

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL TRUST AMONG ADOLESCENTS.  
A TWO-YEAR PANEL STUDY AMONG BELGIAN LATE ADOLESCENTS ON  
THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT AND MEDIA USE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Trust in political institutions can be considered as an important prerequisite for the stability of democratic political systems. Institutional theories assume that levels of political trust respond to government performance, but this perspective fails to explain the apparent stability of political trust, both on an aggregate level within countries and on an individual level across the life cycle. We argue that theories on the origins of political trust should at least accommodate a cultural transmission mechanism, helping us to explain how younger generations are being socialized into a pattern of high or low levels of political trust. Building on a two-year panel study among Belgian adolescents (n=3,632), we demonstrate that school experiences with an open class room climate have a positive impact on political trust, just like the information use of mass media. The effect of civic education, on the other hand remained limited. We observed a remarkable stability of political trust between the ages of 16 and 18, and we argue that this stability offers an explanation for the time lag in the way political trust levels respond to changes in government performance.

**Keywords:** political trust, political socialization, class room climate, Belgium, adolescents

## INTRODUCTION

Political trust is considered to be one of the most important resources for a democratic political system (Almond & Verba, 1963; Easton 1965). Political trust is believed to determine the willingness of citizens to commit public resources to public policy ends, to accept political decisions and to comply with them (Chanley, Rudolph & Rahn, 2000; Hetherington, 2005). Recent evidence suggests that low levels of political trust might even have a broader social impact as they have an effect on subjective well-being and on various forms of risk-taking and sometimes even illegal behavior (Lindström, 2009).

Political trust levels tend to be remarkably stable across countries: while some political systems are traditionally characterized by high levels of trust in political institutions, the reverse pattern can be found in numerous other countries (Zmerli & Newton, 2008). For some recent democracies, like the countries in Central and Eastern Europe, this implies that low levels of political trust remain rather low, and there are very few indications that levels of trust will rise substantially in the years ahead in these countries (Mishler & Rose, 2005).

Given this stability of political trust, the crucial question is to determine how political trust is developed in the first place as apparently political trust patterns are resistant to change once they have settled in. While previous studies highlighted country level determinants of the development of political trust, there are few studies discussing individual level determinants of that development. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that considering individual characteristics is crucial if we want to arrive at a comprehensive explanation for the occurrence of political trust.

As Easton already argued several decades ago, political trust is not always based on real-life experiences with the functioning of political institutions. While initially these experiences might play a role in explaining trust levels, over time personal and unique experiences are generalized and subsequently transmitted across society and across generations: “on the basis of their own experiences, members [of society] may also adjudge the worth of supporting these objects for their own sake. Such attachment may be a product of spill-over effects from evaluations of a series of outputs and of performance over a long period of time. Even though the orientations derive from responses to particular outputs initially, they become in time disassociated from performance. They become transformed into generalized attitudes towards the authorities or other political objects” (Easton, 1975, p. 446).

If the logic adopted by Easton would be correct, this would imply that political trust levels do not respond directly to changes in the performance of political institutions, but that those changes are being transmitted in a culturally determined manner. The relationship between performance and political trust would then be mediated by cultural codes and experiences. Adolescents are a prime category to investigate the validity of the Easton claim, since we can assume that they have very few firsthand experiences with the functioning of the political system. Simultaneously, however, they are exposed to various messages about the perceived trustworthiness of the political system, reaching them through their parents, peers, the education system or mass media. Earlier research has already shown that the attitude of political trust already develops clearly during childhood and adolescence (Abramson, 1972; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008). The study of adolescents therefore allows us to investigate what kind of socialization agents have the strongest impact on the development of political trust.

The occurrence of cultural transmission mechanisms of political trust does not imply yet that institutional approaches toward explaining political trust would be invalid. One might still claim that political trust in some way or another is related to the actual performance of government institutions. But considering the fact that not all citizens will have firsthand experience with all the institutions listed in the conventional survey battery that measures political trust, one needs to allow for the possibility that the impact of performance might be indirect, and might be mediated by a cultural transmission mechanism. That mechanism enables citizens who do not have any experience whatsoever with government performance, to access cultural codes on the perceived trustworthiness of these institutions.

In this article, we investigate cultural transmission mechanisms of political trust among adolescents. We build the argument on a unique two-year representative panel study among Belgian adolescents, allowing us to track the development of political trust over time. More specifically we investigate the impact of two of the main socialization agents at this age: the school environment and mass media. It can be expected that adolescents retrieve most of their information about the functioning of the political system by means of the school or the media (Kisby & Sloam, 2009; Mutz & Reeves, 2005). What happens at school, and the information they receive from the mass media, therefore is expected to have an impact on their political attitudes. In this article we first review the literature on the development of political trust and the cultural transmission of this attitude. Subsequently we present data and methods, and the results from the analysis, before finishing with some observations on the relevance of the study of political trust among adolescents.