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Does political trust strengthen democracy? A cross-national longitudinal analysis

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Abstract

Political trust is widely considered essential for democracy, but empirical evidence testing this hypothesis remains limited. Drawing on research that connects political trust to democratic legitimacy, highlights trust's behavioural and attitudinal consequences, and underscores its contextual character as a form of political support, we hypothesize that political trust exerts a positive effect on subsequent changes in democratic quality, but only in countries that have already reached a high level of democracy. We test this hypothesis with cross-lagged models fit to political trust estimates from 62 countries over 30 years, combined with democratic quality scores from the Varieties of Democracy project. We find little evidence of an overall effect of trust on democracy, and stronger evidence for a conditional effect: based on our results, political trust has a positive effect on democracy, but only in countries that have already achieved high quality of democracy.

Keywords

Political trust, political support, democracy, public opinion, latent trend models

Introduction

There is widespread concern with low or declining levels of political trust as potential threats to contemporary democracies. This concern derives from theoretical understandings of political trust as closely related to legitimacy, which is the basis of regime stability and durability. It is also in line with cross-national studies finding that, within Europe, more democratic countries tend to see higher levels of political trust than less democratic ones. However, so far there is little empirical

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evidence that increasing political trust would improve democracy or that declining political trust constitutes a threat for democratic stability. Hence, in this paper we ask, after Levi and Stoker (2000: 500): Does citizens' political trust affect the performance of democracy? We test the hypothesis about the positive effect of trust on democracy both overall and conditional on prior levels of democracy. The latter builds on research that views trust as context-dependent, reinforcing the *status quo* rather than advancing democracy.

Our analysis relies on country time series of political trust estimated with data from 17 international research projects, 62 countries from five continents, and covering a period of 30 years until 2022. We combine the survey data with country-year level indicators of democracy from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project. We analyse the resulting longitudinal data in a way that considers the uncertainty around levels of political trust stemming from the aggregation of survey measurements of population samples, and the uncertainty of the measures of democracy resulting from the aggregation of expert surveys. In our models, we use lags of varying length, acknowledging the scarcity of theoretical guidance on the expected delays between the change in political trust and expected effect in terms of democratic quality, and to verify the stability of obtained results. We find a positive overall effect of trust on democracy, but only for the shortest lag length of one year. Evidence is stronger for a positive effect of trust on democracy for countries that have already achieved high levels of democracy, for one- and two-year lags.

The main contributions of this research are two-fold. First, our study provides the first rigorous macro-level longitudinal analysis of political trust as the hypothesized cause of democratic performance. Our work thus serves as the first step in what can become a rich line of research on macro-level consequences of political trust. Second, we employ an analytic strategy that addresses challenges faced by researchers interested in longitudinal analyses of mass public opinion. We also leverage the ability of Bayesian methods to quantify uncertainty in a way that provides a more refined picture of the studied associations.

Political trust and democracy

Political trust – the belief that political authorities and institutions act competently, fairly, and in accordance with normative expectations (Miller and Listhaug, 1990: 358) – reflects citizens' evaluations of whether institutions meet the standards they are expected to uphold, even without constant scrutiny. It encompasses both confidence in the competence of political actors, in their integrity, and their willingness to act in the public interest (Citrin and Stoker, 2018). Political trust is a form of political support (Easton, 1975, Norris 1999), shaping citizens' perceptions of the legitimacy of the political system (Dalton, 2004; Thomassen and Van Ham, 2017; Tyler and Jackson, 2013).

Political trust is expected to influence political systems, hence the concern with trust's alleged decline: 'If trust matters, then it should also be apparent at the system level in the patterns of governance and government' (Dalton, 2004: 162). This influence can operate through several, likely interrelated, mechanisms that link mass attitudes to system-level outcomes.

