

RESEARCH

Trust and Distrust in Political Institutions

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Abstract

This paper focuses on trust in political institutions. It builds on a large body of research that has provided a wealth of insights but has neglected the relationship between trust and distrust and the specificities of the relationship between institutions and citizens. Drawing on insights from a variety of research fields (philosophy, organisation studies, sociology and political science), the paper argues for treating trust and distrust as two separate concepts. A relational and institutionalist approach is used to show that trust and distrust are part of institutionalised relations, operating at the individual and collective levels, and involving reciprocities and complementarities.

Keywords: political trust and distrust, trust-distrust distinction, trustworthiness, political institutions, political attitudes and behaviours, relational perspective, institutional approach

Acknowledgment and credits

This paper is based on research conducted within the project “Enlightened trust: An examination of trust and distrust in governance – conditions, effects and remedies” (EnTrust). The project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870572.

1. Introduction

Trust in political institutions has received a great deal of attention from the academic community. This has to do with the relevance of popular support for the stability and legitimacy of political systems, especially with regard to democratic forms of

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governance (Warren 1999; Ankersmit and te Velde 2004). The high priority given to institutional trust is reflected in the diversity of studies rooted in different disciplines (political science, philosophy, sociology, economics, psychology, among others). Scholars have addressed different branches, levels and policy areas of political systems, described trends and scenarios, and identified determinants and consequences (e.g. Levi and Stoker 2000; Zmerli and van der Meer 2017; Searle et al. 2018; Carstens 2023). The wealth of evidence is remarkable. However, it has been repeatedly acknowledged that research has tended to privilege certain aspects while downplaying others (Lewicki et al. 1998; van de Walle and Six 2014). Furthermore, the analysis of trust has been conducted in different disciplines and research areas, resulting in a number of important but partial and disjointed findings.

Two related areas of reflection deserve further attention. On the one hand, research has focused almost exclusively on the analysis of trust, largely ignoring the analysis of distrust as a separate issue. It is true that nuanced analyses of trust in political institutions do not forget to say that some distrust is functional, while unconditional trust is dysfunctional for democratic regimes (Bertsou 2019). These voices add to the growing chorus praising the importance of scepticism in liberal democracies (Bufacchi 2001; Norris 2022). However, the specificities of distrust and trust have been little developed conceptually, and the same is true of the relationship between distrust and trust, although it is generally accepted that democratic governance is built on both (Sztompka 1998).

On the other hand, scholars have been interested in analysing political institutions as targets of trust. The aim is to better understand whether, why and under what conditions politicians, institutions or systems at different levels of governance and in different policy areas are trusted by citizens. Research has provided a wealth of insights into these questions, but has paid much less attention to the specificities of “institutional trust” (e.g. Möllering 2006: 71-75; Warren 2018). Most of these efforts aim at specifying the trustworthiness of political institutions as targets of public trust, for example by referring to the importance of institutional performance, political legitimacy and moral values (Hardin 1996; Sztompka 1998; Uslaner 2002). However, the trustworthiness of institutions provides only a partial picture of what institutional trust and distrust are in its inherent specificities.

This paper seeks to deepen our understanding of trust and distrust in political institutions by addressing these two interrelated shortcomings. To this end, it will briefly describe how institutional trust has been conceptualised and operationalised in previous research. Against this background, the merits of an analysis that treats trust and distrust as distinct but interrelated phenomena will be highlighted. In a

second step, the specificities of institutional trust will be reflected in terms of the characteristics of trustors, trustees and trust relationships. This will also allow to see how trust and distrust are institutionally linked. The paper draws on an interdisciplinary field of research. It aims to bring together evidence from different fields of research that have provided rich but partial insights. Reference is made to philosophy, political theory, organisation studies and sociology, because they contribute complementary knowledge to an relational and institutionalist approach that helps to differentiate different layers of institutional trust and distrust.

2. Trust and Distrust in Institutional Research

Social science research largely shares the conviction that trust deserves privileged treatment. In sociology and political science in particular, trust is seen as a functional prerequisite for social integration and cohesion, political stability and legitimacy (Lewis and Weigert 1985; Putnam 1993). The priority given to trust over distrust is particularly true when reviewing empirical research on institutional trust. In this area, research has dealt almost exclusively with trust, especially when considering measurement instruments (e.g. OECD 2017). Distrust is not entirely absent, as political theory has been interested in how democratic polities institutionalise trust against distrust (Sztompka 1998; Warren 2018). And more recently, researchers have become increasingly interested in scepticism, arguing that some form of distrust is important and even functional for liberal democracies (e.g. Bertou 2019; Norris 2022). However, these attempts provide only a very tentative account of distrust. Indeed, van de Walle and Six (2014: 166) show that empirical research does not measure distrust per se, but rather refers to somewhat related attitudes (e.g., political inefficacy, cynicism, alienation, etc.) or behavioural effects of distrust (e.g., abstention, voting for non-incumbents, lower tax and legal compliance, participation in protests, or other system-challenging behaviours).

This focus is not surprising when one considers the implicit assumption of most studies, namely that trust and distrust are two dimensions of the same phenomenon. In general, the assumption is that distrust is the absence of trust and that measures focusing on the latter are therefore sufficiently complex. A large proportion of studies, for example, ask respondents to rank their trust in political institutions (“to what extent do you trust the following institutions? ”) and provide answers ranging from “tend to trust” to “tend not to trust”, from “do not trust at all” to “completely trust”, or from “very trustworthy” to “not trustworthy at all” (e.g. OECD 2017: 186-196; Marien 2013). This bias towards trust relationships has consequences for the study of distrust, because the dominant stream of analysis follows the latent assumption that “not trusting” implies “distrusting” and that the scales

should therefore be understood as a continuum from trust to distrust (e.g. OECD 2017: 102, 158, 193; Schneider 2017: 965, 968). The idea is that trust and distrust are two entities bound to a zero-sum game, i.e. the more trust there is, the less distrust there will be, and vice versa.

