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## How political malpractice affects trust in EU institutions

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### ABSTRACT

Political misconduct is known to harm the politicians involved. Yet, we know less about how such events affect trust in political institutions. We study a real-world political malpractice affair in the European Commission, using a three-wave panel design to investigate how information about the affair influences trust in EU institutions. This enables us, first, to isolate the impact of new information on political trust, remedying *endogeneity* issues common in political trust research. Second, we assess which institutions are affected most (*specificity*) and whether effects depend upon citizens' sophistication levels (*conditionality*). Finally, we assess the *durability* of effects over time. Our findings demonstrate that citizens obtain knowledge about EU affairs through the media, and use this knowledge in their trust evaluations. In doing so, citizens differentiate between EU and national institutions, with trust in the European Commission affected most. This suggests a sophisticated process and highlights the evaluative nature of political trust.

**KEYWORDS** Political trust; media effects; political scandal; EU institutions; panel study

Political scandals and corruption affairs can have damaging consequences for the politicians involved in them and for democracies at large. Incumbent politicians tend to suffer electoral losses as a consequence of political scandals (Jacobson and Dimock 1994; Welch and Hibbing 1997). Furthermore, higher levels of corruption lead to a decrease in voter turnout across liberal democracies worldwide (Stockemer *et al.* 2013). Yet, we know little about how political malpractice (ranging from instances of unethical behavior to full-fledged power abuse or corruption by political

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actors)<sup>1</sup> affects public trust in the political institutions in which it takes place (but see Bowler and Karp 2004). Research in the European Union (EU) context is even scarcer, despite the fact that the EU and its institutions are often accused of a lack of transparency, opaque procedures and an alleged ‘communication deficit’ (Meyer 1999).

The literature on political trust has identified corruption – the most commonly studied form of political malpractice – as an important explanation for low political trust. However, evidence mostly comes from empirical studies demonstrating a correlation between *aggregate-level* corruption (e.g. Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017) or *perceived* corruption (e.g. Morris and Klesner 2010) and political trust. Aside from the common problems this yields in terms of spuriousness and causal order, there is also little attention to whether and how citizens actually receive information about corruption or political malpractice, and how the reception of such new information affects trust in political institutions. Given that information about political misconduct is mostly conveyed to citizens through the news media (Ares and Hernández 2017; Costas-Pérez *et al.* 2012; Kepplinger *et al.* 2012), individual media exposure should be a crucial source of such information.

The present study assesses the effect of real-world political malpractice on trust in the European Union, analysing whether *political malpractice affairs at the EU-level are a source of distrust in EU institutions*. We employ a three-wave panel-design over a period of six months in which an affair of alleged nepotism in the European Commission was widely covered in the media. In this way, we contribute to the literature on political trust in several ways: first, we are among the first to use an individual-level panel study to assess the impact of new information on political trust, thereby remedying *endogeneity* issues and providing a stricter causal test (Van der Meer 2018). Second, we analyze the degree of *specificity* with which political trust is allocated; i.e. does negative information about political object A only affect trust in A, or does it spill over to B or C as well? To address this question, we distinguish between trust in different European institutions (the European Commission (EC) and the European Parliament (EP)) as well as the national parliament. Third, we test whether the effect of a malpractice affair depends on citizens’ level of political sophistication (*conditionality*). Fourth, we assess whether such effects exist only in the short-term or are more long-lasting in character (e.g. Von Sikorski 2018), and our results hence speak to their *durability* over time.

We focus on the recent appointment of Martin Selmayr as Secretary-General of the European Commission (in February 2018), which sparked allegations of lack of transparency and nepotism in the media, directed at

the European Commission and EC President Jean-Claude Juncker in particular. We use multi-wave panel data collected in The Netherlands, where the affair was widely covered by the media. Using a quasi-experimental design embedded in a three-wave panel study (one pre- and two post-event waves) enables us to establish causal order, isolate the effect of the event and assess the specificity and longevity of the effect. Taking trust levels before the Selmayr affair as the baseline (Wave 1), we assess whether citizens who heard about the affair lowered their trust in EU institutions, and whether this effect is conditioned by political sophistication (Wave 2). Finally, we investigate to what extent this effect endures over a period of three months (Wave 3). In doing so, we compare the effect of knowledge of the affair between institutions that are involved (the EC) and not (directly) involved (the EP and the national parliament) in the affair.

Our findings show that citizens do not only obtain knowledge about EU-level political malpractice through the media; they also use this knowledge to make trust judgments. Importantly, these effects are *specific* in that the directly involved institutions (i.e. the European Commission) are affected most, are found across all levels of political sophistication, and endure until months after the event. Taken together, these findings highlight the evaluative nature of political trust, and suggest that political malpractice affects trust through a sophisticated process.

### **Political trust as performance evaluation**

Political trust is, to a large extent, based on evaluations. According to the ‘trust-as-evaluation’ approach, citizens evaluate a specific political object (e.g. an actor, institution, or the political system) in order to determine to what extent they trust said object (Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017; Hardin 2000). To some extent, political trust can also have a socialised, stable component – a tendency to trust that is extended to all (political) objects in society in an undifferentiated manner (Uslaner 2002). Yet, as many studies have shown, political trust is strongly dependent on evaluations of various aspects of politics, such as political performance, output and procedures. This explains why political trust can change over time, and implies that trust in a political institution can change once citizens receive new information on the performance of this institution.

