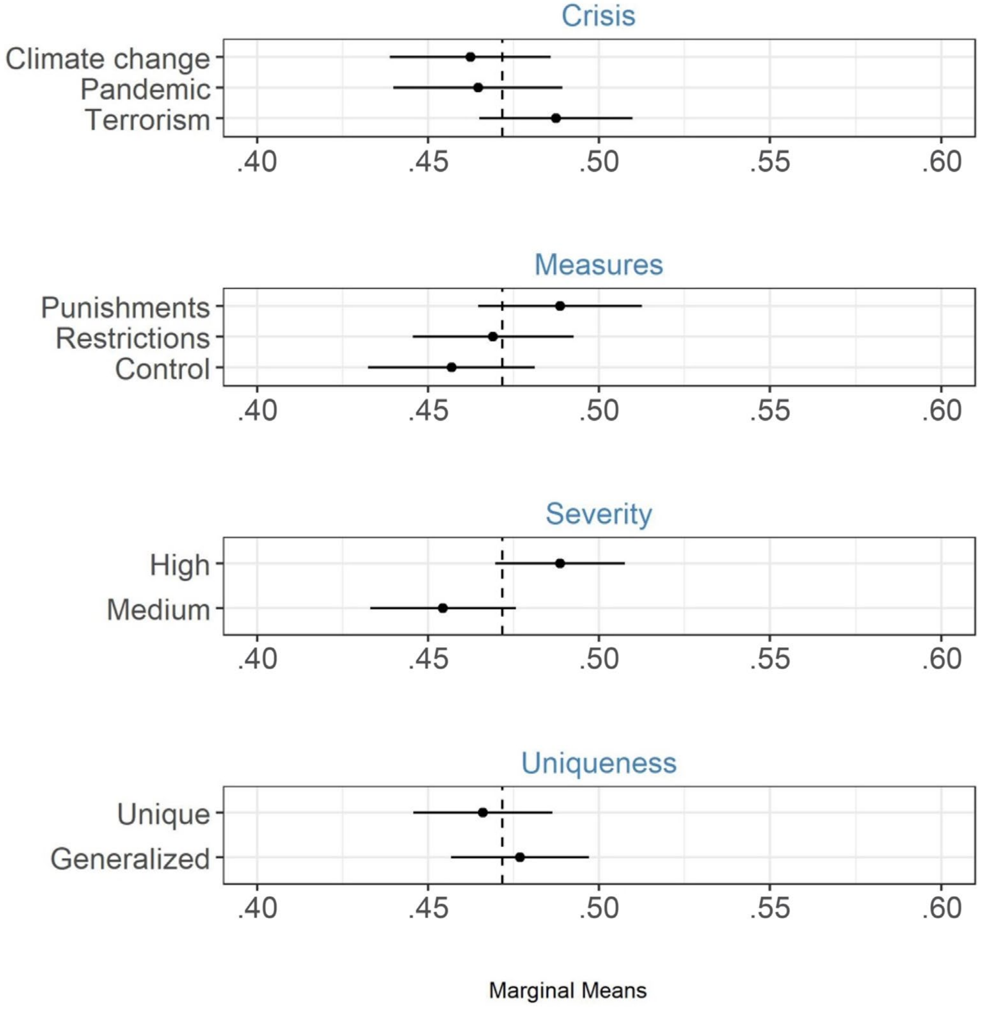

FIGURE 1 Direct effect of vignette's features on perceived legitimacy of measures—Marginal means for the full sample. The plots display marginal means, which reflect the probability of the perceived legitimacy of a measure when it contains a certain level averaged over all remaining attributes. For example, the perceived legitimacy of a measure when the severity of a crisis is high presents a probability of .49, a probability that decreases to .45 when the severity is medium. The dashed vertical line is the overall average value of the perceived legitimacy of measures in our sample. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

terrorism. However, when faced with a potential threat related to climate change or pandemics, respondents with high political trust are more willing to accept exceptional measures to curb the crisis compared to citizens who show low trust.[7] This result echoes recent studies showing that relevant similarities exist among restrictive measures advocated to curb climate change and pandemics (e.g., Jahn, 2005; Schmidt, 2021).[8]

[7]Despite using a different research design, this experimental result aligns with the finding reported by Ladini and Maggini (2023), at least with respect to the relationship between confidence in institutions and acceptance of freedom restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy.