2.1 Distinctiveness and Co-Presence

The one-dimensional approach to the study of trust and distrust has been repeatedly criticised. This is the case, for example, with Hawley (2012), who has criticised the one-sidedness of philosophical considerations (see also Jones 2019). Similar claims have been made by Lewis and Weigert (1985) in sociology, by Lewicki et al. (1998) for management and public administration studies, or by Saunders and Thornhill (2004) for organisational studies. Since then, distrust has received more attention (e.g., Guo et al. 2017; Carey 2017; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018), especially in organisation studies. However, a review of research on organisations, public administration and political institutions still shows the prevalence of a unidimensional approach. Van de Walle and Six (2014) attest to a widespread neglect in the analysis of distrust, with research in these areas failing to conceptualise it as a distinct construct, instead treating trust and distrust as opposites on a continuum.

This raises important questions about the distinctiveness of trust and distrust and their potential interrelationships (Guo et al. 2017; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018). A review of conceptual approaches suggests that there are three options for conceptualising the assumed distinctiveness. The first position is that trust and distrust are two sides of the same coin. Hawley (2012), who is interested in the philosophical foundations of trust and distrust, argues that it is important to provide a unified account of both trust and distrust in order to better understand why we trust and distrust others and on what foundations these relationships are based. For him, the essential conceptual element is commitment (fulfilled or unfulfilled): “Roughly speaking, to trust someone is to rely upon that person to fulfil a commitment, whilst distrust involves an expectation of unfulfilled commitment” (Hawley 2012: 1; also Hardin 1996). According to this conceptualisation, trust and distrust are either mutually exclusive, as commitments are either fulfilled or unfulfilled, or there is a zero-sum relationship, depending on the degree to which commitments are fulfilled or frustrated.

A second position has been taken by writers who subscribe to functionalist thinking. Trust and distrust are seen as interrelated phenomena, reflecting to some extent Hawley’s position. However, this approach places more emphasis on the distinctiveness of each. In fact, in situations characterised by complexity, contingency and uncertainty about the agency of others, trust and distrust are opposing options

used by a trustor to reduce the range of choices (Lewis and Weigert 1985: 969). That is, trust and distrust are functional equivalents in situations involving a bet on the future (Luhmann 1979). This means that actors may choose to trust or distrust – or a combination of the two – depending on what predictions they make about the actions of a trustee. Moreover, trust and distrust can co-exist in a situation because they are complementary ways of organising social relations. This complementarity is particularly relevant in settings governed by more formalised relationships, such as formal organisations or political institutions. The functional argument even implies that trust requires the presence of distrust in order to develop and flourish. Formal organisations and political systems institutionalise both in order to maximise the functionality of governance. This position resonates well with Sztompka (1998), who argues that democratic systems institutionalise distrust (e.g. separation of powers, rule of law and judicial review, periodic elections) in order to promote a *culture of trust* because it allows institutional trustworthiness to be repaired (also Braithwaite 1998).

This functional understanding has some similarities with Hawley's unified account, but it softens the assumption of the same *coin*, since trust and distrust provide – functionally – very different solutions to the same problem. Functionalism thus opens the door to a third option that treats trust and distrust as two distinct phenomena with different characteristics, determinants and consequences. Most of these efforts are related to organisation studies, which have seen the need to move beyond the unidimensional focus on trust to acknowledge the ambivalence and complexity of social relations in organisational settings. Empirical studies have confirmed that distrust is an empirical dimension in its own right, thus requiring different constructs to measure trust and distrust (Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018: 51). In terms of determinants, organisational studies have shown that trust and distrust depend on different factors, both at the individual level and in organisational and situational contexts (Guo et al. 2017: 8-16). For example, Sitkin and Roth (1993) have shown that trust is determined (i.e., corroded or restored) by regulatory and legal measures (or the lack thereof) that make interactions and mutual commitments more predictable and reliable, whereas distrust is more influenced by value incongruence and the violation of shared values. Moreover, trust and distrust are associated with different emotional antecedents, as Liu and Wang (2010) have shown in simulated negotiations, for example, anger is associated with distrust and compassion with trust.

In terms of consequences, empirical evidence underscores the distinctiveness of trust and distrust. Trust and distrust may be functionally equivalent solutions to the problem of uncertainty and complexity, but they will lead to very different constellations, e.g. solidarity versus atomism, in the patterning of social relations and social

order (Barber 1983). In organisational contexts, trust enables collaboration and integration, while distrust entails suspicion, personal safeguards, disruptive competition and potential withdrawal from continued relationships (Lewicki et al. 1998; Liu and Wang 2010; Bies et al. 2018). The problem is exacerbated by the inherent dynamics of social relationships, as trust and distrust can unleash different interactional dynamics, leading to self-reinforcing processes of trust or distrust formation (Korsgaard 2018), which can act as self-fulfilling prophecies (Frisell 2009).

The differentiation of consequences often leads to the distinction of two antagonistic forces: trust as a productive and positive factor, whereas distrust has negative consequences for interpersonal, intergroup and interorganisational relations (e.g. Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018:54). In its extremes, distrust becomes a problem that requires repair in order to restore trust (Gillespie and Dietz 2009). Formulated in this antagonistic way, it brings the conceptualisation back to the one-dimensional model of a trust-distrust continuum. Scholars of organisations criticise this position, arguing that trust and distrust have both *dark* and *bright* sides and thus entail detrimental and beneficial outcomes (Lewicki et al. 1998; Guo et al. 2017: 8-16). Distrust, for example, has been shown to promote active information seeking and healthy vigilance (Kramer 2002), and to help prevent exploitation and protection (Levi 2000) in organisational and institutional contexts. And political theorists of democratic governance argue that trust and distrust are not inherently good or bad in the governance of political power. Liberal democracies limit trust and defend distrust as public virtues by granting rights and establishing institutions that limit, distribute and control political power, for example by providing individual citizens, civil society and the mass media with the necessary opportunities and means to monitor, oppose or replace those in power through electoral processes or legal action (Szomptka 1998; Warren 2018).