Previous research explaining political trust has shown that citizens’ evaluations of political performance matter. Studies focussing on *policy* performance have produced consistent evidence that citizens’ subjective evaluations of the economy are related to political trust (e.g. Armingeon and Guthmann 2014; Van der Meer 2018); yet, less consistent effects are

found for objective, macro-economic indicators (see van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017, for an overview), raising the question to what extent the effects of subjective evaluations are (partly) due to endogeneity issues (Van der Meer 2018). Research on *procedural* performance primarily focuses on corruption, along with characteristics such as transparency and accountability, as explanations of political trust (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Grimmelikhuijsen 2012). Such procedural characteristics are often criticised in the context of the European Union's so-called 'democratic deficit' (Føllesdal and Hix 2006; Meyer 1999), and may ultimately harm democratic legitimacy. There is ample evidence that procedural performance, and corruption in particular, are related to political trust (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Della Porta 2000; Hakhverdian and Mayne 2012; van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017), both when it comes to *objective* (based on expert judgment) and *perceived* levels of corruption (based on citizens' evaluations; Mishler and Rose 2001; Morris and Klesner 2010). Yet, again, such evidence is correlational, raising the concern that findings are endogenous or even tautological, since political trust itself may be a lens through which the government's performance is perceived. Studying specific instances of political malpractice enables a more direct test of how citizens use new information on procedural performance to evaluate political institutions.

### **Political malpractice and political trust**

Research on political malpractice affairs has mainly focused on the effects of such affairs on voting behavior, showing that representatives involved in corruption scandals tend to win less votes in the subsequent elections (e.g. Welch and Hibbing 1997; Jacobson and Dimock 1994). Experimental studies corroborate these findings by showing that (imaginary) scandals impact vote intentions, although the effects are limited and conditional upon other evaluations of the politician involved as well as on preexisting (ideological) attitudes (Breitenstein 2019; Muñoz *et al.* 2016), to the extent that the effects of political misconduct can be mitigated by good economic output or partisan bias (see De Vries and Solaz 2017, for an overview). Surprisingly few studies, however, assess how these effects extend beyond evaluations of individual politicians to more diffuse forms of institutional trust. An exception is the study by Bowler and Karp (2004), which shows that representatives' scandal involvement influences political trust across electoral districts in the U.S. and U.K. Furthermore, aggregate public opinion data shows that the occurrence of various political scandals coincides with lower trust in government and presidential approval rates (Chanley *et al.* 2000). Thus, evidence for an effect of political

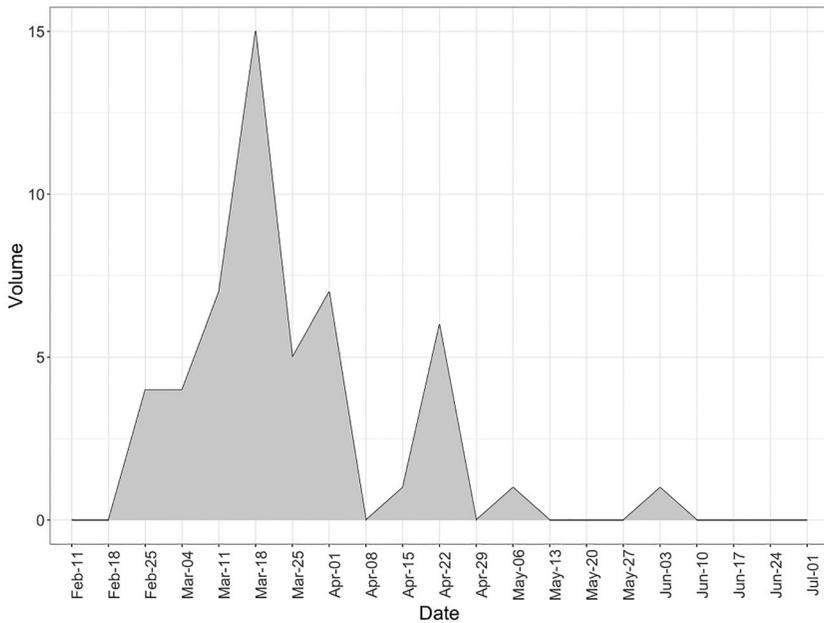
malpractice affairs on political trust is scarce and remains at the aggregate (district or time point) level.

Our study analyses how a political malpractice affair impacts political trust at the individual level. As opposed to experimental work relying on artificial stimuli, we use observational panel data collected around a real-world affair that was widely covered by the news media. This is crucial, as media coverage not only forms the primary source of information about political malpractice, but also actively contributes to producing and shaping such affairs (e.g. Kepplinger *et al.* 2012; Von Sikorski 2018). For example, the ‘congestion’ of news, that is, the number of competing news stories, plays an important role for the evolution and extent of a scandal (Nyhan 2015). In addition, extensive media coverage of a political scandal increases the chances that it has concrete consequences, i.e. that affected politicians step down or voters punish incumbents in subsequent elections (Costas-Pérez *et al.* 2012; Garz and Sörensen 2017). More generally, we know that (negative) political news can influence political trust (e.g. Mutz and Reeves 2005), but the effect of mediated political scandals on political trust remains understudied.

## Case study

In the present article, we study the case of the appointment of Martin Selmayr as Secretary-General to the European Commission, and investigate how it affected trust in EU institutions in the Netherlands. On 21 February 2018, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker appointed the German-Belgian politician Martin Selmayr to this function in a flash procedure, promoting him twice in one day to, first, Deputy Secretary-General and, second, Secretary-General. Many immediately criticised this ‘double promotion’, especially given the close political ties between Juncker and his protégé. In September 2018, the EU ombudsman concluded that the Commission did not follow ‘the relevant rules correctly either in letter or in spirit’<sup>2</sup> and formally classified the instance as a case of maladministration. Though not categorized as an instance of corruption, this violation of rules did carry a strong connotation of ethical misconduct (i.e. abuse of rules to promote self-interest, alleged nepotism).

