RESEARCH

Trust and Distrust in Political Institutions: Conceptual and theoretical reassessments

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Abstract

The analysis of trust in political institutions is rich in insights, but constrained by two conceptual limitations critically discussed in this paper. Research privileges trust and marginalises distrust, thus providing an incomplete and flawed picture; and it focuses on trust dispositions, thus disconnecting institutional trust from what it is, a relational concept. Drawing on interdisciplinary research, this paper proposes a dual conceptualisation that treats trust and distrust as separate but interrelated concepts. An institutionalist approach is used to expose that trust and distrust are part of institutionalised relations, operating at the individual and collective levels, and involving reciprocities and complementarities.

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1. Introduction

Public trust in political institutions is subject to long-term fluctuations, but survey data in all regions of the world appears to confirm a general trend of eroding trust since the 2000s (Perry 2021). National governments and parliaments, which are already at the lower end of the trust scale, are particularly affected by this development. Although the decline in trust does not affect all political institutions and countries at the same time and at the same pace (Petri 2023), empirical evidence suggests that the accumulating crises (e.g., the Great Recession, the Covid-19 pandemic) are spreading a sense of growing uncertainty and dissatisfaction with institutional performance across countries (Ahrendt et al. 2022). These developments have sparked debates about the implications for political systems, particularly democratic forms of governance. While some have expressed concern about dwindling confidence in democracy (Dogan 1997; Citrin/Stoker 2018), most scholars have noted that declining levels of trust do not necessarily indicate a *crisis of democracy* (e.g., Dalton 1999; van der Meer 2017). Democracy not only tolerates lower trust levels. Some scholars even argue that trust in political institutions is not necessarily rational (Hardin 1999; Offe 1999). Others add that distrust is a functional component of democratic regimes (Sztompka 1998; Warren 1999; Bertsou 2019), while further voices join the chorus of those who praise the importance of scepticism in liberal democracies (Bufacchi 2001; Bertsou 2019; Norris 2022).

These debates show that the assessment of trust-related trends and implications is anything but straightforward. The underlying problem of empirical diagnoses is connected to conceptual and theoretical questions that are still partly unresolved. Does a decline in trust in political institutions entail an increase in institutional distrust, and would an increase in public trust reduce institutional distrust? Are trust and distrust complementary concepts, as most studies assume, or rather separate phenomena? If both coexist, what are the respective characteristics and interrelationships of institutional trust and distrust? These questions cannot be answered on the basis of available evidence, due to two biases of current research. On the one hand, scholars have privileged the analysis of trust in political institutions, especially with regard to democratic forms of governance (Warren 1999; Ankersmit/te Velde 2004), distinguishing between different branches, levels and policy areas, describing trends and scenarios, and identifying determinants and consequences (e.g., Levi/Stoker 2000; Zmerli/van der Meer 2017; Searle et al. 2018; Carstens 2023). However, research has downplayed the role of distrust as an issue in its own right. This bias not only creates an incomplete picture of empirical reality, but it also runs the risk of ignoring an important variable, and this gap could lead to erroneous conclusions about the scope and nature of popular support of political institutions. On the other hand, empirical research is dominated by a restrained conception of institutional

trust, given that it predominantly focuses on the individual disposition of citizens to attribute trustworthiness to institutions. Reducing institutional trust to perceptions of trustworthiness, however, limits the ability to properly understand trust and distrust relations between citizens and political institutions.

This article seeks to help overcome these limitations by focusing on the conceptual and theoretical issues responsible for the biases in institutional trust research. In the first section, it will review the broader field of trust-related studies, which comprises, among others, political science, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. This interdisciplinary research field offers different, but also complementary, insights that allow us to develop a more comprehensive and systematic understanding of trust and distrust, their specificities and interrelations. In a second step, the paper will zoom in on the specificities of institutional trust and distrust. It will develop a relational and institutionalist approach that is interested in how trust and distrust are institutionalised in regard to trustors, trustees and trust relationships. The article will conclude with a discussion of implications for further research.

2. Trust and distrust in research

A large number of studies shares the conviction that trust deserves privileged treatment. Philosophy has focused on trust because the debate revolves around questions of epistemology and ethics, with the latter being predominantly interested in the role and substance of moral reasoning and acting (Baier 1986; Gambetta 1988). Sociology and political science have privileged trust because the latter is considered to be a functional prerequisite of social interactions and societal order, political stability and legitimacy (Lewis/Weigert 1985; Putnam 1993; Newton et al., 2017). Economists have insisted on studying trust because it is considered to be an important asset, highly beneficial for the functioning and development of market economies (Zak/Knack 2001; Korczynski 2000; Özen 2019). And psychology has accorded trust more prominence than distrust, as the focus has been on social bonds and developmental processes that lay the ground for a person's well-being, and their cognitive and social functioning (Jones et al. 1997; Rotenberg 2010).

2.1. Institutional trust as the centre of gravity

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 because political theory has been interested in how democratic polities institutionalise trust as well as distrust (Sztompka 1998; Warren 2018). And more recently, researchers have become increasingly interested in

scepticism, arguing that components of distrust are functional for liberal democracies (e.g., Bertou 2019; Norris 2022). However, empirical research has resisted measuring and analysing distrust as a concept in its own right (van de Walle/Six 2014: 166). Most studies address distrust indirectly, for instance, by focusing on 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).

