Political Trust and Democracy: Re-examining the Critical Citizens Thesis

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Introduction

**Objective:** To empirically explore the connection between democracy and political trust

1. To assess the extent to which democracy predicts political trust
2. Comparing trust in partisan and non-partisan political institutions across regime types

• Findings: Democracy strongly, negatively and robustly associated with political trust across all political institutions (partisan and non-partisan)
Democracy and Political Trust

The literature is divided on the relationship between political trust and democracy

• Three broad perspectives:

1. The democratic decline perspective
   • democracies require high levels of political trust, the absence of which leads to democratic crisis (e.g., Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki 1975; Dalton 2004; Lipset 1959; Nye 1997)

2. The critical citizens perspective
   • low levels of political trust a sign of a healthy democracy (e.g., Booth and Seligson 2009; Dalton and Welzel 2014; Norris 1999, 2011; Weil 1989)

3. The “modified” critical citizens perspective
   • Democracies: low trust in partisan institutions, high trust in non-partisan institutions (e.g., Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Warren 2018)
Past Findings

• Cross-national comparisons of the relationship between democracy and political trust across regime types are few

• These studies have parallel findings – a negative association between democracy and trust in various political institutions
  • mostly bivariate correlations
  • do not account for both country- and individual-level factors
  • do not account for potential response bias in non-democratic regimes
  • do not a conduct a systematic comparison of political trust between partisan and non-partisan political institutions
Disaggregating the Concept of Trust

• To what extent can the concept of trust can be validly disaggregated?
• Is trust a general characteristic of individuals?
  • no: distinctions between social and political trust (factor analyses)
• Can political trust be disaggregated in democracies?
  • no: factor analyses suggest that there is a single underlining political trust
  • yes: factor loadings, mean scores, hierarchical analyses of trust in political institutions, multiple group confirmatory factor analysis
• Therefore, there is empirical support for a two-dimensional conceptualization of political trust within democracies:
  1. partisan institutions (political parties, government and parliament)
  2. non-partisan institutions (civil service, the courts and police)
Data and Methods

• Political Trust: confidence in political institutions (WVS/EVS)
• Democracy: V-Dem’s Electoral Democracy (Polyarchy) Index
• Control Variables:
  • various at both country-level and individual-level
  • Political Terror Scale (country-level) – control for potential response bias
• Methods:
  • Multilevel models
  • a panel dataset includes 256,401 observations from 82 countries over the period 1990-2020, with 219 country-years in the models
### Results - Multilevel Models of Political Trust

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>All Political Institutions (β)</th>
<th>Partisan Model (β)</th>
<th>Non-Partisan Model (β)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>-0.23017***</td>
<td>-0.20836***</td>
<td>-0.20752***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income Inequality</td>
<td>0.14239***</td>
<td>0.12669***</td>
<td>0.1214***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corruption</td>
<td>-0.0027</td>
<td>0.06788***</td>
<td>-0.07619***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Terror</td>
<td>-0.07676***</td>
<td>-0.04993***</td>
<td>-0.08966***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Trust</td>
<td>0.10704***</td>
<td>0.09589***</td>
<td>0.09739***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in Politics</td>
<td>-0.12987***</td>
<td>-0.15637***</td>
<td>-0.07488***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>-0.05886***</td>
<td>-0.04987***</td>
<td>-0.0578***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Controls</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>256,401</td>
<td>256,401</td>
<td>256,401</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other controls:

- **Country-Level** – Ethnic Exclusion, State Capacity, Economic Development, Economic Growth, State History
- **Individual-Level** – Sex, Age, Education, Income, Trust Variation
Conclusion

• Overall, the results suggest that there is a strong and robust negative relationship between democracy and political trust
  • holds with a variety of country- and individual-level controls, including controls for potential response bias and individual trust profiles

• However, does not resolve the debate

• Democracy is negatively associated with both trust in partisan and non-partisan political institutions

• For proponents of the modified critical citizens thesis, these results are concerning for democracy