The affair sparked wide media coverage across the EU. In the Netherlands, the appointment was first covered the day after (February 22), but coverage strongly increased from March 1 onwards (see Figure 1). On March 11, the widely watched Sunday late-night political satire show *Zondag met Lubach* covered the affair as one of its lead items, heavily criticising the course of events, and this was followed by a peak in newspaper coverage in the week of 12–18 March. An exploration of newspaper coverage shows that it was negative across all (tabloid and quality)



**Figure 1.** Newspaper coverage of the Selmayr affair per week.

Note: The volume reflects the number of newspaper articles per week that include the name ‘Selmayr’, based on a LexisNexis search of the five main Dutch newspapers (*Telegraaf*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, *Volkscrant*, *NRC*, *Trouw*) between 1 February and 1 July. The dates reflect the last day of the week.

newspapers, focussing on the upheaval and criticism sparked by the ‘flash appointment’. Headlines allude to the ‘Growing fuss about Selmayr’s “flash appointment”’ (*NRC Handelsblad*, March 8, 2018), the ‘Shady “Selmayrgate”’ (*Volkscrant*, March 8, 2018), or state that the ‘Appointment of EU official reeks’ (*Algemeen Dagblad*, March 13, 2018). A key-word search shows that most of these articles (80%) explicitly refer to the European Commission, thus implicitly or explicitly relating this institution to the affair.<sup>3</sup> Coverage endures for the weeks after, mostly dying down by the end of April. The highly visible and negative coverage, in combination with the clearly delimited time span of the affair as well as the fact that there were no major EU events (e.g. elections, referenda) in this period, makes this a plausible and suitable case for studying the effects of political malpractice on EU trust.

## Hypotheses

We assume that citizens learned about the Selmayr affair almost exclusively through the news media (e.g. Kepplinger *et al.* 2012). News coverage about the EU increases considerably following policy-related events

(Boomgaarden *et al.* 2010; Peter and De Vreese 2004), and the screening of newspaper content above shows that this also applied to the affair under study. Media coverage enables citizens to learn about potential democratic shortcomings (Desmet *et al.* 2015; Marquart *et al.* 2018), and EU news coverage affects performance and efficiency evaluations of the EU (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; De Vreese *et al.* 2016; Semetko *et al.* 2003). Given the consistent evidence for the media's capacity to inform citizens about the EU, we expect citizens with higher media exposure to have greater knowledge about the Selmayr affair. We assume a general media effect across different media types and outlets, since previous studies show outlet-level variation in EU coverage to be moderate (e.g. Barbieri and Campus 2015). Our empirical analyses do however assess different types of news consumption separately, to allow for the fact that some media types (e.g. quality newspapers) might have stronger information effects than others (De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006).

*H1: Knowledge of the malpractice affair is greater for citizens with higher exposure to news media.*

Based on the trust-as-evaluation approach as set out above, we assume that trust in a political object follows from evaluations of *that specific object*. Hence, knowledge of the political malpractice affair is expected to lead to negative evaluations of the institution in question. Thus, to the extent that political trust is derived from a rational-evaluative process, information on *EU-level* political misconduct should affect trust in *EU* institutions, but leave national political institutions unaffected. Even if EU and national political trust are strongly correlated, this is mainly due to spillover effects or reliance on heuristics in low-information contexts (Anderson 1998; Muñoz *et al.* 2011). When it comes to the effect of information per se, we expect evaluations to (primarily) affect trust in the institution in question. Therefore, citizens should differentiate between EU and national institutions when using specific information in their decisions to trust.

Moreover, the same argument can be applied to distinguishing between specific EU institutions. The fact that the affair under investigation specifically took place in the European Commission raises the question whether citizens with knowledge of the affair differentiated between distinct EU institutions (i.e. the European Commission and the European Parliament) in making their trust judgment. Most research on EU trust does not distinguish between specific institutions (e.g. Hartevelde *et al.* 2013). In other cases, trust in one institution (e.g. the European Parliament) has been used as a *pars pro toto* for the EU as a whole (e.g. Muñoz *et al.* 2011). It is unclear to what extent citizens distinguish between EU institutions when evaluating their performance. Since both EC and EP trust are

related to citizens' more general trust in the EU, we expect both institutions to be affected; yet, the impact on the EC is likely more direct, and hence larger. In sum, given the assumption that evaluations of a political object should influence trust in that specific political object (Hardin 2000), combined with the potential limits on citizens' ability to differentiate between the institutions of the EU, we formulate the following hypotheses.

*H2a: Knowledge of the malpractice affair decreases trust in EU institutions.*

*H2b: Knowledge of the malpractice affair decreases trust in the European Commission more strongly than trust in the European Parliament.*

*H2c: Knowledge of the malpractice affair does not decrease national political trust.*

Knowledge of short-term political events may not affect the attitudes of all citizens equally. An important moderator is political sophistication, or 'the extent to which [a person's] political cognitions are numerous, cut a wide substantive swath, and are highly organised, or 'constrained'' (Luskin 1990: 332), which may condition the effects of new information in two ways. First, while more politically sophisticated citizens are more likely to receive new information (due to higher political interest), citizens with low political sophistication are more prone to change their attitudes in response to short-term political cues (Zaller 1992; Lachat 2007). This is because the less politically sophisticated tend to have less firm or well-organised political opinions, and are therefore more easily swayed by new information (Converse 1962). Indeed, a recent experimental study shows that news about corruption has a larger impact on less educated citizens (Botero *et al.* 2015). Second, the political cognitions of 'low sophisticates' are less complex and differentiated (Luskin 1990: 332), which makes them less likely to differentiate between political objects when it comes to their decision to trust. We therefore expect the effect of event-specific knowledge to be conditional on political sophistication in two ways.

*H3a: Knowledge of the malpractice affair decreases trust in EU institutions more strongly among less politically sophisticated citizens.*

*H3b: Citizens with lower levels of political sophistication are less likely to differentiate between the European Commission and European Parliament.*

Finally, the effects of short-lived political events such as the affair under study are likely to wear off over time. New information directly affects attitudes while it is salient, but such effects decay as soon as media attention wanes. Long-lasting effects, in turn, require more effortful updating of one's overall opinion, which is stored in memory and thus becomes independent of the specific event (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). As

low-effort information processing is much more common for most citizens, most information effects do not last over time (Hill *et al.* 2013). Existing studies find that framing effects of EU media content fade after some weeks (De Vreese 2004), even though they do not necessarily disappear completely (Lecheler and de Vreese 2011). Similarly, political advertising generally also has only short-term effects (Gerber *et al.* 2011; Hill *et al.* 2013). In the specific context of mediatised political scandals, effects of affairs have also been found to decay (Ares and Hernández 2017), although they can linger beyond a single electoral cycle (Praino *et al.* 2013). In addition, experimental evidence shows that voters punish politicians harsher when a scandal is presented as having taken place more recently (Doherty *et al.* 2014). Thus, we expect the effect of malpractice affairs to decrease over time.