The predominant focus on trust is grounded in the conviction that trust and distrust belong to the same phenomenon. In line with this view, distrust is the absence of trust, which implies that measures focusing on the latter are regarded as sufficiently complex (e.g., OECD 2017; Davies et al. 2021). The prevailing practice is to ask respondents to rank their trust in political institutions ("to what extent do you trust the following institutions?") by offering 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). The analyses thus follow the 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; Davies et al. 2021; Schneider 2017: 965, 968). The idea is that trust and distrust are two entities bound to a zero-sum game: The more trust there is, the less distrust there will be, and vice versa.

This one-dimensional approach has been criticised, primarily by scholars from neighbouring disciplines, among them philosophy (Hawley 2012; Jones 2019), sociology (Lewis/Weigert 1985), psychology (Markova/Gillespie 2008), and research on organisations and public administration (Lewicki et al. 1998; Saunders/Thornhill 2004; van de Walle/Six 2014). A number of conceptual papers and research reviews were issued, calling for an equal examination of trust and distrust (Sitkin/Roth 1993; Lewicki et al. 1998, 2006; Guo et al. 2017; Sitkin/Bijlsma-Frankema 2018). Before this backdrop, scholars have intensified their attempts to develop, test and validate concepts and measurements of trust and distrust, even though these voices are still minoritarian in their respective research fields. Studies dealing with workplace and interorganisational relations (Patent 2014; Guo et al. 2017; Min/Zickar 2023; Lewicka/ Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2022) and Internet commerce (McKnight/Chervany 2000; Cho 2006; Ou/Sia 2010; Chang/Fang 2013) have been in the lead, probably because distrust is a more obvious issue.

All these studies recommend that trust and distrust be measured as separate concepts, and they suggest three ways of proceeding. First, scholars propose measuring general dispositions, implying that respondents are not only asked about their

general propensity to be trustful, confident or faithful, but also about their inclination to be distrustful, suspicious or watchful (Patent 2014; Chang/Fang 2013). Second, they advise asking respondents about expected behaviours of trustees and/or outcomes of interactions, for instance, by linking trust to expected positive outcomes (e.g., cooperation, benefits, and fulfilment of needs), and distrust to expected risks, damages, and necessary controls (McKnight et al. 2003; Cho 2006; Ou/Sia 2010; Lewicka/Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2022). Finally, most attempts centre on the perception of the trustees' (un)trustworthiness in terms of characteristics, intentions, and motives. They invite respondents to indicate, for instance, the trustees' competence, integrity, benevolence, and predictability and/or their incompetence, dishonesty, unpredictability, hostility, disloyalty, deceptive and fraudulent intention (Benamati et al. 2006; Cho 2006; Patent 2014; Lewicka/Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2022).

Only recently, institutional research has started to follow these recommendations. Scales measuring distrust in the healthcare system, for instance, have been developed and validated under the impression of the pandemic (Rose et al. 2004; Sanford/Clifton 2022). The results show that distrust is closely related to fear of harm, doubts about the accuracy of information, and questions about the motives of medical authorities. Other studies have started to experiment with measurements of trust, mistrust and distrust in politicians and political institutions (Jennings et al. 2021; Bunting et al. 2021). They follow the studies cited above by operationalising distrust as the propensity to be suspicious, cautious, doubtful, or watchful (also Tsatsanis et al. 2023; Maggetti et al. 2023), and/or they aim to determine perceptions of (un)trustworthiness in terms of reliability, competence, honesty, fairness, or transparency of politicians and institutions (Jennings et al. 2021).

2.2. Distinctiveness and co-presence

The review demonstrates that institutional research is starting to be more sensitive to the relevance of distrust, probably stimulated by the empirical observation of a growing dissatisfaction with institutional performance, the spread of scepticism, populist and/or anti-democratic sentiments (Butzlaff/Messinger-Zimmer 2020; Wood 2022; Thielmann/Hilbig 2023). However, the underlying question about the relation between trust and distrust remains unresolved. A closer look at the interdisciplinary field of research is promising in this respect, as it helps to identify three ways of conceptualising the relationship between the two (Guo et al. 2017: 25-29). It should be noted, though, that these debates address the topic in a more generic way, thus disregarding differences between the interpersonal and institutional realms, which will be discussed later.

The first position claims that trust and distrust are two sides of the same coin. Hawley (2012), who is interested in the philosophical foundations of trust and distrust, supports this position. He argues that it is important to provide a unified account of both to better understand why we trust and distrust others. For him, the essential conceptual elements are (fulfilled or unfulfilled) commitments: "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). According to this conceptualisation, trust and distrust are either mutually exclusive, as commitments are fulfilled or unfulfilled, or there is a zero-sum relationship that depends on the degree to which commitments are accomplished or disregarded (Hardin 1996).

A second position has been taken by writers who subscribe to functionalist thinking. Trust and distrust are seen as interrelated phenomena. Compared to the first view, this approach places more emphasis on the distinctiveness of each: 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/Weigert 1985: 969; Min/Zickar 2022). That is, trust and distrust are functional equivalents in situations involving a bet on the future (Luhmann 1979). This means that trust and distrust can co-exist in a given 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. 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*. Distrust allows institutional trustworthiness to be repaired (also Braithwaite 1998).