One central pathway linking political trust to democratic performance is political engagement, including electoral participation. Political trust is often considered a precondition for participation, as purposeful actors need to believe in the responsiveness of the state and the political efficacy of their actions (Almond and Verba, 1963). Empirical studies confirm that individuals with higher political trust are more likely to vote (Devine, 2024; Hooghe and Marien, 2013), thereby influencing the representativeness of elected institutions and the legitimacy of the political system (Cześnik, 2006; Stiers, 2025). While low trust may depress turnout and foster withdrawal from politics, it can also increase support for radical or populist parties (Geurkink et al., 2020; Hooghe and

Dassonneville, 2018), which − if given power − may attempt to introduce changes that undermine pluralism and political competition. This dynamic has been evident, for example, in Hungary and Poland, where populist parties capitalized on public dissatisfaction with liberal elites, corruption and economic inequality, and − once in power − expanded their control over the media, judiciary and civil society (Enyedi and Mikola, 2024; Tworzecki, 2024).

Low trust can redirect political participation toward protest and anti-system movements (Hooghe and Marien, 2013), particularly when conventional channels are perceived as ineffective or unresponsive. Such protests signal widespread discontent, lowering the barriers for others to reveal their private preferences and join collective action (Kuran, 1991). While these movements can pressure institutions to implement reforms or improve accountability, they may also fuel demands for systemic change, creating a tension between fostering responsiveness and risking political instability. In this way, political trust shapes not only the form and intensity of citizen participation but also the capacity of political systems to absorb dissent constructively and maintain legitimacy.

Beyond political participation, political support is also theorized to have other behavioural and attitudinal effects that may strengthen democracy and its institutions (Dalton, 2004: 157–187). Trust increases the acceptance of government policies, even those with which an individual disagrees (Rudolph, 2017: 205; Trüdinger and Ballow, 2011). Declining political trust thus makes governance more difficult and reduces the effectiveness of government policies, potentially triggering further dissatisfaction. Trust also improves compliance with the law in general, and with tax regulations in particular (Chan et al., 2018; Letki, 2007; Marien and Hooghe, 2011; Tyler, 1990) . These compliance effects are critical for state capacity, as widespread voluntary cooperation reduces enforcement costs and – in the case of taxes – increases budget revenue. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a recent and stark example: in many contexts, higher trust in political institutions correlated with greater adherence to public health measures, such as social distancing and vaccine uptake (Devine et al., 2021; Ezeibe et al., 2020).

More generally, during crises, political trust may serve as a reservoir of goodwill (cf. Easton, 1965: 273), maintaining support for institutions tasked with responding to unexpected events. This buffering role of political trust reflects its conceptualization as an intermediate form of political support and its connection to more diffuse and stable forms, such as support for the political system (Easton, 1975). According to this framework, a decline in political trust may eventually weaken endorsement of the entire political system and foster openness to alternative decision-making models (Van der Meer and Janssen, 2025).

While the mechanisms outlined above highlight the beneficial role of political trust in maintaining political stability, it is important to remember that key features of democratic systems, such as checks and balances and watchdog institutions, were founded on distrust (Warren, 2017). Bertsou (2019) uses the term ‘liberal distrust’ to describe an attitude of caution and suspicion in interactions with institutions due to the inherent power imbalance in contexts without checks and balances, watchdogs, or institutional oversight. Liberal distrust then puts checks on the system and reduces opportunities for abuse of power. The presence of safeguards, as is the case in contemporary liberal democracies, corrects the power imbalance and reduces the need for liberal distrust. This would mean that if safeguards are in place, political trust strengthens democracy, and distrust weakens it. In other words, in order to strengthen democracy, trust must be warranted, that is, ‘based on good judgements by citizens that their trust will be reciprocated by trustworthiness, thus extending their self-determination’ (Warren, 2017: 35). Similarly, Van der Meer argues that ‘vibrant democracies do not simply require political trust regardless of object and circumstances’ (Van der Meer, 2017: 6).

The concentration of studies on political trust in democracies draws attention away from the fact that there is nothing inherently pro-democratic in political trust. Instead, trust in each organization

or institution reflects support for the organizations or institutions' values and principles. In democratic countries, people with high trust in state institutions also tend to exhibit high support for democratic principles; in non-democratic countries the association is the opposite: people with highest political trust are the ones with low support for democracy (Kołczyńska, 2020). Put simply, 'an actor that can rely on a "reservoir of goodwill" has much better chances to prevail in a political struggle than one who is seen as untrustworthy and illegitimate' (Arzheimer, 2024: 4), so high political trust strengthens the system towards which the trust is directed. This is why in countries with flawed democracies, in transition, or countries experiencing democratic backsliding, high political trust cannot be universally expected to improve democratic functioning, because in those contexts trust does not necessarily represent support for democratic principles. Rather, it signifies support for the current political regime or some of its features that the trustor considers the most important (Lussier, 2016). Consequently, we expect the effect of political trust on democracy to be conditional on prior levels of democracy (cf. Valgarðsson and Van der Meer, forthcoming) and that political trust predicts future improvements in democracy only in already democratic countries.