The three approaches described so far make different assumptions about the pervasiveness of trust and distrust. The first approach leans towards a monist understanding that advocates the unidimensionality of trust and distrust (Marien 2013; OECD 2017). It advocates a trust-distrust continuum and assumes a zero-sum game, i.e. a loss of trust always implies a gain of distrust. The position of a trustor would be clearly identifiable because it could be located on a scale ranging from blind trust to scepticism to outright distrust. Although this position might vary over time and in different situations, the relationship to a trustor would be unambiguous, excluding the co-existence of trust and distrust. The second approach subscribes to the idea of functional equivalence and complementarity, and thus assumes a partial co-presence of trust and distrust. The co-presence is partial because formal organisations and political systems are internally differentiated, which means that trust

and distrust are assigned to different organisational units and/or public institutions (Sztompka 1998; Braithwaite 1998). Citizens would also allocate trust or distrust differently, for example, by favouring international over national institutions, the judiciary over the legislature, civil servants over politicians (Marien 2013: 24-7). The third approach argues strongly for the distinctiveness and pervasiveness of trust and distrust, and thus assumes a general co-presence of both. Citizens may trust or distrust public institutions to different degrees depending on the time and situation, but each institutional target would always mobilise elements of public trust and distrust at the same time.

The available research on formal organisations and political institutions presented earlier suggests that the second and third approaches are the most plausible. The first position seems immediately plausible when focusing on the realm of personal relationships, since continuous interactions and experiences among relatives, friends or acquaintances may lead to more stable and unambiguous relationships that are clearly located on the continuum of trust or distrust. The two assumptions arguing for (partial) co-presence are much more plausible when we move into the realm of more distant, complex and formalised relationships within organisational fields and/or political institutions. Partial co-presence is to be expected in organisational and institutional contexts characterised by internal differentiations, and thus populated by a number of different entities, mandates and procedures. However, this assumption has the disadvantage of the first one, because it stipulates unambiguous relations of trust or distrust with the different institutions, units or representatives.

The scenario of a pervasive co-presence of trust and distrust seems the most coherent and likely. There are two reasons for assuming such a co-presence. On the one hand, pervasiveness is to be expected because social relationships are generally characterised by ambivalence and uncertainty. Even personal contacts may not behave in a fully coherent and predictable way, depending on context and time. These ambivalences are much more relevant in the context of organisational and institutional relationships (Lewicki et al. 1998; Guo et al. 2017: 54-8), due to the complexity of these entities, the fact that relationships are more distant and mediated, and that actions are more difficult to anticipate. Citizens are therefore likely to have different experiences and develop mixed emotions and cognitions; at best, their expectations of the agency of organisations and their office-holders are cautious, hesitant or changeable.

On the other hand, it is to be expected that every organisational and institutional relationship will be shaped by different criteria of (un)trustworthiness at the same time. Research converges in showing that trustworthiness depends primarily on

perceived competence, integrity and benevolence (Bacharach and Gambetta 2001), although people also tend to have different conceptions of trust depending on cultures and political regimes (Schneider 2017) and the different conceptions of (un) trustworthiness that prevail in these cultural and political contexts. These criteria may correlate and thus merge into a coherent perception of trustworthiness, but they do not necessarily coincide. Citizens may trust and distrust a politician or public official at the same time if they perceive him or her to be honest but incompetent, or competent but unreliable. Moreover, although distrust has received little attention so far, it can be expected to add another layer to these relationships. Indeed, it is to be expected that distrustworthiness is a relevant issue in its own right. Citizens may perceive a person, organisation or institution as distrustworthy if the above criteria of trustworthiness are violated, i.e. if a trustee is dishonest, disloyal, malevolent, careless or incompetent. However, especially in the political sphere, it is to be expected that notions of distrustworthiness are not limited to notions of trustworthiness. On the contrary, proper notions of distrustworthiness are well established in political systems. The most prominent and researched notion of distrustworthiness is corruption (e.g. Uslaner 2013), but favouritism, nepotism and cronyism have also been shown to be relevant (Im and Chen 2020). Depending on the country and political culture, concepts such as arbitrariness, insolence, incivility, authoritarianism or ostentation may also indicate distrustworthiness (e.g. Daloz 2003). A politician or civil servant might thus be perceived as competent but corrupt, reliable but ostentatious.

The assumed co-presence of trust and distrust leads to the proposition that every relationship between citizens, formal organisations and political institutions is governed by different combinations of trust and distrust. This proposition was developed by Lewicki et al. (1998) in relation to interpersonal relations within organisations and consists of four cells: (1) a *high trust-low distrust* situation characterised by congruence and cooperation; (2) a *high trust-high distrust* situation characterised by scepticism and monitoring (trust but verify); (3) a *low trust-low distrust* situation characterised by arms-length transactions; and (4) a *low trust-high distrust* situation characterised by fear and general suspicion. Recent survey results, which distinguish trust and distrust as two separate constructs, show that this typology also applies to the relationship between citizens and political institutions. On the one end, citizens conform to the notion of “trust but verify” when they simultaneously express full trust and high vigilance; on the other end, they express low trust and little scepticism (Tsatsanis et al. 2023; Maggetti et al. 2023).