*H4: The effect of the malpractice affair on trust in EU institutions is strongest during/shortly after the event, and decreases in the long term.*

## Data and method

In order to explain changes in political trust over time, we make use of an ongoing panel study in the Netherlands. The analyses are based on three waves conducted in January 2018 (W1), March 2018 (W2), and June 2018 (W3). Table 1 gives an overview of the waves and the relevant variables in each of them. Wave 1 provides the base level of trust in EU institutions before the appointments of Selmayr had occurred. Data collection for Wave 2 started on March 20, shortly after the first coverage of alleged misconduct regarding Selmayr's appointments (from March 1 onwards), and measures trust in EU institutions and knowledge of the affair in order to analyze short-term effects. Wave 3, then, again measures trust in EU institutions, which enables us to assess effects in the longer term. In addition, the very first wave of the survey (W0), fielded in September 2017, was used for the measurement of a set of background variables that function as controls in the analyses.

**Table 1.** Data structure.

W0 (September '17) <i>Controls</i>	W1 (January '18) <i>Base level</i>	W2 (March '18) <i>Short-term effect</i>	W3 (June '18) <i>Long-term effect</i>
Age	EC trust	EC trust	EC trust
Gender	EP trust	EP trust	EP trust
Education	NP trust	NP trust	NP trust
Left-right		Affair knowledge	
Political interest			
Media use			
General political knowledge			

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of variables used in the analyses.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Trust in European Commission (W2)	3.57	1.46	1	7
Trust in European Parliament (W2)	3.57	1.46	1	7
Trust in National Parliament (W2)	4.04	1.50	1	7
Affair knowledge (W2)	2.18	0.87	1	3
Exposure quality newspapers	1.35	0.88	1	8
Exposure tabloid newspapers	1.87	1.25	1	8
Exposure TV news	2.66	1.21	1	8
Exposure online news	1.62	0.67	1	8
Exposure satire news show (Zondag met Lubach)	0.10	0.29	0	1
General political knowledge	2.45	0.75	1	3
Political interest	4.04	1.59	1	7
Left-right self-placement	6.08	2.02	1	11
Level of education				
Low	0.32	0.47	0	1
High	0.37	0.48	0	1
Age	48.02	16.83	17	91
Gender (1 = female)	1.50	0.50	0	1

Waves 0, 1 and 3 are core waves of the panel survey: Only those respondents who participated in the previous wave were re-invited for the subsequent wave. Wave 0 started with a net sample of 3,026 respondents (response rate 72%). The survey was conducted by Kantar Public and the sample was drawn from TNS NIPObase, which consists of 124,000 individuals recruited by telephone, face-to-face, and online. Quotas were enforced for age, gender, education, and region. The survey was conducted using Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). The retention rates for waves 1 and 3 were 88% and 84%, respectively. Wave 2 was conducted as an in-between wave (a ‘flash survey’) very shortly after the event of interest, and had a response rate of 95%. For the present study, we include respondents who participated in all three core waves (W0, W1, and W3) as well as in the flash survey (W2), resulting in a total sample of 2,153 respondents. The sample is fairly representative of the Dutch population on the key socio-demographic variables of age, gender, and education (see Table 2).<sup>4</sup>

### Variables

Table 2 displays the descriptives for all variables included in the analyses. For Hypothesis 1, the dependent variable is knowledge of the Selmayr affair. This is measured by asking respondents the following question: ‘Recently, Martin Selmayr has been appointed as Secretary-General of the European Commission. Have you heard about this appointment?’, with a three-fold answer scale from 1 (Yes, I am fully aware of this) to 2 (Yes, I’ve heard about this) to 3 (No, never heard of this).<sup>5</sup> The question was deliberately phrased neutrally – not referring to the appointment as

ethically dubious or problematic – to avoid biased responses. The key independent variable for H1 is media use, which we measure for an extensive battery of Dutch media outlets. For newspapers, we list seven outlets asking respondents ‘On how many days during a typical week do you read the following newspapers?’ (0 days per week ... 7 days per week). Similar questions are used for TV news (eight programs) and online political news (13 websites). From these extensive batteries, we create indices per medium by taking the average score across the items. For newspapers, we additionally distinguish between quality and tabloid newspapers. Finally, we measure exposure to the political satire show *Zondag met Lubach* (ZML), by asking respondents how often they watch the show in a usual month (from 0 (never) to 4 (all episodes)). We recoded this into a dummy variable distinguishing respondents who watched all shows from those who watch ZML less frequently or never (to ensure that these respondents watched the episode which covered the event).

For Hypotheses 2–4, the dependent variables are trust in the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the national parliament. Trust is measured by asking respondents to what extent they agree with the following statement: ‘I trust the European Commission’ (or the European Parliament/national parliament) with answer options ranging from 1 (fully disagree) to 7 (fully agree). In these models, affair knowledge (three levels) is the key independent variable. Importantly, we measured trust before knowledge of the Selmayr affair (in Wave 2), to prevent any influence of the latter item on the first due to survey context or priming effects.

For Hypotheses 3a and 3b, we measure political sophistication by the commonly used proxy of general political knowledge, constructing a scale based on three knowledge questions about national politics (ranging from 1 ‘low knowledge’ to 3 ‘high knowledge’).<sup>6</sup> Such factual knowledge indices have been recommended as the closest measurement of political sophistication (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993) and are widely used in studies on this topic (e.g. Highton 2009; Gomez and Wilson 2001).