Analytic strategy

Data and variables

To estimate country-year levels of aggregate political trust, we use a strategy described by Kołczyńska et al. (2024), who also validate their trust estimates against those obtained with other models. The chosen approach includes individual-level item response theory models applied to ordinal trust in parliament, political parties, and the justice system, as the measurement model, and splines as the latent trend model. The details of the estimation approach are included in the Online Supplementary Materials. Analyses by Kołczyńska and Bürkner (2024) provide a simulation-based comparative validation of approaches to modelling time trends in public opinion with splines. The survey data come from 17 cross-national survey projects, from 62 countries between 1989 and 2022. The list of survey sources is available in the Online Supplementary Materials.

As the measure of democracy, we use the Liberal Democracy Index from the V-Dem project (Coppedge et al., 2024a), which has been used earlier in analyses of the effects of mass public opinion on democracy (Claassen, 2021; Tai et al., 2024). This index captures the respect for freedoms and liberties as well as controls placed on the government, in addition to meeting requirements of electoral democracy, that is, free and fair elections (cf. Coppedge et al., 2024a: 42–43). The index is based on expert responses to a standardized questionnaire, which are aggregated with Bayesian factor analysis into sub-indicators and then combined into target indicators (Coppedge et al., 2024b).

To account for the uncertainty in the V-Dem Index estimates, we use 100 posterior draws from the Bayesian analysis performed by the V-Dem team, rather than extracting only point estimates. In the 'Models' sub-section below, we detail how we incorporate this uncertainty into our trust−democracy models. Plots of the posterior draws, illustrating the considerable uncertainty around estimates of liberal democracy, are presented in the Online Supplementary Materials.

We use three control variables that capture different aspects of economic performance, which are known to be important antecedents of both trust and democracy (Haggard and Kaufman, 1995, 2010; Martini and Quaranta, 2020; Obydenkova and Arpino, 2018; Van Erkel and Van der Meer, 2016): gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (World Development Indicators, 2024b); unemployment (World Development Indicators, 2024c); and GDP growth (World Development Indicators, 2024a), from the World Bank's World Development Indicators database. The final dataset, after deleting cases with missing values, includes data from 62 countries and the period 1992–2022.

Models

To analyse the relation of trust and democracy, while accounting for variation across countries and time, as well as for economic influences we applied Bayesian cross-lagged multilevel models (Gelman et al., 2013; Schuurman et al., 2016). We denote the democracy score of country j at year t as dem_{jt} and the corresponding trust score as trust_{jt}. For easier interpretation and comparison, all variables are standardized on the overall mean and standard deviation across countries and time. We assume a bivariate normal likelihood with mean vectors $\mu_{\text{dem},jt}$ and $\mu_{\text{trust},jt}$ for democracy and trust, respectively, as well as residual covariance matrix Σ:

$$(\text{dem}_{jt}, \text{trust}_{jt}) \sim \text{BivariateNormal}((\mu_{\text{dem},jt}, \mu_{\text{trust},jt}), \Sigma). \tag{1}$$

The mean vectors $\mu_{\text{dem},jt}$ and $\mu_{\text{trust},jt}$ follow the same predictor structure, so we only write down the equation once to simplify the notation. All involved coefficients are implicitly response-specific, that is, different for $\mu_{\text{dem},jt}$ and $\mu_{\text{trust},jt}$. We predict the mean vectors as

$$\mu_{jt} = \beta_{0j} + \sum_{l=1}^{L} \beta_{lj} x_{ljt} + \gamma_{1j} \text{dem}_{j(t-\tau)} + \gamma_{2j} \text{trust}_{j(t-\tau)} + \gamma_{3j} \text{dem}_{j(t-\tau)} \text{trust}_{j(t-\tau)}, \tag{2}$$