This typology needs to be extended when moving beyond the realm of formal organisations, where members are very likely to have developed some form of trust or

distrust. In an institutional context, where relationships between citizens and political institutions may be distant, mediated or suspended, it is necessary to consider that trust and distrust may be absent altogether. Citizens may be disillusioned, disengaged or distant, and thus not inclined to trust or distrust institutions in the fulfilment of their commitments. Alternatively, citizens may be convinced that trust and distrust are not relevant issues, assuming that their relationship with political institutions is governed more by formal rules and hierarchy, power and compliance.

2.2 From Latency to Salience

The possibility that citizens abstain from trusting or distrusting political institutions may be empirically marginal, but it is theoretically highly relevant because it opens the door to a relevant debate on the conceptual meaning of trust and distrust. According to this debate, trust can oscillate between a conscious disposition and an implicit behavioural rule (Möllering 2006:51-4). They can operate at the level of internalised and unconscious behavioural patterns, habitual and semi-conscious predispositions and/or explicit verbalisations and reflections (Endreß 2014:62-8; Offe 1999). For Luhmann (1988), this conceptual ambiguity was a reason to distinguish analytically between familiarity, confidence and trust. These conceptual distinctions are helpful to better understand that citizens' expectations may oscillate between implicitness and reflexivity. For example, citizens may not express institutional trust or distrust as long as the reliability of institutions is taken for granted. Citizens may be used to relying on public infrastructure (e.g. rubbish collection, water supply, transport routes), implicitly assuming that the state will regularly take care of them, and only when state institutions fail to do so will they ask why and whether the question of trust should be raised. Or they are used to not expecting anything from public authorities and are surprised by efficient services, which raises the question of the reasons for these unexpected signs of trustworthiness.

A similar conceptual distinction has been proposed by Hawley (2012) when distinguishing between reliance and trust. For him, trust is not to be confused with reliance or reliability, because people rely on many things, including people and non-human objects. Citizens rely on people without worrying about trustworthiness, and the same applies to most everyday objects (coffee machines, lifts, mobile phones, etc.) and public infrastructure (roads, bridges or buildings). This dependency also affects the institutional sphere. For example, when citizens rely on machines or infrastructure, they implicitly rely on these artefacts, but also on companies to produce safe products, on governments to establish safety regulations for these products, and on agencies to monitor their implementation. But none of this is of concern to citizens as long as they routinely rely on things and people to work as they usually do. The same argument applies to the unreliability of things and people. Citizens may be used to

things or people in their environment not working as they should, which means that they avoid them or learn to cope with them. This does not necessarily mean that citizens distrust them, as they simply accept that things work as imperfectly as they do. However, distrust may arise under certain circumstances, for example when disruptions (positive or negative) to this everyday order bring issues of trust and distrust to the fore.

Following the conceptual distinction introduced so far, it is advisable to distinguish between habitual faith and disbelief as taken-for-granted, implicit and latent attitudes and habits on the one hand, and trust and distrust as conscious and explicit choices on the other. The conceptual boundaries are blurred, as habitual faith in the proper functioning of public infrastructures may predispose citizens to express institutional trust when asked. At the same time, conscious experiences of institutional trustworthiness may be sedimented into a latent faith or disbelief. However, distinguishing between the two levels is important for analytical reasons, as it allows for a better understanding of the conditions that make institutional trust or distrust a salient personal issue. In this regard, it is possible to point to a number of conditions that have been proposed by research in philosophy and sociology. These conditions do not refer to individual and contextual determinants explaining different degrees of trust and distrust (e.g. Carstens 2023), but to the constitutive elements of trust and distrust themselves.

In this context, two conditions are repeatedly emphasised: vulnerability and uncertainty. On the one hand, it is argued that trust is a salient issue within a relationship between two actors (a trustor and a trustee) characterised by dependence and vulnerability. Dependence is an issue because the trustor is exposed to the action or inaction of a trustee, which may affect him or her positively or negatively. This dependence entails vulnerability because the trustor opens himself to the possibility of being disappointed, betrayed or even harmed by others (Baier 1986). Making oneself vulnerable to others could promote positive relationships with people, because vulnerability invites the commitment of a trustee to act on one's behalf, thus contributing to the development of fulfilling personal relationships and stable forms of social cooperation. But vulnerability can also have a negative side, opening the door to greater dependency, exploitation or abuse. In this sense, vulnerability can also develop into overt forms of precariousness (Mackenzie 2020). With regard to political institutions, we can therefore expect institutional trust and distrust to come to the fore as soon as citizens experience or perceive dependency and vulnerability, even precariousness, in relation to institutional action or inaction.

On the other hand, uncertainty (Luhmann 1988) is important because trust and distrust become salient concerns as soon as citizens are unable to anticipate the actions or inactions of others, be it a person or a political institution. In particular, in cases where a person has to decide whether or not to enter into a personal or institutional relationship (e.g. to vote, to apply to social services, to contact politicians), the uncertainty about institutional responses requires a decision rule. And in this respect, trust and distrust as options seem to play a crucial role.

Vulnerability and uncertainty help to understand why trust or distrust emerges as a relevant personal issue (Möllering 2006: 111), but they do not necessarily help to understand which route individuals take, whether trust or distrust in others is the more likely option. In this regard, three further conditions have been highlighted: cognitive, emotional and normative.

Cognitively, trust and distrust depend on what a trustor knows about a trustee, how people perceive the other person, and how they evaluate the interpersonal relationship and the planned interaction. According to Hardin, this cognitive dimension involves rational cost-benefit calculations. Trust and distrust are based on the trustor's expectation that the intentions and actions of others will be favourable and beneficial or unfavourable and detrimental to oneself (Hardin 2002; also Lewicki et al. 1998). Following this line of reasoning, he even claims that trusting a person – and especially an institution (Hardin 1999: 23) – is not a very rational choice for most people most of the time, because trust should be in the individual's own interest (Hardin 1999: 39). Trusting a person or an institution implies the expectation that one's interests will be protected and promoted by the counterpart. In evaluative terms, trust has a strong cognitive dimension (Lewis and Weigert 1985) and requires various cognitive operations to anticipate the other's ability or willingness to refrain from harm or betrayal: recalling the other's past activities, inferring his or her personal interests, and extrapolating his or her motives or intentions. The assumption would be that congruence or complementarity of interests, intentions and motives leads to trust, while divergence cognitively favours distrust (Sheppard 1995).