[8]To be sure, such similarities could also be due to the fact that climate change and pandemics were both more salient crises compared to terrorism when the experiment was conducted.

TABLE 3 Subgroup characteristics—Tests for preference heterogeneity/F-test results according to respondents' political trust.

Crisis's characteristics → Respondents' characteristics ↓	Overall	Type of crisis	Severity	Measures	Range
Trust in parliament	$F(7;1986)=2.4$, $p=.000$***	$F(3;1994)=2.1$, $p=.000$***	$F(2;1996)=1.9$, $p=.000$***	$F(3;1994)=2.2$, $p=.000$***	$F(2;1996)=1.8$, $p=.000$***

p-value: ***.001; **.01; *.05.

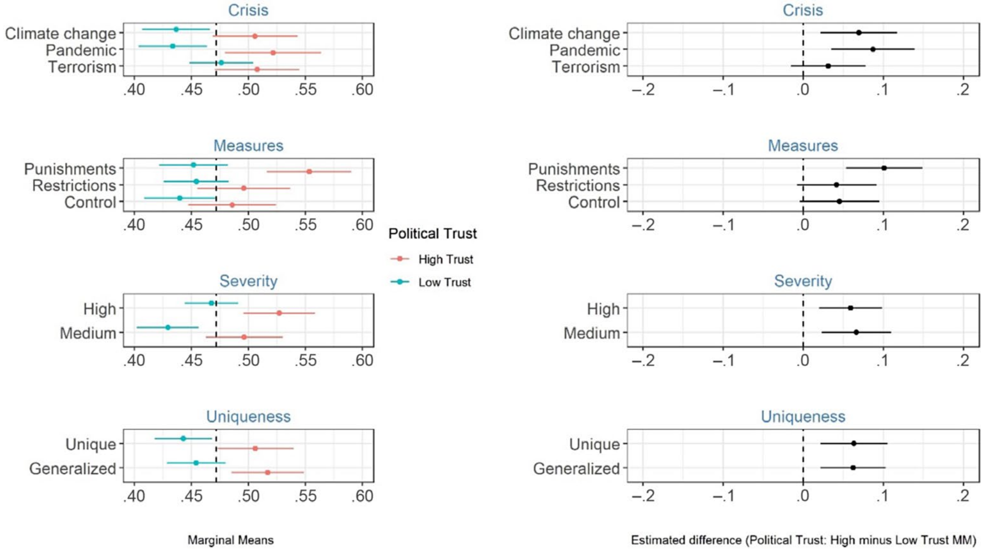

FIGURE 2 Conditional marginal means (left panel) and differences in conditional marginal means (right panel) of vignette's features on perceived legitimacy of measures, by political trust. Estimates are marginal means for each attribute conditional on the level of political trust of the respondent. Left panel displays marginal means for each attribute conditional on the level of political trust of the respondent. Right panel displays the difference in marginal means. The dashed vertical line is the overall average value of the perceived legitimacy of measures in our sample. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Across the remaining crisis characteristics, the legitimacy of the interventions is systematically higher among voters with high levels of political trust, with all differences being statistically significant, at least at the 90% confidence intervals. This largely confirms H1 and aligns with the concept of trust-as-heuristic in the context of state interventions (Hetherington, 2005; Rudolph & Evans, 2005).

The moderating impact of anxiety

To what extent are these trust-related effects uniform across respondents with different levels of issue-related anxiety? To explore this, we divided our respondents into two subgroups based on their anxiety levels. The *high-anxiety* subgroup includes those respondents who rated their anxiety for at least one of the two exposed scenarios higher than the third quartile of anxiety (i.e., above 8). The *low-anxiety* subgroup comprises the remaining

TABLE 4 Subgroup characteristics—Tests for preference heterogeneity/*F*-test results according to respondents' political trust in the two subsamples (low- vs. high-anxiety setting).