where β_{0j} denotes the intercept and β_{lj} denote the coefficients of the cross-sectional control variables x_l. Further, γ_{1j} denotes the lagged coefficient of democracy, γ_{2j} denotes the lagged coefficient of trust, and γ_{3j} denotes the lagged interaction coefficient of democracy and trust. Finally, τ indicate the length of the lag, for example, $\tau = 1$ for a lagged model based on the directly preceding year. As cross-sectional control variables we included: GDP per capita, GDP growth, and unemployment. To account for the dependency between countries and allow the model to share information across countries, we assume a multilevel model over the vector of by-country regression coefficients $b_j = (\beta_{0j}, \ldots, \beta_{Lj}, \gamma_{1j}, \gamma_{2j}, \gamma_{3j})$ as

$$b_j \sim \text{normal}\left(b, \Lambda\right), \tag{3}$$

where $b = (\beta_0, \ldots, \beta_L, \gamma_1, \gamma_2, \gamma_3)$ is the vector of average coefficients across countries and Λ is the multilevel covariance matrix of the by-country coefficients. For ease of interpretation, Λ is parameterized in terms of a vector of standard deviations and a correlation matrix (Bürkner, 2017).

Both trust and democracy scores are not directly observed but rather estimated via complex Bayesian models (see the 'Data and variables' sub-section above). As a result, these variables come with considerable estimation uncertainty. Using only point estimates for dem_{jt} and trust_{jt} would ignore said uncertainty, thus ultimately underestimating also the uncertainty in the present analysis and results. In order to account for the estimation uncertainty in these variables, we use techniques from the Bayesian uncertainty propagation literature (Huggins and Miller, 2020; Reiser et al., 2024). First, we extract $M = 100$ posterior draws from both the trust model (Kołczyńska et al., 2024) and the V-Dem democracy index model (Coppedge et al., 2024b). This way, we create not a single but M datasets $D^{(m)} = (\text{dem}_{jt}^{(m)}, \text{trust}_{jt}^{(m)})$. Next, for each of these datasets, we fit the above-described statistical model. The results of these M models are then combined by simply concatenating all the obtained posterior draws. That is, having obtained S posterior draws from each of the M models, we obtain a total of $M \times S$ posterior draws for inference. Theoretical justifications for this approach are provided in Huggins and Miller (2020). In the Online Supplementary Materials

we provide, for reference, also results that ignore the uncertainty in trust and democracy estimates, to demonstrate that doing so leads to underestimation of credible intervals (CIs) and overconfidence in interpreting the results.

The literature provides little guidance as to the expected lag between the hypothesized cause and effect in analyses of political attitudes and democracy. In the analysis of the effect of democratic support on democracy, Claassen (2020) uses a one-year lag. However, for a change in democratic quality, a one-year lag seems short and longer lags seem more suitable. At the same time, it is not likely that the association only appears for one length of the lag, so testing different lags would reveal whether associations are consistent or whether one lag length stands out as a possible data artefact. Practical considerations are not irrelevant either. The longer the lag, the shorter the time series available for modelling. Given the length of our time series data of around 30 years, having long lags would substantially reduce our dataset. Thus, we decide to use lag lengths of between one and six years.

In addition to the above main model, we consider two other models, one simpler and one more complex than the main model. In the simpler model, we remove the lagged interaction term $\gamma_{3j}\, \text{dem}_{j(t-\tau)}\, \text{trust}_{j(t-\tau)}$ such that only the lagged main effects (and the control variable terms) remain. In the more complex model, we replace the linear lagged terms (both main effects and interaction) with factor-smoothing splines of the lagged variables (Pedersen et al., 2019; Wood, 2003). This enables to investigate whether any non-linear lagged effects beyond a simple interaction are present in the data.

Finally, we fit one more set of models, where random intercepts and slopes by country are replaced by country fixed effects. We find that these models underestimate the uncertainty associated with the effects of trust on democracy. We thus proceed to use results from the cross-lagged mixed models as our primary evidence, and present the country fixed effects models in the Online Supplementary Materials.