A second condition of trust and distrust is related to affections and emotions (von Scheve and Slaby 2019: 43). The relationship between trust and emotions is complex, as emotions can be an antecedent, correlate or consequence of trust (Sitkin and Roth 1998; Liu and Wang 2010; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018:54). Nevertheless, research suggests that emotions play a constitutive role in generating trust and distrust. Studies attribute trust to emotions such as esteem, empathy and compassion, while distrust is associated with contempt, fear and anger, meaning that the two different sets of emotions also drive distrust and trust respectively (Jones 2019).

Furthermore, emotions are also responsible for feedback loops that reinforce and self-perpetuate trust and distrust: “If we accept an affective attitude account of trust and distrust, we should expect these phenomena to focus attention, shape interpretation, direct inquiry, structure inference and so affect the salience and perceived desirability of action options. This is exactly what we find: seen with distrust an action or remark that might otherwise have seemed innocent will be taken to reveal an ulterior motive, or a lack” (Jones 2019: 959).

Finally, trust and distrust depend on (shared) norms and values. In other words, a person will trust and distrust others depending on normative expectations about the behaviour and commitment of the trustees. Scholars argue that shared norms are conducive to trusting relationships, while normative disagreement or value incongruence promotes distrust, for example when a trustor assumes that a trustee disregards or even violates shared norms (Sitkin and Roth 1998; Sitkin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018: 53-4). Shared norms reduce the uncertainty associated with the trustee’s actions because the trustor can assume that the trustees are bound in their motives and intentions by these norms and values. Moreover, if the trustees’ obligations are defined in normative terms, compliance with these obligations can be ensured through normative compliance. This normative condition is thus intrinsically linked to criteria of trustworthiness and distrustworthiness (Levi and Stoker 2000: 481; Bertsou 2019). They show that citizens assess the trustworthiness of individuals or institutions in relation to a particular set of norms and values.

3. Institutional Trust and Distrust

Research on trust and distrust has tended to engage in generalizing reflection, arguing that trust in institutions is not entirely distinct from trust in people. Some scholars even argue that an adequate “theory of trust must offer a conceptualisation of trust that bridges the interpersonal and systemic levels of analysis, rather than dividing them into separate domains” (Lewis and Weigert 1985: 974; see also Hawley 2012). The previous chapter has provided evidence that such an integrated account of trust and distrust can be a compelling proposition. The conditions of trust and distrust that have been identified among individuals also appear to apply to citizens’ relationships with institutions. Moreover, the criteria of trustworthiness seem to revolve around a limited set of concepts (e.g. competence, integrity and benevolence; Bacharach and Gambetta 2001), and this observation seems to apply equally to interpersonal, organisational and institutional relationships. But does this mean that there are no differences between these different levels and goals of trust and distrust? And if there are differences, what are the specific characteristics of institutional trust and distrust?

3.1 The Institutionalisation of Trust and Distrust Relations

The conceptual debate on trust has converged on the conviction that there are different levels of trust attribution. Most commonly, scholars distinguish between interpersonal, organisational and systemic trust (Kroeger and Bachmann 2013: 256-8), depending on whether the target of trust is a person, an organisation or a social system (e.g. the economy, the state, science or the mass media). Three characteristics seem to be particularly relevant in this distinction. First, trust in people, organisations or systems differs in the level of abstraction. Interpersonal trust relies less on abstractions when it is anchored in individual encounters and relationships, and when generalised trust in others is discounted as a construct. Trust in organisations may also relate to tangible establishments with their organisational characteristics (a name, a building, a formal structure, a set of practices). But at this level it is based on a more abstract expectation that organisations will act in a predictable, reliable and considerate way. In relation to systems, the level of abstraction increases disproportionately, as systemic trust is said to relate to the expectation “that a system will work” (Luhmann 1979: 50).

Second, trust in people, organisations and systems is characterised by increasing complexity. This complexity can be attributed to scale and internal differentiation, which means that trust relationships in organisations, and even more so in social systems, become more distant, indirect and mediated. Internal differentiation also implies that the larger entities are aggregates of the smaller ones, which means that trust relationships with the larger entities also include the smaller ones. According to Kroeger (2017), citizens may trust or distrust an organisation as an operational entity, but the relationship with the organisation may also be intertwined with the relationship with the organisational representatives with whom they interact. And the same applies to systemic trust, which will depend on the particular organisations and their representatives, and the experiences that individuals have with them.

Third, trust in people, organisations and systems does not necessarily differ in terms of the criteria of (dis)trustworthiness, but in the way they are made relevant. Organisational trust, for example, depends on perceived competence, integrity and benevolence, as does interpersonal trust (Schoorman et al. 2007). However, the level of codification and formalisation of rules and norms governing human behaviour and interactions is higher at the organisational and systemic level than in interpersonal relationships. This codification and formalisation affects trust relations, as political institutions establish a set of normative principles and rules that make it possible to assess the trustworthiness of the operating system, individual organisations and office holders (Sztompka 1998; Warren 2018). Sociological institutionalism is correct in qualifying that institutions are not only governed by formal principles and

structures, but that they also operate at an informal level on the basis of practical routines, bodies of knowledge and myths (March and Olsen 1984; Möllering 2006: 61-71). However, the specificity of trust in organisations and inter-organisational fields lies precisely in the duality of formal and informal rules and norms, and the complementarities, ambivalences and tensions associated with them.

