

Does political trust matter? An empirical investigation into the relation between political trust and support for law compliance

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European Journal of Political Research, Accepted
Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

SUMMARY

Abstract. Scholars have repeatedly expressed concern about the consequences low levels of political trust might have for the stability of democratic political systems. Empirical support and the identification of causal mechanisms for this concern, however, are often lacking. In this article, the relation between political trust and law-abiding attitudes is investigated. It is expected that citizens with low levels of trust in the institutions of the political system will find it more acceptable to break the law. As a result, low levels of political trust might undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of government action and its ability to implement legislation. Based on survey data from 33 European countries using the 1999–2001 European Values Study (N = 41,125), the relation between political trust and legal permissiveness is examined using a multilevel ordered logistic regression analysis. The results show that respondents with low levels of political trust are significantly more likely to accept illegal behaviour such as tax fraud than respondents with high levels of political trust. Since it is known from earlier research that actors who are permissive towards law-breaking behaviour are more likely to commit these acts themselves, the hypothesis that low levels of political trust will be associated with less law compliance within a society is supported.

Introduction

There is an ongoing debate in the academic literature about the level of political trust a political system requires in order to function in a satisfactory manner. Traditionally, the dominant view was that democracies need high levels of political trust as a form of diffuse support from the citizenry. Diffuse political trust can be considered as an essential resource to govern a society effectively (Easton 1965). In this context, Easton (1965, 96) argued that a political system distinguishes itself from all other social systems through its “capacity to make decisions for the society and the probability of their frequent acceptance by most members as authoritative”. This “frequent acceptance” of authoritative decisions depends on political trust. Trusting citizens are more likely to perceive political decisions as legitimate than distrusting citizens even if these decisions are unfavourable to their own particular interests (Rudolph & Evans 2005). Distrusting citizens, on the other hand, are more likely to calculate the costs and benefits of compliance and this might lead to free riding practices (Tyler 2006). As Gamson (1968, 127) states “if legitimacy is high, then there is a high potential for activating commitments and other, more costly forms of control may be avoided (...) a wide variety of unpleasant commitments may be accepted with good grace when there is a surplus of political trust (...)”. The basic assumption in this stream of the literature, therefore, is that low levels of political trust and legitimacy will make it more difficult for political systems to implement authoritative rules on the regulation of society.

In recent years, however, several scholars have argued that a critical outlook towards the political process could actually invigorate a democratic society (Norris 1999a; Rosanvallon 2008; Geißel 2008). By critically examining government policy and governance, citizens hold government officials accountable on a permanent basis and this should increase the quality of democratic decision-making. As Rosanvallon (2008) phrases it: citizens are not just voters, but they also increasingly function as quality controllers for the political system. In line with this argument Cook and Gronke (2005, 801) conclude that the alleged decline of trust in institutions and authorities in some countries “would not necessarily be bad news. It would represent the rise of a public that is – and perhaps as they should be – sceptical of many forms of power”. Authors who follow this line of argument often perceive distrust to be “an excellent working hypothesis in politics” (Hardin 2006, 159-160). In this context, Norris states (1999, 27): “too much blind trust by citizens and misplaced confidence in leaders, for good or ill, can be as problematic for democracy as too little. The consequences of declining support for government institutions therefore remain open to debate”.

It is striking to observe that most of this debate is being conducted in the absence of reliable knowledge about the possible social and political consequences of lower levels of political trust. Given the currently available evidence, we do not know whether the stability of democratic political systems is threatened by low levels of political trust. Therefore, in this article we investigated the consequences of (the absence of) political trust. In particular, we analyzed whether different levels of political trust could explain differences in permissiveness of illegal behaviour among European citizens. We can assume that citizens are more likely to abide by the decisions of political institutions if they perceive these institutions to be legitimate (Tyler & Huo 2002). If citizens with a low level of political trust are in fact less likely to follow governmental regulations, it can be argued that low levels of political trust among citizens can create a social environment in which it is more difficult for political leaders to govern and implement legislation.

To present an accurate and thorough analysis of this relation between political trust and law compliance, this article was structured as follows. First, we provided an overview of the theoretical debate about the consequences of the presence or absence of political trust. We then turned to comparative survey data to analyze the relation between political trust and support for law compliance. We closed with some observations on what these findings might mean for the stability of contemporary liberal democracies.

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Discussion

While there is a fairly large body of research related to the *causes* for the occurrence of political trust, relatively little empirical research has been published on the *consequences* of political trust. In this article, we provided empirical results on the possible effects of political trust on the effectiveness of government. The study suggests that low levels of political trust are associated with less support for law compliance within a society. Low trust in political institutions results in less public willingness to defer to decisions taken by those institutions. In the absence of voluntary compliance, governments have to resort to coercive measures to enforce regulations. As a result governing is rendered more difficult and more costly. Therefore, low levels of political trust can undermine the effective governing of a society and carry with them a potential threat for the functioning of democratic processes.

This empirical finding sheds new light on the discussion about the consequences of low trust levels among European populations. Authors such as Inglehart and Norris have stated that

citizens with low levels of political trust should be labelled as ‘critical citizens’: they are more sceptical about the promises of politicians, and political systems just need to find a way to deal with the increased scrutiny of cognitively engaged citizens. Based on our findings, we cannot make any statements on the consequences of low political trust levels for a normative concept of democracy, since we did not investigate these broader consequences.

The strong positive relation we find between political distrust and legal permissiveness, however, demonstrates that these ‘critical citizens’ are also quite tolerant with regard to fiscal fraud or false social security claims. These attitudes can be seen as detrimental to the functioning of contemporary welfare states. They do entail that the state apparatus and the social security system will need more resources to ensure the collection of taxes and correct social security payments. Earlier research has shown that political trust can have an important effect on the economic growth potential of a region or a political system (Cherchye & Moesen 2004). What our analysis suggests, is that we can also take the argument a step further: political trust also has a direct effect on the capability of government systems to fulfil their basic tasks towards the population. This would imply that low levels of political trust can pose a challenge for the governability of contemporary liberal societies. While the Inglehart argument holds that governments will simply have to learn to deal with more critical citizens could be accepted, it is more difficult to explain how governments will be able to live with citizens that are more permissive towards fiscal and social fraud. In the worst case scenario, this could even lead to the development of a vicious cycle for governments and political trust. Earlier research has suggested that trust levels are threatened mainly because expectations towards government action have risen (Hetherington & Rudolph 2008). In addition, the current analysis suggests that distrust actually makes it more difficult for government institutions to function in an effective manner. The current state of research does not allow us to suggest an easy way out of this negative spiral but the current analysis suggests that authors claiming that political distrust is not a problem for the stability of political systems, should also pay attention to the ability of political institutions to implement government policy.