Priors for all (hyper-)parameters were chosen as weakly-informative, thus having only minimal influence on the obtained inference while ensuring sufficient sampling efficiency (Gelman et al., 2008). Models were estimated and post-processed using the probabilistic programming language Stan (Carpenter et al., 2017) and the R package brms (Bürkner, 2017) which provides a high-level interface to Stan. Inference on central model parameters is reported in terms of: posterior means (point estimate); quantile-based 95% posterior uncertainty intervals (i.e., CIs): and posterior probabilities (PPs) that the effects are positive (Gelman et al., 2013). By interpreting PPs as a continuous measure of evidence in favour of (or against) the expected effects, we deliberately avoid binary decision making enforced by the classical approach of 'statistical significance.' In the description of results, we use the term 'effect' to refer to the estimated lagged coefficients, being aware of the limitations of statistical models in testing causal claims.

Results

First, we examine the results obtained from the simpler models without the lagged trust−democracy interaction. Figure 1 presents coefficients corresponding to the average effects of lagged political trust on democracy – posterior means and 95% posterior CIs – for lags of between one and six years. These results demonstrate that the effects are distinguishable from 0 only for the shortest lag of one year. While the coefficient sizes remain roughly stable for most lag lengths, the standard errors increase substantially for longer lags. The upper part of Table 1 shows PPs of the effects of trust on democracy being greater than 0. Only for the one-year lag is the posterior probability of a positive effect high and equals 0.97. For the other lags, PPs of positive effects are all well below 0.9. These results provide little evidence supporting the hypothesis about a universally positive effect of political trust on democracy.

Figure 1. Effect estimates of lagged political trust on democracy, for different lag lengths. Points indicate posterior means and error bars indicate 95% credible intervals.

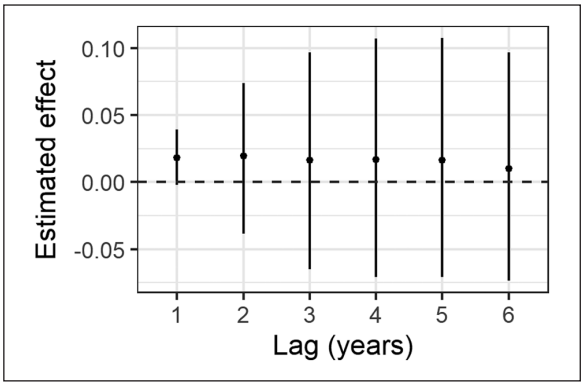


Table 1. Posterior probabilities of the lagged trust effects on democracy being positive.

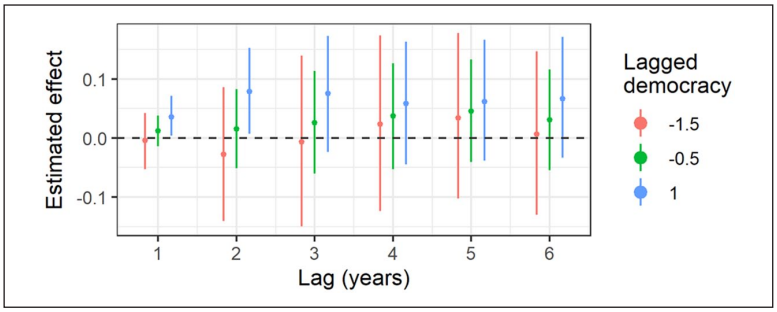
Lagged democracy	One year	Two years	Three years	Four years	Five years	Six years
Linear overall effects, cross-lagged mixed models						
Overall	0.960	0.756	0.659	0.644	0.639	0.592
Linear conditional effects, cross-lagged mixed models						
−1.5	0.453	0.342	0.466	0.600	0.647	0.528
−0.5	0.783	0.647	0.692	0.760	0.807	0.722
1	0.969	0.965	0.896	0.823	0.842	0.858

Results are based on the same models as shown in Figures 1 and 2.