The third position moves beyond the assumption of functional equivalents by treating trust and distrust as two distinct phenomena with different characteristics, determinants, and consequences. In regard to characteristics, research has shown that trust and distrust are distinct variables with separate attitudinal dimensions that variate independently from each other (McKnight et al. 2003; Min/Zickar 2022; Lewicka/Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2022). In regard to determinants, organisational studies have shown that trust and distrust depend on different factors when looking at the individual, organisational and contextual levels (Guo et al. 2017: 8-16). For example, Sitkin/Roth (1993) have shown that trust is determined (i.e., corroded or restored) by regulatory and legal measures (or the lack thereof) because they make interactions and mutual commitments more (or less) predictable and reliable, whereas distrust is influenced rather by value incongruence and the violation of

shared values. Moreover, trust and distrust are associated with different emotional antecedents because anger, fear and sadness are associated with distrust, while compassion, gratitude and happiness are related to trust (Dunn/Schweitzer 2005; Liu/Wang 2010; Chang/Fang 2013). Neuropsychological studies have corroborated this distinctiveness by evidencing that trust and distrust are linked to different brain areas and neurological processes (Dimoka 2010).

In terms of consequences, empirical evidence underscores the distinctiveness of trust and distrust. At an individual level, distrust seems to arouse stronger behavioural effects than trust because distrust is associated with deeper emotions, feeling of powerlessness, distress, risk, threat, or betrayal, which induce protective and/or pre-emptive actions (McKnight et al. 2003; Guo et al. 2017). At the aggregate level, trust and distrust seem to lead to different constellations. In organisational contexts, for instance, trust enables collaboration and integration, while distrust arouses personal safeguards, disruptive competition and/or the potential withdrawal from continued relationships (Lewicki et al. 1998; Liu/Wang 2010; Guo et al. 2017: 17-19; Bies et al. 2018). The distinctiveness of outcomes is magnified by processual dynamics because trust and distrust unleash different interactional developments, leading to self-reinforcing processes of trust or distrust formation (Bijlsma-Frankema et al. 2015; 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 is a productive and positive factor, whereas distrust has negative consequences for interpersonal, intergroup and interorganisational relations (e.g., Sitkin/Bijlsma-Frankema 2018: 54). In its extremes, distrust becomes a problem that requires repair in order to restore trust (Gillespie/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 interpretation, 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). It helps to prevent exploitation and seeks protection (Levi 2000) in organisational and institutional contexts. Political theorists of democratic governance add 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). Distrust is thus a motivating factor for civic participation and democratic governance.

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 one-dimensionality of trust and distrust (Marien 2013; OECD 2017). Although a trustor's position on the trust-distrust continuum may vary over time and in different situations, the relationship with a trustee would be unambiguous, thus excluding the coexistence 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, meaning that trust and distrust are assigned to different organisational units and/or public institutions (Sztompka 1998; Braithwaite 1998). The third approach argues strongly for the distinctiveness and pervasiveness of trust and distrust, thus implying a co-presence of both (Jennings et al. 2021; Maggetti et al. 2023). Citizens may trust or distrust public institutions to different degrees, but each institutional target will always mobilise elements of public trust and distrust at the same time and in the same situation.

There are several arguments in favour of the assumed co-presence of trust and distrust. First, research findings presented above empirically corroborate that trust and distrust are separate phenomena requiring distinct concepts and operationalisations (e.g., McKnight/Chervany 2000; Dikota 2010; Guo et al. 2017). Different measurement tools and scales have been developed, tested, and validated in different research fields, involving electronic commerce (McKnight et al., 2003; Benamati et al. 2006; Chang/Fang 2010), organisational studies (Lewicka/Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2022; Min/Zickar 2023), and public perceptions of state authorities (Rose et al. 2004; Bunting et al. 2021; Sanford/Clifton 2022), thus providing robust evidence for co-presence.

Second, a pervasiveness of trust and distrust is to be expected because social relationships are often characterised by ambiguity and ambivalence. Even personal contacts may not behave in a fully coherent way. But ambivalences are much more pronounced in the context of organisational and institutional relationships (Lewicki et al. 1998; Guo et al. 2017: 54-8; Min/Zickar 2023). This is 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 likely to have different experiences and develop mixed emotions and cognitions that mobilise both trust and distrust.

Third, it is to be expected that individual, organisational, and institutional relation-ships 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/Gambetta 2001; McKnight et al. 2002). These criteria may correlate and merge into a coherent perception of a trustee's trustworthiness, but they do not necessarily coincide: Citizens may both trust and distrust an office holder at the same time if they perceive him or her to be honest but incompetent, or competent but unreliable. Moreover, distrust adds another layer to these relationships. Citizens may perceive a person, organisation, or institution as untrustworthy if the above criteria of trustworthiness are violated, that is, if a trustee is dishonest, disloyal, malevolent, careless, unpredictable and/or incompetent (Sanford/Clifton 2022; Lewicka/Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2022). However, especially in the political sphere, it is to be expected that notions of *distrustworthi-ness* are not limited to concepts of violated trustworthiness. On the contrary, proper conceptions 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 rele-vant (Im/Chen 2020). Depending on the country and political culture, concepts such as arbitrariness, insolence, incivility, authoritarianism or ostentation may also indi-cate *distrustworthiness* (e.g., Daloz 2003). A politician or civil servant might thus be perceived as competent but corrupt, reliable but ostentatious.

