

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

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

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

THANK YOU

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