When comparing by-country effects presented in the Online Supplementary Materials, in most countries the effects of trust on democracy are small regardless of the lag length. Exceptions are Brazil, Ecuador, Nigeria and Ukraine, where at least for some lag lengths the estimated effect is clearly positive, as well as Armenia and Croatia, where some of the effects are negative. A closer inspection of these cases (see also the descriptive country plots in the Online Supplementary Materials) reveals that the instances of the strongest positive effects of lagged trust on democracy correspond to situations where steep declines in trust were followed by democratic deterioration. In Brazil, for example, a sharp decline in political trust starting after 2010 was followed by a decline in the democracy score in 2015, when Brazil lost its liberal democracy status (cf. Spektor, 2024, for an in-depth analysis). In Ecuador, to give another example, a trust decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s was followed by a decline in democratic performance starting in 2007 until 2016 (cf. Moncagatta and Pazmiño, 2024). Cases where our model identifies a clear negative effect of trust on democracy are perhaps more intriguing, as they are fewer. One such case is Croatia, where a substantial decline in political trust in the 1990s until around 2010 was accompanied by an increase in democratic performance around the year 2000 when the country was upgraded by V-Dem to electoral democracy from electoral autocracy.

Next, we turn to models with a linear interaction between lagged political trust and lagged democracy. Figure 2 presents estimated effects for selected values of lagged democracy. The values of the standardized liberal democracy index of −1.5, −0.5, and 1 roughly correspond to means of liberal democracy scores for electoral autocracies, electoral democracies, and liberal democracies (following V-Dem's Regimes of the World classification), respectively. The value of −1.5 on

Figure 2. Effect estimates of lagged political trust on democracy, for selected levels of lagged democracy and different lag lengths. Points indicate posterior means and error bars indicate 95% credible intervals.



the liberal democracy scale reflects e.g. the situation in Turkey in 2014, Serbia in 2020–2022 or Ecuador in 2012–2016. Liberal democracy of −0.5 represents Mexico 2002–2005, Poland 2018–2019, and Georgia 2014–2017, among others. Liberal democracy of around 1 corresponds to most Western European countries during the studied period.

According to Figure 2, if prior levels of democracy are low (−1.5), estimated effects of trust on democracy are not distinguishable from 0. The coefficients are positive or negative, depending on the lag length, and the uncertainty is very high compared to coefficient size. The evidence is also weak for the middle level of prior democracy (−0.5), corresponding roughly to electoral democracies. The effect of lagged trust on democracy only becomes significantly positive for the highest level of lagged democracy.

The bottom part of Table 1 presents these results as PPs of the effect of trust on democracy being greater than 0 for the three selected values of lagged democracy, and for different lag lengths. For low lagged levels of democracy these PPs are quite low and remain below 0.7. In the case of moderate levels of lagged democracy, PPs of the effect of trust on democracy being positive are higher, but do not exceed 0.85. Only for the highest level of lagged democracy are effects of lagged trust on democracy greater than 0 with probabilities exceeding 0.95, and only for the shortest lags. Probabilities of the effects being positive are consistently between 0.8 and 0.9 for longer lag lengths. Thus, the evidence supporting a positive effect of trust on democracy is strong only for countries with already high democracy scores and far weaker for countries with lower levels of democracy.

For the highest level of democracy, the estimated effect equals $\gamma = 0.036$, 95% CI = (0.003, 0.048) for the 1-year lag and $\gamma = 0.078$, 95% CI = (0.007, 0.153) for the lag length of two years. These estimated effects, while positive, are arguably small. An increase in political trust standard deviation, which represents substantial but realistic change (see the descriptive plots of trust trajectories by country in the Online Supplementary Materials), would translate into a 0.08 increase in the standardized liberal democracy score. To give more perspective on this effect size, moving from electoral democracy to liberal democracy, using V-Dem's Regimes of the World categories, corresponds to an average change of over one unit on our standardized liberal democracy scale. When interpreting these effect sizes, one must, however, keep in mind the ceiling effect as countries with already high levels of democracy have limited room for improvement. Additionally, changes in democracy likely result from numerous interacting factors, with political trust constituting only one of them.

Replacing the linear interaction of lagged trust and lagged democracy with factor-smoothing splines of the lagged variables does not substantively change the interpretation of the results. According to these more complex models, the effects of trust on democracy most strongly depend

on prior levels of democracy for shorter lag lengths. These results are presented in the Online Supplementary Materials.