The argument of a co-presence of trust and distrust has been used to develop heuristic models that depict different combinations of both. Lewicki et al. (1998), for instance, have proposed a two-by-two table to designate different types of social relations within organisational settings patterned by different constellations of trust and distrust: (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. This and similar typologies (e.g., Benamati 2006; Lewicka/ Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2022) were developed to suggest that different trust-distrust constellations generate different outcomes, in this case, different forms and degrees of interdependency and collaboration within organisations (e.g., full cooperation, bounded relations, arms-length transactions). However, beyond its heuristic value in hypothesising outcomes, the typology has proved less useful for the empirical analysis of trust and distrust itself. This has to do with the variety of expressions of trust-distrust combinations that have been articulated in empirical research. They range from blind or credulous trust, to bounded trust, including watchfulness, scep-ticism or vigilance, to suspiciousness, mistrust, distrust and cynicism (Benamati et al.

2006; Fieschi/Heywood 2006; Betsou 2019; Jennings et al. 2021; Norris 2022; Tsatsanis et al. 2023; Maggetti et al. 2023). A heuristic systematisation of these observations may distinguish between unconditional and conditional forms of trust, excluding or including some degrees of distrust, as well as conditional and unconditional forms of distrust. However, such an exercise would require a sound understanding of the meaning and rationale of the various trust-distrust constellations, and a related empirical validation.

2.3. From latency to salience

The assumption of a co-presence of trust and distrust entails a substantial advance, as has been shown in the previous section, but it downplays one possibility, namely the absence of both trust and distrust (Benamati et al. 2006). This is likely to be the case because citizens may feel detached, disillusioned, or disengaged and therefore without expectations, or they may feel that trust and distrust are less important in their relationship with political institutions than formal rules, power, and compliance. A conjoint absence, however, is particularly pertinent and instructive, in theoretical terms, because it opens the door to a relevant debate on the conceptual meaning of trust and distrust. According to this debate, trust and distrust can oscillate between a conscious disposition and an implicit behavioural rule (Möllering 2006: 51-54). They can operate at the level of internalised and unconscious behavioural patterns, habitual and semi-conscious predispositions and/or explicit verbalisations, reflections, and choices (Endreß 2014: 62-68; Offe 1999). For Luhmann (1988), this conceptual ambiguity was a reason to distinguish analytically between familiarity, confidence, and trust. In regard to state authorities, citizens may not express insti-tutional 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 whether the question of trust should be raised. Or they may be used to not expecting anything from public authorities and may be surprised by efficient services, which provokes questions about unexpected trustworthiness.

Consequently, trust should not be confused with reliance or reliability (Hawley 2012), as people rely on others in their immediate environment without necessarily worrying about trustworthiness, and the same applies to everyday objects (coffee machines, lifts, mobile phones, etc.) and public infrastructure (roads, bridges or buildings). This reliance 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. These examples show that trust and distrust may be absent, but they may arise under certain circumstances, for example when (positive or negative) disruptions to this everyday order/disorder bring issues of trust and distrust to the fore.

Following these considerations, 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 dispositions and behavioural 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 transformed into a latent faith or disbelief. However, the distinction 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 or public issue. In this regard, it is possible to point to a number of conditions that have been proposed by research in philosophy, psychology, and sociology. These conditions do not refer to individual and contextual determinants explaining different degrees of trust and distrust (e.g., Levi-Faur et al. 2020; 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 characterised by dependence and vulnerability. Most definitions of trust underline these conditions as decisive, for instance, when Mayer et al. (1995: 712) speaks of trust as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party". 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 him- or herself up to the possibility of being disappointed, betrayed or even harmed by a trustee (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. This uncertainty indicates that trust and distrust presume the existence of freedom (Carey 2017). A trustor may voluntarily choose to enter into a relationship of dependency and vulnerability when entrusting someone to do something on his or her behalf (Baier 1986). And even in the case where individuals may not be able to escape a situation of dependency and vulnerability, they may still opt for trust and/or distrust, implying engagement and cooperation, or detachment and pre-emptive or remedial actions. Trustees are also in a situation implying freedoms, as they may decide to be reliable and conform to trustor's expectations, or they may decide to ignore their commitment, even openly betraying or abusing them. This is also the reason why trust and distrust become a particularly salient issue, when discretion of political institutions and office holders patterns their relationship with citizens.

Vulnerability and uncertainty are thus widely accepted conditions for the arousal of trust and distrust issues (e.g., Lewis/Weigert 1985; Baier 1986; Mayer et al. 1995; Möllering 2006: 111). However, they do not necessarily help to clarify which route individuals take, and whether trust or distrust in others is the most likely option. In this regard, three further conditions have been highlighted: cognitive, emotional, and normative. First, trust and distrust depend on what a trustor knows about a trustee, how people perceive others, and how they evaluate the interpersonal relationship and interaction. According to Hardin (2002), 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). They require cognitive operations to anticipate the other's ability or willingness to refrain from harm or betrayal: recalling the trustees' past actions, inferring their (hidden) interests, and extrapolating their motives or intentions. The underlying assumption is 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. The relationship between trust and emotions is complex, as emotions can be an

antecedent, correlate, or consequence of trust (Sitkin/Roth 1998; Liu/Wang 2010; Sitkin/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 gratitude, esteem, empathy, and compassion, while distrust is associated with contempt, sadness, fear, and anger (Dunn/Schweitzer 2005; Liu/Wang 2010; Chang/Fang 2013). These emotional conditions are not irrational because they involve an affective intuition of whether a trustor is trustworthy or not, and whether collaboration or detachment is the best option. In this sense, a congruence of emotions (e.g., shared empathy or appreciation) will contribute to trusting relationships, while a complementarity of affections (e.g., fear and anger) will lead to distrust, thus contributing to feedback loops that reinforce and self-perpetuate trust and distrust relationships (Bijlsma-Frankema et al. 2015; Korsgaard 2018; Jones 2019).