Crisis's characteristics → **Respondents' characteristics ↓**	**Overall**	**Type of crisis**	**Severity**	**Measures**	**Range**
Trust in parliament (low-anxiety setting)	$F(7;1364)=2.11$, $p=.000$***	$F(3;1372)=1.68$, $p=.000$***	$F(2;1374)=1.70$, $p=.000$***	$F(3;1372)=1.76$, $p=.000$***	$F(2;1374)=1.65$, $p=.000$***
Trust in parliament (high-anxiety setting)	$F(7;608)=1.31$, $p=.164$	$F(3;616)=.48$, $p=.28$	$F(2;618)=.43$, $p=.18$	$F(3;616)=.81$, $p=.09$	$F(2;618)=.51$, $p=.13$

p-value: ***.001; **.01; *.05.

respondents. The former set consists of 31.1% of our respondents. The balance test for political trust is satisfactory, as there is no systematic difference in how high versus low political trust respondents in the two subgroups (high and low anxiety) have been exposed to the profile attributes and experimental traits of our vignettes (see Figures 3A and 4A in the appendix). This is a reassuring result, given that experimental groups must be well balanced in a given sample to produce reliable estimates via a randomized conjoint analysis. Furthermore, the balance test for the two subsamples (high vs. low anxiety) also shows overall satisfactory results (see Figure 5A in the appendix).[9]

As a result, any difference we report below cannot be due simply to a different exposure of respondents to the profile attributes of our vignettes. Specifically, differences in anxiety levels do not stem from more anxious respondents being exposed to vignettes that differ significantly from those viewed by less anxious respondents, such as in the severity of the crisis. Rather, any observed differences are attributable to specific characteristics of the respondents themselves.

As a robustness check, we replicated the computation of the two subgroups (high- vs. low-anxiety set) using a more stringent criterion. This involved considering whether a respondent presents an average anxiety score for *both* exposed scenarios higher than the third quartile of anxiety. Our results remain solid and consistent in each alternative scenario (see Figure 6A in the appendix).

To test our theoretical expectation derived from affective intelligence theory (AIT), we examined the interaction between political trust and anxiety levels among respondents (Table 4). The results consistently show that political trust is significantly associated with support for state interventions among respondents with low anxiety, whereas this relationship is not significant among those with high anxiety. Figure 3 further illustrates these findings: In the left panel for respondents with low anxiety, there is a clear, positive effect of high political trust on support for state interventions across various crisis attributes. This echoes the patterns observed in Figure 2, reinforcing the notion that high political trust tends to enhance support for interventions among less anxious individuals, consistent with our hypothesis (H2). Conversely, in the right panel for respondents with high anxiety, political trust does not show a significant effect on support for state interventions across the crisis attributes, indicating that anxiety may override the usual positive influence of trust in these circumstances.[10]

[9]This result is coherent with our earlier discussion regarding the intraclass correlation's outcome.

[10]In Appendix B, we have also investigated the empirical support for our two hypotheses (concerning the role of political trust and the mediating impact of anxiety) through a series of interaction terms of the attribute “type of measures” with attributes measuring characteristics of the crisis. All our results remain qualitatively the same.