In addition, all models include a set of conventional control variables. As socio-demographic variables, we measure age (in years), gender, and educational level (completed education, recoded in low/medium/high). Furthermore, we include left–right political self-placement (measured on a 0 to 10 scale) and its squared term, which has been shown to explain EU support (Van Elsas and Van der Brug 2015). We include political interest as it relates to both political knowledge and EU support (ranging from 1 ‘not interested’ to 7 ‘very interested’).

Hypothesis 1 has a categorical dependent variable (knowledge of the Selmayr affair) and requires a multinomial regression model. For

Hypotheses 2–4, we use OLS regression models with a lagged dependent variable (LDV), which is an appropriate modeling strategy when ‘an attitude at time  $t$  is a function of that same attitude at  $t-1$  as modified by new information’ (Keele and Kelly 2006: 187). Trust levels are highly dependent on one’s previous level of trust, and LDV models allow us to control for baseline trust (W1) while explaining trust in Wave 2 and Wave 3 respectively. The models thereby focus on explaining the dynamic component (i.e. the degree of change) of trust, which is where we expect to find effects of knowledge gains.

## Results

We first turn to the effects of media use on knowledge of the Selmayr affair. Table 3 displays the results for the multinomial regression models. Model 1 shows the effects of the four media outlet types (quality and broadsheet newspapers, TV news, and political news websites online),

**Table 3.** Multinomial regression model explaining knowledge of the Selmayr affair (ref: somewhat aware).

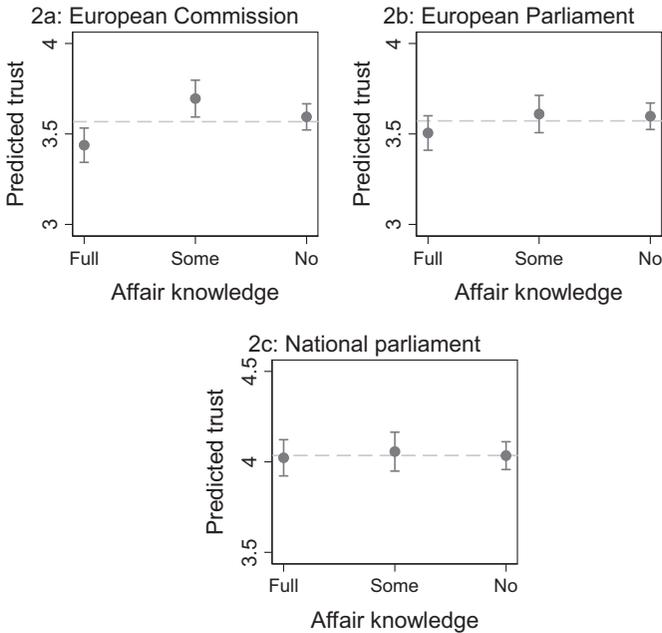
	M1		M2	
	Fully aware	Never heard of	Fully aware	Never heard of
<i>Media exposure</i>				
Quality newspapers	0.22** (0.08)	-0.13 (0.09)	0.19* (0.08)	-0.11 (0.09)
Tabloid newspapers	-0.09 (0.05)	-0.14** (0.05)	-0.07 (0.05)	-0.14** (0.05)
Television news	-0.11 (0.06)	-0.15** (0.06)	-0.10 (0.06)	-0.14* (0.06)
Online news	0.44*** (0.11)	0.08 (0.11)	0.39*** (0.11)	0.08 (0.11)
Satire (Zondag met Lubach)			0.99*** (0.21)	-0.99*** (0.26)
<i>Education</i>				
Lower educated	-0.21 (0.18)	0.18 (0.15)	-0.17 (0.18)	0.18 (0.15)
Higher educated	0.15 (0.16)	-0.11 (0.15)	0.16 (0.16)	-0.10 (0.15)
Age	0.03*** (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	-0.01* (0.00)
Gender (1 = Female)	-0.20 (0.13)	0.24* (0.12)	-0.21 (0.13)	0.25* (0.12)
Political interest	0.23*** (0.05)	-0.21*** (0.05)	0.22*** (0.05)	-0.21*** (0.05)
General political knowledge	0.49*** (0.11)	-0.18* (0.07)	0.48*** (0.11)	-0.16* (0.07)
Constant	-3.94*** (0.41)	2.98*** (0.30)	-3.99*** (0.42)	3.01*** (0.30)
N	2,153	2,153	2,153	2,153
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.16	0.16	0.18	0.18

Note: Coefficients are log-odds. Average marginal effects displayed in [Online appendix A1](#).

\*\*\* $p \leq .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .

while Model 2 adds a variable tapping exposure to the political satire show *Zondag met Lubach*. Overall, H1 is supported: Media exposure has a positive effect on knowledge about the affair, yet the strength of this effect varies between outlets.<sup>7</sup> As Model 1 shows, quality newspaper exposure increases the likelihood of being fully aware of the affair compared to either being somewhat or unaware of it. Online news exposure has a similar, but even larger effect. Being exposed to tabloid newspapers or television news does not increase full awareness, but it does decrease the likelihood of never having heard of the affair. In sum, all media types lead to incrementally more knowledge, either at the higher or the lower end of the scale. Interestingly, the widely watched news satire show *Zondag met Lubach* has a much larger effect than any of the general exposure variables (Model 2, see also [Online appendix A1](#)). Citizens who always watch the show are much more likely to be fully aware of the affair ( $b = 1.02$ ) and much less likely to have never heard of it ( $b = -1.03$ ) as compared to being somewhat aware. The inclusion of this variable does not change any of the general media effects, indicating that both watching this particular show and the general exposure to different sorts of media increase knowledge of the affair. Among the control variables, we find that political interest leads to more knowledge of the affair, older citizens are more aware of the affair than younger citizens, and women are more likely to have never heard of it compared to men. Finally, education has no significant effect, yet additional analyses (not displayed) show that this is due to the inclusion of political interest.