Finally, trust and distrust depend on norms and values (Uslaner 2002). In other words, a person will trust and distrust others depending on normative expectations about their motivations and behaviours. This means that trustworthiness or untrustworthiness are very often defined in normative terms (Levi/Stoker 2000: 481; Bertsou 2019). Evaluating a person or institution, for instance, in terms of honesty, benevolence, competence or transparency, implies that interpersonal or institutional relations should be governed by these norms according to a trustor, and the inverse would be true for criteria of untrustworthiness, such as incompetence, corruption, nepotism or insolence. Additionally, scholars point to the intersubjective dimension of norms, arguing 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/Roth 1993; Sitkin/Bijlsma-Frankema 2018: 53-54). Shared norms have these effects because they reduce the uncertainty associated with the trustee's actions: Trustors can expect that trustees are bound in their intentions and actions by these norms, and if they are not, this could be an indication of uncertain, potentially harmful outcomes.

3. Institutional trust and distrust

The conceptual debates reviewed so far tend towards generalising reflections, in some cases even arguing that trust in institutions is not entirely distinct from trust in people (e.g., Lewis/Weigert 1985: 974; Hawley 2012). Such an integrated account can be compelling because the conditions of trust and distrust identified above apply to interpersonal and institutional domains alike, and the same seems to be true in regard to the relevant criteria that trustors follow when assessing trustworthiness.

However, the identification of commonalities does not exclude the possibility of substantial differences between the interpersonal and institutional realm. But if this is the case, what then are the specific characteristics of institutional trust and distrust? An answer to this question requires conceptual clarifications and theoretical choices that go beyond most standard conceptualisations. In fact, most of the conceptualisations outlined in the previous section focus their attention on the trustee when discussing trust and distrust, thus marginalising or even ignoring differences between individual, organisational or institutional trustees.

This is true for philosophical and psychological studies, in particular, because they treat trust and distrust either as anthropological constants and/or personality traits acquired during the life-course (e.g., Baier 1986; Jones 1999; Hardin 2002; Rotenberg 2010), which helps to explain generalised inclinations and stable dispositions that may vary between individuals, depending on socialisation and personality. A similar focus on the trustor is also shared by scholars of political sociology and political science, but these studies attribute a greater role to the political, societal, and cultural context within which individuals develop their attitudes and behaviours. According to this approach, political cultures are characterised by a similar propensity to trust or distrust, and they share similar ideas and norms of (un)trustworthiness (Inglehart 1988; Kaasa/Andriani 2022). Both approaches are well equipped to explain the general propensity of individuals, groups, or societies to trust and/or distrust, but they are less apt to understand the specificities of institutional trust and distrust. Additionally, they are weak in revealing why and how institutions shape citizens' dispositions and behaviours, and why trust and distrust in institutions vary over time and across domains.

Conceptualisations that move institutions as targets of trust and distrust at centre stage provide important corrective insights. Institutional theories share the conviction that political institutions have a mandate and responsibility to address societal needs and problems, thus providing a framework within which citizens form and express trust and distrust relations. Performance theory is a widely used institutionalist approach, as it argues that public trust and distrust are a function of the ability of institutions to comply to their mandates and meet public expectations (Miller/Listhaug, 1999). Institutional trust and distrust are thus influenced by the objective performance of institutions and/or its subjective evaluation (Bouckaert et al. 2002; Mishler/Rose 2001; Norris 2022). This theory is appropriate when explaining varying degrees of trust or distrust, particularly when considering variations between policy domains, times, and institutions. But the institutional claim is modest: The agency of institutions is important in influencing public perceptions, but the decisive role is attributed to the trustor, who rewards the good or bad performance of a political

institution with trust and/or distrust. Other institutional theories are better suited to understanding the formative role of institutions in the constitution and development of trust and distrust. Democratic and constitutional theory (Sztompka 1998; Warren 2018) has made such an argument in relation to the formal principles and structures of political systems, and sociological institutionalism has done so in relation to the practices, rules and norms that shape the operation of political institutions (March/Olsen 1984; Möllering 2006: 61-71), and thus also the relations between citizens and state authorities. The following reflections will thus follow the path of these institutionalist theories.

3.1. The institutionalisation of trust and distrust relations

The specificities of institutional trust and distrust can be determined using a recurring distinction between the individual, organisational and systemic levels (Kroeger/ Bachmann 2013: 256-258), that is, between trust in office holders, political organisations and the political system. Three characteristics are particularly relevant in this regard. First, trust in people, organisations or systems differs in its level of abstraction. Interpersonal trust relies on specific experiences and assessments when anchored to individual encounters and relationships, even though it is certainly possible to conceive of abstract conceptualisations to measure the generalised propensity to trust others, for instance, people or humanity (Frazier et al. 2013). Trust in organisations may also relate to tangible entities with specific organisational characteristics (a name, a building, a formal structure, a set of practices and representatives). But at this level, it is based on a more abstract expectation that an organisation, as a collectivity, will act in a predictable, reliable, and considerate way. In relation to systems, the level of abstraction increases disproportionately, as systemic trust is related to the general expectation "that a system will work" appropriately (Luhmann 1979: 50).