The heuristic distinction between interpersonal, organisational and systemic trust has been widely used in research on political trust, because it is agreed that institutional trust must be located at the intersection of these goals and levels: the *state* or *political system*, the various *political institutions*, the various organisations and their individual representatives (Offe 1999; Hooghe and Zmerli 2013; Warren 2018). Political systems are understood as fields of organisation that have institutionalised a distinctive rationality with a set of rules and norms that regulate and evaluate their functioning (Möllering, 2006: 71-5; Kroeger 2012). The structuring principle of this system (the separation of powers) has created different political institutions, which can be defined as organisational fields that comprise an ensemble of organisations (e.g. *the* executive, judiciary and legislature, *the* public administration, courts or parliaments) that are patterned by a set of operational practices, rules and norms. Public trust in political institutions is thus located at different levels of aggregation and abstraction (individual office-holders, organisations and larger organisational fields). While these levels provide different targets for public trust, it has been found that citizens tend to trust the different levels and branches of political institutions in similar ways (Marien 2013; Schneider 2017). This suggests that political institutions, with their internal differentiations, are judged against a set of similar institutional rules and norms that establish specific ideas and beliefs about what is trustworthy (e.g. competence, benevolence, integrity, impartiality; Bachrach and Gambetta 2001; Norris 2022) and untrustworthy (e.g. corruption, nepotism, favouritism, ostentation, arbitrariness; Uslaner 2013; Im and Chen 2020; Daloz 2003). It is important to remember, however, that the spotted convergence of trust levels is the product of surveys that are interested in generalised trust in political institutions. They do not take into account the specific experiences that citizens may have in a political system that is highly differentiated along governance levels and policy areas. In such a context, citizens may maintain more ambivalent, mixed and contradictory relationships.

The research debate outlined so far has been strongly guided by an institutionalist approach, which argues that public trust (and distrust) is deeply shaped by a country's institutional architecture (e.g. Möllering 2005; Bachmann and Inkpen 2011; Zmerli and Hooghe 2013). Rules and norms that ensure trust and channel distrust are inscribed in constitutional documents, institutional designs, organisational

structures and operational practices. The aim is to create institutional settings within which distrust can be productively processed and trust-building encounters and interactions between citizens and public officials can develop. This institutionalist approach thus generally subscribes to a learning theory according to which citizens learn to trust or distrust political institutions depending on the experiences they make within institutionally structured settings (e.g. personal encounters, written communications, public events) and the lessons they draw from public talk about institutional legitimacy. Institutional theories in political science tend to emphasise the influence of the institutional architecture of democratic governance (Sztompka 1998; Warren 2018). They argue that trustworthy institutions inspire public trust (e.g. Rothstein and Stolle 2008), although distrusting institutions are to some extent important in channeling distrust and restoring trust (Braithwaite 1998). Sociological institutionalism has added that the institutional rules and norms that shape relations between organisations, their employees and citizens are not only codified, implemented and reviewed from the top down. They insist that these rules and norms are reproduced through institutional work within and between the various organisations involved (March and Olsen 1984; Möllering 2006: 61-71; Bachmann and Inkpen 2011). The ability to shape institutional rules and norms across organisations has been attributed not only to the state, but also to professions (lawyers, economists, social workers, etc.). Their professional ethos, knowledge and practice influence institutional trust relations with citizens through their everyday work (e.g. Poulsen et al. 2020; Karlsson et al. 2022), but also establish *chains of trust* within and between organisations (Kroeger and Bachmann 2013).

The institutionalist approach seems particularly promising, when combined with a relational approach to the study of trust and distrust, as it allows to disentangle the ways in which the three elements of a trust or distrust relationship are institutionally embedded: the trustor, the trustee and the relationship itself. First, institutional trust and distrust implies that a trustor is not just an individual actor. Relationships between citizens and public officials (e.g. the local elected politician or the relevant street-level bureaucrat) may be highly personalised, and individual experiences and evaluations may therefore be crucial. Citizens may choose to trust public officials and the organisations they represent if they expect them to act in their interests, while they may distrust them if they expect harmful decisions or betrayed commitments. However, citizens do not trust or distrust institutional actors only in terms of personal relations, because institutional relations are defined along specific characteristics or roles. Individuals interact with political institutions on the basis of their rights and entitlements as citizens, immigrants, voters, taxpayers, social beneficiaries, etc., and their expectations and anticipations will be based on these grounds. Individuals know that their relationship to political institutions should be

the same for the category or group of people to which they belong. That is, their relationship with political institutions is the same for all members of, for example, the group of vulnerable families, the unemployed, taxpayers, voters, etc. Uncertainty may be a problem for individuals, since taxpayers or benefit claimants do not know with certainty whether they will be treated similarly or differently from other people belonging to the same group or category. But it is precisely this institution-alised reference point that makes a difference: in trusting or distrusting an office-holder or political organisation, individuals will relate their personal situation to the commitments that political institutions make to the group or category in general. It can thus be assumed that institutional trust adds a collective dimension to the individual dimension: a trustor is not just an individual person, but a member of a class or group that shares similar characteristics, and the trust or distrust that the individual develops is shaped by collective conditions of vulnerability and uncertainty, and by the cognitions, emotions and norms that the person may share with others. The collective dimension also explains why considerations of equality, justice and fairness play such an important role among citizens when it comes to institutional trust (Hough et al. 2010; Schnaudt et al. 2021).