We now turn to the short-term effects of affair knowledge on trust in the European Commission, European Parliament and national parliament (H2a–c). [Figure 2](#) displays the predicted values of trust in each of these institutions by affair knowledge, based on the lagged dependent variable (LDV) models explaining trust in Wave 2 while controlling for trust in Wave 1 (see [Online appendix B1–B3](#) for full models). In support of H2a, we find a significant negative effect of Selmayr knowledge on trust in the EC ([Figure 2\(a\)](#)). Controlling for previous trust levels, a citizen with full awareness of the affair holds lower trust in the European Commission (3.4) compared to someone who is somewhat aware (3.7,  $p < .001$ ) or has never heard of it (3.6,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, only full awareness of the affair leads to a decrease in EC trust, while there is no significant difference between those somewhat aware or not aware at all. The control variables show that there are few direct media effects on EC trust (full results displayed in [Online appendix B1](#)). Only exposure to TV news has a slight negative effect. In contrast, readers of quality newspapers have somewhat higher EC trust in Wave 2. The remaining controls show that higher educated citizens and those with moderate to right-wing ideological positions, as well as females, tend to trust the EC more, while the quadratic

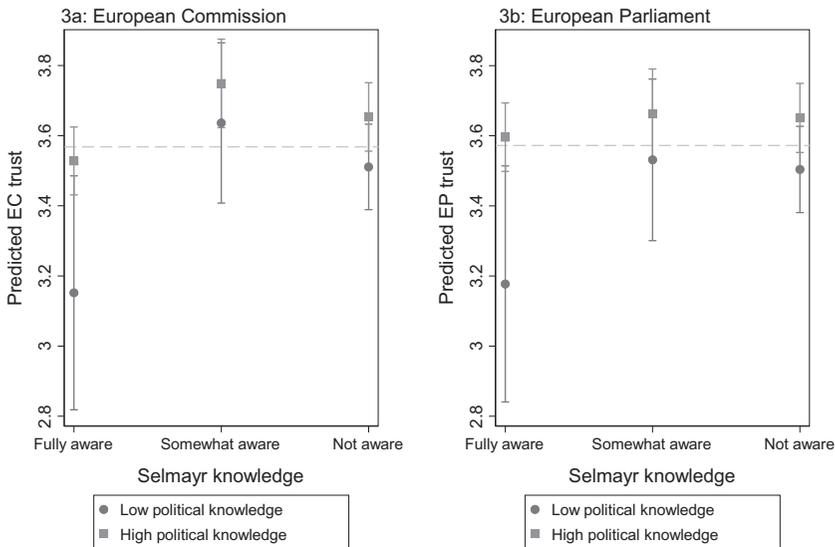


**Figure 2.** Predicted values for trust in EU and national institutions, by affair knowledge. Note: Predicted values with 95% confidence intervals, based on Lagged Dependent Variable models controlling for baseline trust (Wave 1), keeping all other variables at mean. Dashed line represents average trust. Full coefficients table in [Online appendix B1–B3](#) (Model 1).  $N = 2,153$ .

term for left–right placement shows that citizens at the ideological extremes are less trusting of the EC.

[Figure 2\(b\)](#) shows the results for trust in the European Parliament (see [Online appendix B2](#) for full results). Interestingly, there is no significant effect of affair knowledge on EP trust, and H2a is thus not supported for the EP. This indicates that citizens actually discern between different EU institutions, and blame the specific institution where the affair took place, in line with H2b. The effects of the media exposure variables are highly similar to those found for trust in the EC; this suggests that these effects tap general trends in EU trust rather than the consequences of a specific event. Finally, [Figure 2\(c\)](#) shows the predicted values for trust in the national parliament ([Online appendix B3](#)). The results show that knowledge of the affair has no effect on trust in the national parliament, supporting H2c. Again, this demonstrates the specificity of the impact of the affair, and citizens’ ability to differentiate between different political objects when making trust evaluations.

We test to what extent the identified effects of knowledge of the affair are conditional upon political sophistication by adding general political knowledge as a moderator ([Online appendix Tables B1–B2](#), Model 2). The interaction effects are not significant and thus do not provide

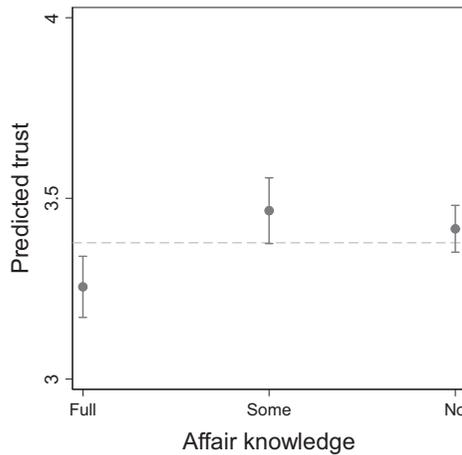


**Figure 3.** Predicted EC and EP trust by affair knowledge, for citizens with low and high general political knowledge.

Note: Predicted values with 95% confidence intervals, based on Lagged Dependent Variable models controlling for baseline trust (Wave 1), keeping all other variables at mean. Dashed line represents average trust. Full coefficients table in [Online appendix B1–B2](#) (Model 2).  $N = 2,153$ .

support for H3a and H3b, but the predicted values of EC and EP trust do display the expected patterns ([Figure 3\(a and b\)](#)).<sup>8</sup> The effect of full awareness of the affair is most pronounced for less sophisticated citizens, as EC trust decreases from 3.65 to 3.15 when going from ‘some’ to ‘full’ awareness, compared to a smaller decrease from 3.75 to 3.55 for high sophisticated citizens. [Figure 3\(b\)](#) shows a similar pattern for trust in the EP. Even if the effects of the affair on EP trust did not appear in the main models ([Online appendix B1–B2](#)), distinguishing between knowledge groups suggests that full awareness of the affair affects EP trust among those with lower levels of sophistication (the predicted value of EP trust decreases from 3.55 to 3.20, compared to a minimal decrease from 3.65 to 3.60 for high sophisticated citizens). Although the interaction terms are not significant, these patterns qualify the conclusions for H2b regarding the degree of differentiation between the EC and the EP: While we found that the average effect of the affair was significant for the EC but not for the EP, adding the moderator suggests that among less sophisticated voters, EP trust may have been ‘contaminated’ by the affair as well. In any case, the effect is still substantively larger for the EC than for the EP, across all sophistication groups.