Second, trust in people, organisations and systems is characterised by increasing complexity. This complexity increases ultimately because the larger entities are aggregates of the smaller ones: Political systems are complex organisational fields (e.g., the legislative, executive and judicial branches) comprising different organisations with specific objectives and rationales, just as organisations are aggregates of people with specific mandates and roles. This means that trust relationships within larger entities also encompass the smaller ones. According to Kroeger (2017), for instance, citizens may trust or distrust an organisation as an operational entity, but the relationship with the organisation will be intertwined with the relationship with the organisational representatives with whom they interact. The same applies to systemic trust, which will be interrelated with the experiences individuals make with particular organisations and their representatives.

Third, trust in people, organisations and systems does not differ categorically in terms of the criteria of trustworthiness, but in the way they are made relevant. Organisational trust, for example, depends on perceived competence, integrity, and benevolence, as does interpersonal trust (Bacharach/Gambetta 2001; 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 at interpersonal relationship level. This codification and formalisation has an impact on relations of trust and distrust, as political systems and their institutions are constitutionally based on a set of normative principles and rules that make it possible to assess the trustworthiness of the operating systems, individual organisations, and their office holders (Sztompka 1998; Warren 2018). Moreover, institutions are not only governed by formal principles and structures, but also by practical routines, bodies of knowledge and myths (March/Olsen 1984; Möllering 2006: 61-71), which add a further set of criteria to evaluate the (un)trustworthiness of political institutions.

These considerations show that institutional trust and distrust are closely linked to formal and informal rules and norms. Institutional trust can thus be defined as the readiness of a trustor to rely on a person, organisation, or system to fulfil a mandated commitment formally and informally attributed to these trustees, while distrust involves an expectation of unfulfilled mandates and commitments. The constitutional theory of democratic governance rightly insists on the constitutive role of formal principles and rules for institutional trust and distrust, because these values and norms define what are legitimate expectations regarding the mandated commitments of an office holder and/or an organisation, and what the proper procedures and measures are for fulfilling these commitments. And sociological institutionalism rightly asserts that what constitutes a mandated commitment also depends on informal practices, rules, and norms (Möllering, 2006: 71-75; Kroeger 2012). These practices might correspond to what formal principles and rules prescribe, but normally they add another layer to the commitments expected to be fulfilled and the criteria to assess their fulfilment.

The institutionalist approach thus argues that public trust and distrust are keenly shaped by a country's institutional architecture (e.g., Möllering 2005; Bachmann/Inkpen 2011; Zmerli/Hooghe 2013), as defined and realised through constitutional documents, organisational structures, and operational practices. Moreover, the institutionalist approach generally subscribes to the assumption that citizens learn to trust or distrust political institutions depending on the experiences they have in their dealings with wider organisational fields (ministries, courts, parties, etc.), with specific organisations and/or individual office holders. As will be shown later, these

experiences are also determined by the institutional work done by office holders within and between the various organisations in the field, and the role trust and distrust play within this work (March/Olsen 1984; Möllering 2006: 61-71; Bachmann/Inkpen 2011).

The institutionalist approach claims, finally, that the specificities of institutional trust and distrust can only be fully understood by moving beyond the exclusive focus on the individual trustor. Rather, all three components need to be acknowledged in its institutional constitution: the trustor, the trustee, and the relationship itself. First, the institutionalist argument proposed here maintains that a trustor is not just an individual actor, but an institutionalised category or group. Citizens might maintain an individual relation with an office holder (e.g., a local politician or a street-level bureaucrat), and personal experiences and evaluations may therefore be crucial. However, citizens relate to political institutions on the basis of their rights and obligations (e.g., as voters, taxpayers, social beneficiaries, immigrants), and their expectations and anticipations will be shaped accordingly. Additionally, institutional rules and norms prescribe that the relationships between citizens and political institutions should be the same for the category or group of people to which citizens belong. Uncertainty may be a problem for individuals, since taxpayers or benefit claimants might not know whether they will be treated similarly or differently from other people belonging to the same group or category. But it is precisely this institutionalised reference point that makes a difference: Individuals will relate their personal situation to the commitments that political institutions make to the collective group or formal category in general. This collective dimension explains why considerations of equality, justice and fairness play such an important role among citizens when it comes to institutional trust or distrust (Hough et al. 2010; Schnaudt et al. 2021).

Second, the specificity of institutional trust and distrust is tied to the fact that the target is also a collective actor. Conceptually, limiting trust to interpersonal relations in institutional settings has been proposed, with claims that only specific commitments by tangible office holders can inspire trust, while complex and opaque social systems can only stimulate confidence (Offe 1999: 56; also Hardin 1999). This observation might be plausible when moving to the level of societies, but it is misplaced when moving to the organisational level. Agency is not limited to individuals, but extends to the organisational level, as well: Individual citizens may not only develop trust and distrust depending on the *facework* of recognisable public officials (Kroeger 2017); their experiences will also be impersonal when it comes to highly formalised, standardised and digitised procedures and encounters with organisations (e.g., public administrations, courts or parties). This is the reason why the study of institutional trust and distrust must consider interlocking targets. For example, citizens