Conclusion

Social science research on political trust often assumes that trust in the state and its institutions among the population is necessary for democracy to thrive. A more nuanced approach to political trust expects a positive effect of trust on democracy only in already democratic countries, since in non-democracies increasing trust would just aid in consolidating the *status quo*. We examined these propositions with cross-lagged models applied to country time series of political trust – estimated with data from 17 cross-national survey projects – and the V-Dem liberal democracy indicator, from 62 countries worldwide between 1992 and 2022.

We only find evidence of a positive overall effect of trust on democracy for the shortest lag length of one year; for longer lags, there is no discernible effect. Our main hypothesis posited that the effect of trust on democracy would be positive only once democracy is already present. Our results provide support for this hypothesis in that PPs of trust having a positive effect of democracy are substantially higher – for all lag lengths – for higher lagged levels of democracy compared to lower lagged levels of democracy. For models with lag lengths of one and two years, PPs of the effect of trust on democracy in countries with high levels of democratic quality exceed 0.95 providing support for the claim that political trust indeed contributes to improving democracy in already democratic countries. For longer lags, PPs of these effects being positive remain in the range 0.8–0.9, which indicates that more distant effects of trust changes for democratic performance are more uncertain.

Even though this analysis failed to demonstrate an effect of political trust on changes in democratic quality in non-democratic countries or in electoral democracies, it does not mean that trust is of no consequence in such contexts. A recent study of countries that have experienced democratic backsliding highlights political trust as a decisive factor in withstanding authoritarian threats and strengthening democratic capacity (Bianchi et al., 2025). In weak or delegative democracies, that is, democracies that have failed to successfully institutionalize following transitions from autocracy (O'Donnell, 1994), the link between trust and democratic quality is complex. High trust is such contexts can either hurt or help democracy, depending on the characteristics, and pro-democratic or anti-democratic tendencies, of the object of trust (cf. Lussier, 2016). The lack of clear effects of trust on democracy in less democratic contexts thus demonstrates the contextual character of political trust in its connection to democratic governance.

Our analysis of country-specific effects of trust on democracy suggests that the average positive effect may predominantly stem from instances when trust declines preceded democratic deterioration rather than from cases when trust increases were followed by democratic improvement. This aligns with the analysis by Bianchi et al. (2025) who found that autocratization spells are sticky and overcoming them requires disproportionate effort. Future research may account for this asymmetry.

The present study provides a starting point for further research on macro-level consequences of political trust. More research is needed to uncover the mechanisms through which political trust translates into changes in democratic performance. These mechanisms may be behavioural (through voting or protest), institutional (through support for reforms), or elite-driven (through responsiveness), and their relative importance and effectiveness are likely context-dependent. Future research may also take up the issue of measurement of macro-level political trust in a way that distinguishes healthy distrust and unfounded trust. Regarding modelling, as the time series of political attitudes available to researchers become longer, there will be more opportunities for modelling more complex associations.

Our analysis is limited by data availability, and only includes countries that are sufficiently well-surveyed to enable estimation of political trust trajectories without borrowing information – which we consider unwarranted – from other countries' surveys. Given the correlation of survey data availability with economic development and institutional stability, our analysis systematically leaves out poorer and less stable countries, and the results may not represent the dynamics experienced in these contexts. We hope that continued data collection efforts in countries and regions historically underrepresented in survey projects will help remedy this situation.

When examining the relationship between political trust and democratic quality, cross-lagged panel models are appropriate because they explicitly test the possibility of reverse causality. By estimating both the effect of lagged political trust on subsequent democratic performance and the effect of lagged democratic performance on subsequent trust, the models account for temporal precedence and allow for a direct comparison of directional effects. However, while this approach helps mitigate concerns about reverse causality, it cannot fully resolve them, since unobserved confounders may still bias the estimates. The results should therefore be interpreted as suggestive evidence rather than proof of causation.

The analytic framework we applied, combining model-based aggregation of survey data with longitudinal models, can be flexibly adapted for further investigations into the causes and consequences of mass attitudes. We emphasize the importance of incorporating information about uncertainty in measures of public opinion, as well as in indicators of macro-level characteristics, to enhance the robustness and credibility of future research in this area.

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Data availability statement

Replication materials are available online: https://osf.io/tpywu/

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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