Additional analyses with trust in national parliament ([Online appendix B3](#), Model 2) show that affair knowledge does not have an effect on national trust



**Figure 4.** Predicted trust in the European Commission (long term effect) by affair knowledge.

Note: Predicted values with 95% confidence intervals, based on Lagged Dependent Variable models controlling for baseline trust (Wave 1), keeping all other variables at mean. Dashed line represents average trust. Full coefficients table in [Online appendix B4](#).  $N = 2,153$ .

for any of the knowledge groups, demonstrating that even the least politically sophisticated differentiate between EU and national political objects when deciding to trust.

Finally, we turn to the question to what extent the effect of the affair endures or wears off three months after the height of news coverage, by running the main models with EC trust in Wave 3 as the dependent variable. The effects of knowledge on EC trust are highly similar to those found in Wave 2 ([Figure 4](#) and [Online appendix B4](#)). For citizens with full awareness of the affair, predicted trust in the European Commission is lower (3.2) compared to those who are somewhat aware (3.5,  $p < .001$ ) or have never heard of it (3.4,  $p < .01$ ), controlling for EC trust in Wave 1. The effects are only slightly smaller, and only for full versus some awareness. H4 is thus not supported. Instead, the findings suggest that receiving information about political malpractice can affect trust until months after.

## Discussion

The political malpractice affair that occurred in early 2018 around the appointment of Martin Selmayr as Secretary-General of the European Commission provided a unique opportunity to assess the direct influence of such affairs on citizens' institutional trust. While evidence abounds that corruption levels (negatively) correlate with political trust (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Della Porta 2000; Hakhverdian and Mayne 2012;

Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017), we know little about the direct impact of an individual instance of alleged corruption on institutional trust. Our study makes a novel methodological contribution, using a three-wave panel-design to study how citizens receive information about a real-world affair through the media, and how this information in turn affects their trust in the EU in both the short and longer term (Ares and Hernández 2017), while also paying attention to citizens' sophistication and their ability to differentiate between political institutions.

First, the findings of our study emphasise the importance of media exposure in informing citizens about EU-level affairs. Irrespective of the type of news consumption, news exposure increased knowledge of the Selmayr affair, with quality and online newspapers most effective in informing citizens (see also De Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006). This highlights the important role of the news media in safeguarding transparency and informing citizens about potentially non-democratic procedures (see also Grimmelikhuisen 2012). In addition, our results stress the crucial role of political entertainment for democracy: watching the satirical news show *Zondag met Lubach* had a much larger effect on knowledge about the Selmayr affair than any other form of media exposure. This corroborates evidence from the U.S. on the impact of political satire on citizens' political knowledge (e.g. Becker and Bode 2017), and is most likely attributable to the fact that the show devoted an entire segment to the affair. Moreover, the inspection of newspaper coverage suggests that the show might have had an important indirect effect by influencing other Dutch media outlets, as coverage peaked in the week after the satirical broadcast.

Second, our findings show that information about a single malpractice affair can influence trust in the political institution involved in the affair. This extends the literature on the effects of political scandals and corruption affairs by demonstrating that these can harm not only the politicians involved (e.g. Weitz-Shapiro and Winters 2017; Jacobson and Dimock 1994; Welch and Hibbing 1997), but also the more abstract institutions (Bowler and Karp 2004; Chanley *et al.* 2000). Our results advance these findings by showing that citizens differentiate between political institutions when they draw consequences from these affairs. Trust in the European Commission, the institution where the affair took place, was affected most, followed by the European Parliament; trust in the national parliament, on the other hand, remained unaffected. The effects were not significantly different for less and more politically sophisticated citizens, yet they were substantively larger among the less sophisticated. This tentatively shows that less sophisticated citizens are more prone to short-term attitude change in response to information about political malpractice

(Botero *et al.* 2015). Such differences between the more highly and less sophisticated might be augmented if measured instantaneously, ‘on-the-spot’, as happens in an experimental set-up. Another reason for the limited differences found in our study could be the more distant or complex nature of EU politics, which dampens its impact among the less sophisticated. That said, we do find that even the less sophisticated differentiated between political objects, which aligns with earlier evidence on the ‘rationality’ of political trust across education groups (Van Elsas 2015). Finally, effects were only detectable for citizens fully aware of the affair as compared to citizens with some or no knowledge of it. This emphasises the importance of a well-informed citizenry when it comes to the evaluation of political institutions on the basis of their short-term performance (e.g. Norris 2011).

Finally, we addressed the durability of the effects of the affair under study: were these only short-term priming effects, or did they induce more long-lasting attitude change (e.g. Ares and Hernández 2017; Lecheler and de Vreese 2011)? According to our findings, citizens are still more distrustful of the European Commission three months after they learned about the Selmayr case, which allows us to – tentatively – speculate that the initial decrease in EC trust may not only be attributable to a mere priming effect of mediated information (Gerber *et al.* 2011). Instead, citizens actually learned something about the proceedings and workings of the European Commission and updated their trust attitudes accordingly.

These results speak not only to the literature on political trust, but also to research on the effects of corruption affairs on electoral behavior. Interestingly, this line of research has found that though harshly disapproved of, corruption often has surprisingly mild electoral consequences (Breitenstein 2019; De Vries and Solaz 2017). This is explained, in part, by partisan biases in blame attribution (Solaz *et al.* 2019) and by the fact that voters prioritise material gains over ethical concerns when casting a vote. It could well be that, while not leading to punishment of politicians at the voting booth, (repeated) instances of corruption do harm the legitimacy of the institutions where they take place, and could even lead voters to abstain from voting altogether (Stockemer *et al.* 2013). Future research could address this by analyzing the effect of malpractice on voting (intentions) and trust simultaneously. Moreover, although partisan biases are less applicable to institutional trust, further research could assess whether the impact of political malpractice could also be mitigated by favorable EU attitudes.