may find the civil servant at the state authority to be unreliable and ungenerous; they may find the local authority to be the same; or they may find the institutional rules that govern individual and organisational actions to be defective and/or harmful. Institutional trust and distrust are thus located at the intersection of what the rules say and how they are applied: trustors need to trust that the institutional rules will not exploit their vulnerability, but they also need to trust the organisations or office holders to abide by these rules (Kroeger 2017). Thus, distrust will arise when citizens expect office holders or organisations 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 when focusing on its relational dimension. As discussed in the previous section, trust 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 may also exhibit this informality, especially when considering personal encounters with public officials. But these relationships are embedded in institutional settings that are regulated and organised. 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 their dependency, vulnerability and uncertainty in their dealings with political institutions (Braithwaite 1998) – and also state authorities legitimately distrust citizens in order to upkeep the rights and obligations of 'trustworthy' citizens. Citizens and state authorities can both legitimately expect the other side to fulfil their obligations and commitments, and both sides are provided with legal, administrative, and political means to question, control or object to decisions and actions (Offe 1999: 73-75; Sztompka 1998: 25-27). Institutional relations of trust thus require that distrust is a legitimate option to which citizens and state authorities can resort. In regard to citizens, for instance, there are a number of legal, administrative and political provisions that 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). Institutions thus also regulate how trust and distrust materialise in the relationships between citizens and political authorities.

3.2. Reciprocity between mutuality and complementarity

The institutionalist approach proposed here contends that institutional trust and distrust are ultimately relational phenomenon. This assertion may seem too far-reaching, especially for research dedicated to the study of attitudes (Levi 2000; Marien 2013; OECD 2017), as these studies focus exclusively on the examination

of trustors and their dispositions, thus asserting that the willingness to trust can be measured and surveyed in terms of individual and unilateral statements only. However, this research strand restricts trust to a cognitive and emotional attribution of trustworthiness to a trustee by individual trustors, and thus to perceptions of institutional trustworthiness. It disregards the institutional embeddedness of individual expressions of trust and distrust, and the experiential contexts it implies. An institutionalist approach insists on the need to understand and reconstruct trust and distrust as an institutionalised relation, along the lines of the argument developed above. Additionally, it proposes to consider the role of reciprocity in the formation and expression of institutional trust and distrust relations (Serva et al., 2005; Siktin/Bijlsma-Frankema 2018: 54-55; Kosgaard 2018). The argument requires clarification, particularly because the meaning of reciprocity is not self-evident and oscillates between mutuality and complementarity.

Interpersonal trust exhibits elements of mutuality and complementarity at the same time, when focusing on continuous encounters and interactions (Kosgaard 2018). This is the case when individuals continuously rely on each other, for example, by helping one another, exchanging services or goods, and collaborating on joint activities. In these cases, interactions may involve role-swapping, where a trustor and a trustee alternately depend on each other's actions to enable exchange or collaboration. Reciprocity is thus linked to the notion of mutuality and complementarity: Individuals will mutually trust each other because each has reciprocated the trust of the other as a trustor and/or trustee.

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 only a disposition of the trusting party, which depends on the trustworthiness of the other party; 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 (Bijlsma-Frankema et al. 2015), even in the sense of self-fulfilling prophecies (Korsgaard 2018; Frisell, 2009).

The reciprocity assumption 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 uncertainty. Even within these complementary roles, however, trust and distrust can be reciprocated: Citizens will distrust political institutions to the extent that they will have experienced being distrusted; and trust is more likely in contexts where trust in citizens is more proactively institutionalised. Institutionalist theories support this idea of reciprocity when they argue that the institutionalisation of trust in democratic systems and welfare states has a positive impact on generalised interpersonal and institutional trust (Levi 1998; Rothstein/ Stolle 2008; Hänninen et al. 2019; also, Wellander/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; Bertsou 2019), 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 (Karlsson et al. 2022: 483).

The idea that trust and distrust are contagious relational attributes that imply mutuality has plausibility, but empirical causality is difficult to prove (Wellander/Sanandaji 2020). At the same time, it is also possible that distrust can foster trust and vice versa, if reciprocity is understood in terms of complementarity. This proposition 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, 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). Institutionalised distrust may thus even be necessary to repair institutional trust.

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, roles, and 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). All these regulations make it possible to increase trust at the operational level of organisational work because it frees the relevant persons and units from monitoring, checking, and controlling

others (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/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: 56-57).

Beyond these studies, the complementarity of trust and distrust has received little attention by scholars interested in public trust in political institutions. However, there are indications that such a complementarity also patterns public perceptions. It is well known, for example, that citizens rate institutions differently in terms of trustworthiness. Citizens trust non-majoritarian and rule-enforcing institutions more than partisan and rule-giving ones, when they assign higher trustworthiness to the police and courts than to parliaments and parties (Marien 2013: 24-27). This indicates that citizens trust judicial and law-enforcing institutions because they allow distrust towards officials and/or citizens to be expressed and managed. In addition, citizens tolerate elements of distrust in their personal dealings with executive institutions (e.g., eligibility criteria, verification requirements, controls or sanctions for misconduct). In part, they seem to expect this institutional distrust to be applied because it signals impartiality, due process and law-abiding behaviour (Schnaudt et al. 2021), and because it helps to combat citizens' abuse of public services. In sum, citizens seem to trust institutional distrust, while distrusting institutional trust, even though the specific mechanisms, circumstances and contexts are not yet well defined or understood.