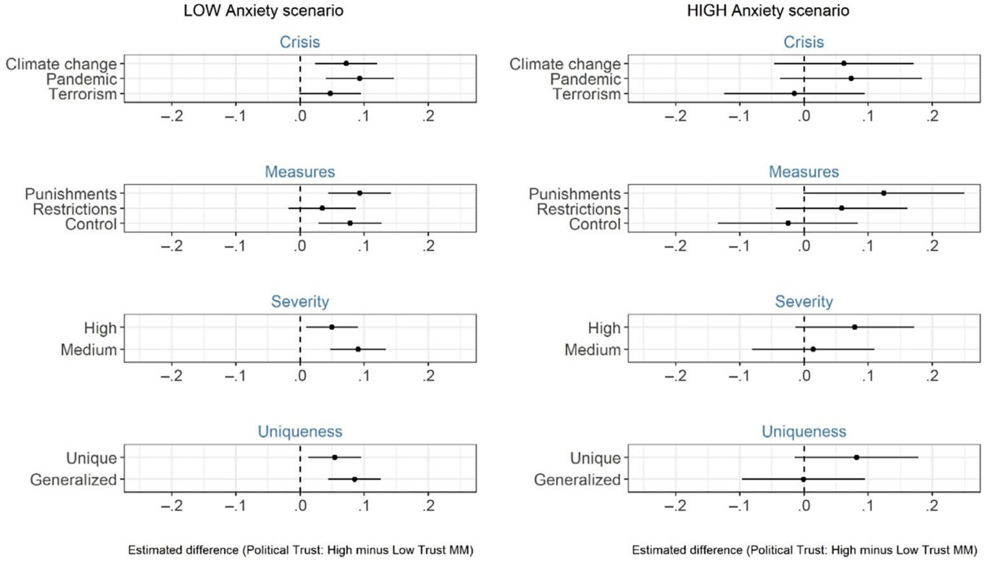

FIGURE 3 Difference in conditional marginal means of vignette's features on perceived legitimacy of measures, by political trust—Low-anxiety set (left panel) versus high-anxiety set (right panel). Left panel displays the difference in marginal means for each attribute conditional on the level of political trust of the respondent when the level of anxiety is low. Right panel displays the difference in marginal means for each attribute conditional on the level of political trust of the respondent when the level of anxiety is high. The dashed vertical line is the overall average value of the perceived legitimacy of measures in our sample. Horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals.

Results from robustness checks using different cutoff points for issue anxiety (specifically, based on quartiles, on the one hand, and on standard deviations around the mean, on the other hand) consistently support our conclusion: In high-anxiety situations, trust does not have a significant effect on support for state interventions (see Tables 1A and 2A in the appendix).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Which factors drive popular support for governmental interventions to curb crises? Within the ongoing challenges set by the global pandemic that swept the world at the dawn of the 2020s—and in light of the various, and differently successful, ways in which countries tackled the crisis (e.g., Capano et al., 2020)—this question is not only a lofty academic exercise. Our study offers new insights into the dynamics of attitudes toward restrictive measures across different crises, expanding the comparative scope of the existing literature on political legitimacy. We presented here the results from a conjoint experiment conducted with a sample of Italian citizens in early 2022. This allowed us to investigate how different crisis characteristics (e.g., nature, severity) and respondents' levels of political trust and issue anxiety influence their support for governmental interventions. Evaluated against our theoretical framework, the results of our analysis suggest two important conclusions: (1) high individual levels of trust are generally positively associated with greater support for governmental interventions (confirming H1), and (2) this association appears particularly pronounced among less anxious respondents (confirming H2). Our results offer three main insights.

First, from a theoretical standpoint, our findings contribute to studies of political behavior by shedding light on how trust and anxiety interact to explain public political attitudes toward sensitive issues such as limitations of freedom, punishment, and violations of privacy. Broadly speaking, our investigation suggests that anxiety tends to "override" the positive effect of political trust on support for state interventions, at least in our case study. This effect is significant both empirically and theoretically, as trust could have been expected to play a *stronger* role among anxious citizens.

Anxiety has been shown to be associated with more pessimistic appraisals of the future (Shepperd et al., 2005) and is also strongly correlated with risk aversion (Maner et al., 2007) and a general inclination to avoid threats (Butler & Mathews, 1987). For instance, research indicates that anxious individuals are less likely to support an expansion of military actions and domestic security initiatives in response to potential terrorist threats in the United States (Huddy et al., 2005). Similarly, Vasilopoulos et al. (2019) found that anxiety following the 2015 terrorist attacks in France was associated with lower support for far-right parties vocally advocating for more restrictive societal interventions to curb terrorism. However, as discussed earlier, political trust becomes particularly important in those situations associated with greater risk aversion. This is important to better understand the relation between crises, trust, and voting for extremist political parties, such as the far right (Geese, 2024).