Second, differences from the interpersonal level emerge when considering that the target of trust is a collective actor. Conceptually, it has been proposed to limit trust to interpersonal relations in institutional settings, claiming that only specific commitments by tangible office-holders can inspire trust, while complex and opaque social systems can only stimulate confidence (Offe 1999: 56). This observation is correct when focusing on the aggregate level of societies, but is misplaced when moving to the organisational level. Agency is not limited to individuals, but extends to the organisational level through formal operating procedures and established routines of decision making and implementation. Individual citizens may develop trust and distrust depending on the *facework* (Kroeger 2017) of recognisable public officials. However, their experiences will also be impersonal when it comes to highly formalised, standardised and digitised procedures and encounters with public administrations, courts or party organisations. Citizens will trust or distrust individual office holders as well as organisations, depending on whether they fulfil institutionally prescribed obligations or fail to fulfil their mandates.

However, both levels of agency converge on an observation that institutionalist theories in sociology and political science have repeatedly made (Offe 1999; Warren 2018; Möllering 2005; Kroeger and Bachmann 2013). Institutional rules are at the heart of trust and distrust relations because they allow citizens to assess the trustworthiness of public officials, organisations and the wider inter-organisational field. For example, citizens may find their public servant in an employment agency to be

less reliable and benevolent, they may find their responsible authority to be less reliable and benevolent than others, or they may find the institutional rules that govern individual and organisational actions to be arbitrary or harmful. Trusting institutions therefore means three things at once: trusting that the office-holder and/or organisation will not betray or harm by their actions, trusting that the institutional rules will not be harmful in their operation, and trusting that the office-holders, organisations and institutional rules will be consistent in responding to citizens' needs. This complexity shows that institutional trust is highly conditional, as it refers to *rules in action* and is thus located at the interface between what the rules say and how they are applied: trustors need to trust the institutional rules not to exploit their weaknesses, but they also need to trust the office holders or organisations to abide by these rules (Kroeger 2017). Thus, distrust will arise when citizens expect office holders to implement harmful rules and/or when they anticipate that office holders or organisations will deviate from responsive rules.

Third, the specificity of institutional trust can also be identified in terms of its relational dimension. As discussed above, trust always involves relational work between a trustor and a trustee, because it helps to overcome the uncertainty and dependency inherent in their encounters. In interpersonal encounters, trust relationships are mostly informal, sometimes spontaneous, and the social rules and norms that shape these encounters are not necessarily codified. Relations between citizens and political institutions also exhibit this informality, especially when considering *street-level* encounters with public officials. But these relationships are embedded in institutional settings that are highly regulated and formalised. In a democratic system of governance, these regulations and formalisations aim to limit the power of office holders and the vulnerability of citizens. As political theory emphasises, constitutionalism, the rule of law and the separation of powers vest citizens with civil, political and social rights that seek to reduce the dependency and uncertainty inherent in their relations with political institutions (Braithwaite 1998). Citizens can legitimately expect political institutions to fulfil their mandates and obligations, and they are provided with legal, administrative and political means to question, control or resist institutional decisions, be they those of parliaments, public administrations or courts (Offe 1999: 73-5; Sztompka 1998: 25-7). Institutional relations of trust thus require that distrust is a legitimate option to which citizens can resort. Such legal, administrative and political provisions regulate trust and distrust relations directly (e.g. public access to information, judicial review, elections) and indirectly (e.g. guarantees of free media, organised civil society; Braithwaite 1998; Warren 2018), although scholars agree that the arousal of trust relations is fragile and contested, and thus subject to constant reproduction.

3.2 Reciprocity between Mutuality and Complementarity

The relational dimension shows that institutional trust and distrust are linked to situations and settings that are institutionally predefined and prefabricated, even though organisations and their employees introduce variance into the way these settings are designed and the way institutional rules and norms are reproduced and updated. However, further precision is needed to better understand the logic of trust and distrust formation within these settings. In this regard, the concept of reciprocity seems to provide important insights into the constitutive elements of trust and distrust formation processes (Serva et al., 2005; Siktin and Bijlsma-Frankema 2018: 54-5; Kosgaard 2018). The general message is clear, but clarification is needed because the meaning of reciprocity oscillates between the logic of mutuality and complementarity.

With regard to interpersonal trust, it has been shown that reciprocity is a consequence of continuous encounters and interactions (Kosgaard 2018). This is the case when individuals continuously rely on each other, for example by helping each other, exchanging services or goods, and collaborating on joint activities. In these cases, interactions may involve role-swapping, where a trustee and a trustee alternately depend on each other's actions to enable exchange or collaboration. Reciprocity is thus linked to the notion of mutuality: individuals will trust others on whom they depend because they experience that their trust is reciprocated. Ultimately, reciprocity allows second-order trust to develop because both sides experience that they can rely on their trust relationship. This means that trust is not a disposition of the trusting party that refers to or depends on the trustworthiness of the other; it is a quality of the interpersonal relationship itself on which both can rely. Relations of trust and distrust thus develop as a (learning) process: "We learn that, tentatively and conditionally, we can trust trust and distrust distrust, that it can be rewarding to behave as if we trusted even in unpromising situations" (Gambetta 1988: 228). Accordingly, trust is a quality of social relations that requires constant nurturing: "like the ability to speak a foreign language or to play the piano, these moral resources are likely to become depleted and to atrophy if not used" (Hirschman 1984: 93). The same logic of *learning* applies to distrust, as the latter can develop along a self-reinforcing process of negative expectations and experiences, even in the sense of self-fulfilling prophecies (Frisell 2019).