4. Conclusions

A review of the academic literature shows that research still privileges the study of trust. Although a growing strand of research recognises the relevance of distrust as a concept in its own right (Lexicki et al. 1998; Guo et al. 2017; Sitkin/Bijlsma-Frankema 2018), it is still primarily rooted in psychological and organisational studies that focus on interpersonal, organisational relationships or economic transactions (Cho 2006; Ou/Sia 2010; Chang/Fang 2013; Min/Zickar 2023). With regard to political institutions, research is lagging behind, despite current developments that urge us to consider the interplay between trust and distrust. In fact, available evidence suggests an erosion of trust as a response to the multiplication of crises, the deficits in government performance, the increasing fragmentation of public opinion and the spread of populist movements (van der Meer 2017; Perry 2021). However, these observations do not allow us to determine whether the erosion of trust automatically implies an increase in institutional distrust. Moreover, scholars who praise the role of scepticism

in liberal democracies (Bufacchi 2001; Norris 2022) have begun to acknowledge that trust is not necessarily a democratic virtue. Finally, research in neighbouring disciplines (McKnight et al. 2003; Dimoka 2010; Guo et al. 2017) has convincingly shown that the one-sided focus on trust risks overlooking distrust as an important variable, meaning that available evidence may be conceptually flawed and empirically incomplete, or even incorrect.

This paper argues for a conceptual and theoretical reassessment of research agendas in order to transcend existing biases and limitations in two respects. First, it opposes two conceptualisations dominating the research field: the monist understanding of trust and distrust as ends of a single dimension, and the functionalist account that treats both merely as functional equivalents. A dualist conception is proposed that presupposes different constitutive elements, antecedents, correlates, and consequences at the interpersonal and institutional levels, and argues for a co-presence of trust and distrust. Second, this paper criticises the dominant conceptualisation of institutional trust in empirical research for unilaterally ascribing trust to a trustor, thus reducing the examination of trust to individual perceptions of institutional trustworthiness. The institutionalist approach promoted here insists on the need to understand the specificities of institutional trust and distrust in regard to all their components (the trustor, the trustee and the trust relationship) in terms of collective practices, rules and norms, categorisations, roles and mandates. Individuals might unilaterally express their propensity to trust or distrust, but these attitudes are embedded in institutionalised relations that exhibit a reciprocity oscillating between mutualism and complementarity.

The conceptual and theoretical reflections, to which this paper contributes, seem particularly pertinent to sensitise for the shortcomings of current research agendas and stimulate corrective measures. First, the review of available studies indicates that distrust has characteristics, determinants and consequences that are not necessarily the same as those of trust. In regard to political institutions, democratic and constitutional theory has provided general insights (e.g., Sztompka 1998; Braithwaite 1998; Warren 2018), but the empirical observations made by neighbouring disciplines still await systematic empirical validation in regard to political institutions (e.g., Rose et al. 2004; Jennings et al. 2021; Sanford/Clifton 2022; Maggetti et al. 2023).

Second, studies in the social sciences acknowledge that citizens do not unconditionally trust political institutions (Bufacchi 2001; Betsou 2019; Norris 2022; Wood 2022), thus expressing more nuanced and/or ambivalent opinions that combine elements of trust and distrust. A number of descriptive concepts have been used: blind or unconditional trust, vigilant trust, cautiousness, watchfulness and scepticism, suspiciousness,

mistrust, distrust or cynicism. But more emphasis should be placed on analysing the meaning and logic of the various trust-distrust constellations, particularly in comparative terms, in order to allow for concerted and cumulative evidence.

Third, empirical research has to devote itself to a more careful and systematic analysis of trustworthiness. Research has highlighted a similar set of trustworthiness criteria (Hardin 1996; Bacharach/Gambetta 2001; Sanford/Clifton 2022; Lewicka/Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2022), but it is not clear whether these criteria variate between political systems and cultures. Additionally, very little is known about the criteria of untrustworthiness, which are partly unrelated to trustworthiness, when considering, for example, hostility, fraudulent behaviour, ostentation, nepotism or clientelism (Uslaner 2013; Cho 2006; Im/Chen 2024; Lewicka/Zakrzewska-Bielawska 2022).

Fourth, research has not sufficiently taken into account the conceptual differences between trust and trustworthiness. Most empirical studies claim to analyse trust, but they are either interested in measuring the personal propensities to trust (Patent 2014; OECD 2017) that may converge with confidence, faith or optimism, or they focus on the individual attribution of trustworthiness to political institutions (Levi/Stoker 2000; Jennings et al. 2021), which is not the same as institutional trust (van de Walle/Six 2014).

Finally, empirical analysis has paid too little attention to the interdependencies between institutional trust and distrust. There are indications that whoever sows distrust reaps distrust – while the same seems to be true for trust, as well (Levi 1998; Rothstein/Stolle 2008; Hänninen et al. 2019). However, trust and distrust are also institutionalised as complementary elements (Lumineau 2017; Guo et al. 2017: 56-57; Warren 2018), whereas institutional trust depends on distrust, and distrust is nourished by trust. The conditions, arrangements and mechanisms impacting on the specific relations between institutional trust and distrust are thus still awaiting further inspection.

These open questions suggest that the analysis of trust and distrust in political institutions still has a way to go. Undoubtedly, previous research has been extremely productive, which is why we can build on a highly developed body of knowledge about the forms, causes and consequences of institutional trust. However, research agendas and their implicit biases need to be critically reassessed in order to explore new avenues of inquiry. In this regard, a more proactive engagement with the interdisciplinary research field is highly recommended in order to better understand the complex and dynamic relationships between institutional trust and distrust.

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