In terms of our study’s limitations, we should first address its generalisability. In a country with low corruption levels and high-quality national

institutions such as the Netherlands, instances of political malpractice may have a larger impact than in high-corruption contexts that are more 'saturated' with corruption news. However, we also know that precisely under corrupt national regimes, citizens tend to value the EU most, while citizens in high-quality democracies are more skeptical about the EU's institutional and democratic quality (De Vries 2018; Muñoz *et al.* 2011). Following this reasoning, EU-level malpractice could affect EU trust even more strongly in countries where the expectations of its institutional quality are high, potentially inducing a broader political cynicism.

The characteristics of the specific affair under study mostly raise the bar against finding effects. First, the affair is a case of 'mild' malpractice as there were no formal allegations of corruption. Second, the affair has a rather technical character with detailed information about EU institutional procedures. Third, and more generally, EU politics are more remote and potentially less subject to direct public scrutiny, which could mean that EU-level affairs have less impact than national political scandals. The fact that we found an effect of a mild and technical malpractice affair is thus telling, but further research is needed to address generalisability to other countries and types of affairs.

Other limitations relate to measurement. While we take into account the impact of different media outlets on knowledge of the affair, we did not address potential differences in content between these outlets. Even if trends in coverage tend to coincide between outlets (e.g. Barbieri and Campus 2015), research has shown that coverage of the European Union differs in both volume and evaluation (e.g. Boomgaarden *et al.* 2013). While we did ascertain that Selmayr's appointment was generally negatively discussed across outlets, only a systematic content analysis of the Selmayr affair in the Dutch media (e.g. Kepplinger *et al.* 2012) would enable us directly to link knowledge gain and attitude change to specific content. On a more general note, there are of course numerous topics in newspaper content that can explain fluctuations in political trust. An encompassing analysis of all news content in a specific period could assess the affair's relevance in comparison to other (EU-related) news.

Finally, we measured knowledge about the Selmayr case as a single, three-level variable measuring self-reported familiarity. Asking a set of factual questions about the affair would have allowed for a more differentiated measurement of knowledge gain. However, the scope of the flash survey was restricted by the use of an ongoing panel survey with a large number of respondents. This enabled us to question citizens about their knowledge about the issue in a very timely manner, which allowed for a stricter design in terms of causal order and endogeneity (e.g. Van der Meer 2018).

These limitations notwithstanding, our findings have several broader implications. First, they constitute strong evidence for conceptualising trust as an evaluation (e.g. Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017) by showing that institutional trust changes in response to new information. In this light, the finding that citizens make rather fine-grained distinctions in their evaluations of different political institutions is highly relevant, as it adds to the picture of citizens as rational actors who make trust decisions on the basis of their evaluation of a specific political object (Hardin 2000). This is good news for the functioning of democratic politics, as it shows that citizens are able to hold specific institutions accountable for procedural malpractice. Second, this, however, also implies that individual politicians' misconduct can harm citizens' trust in more abstract institutions. This does not necessarily corrode the legitimacy of politics more generally, as evaluations do not spill over to the national level. That said, the present study leaves us agnostic as to the accumulated effect of repeated corruption affairs, which is likely more detrimental and may not remain confined to the institutions at play.

Finally, our findings highlight the important role of the news media as watchdogs in the political process, in so far as they inform the citizenry about misconduct affairs and political wrongdoing. As Stockemer *et al.* (2013: 83–4) state, 'Corrupt practices not only hinder economic and social development, they also prevent democracies from functioning properly'. It is therefore important that citizens learn about undemocratic and nontransparent processes, so they are able to hold their representatives accountable. The Selmayr affair, in the view of many European Union citizens, may have been a symptom of the EU's so-called 'democratic deficit' (Meyer 1999). Such nontransparent processes can lead to long-lasting decreases in citizens' trust and threaten the Union's democratic legitimacy. But our study also shows that the news media is able to provide citizens with the necessary means to hold their political institutions accountable.

## Notes

1. We use the general terms of political malpractice and political misconduct interchangeably to denote any instance of political conduct that violates common ethical standards.
2. European Ombudsman, Press release of 4 September 2018. Available online at <https://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/nl/press-release/en/102716> (accessed 26 October 2018).
3. A *LexisNexis* search shows that out of the 51 articles that were published in the main five Dutch newspapers containing the word 'Selmayr' between February 1<sup>st</sup> and July 1st, 41 (80%) also contained references to the European Commission, and 43 (84%) included Juncker.
4. The sample is older and slightly higher educated than the Dutch population (with mean age of 41, and high-middle-low education at 30%–40%–30%, CBS

2018). Given our focus on *changes* in EU trust rather than absolute levels, crucial to our study is that panel composition is stable over time. Panel attrition is very low, and additional analyses show no compositional changes. Comparing W0 to W3, the more highly educated make up 36% and 37% of the sample respectively. The average age is stable at 48.

5. Dutch question wording: 'Recent is Martin Selmayr benoemd tot secretaris-generaal van de Europese Commissie. Heeft u over deze benoeming gehoord? 1. Ja, ik ben hiervan op de hoogte. 2. Ja, wel eens van gehoord. 3. Nee, nooit van gehoord'.
6. This variable counts the number of correct answers to the following knowledge questions: 'Who is currently the minister of Finance in The Netherlands?', 'How long is a usual government term in The Netherlands', and 'Which party gained most votes in the last parliamentary election?'. Scores 0 and 1 were merged to obtain a more equally distributed variable.
7. In order to compare the substantive strength of the effects, [Online appendix A1](#) presents the same results in average marginal effects (AME). The relative strength of the explanatory variables is similar to the pattern as displayed by the multinomial log-odds.
8. Large confidence intervals for those with low general knowledge and full affair knowledge are due to smaller cell size ( $N=20$ ). All other cells of the joint distribution of these variables are  $N > 60$ .

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