Therefore, anything that enhances anxiety could also potentially magnify the role of political trust. Given that anxious individuals can be expected to be particularly inclined to avoid any situations with risky outcomes (e.g., societal interventions associated with significant outcome uncertainty; see Marcus et al., 2019), high trust could potentially become the key factor that determines whether they reject interventions or support government measures. It could also be, as evidenced in the case of support for lockdown measures in the Netherlands during the COVID-19 pandemic (Schraff, 2021), that high uncertainty associated with the crisis led to a "rally around the flag" effect. In such situations, anxiety drives individuals to turn toward "their political institutions as a lifebuoy" (p. 1007), suggesting a reinforcing effect between anxiety and political trust.

Our results, although limited to a specific set of crises within a particular country, do not indicate that these mechanisms are universally applicable. On the contrary, and in line with affective intelligence theory (Marcus et al., 2000; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993), issue-related anxiety can, under certain circumstances, uncouple individuals from their political and attitudinal predispositions. We observe such mechanisms at work in our data. Although there appears to be a general positive effect of trust, it fails to exert any effect on support for interventions among high-anxiety citizens. The fact that political trust matters particularly for "calm" citizens when gauging their support for state interventions furthermore finds an echo in research investigating individual compliance to anti-COVID restrictions. For instance, Turk et al. (2021) found that more "emotionally stable" respondents (low neuroticism) are more likely to adhere to basic guidelines and anti-COVID protective measures.

More prosaically, our results suggest that when people are scared, they do not necessarily need to trust the government to intervene on their behalf—they likely just want to find relief from their anxious state, regardless of who is able to intervene to accomplish that. Depending on the reader's normative stance about governmental intervention, this could be either good or bad news. For advocates of lesser regulation, showing that in times of crises not all people need to put their trust in a potentially fallible government (as many governments unfortunately proved to be during the COVD-19 pandemic; Sachs et al., 2022) likely will be read as new evidence supporting reduced government interventions. Conversely, for advocates of state interventionism, the fact that scared citizens seem to move away from under the umbrella of governmental regulation likely suggests the need to develop better interventions to increase trust in the public at large—and reaffirm the imperative of a public mandate to address the needs (and fears) of the electorate as a whole.[11]

[11]We consider the potential underlying role of ideology in Appendix C.

From a practitioner's standpoint, our results generate some policy implications, especially regarding the conditions and individual characteristics that drive citizens to evaluate governmental crisis measures. This can potentially provide information to governments concerned about developing interventions that are seen as legitimate in the eyes of the voter, particularly relevant in light of recent evidence showing that authoritarian governments have in some cases exploited the COVID-19 pandemic to tighten controls on their citizens and enforce anti-democratic measures (e.g., Grasse et al., 2021).

Finally, from a societal standpoint, the finding that anxious citizens seem to discount their political trust when evaluating the legitimacy of state interventions speaks about the role—both positive and negative—that news media can play when covering crises. A long tradition of scientific research has shown that exposure to (negative) news media can boost public anxiety and distress (e.g., Bodas et al., 2015; McNaughton-Cassill, 2001), including COVID-19-related news (Liu & Liu, 2020). In countries like Italy, where political trust is particularly low, our findings suggest that urgent issues such as the current climate change crisis require high levels of political trust for citizens to accept curbing measures. This aligns with our overriding hypothesis. This dynamic should motivate further research to explore the broader implications of trust and anxiety, assess different case studies, and investigate how media frames contribute to individual anxiety and their combined role in shaping the effects of political trust.

On this point, if trust is not substantially related to political extremism (Krouwel et al., 2017), increasing evidence suggests that the way in which political trust unfolds is also a function of the underlying ideological stance of the individual, most notably in terms of ideological support for the parties that currently hold power (Hetherington & Rudolph, 2020). Further research is needed to disentangle the complex interaction between trust, underlying emotional states, and the moderating role of ideological predispositions.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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