This assumption of reciprocity needs to be adapted with regard to institutional trust, because the institutionalised setting assigns different roles to citizens and officials, and thus different duties and rights, mandates and obligations. The setting implies asymmetrical power relations that involve different but complementary experiences of dependency, vulnerability and insecurity. Even within these complementary roles,

trust and distrust can be reciprocated: Citizens will distrust political institutions to the extent that they experience that they are distrusted; and trust is more likely in contexts where trust in citizens is more proactively institutionalised. Institutional theories support this idea of reciprocity when they argue that the institutionalisation of trust in democratic polities and welfare states has a positive impact on generalised interpersonal and institutional trust (Levi 1998; Rothstein and Stolle 2008; Hänninen et al. 2019; for a more nuanced analysis, Wellander and Sanandaji 2020). Conversely, the institutionalisation of distrust should lead to the generalisation of public distrust. This is echoed by political theorists of democratic governance, who are concerned about an unbalanced promotion of public distrust (Sztompka 1998; Uslaner 2016), but also by welfare state scholars, who see the risk that restrictive welfare state provisions (e.g. restrictive eligibility criteria, means testing or credibility checks) promote distrust as a default setting in encounters between citizens and public authorities: “to preserve citizens trust in the system, the system needs to demonstrate trust also in the clients” (Karlsson et al. 2022: 483).

The idea that trust and distrust are contagious relational attributes that imply mutuality has empirical plausibility, but it is generally too simplistic. In institutional settings, asymmetric power relations between citizens and public officials prevail, so that the complementarity of trust and distrust is assumed to be a necessary structural feature of complex social systems. This argument reiterates the functionalist assumption presented above, which argues that the institutionalisation of distrust at the level of social systems is functional in order to increase trust at the interpersonal level (Luhmann 1979). The same argument applies to institutional trust within democratic systems of governance, since generalised trust in political institutions paradoxically requires the institutionalisation of distrust, even if the latter is used sparingly (Sztompka 1998). “As part of this, there are certain professions that entail the exercise of suspicion and distrust as a professional duty, including the police, border guards, attorneys, ticket controllers and, crucially, judges” (Albi 2022: 7).

The presumed complementarity of trust and distrust also applies at the level of organisations and their staff. In terms of internal relations, distrust is institutionalised in organisational structures and roles or positions (e.g. quality control inspectors, auditors, first-line supervisors) or in specific procedures and regulations (e.g. penalties for transgressions, contract clauses for misconduct), and these regulations make it possible to increase trust at the operational level of organisational work (Lewicki et al. 1998). Similar observations apply to external relations, as external control bodies aim to increase external trust in the organisation and its performance (e.g. Elken and Telmann 2021). Contracts play a particularly important role in regulating trust and distrust with regard to internal and external relations, as they set out

rights, obligations and clauses for misconduct and thus aim to combine coordinating and controlling functions (Lumineau 2017; Guo et al. 2017: 56-7).

Empirical evidence suggests that citizens welcome the prevalence of trust and distrust. High levels of public trust in the police or courts (Marien 2013: 24-7) indicate that citizens trust political institutions to be willing to distrust citizens and public officials to abide by established rules and norms. And similar findings apply to citizens' personal relationships with public institutions. Citizens tolerate elements of distrust in their personal dealings with executive institutions. In part, they seem to expect this institutional distrust because it signals impartiality, due process and law-abiding behaviour (Schnaudt et al. 2021). Reciprocity may thus involve complementary roles, organisational structures and institutions, which arouse interlocked relations of trust and distrust: citizens may trust institutional distrust, while distrusting institutional trust.

Conclusions

The analysis of trust in political institutions can build on an extensive body of research with ample evidence on the forms and levels of institutional trust, its determinants and consequences. However, previous research has downplayed the relationship between trust and distrust and the specificities of the relationships between institutions and citizens. The paper argues for a more nuanced approach that treats trust and distrust as two distinct concepts and relationships, as opposed to a monist understanding of trust and distrust as ends of a single dimension, and a functionalist perspective that treats them as functional equivalents. A dualist conception is proposed, which presupposes different antecedents, correlates and consequences, and maintains that institutional relations are multifaceted and ambivalent, characterised by different criteria of trustworthiness and distrustworthiness. With regard to institutional trust and distrust, a relational and institutionalist approach is adopted in order to highlight the specificities of institutionalised trust and distrust relations. These relationships are located at different levels – office-holders, organisations, organisational fields – and are characterised by personal and impersonal, informal and formal dimensions. In all cases, these relationships are highly institutionalised, i.e. they are based on collective categorisations, roles and mandates, and an asymmetry of dependence and power. Additionally, institutionalised relations of trust and distrust exhibit a reciprocity that oscillates between mutualism and complementarity. Not only do citizens reciprocate the trust and distrust they experience, but they may also be suspicious of institutional trust and supportive of institutional distrust. The relationship between citizens and political institutions is thus characterised by reciprocities, complementarities and ambivalences that deserve more in-depth analysis.

The reflections in this paper suggest avenues for further progress in the analysis of institutional trust. Research has developed in different and partly disconnected fields (e.g. philosophy, political science, sociology, psychology, organisation studies). A more structured dialogue between political sociology and organisation studies is particularly promising. Political sociology could greatly benefit from organisational studies in order to better understand how trust and distrust are institutionalised within organisations and organisational fields, and how the co-presence of trust and distrust generates ambivalences, tensions and conflicts at the individual, organisational and inter-organisational levels.

Research on democratic governance and political institutions has echoed these insights in describing the institutional architecture of liberal democracies and the fragile balance between institutions of trust and distrust, but the focus has been primarily on institutional trustworthiness. There has been less systematic research into the tangible relationships of trust and distrust between citizens and political institutions. One of the main shortcomings of current empirical research is the lack of studies that operationalise and analyse trust and distrust as separate constructs. Against this background, it is difficult to develop a solid and deep understanding of how institutionalised trust and distrust are interrelated in public perceptions and experiences. Following the dominant unidimensional trust/distrust continuum, research is limited to analysing how institutions push trust or distrust in or out. However, little is known about the complementarity or incommensurability of institutional trust and distrust in terms of public perceptions and experiences, attitudes and behaviours. This interdisciplinary field of research suggests that institutional trust and distrust have complex relationships that merit more systematic analysis.

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