

POLITICAL TRUST, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIOUR IN POPULATION AND POLITICIAN SAMPLES FROM LATVIA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines differences between the general population and politicians in overall political trust, previous and planned behaviour in line with COVID-19 restrictions, the importance of considering budget limitations, the industry needs, and the desirability of the solution when spending state budget funds. We compared answers from a population-representative sample ($N=1000$) with a sample of active political actors ($N = 100$) in Latvia. The results showed that, in the case of political trust, political actors have significantly higher reported trust in the public administration and government during the COVID-19 pandemic, higher levels of overall trust in people, and substantially lower reported political cynicism – distrust in political actors' intentions for participating in politics. There were no differences between both samples when asked about the past behaviour regarding COVID-19 restrictions; however, political actors reported significantly higher commitment to comply with the restrictions in the future. There were no differences between the groups when asked to rank factors that need to be considered when the state's budget is used to solve acute problems – participants from both general population and political actor samples placed budget limitations at the top, followed by the desirability of the solution to the problem, with industry needs put at the bottom of the three-item list. The expected impact of construal level based on the distance to political decision-making thus was not observed in the results. These findings provide additional insight into differences between the general population and politicians in the context of political trust and cynicism, past and future behaviour, and consideration of factors when public funds are needed to solve an acute issue.

Keywords: *compliance with restrictions, construal level, political cynicism, political trust*

Introduction

Political trust influences a relatively wide range of individual and public behaviour, decision making, and opinions has been well documented in research (Rudolph, 2017; Rudolph & Popp, 2009). And while one might assume that those involved in a democratic political system might also be

more trusting towards politics in general, direct comparison of public and political actors' attitudes and, more specifically, behaviour and decision-making when it comes to rather complicated topics have lacked attention. While public discourse has shown that political trust is often associated with socially responsible behaviour and the lack of it endangers such actions, the perception of needed steps to overcome topical issues has been accentuated as a polarising issue. In the current study, our focus is on the perception of these factors between people from public vs active political actors. More specifically – whether involvement in politics promotes general political trust, lowers political cynicism, indicates a higher level of compliance with restrictions during COVID-19 pandemic and to what extent does these groups differ in perception of the balance of feasibility and desirability in political decision-making.

Political trust

Political trust has been a central topic in political science and political psychology for many years (Braithwaite & Levi, 2003). Political trust has been defined as “a summary judgment that the [political] system is responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny” (Miller & Listhaug, 1990). Political trust is considered a need for democratic rule; therefore decline in it is believed to fundamentally question the quality of representative democracy (van der Meer, 2017). Moreover, political trust has been emphasised as one of the most critical aspects in democracies nowadays; in the context of the global pandemic and populist notions in media about public safety, political trust is crucial to achieving public safety (Woelfert & Kunst, 2020). While there is plenty of research on political trust from the public perspective, few have managed to compare the public perspective with the point of view of political actors. For example, in the UK, studies show that politicians emphasise integrity as an essential trait for politicians; however, journalists are more focused on competency while public representatives emphasise the authenticity of political actors (Valgarðsson, Clarke, Jennings & Stoker, 2020).

Also, mere participation in organisations can be influential and promote political trust, even if the organisation itself is not democratic (Fennema & Tillie, 1999). Political trust also is positively related to institutionalised involvement (Hooghe & Marien, 2013). Therefore, a better understanding of how political trust influences individuals at a time of need and what differences may engagement in political processes cause to individuals' perspectives on the political system is critical to ensuring longevity for democracy in jeopardy. This theoretical background leads to our first prediction that political trust will be higher in the sample of active political actors compared to national sample participants.

Feasibility and desirability concerns in political decision-making

The need to balance feasibility and desirability concerns in political decision-making is complicated by the fact that desirable end-states are often represented in human perception at a higher-level construal (focusing on more abstract attributes), whereas the feasibility of attaining these end-states is represented at a lower level of construal (focusing on more concrete details) (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2010). The effect of temporal distance on attitudes toward a policy is mediated by people's attention to different aspects of the policy (desirability vs feasibility, pros vs cons, self vs other) (Nakashima, Daniels & Laurin, 2017). It, therefore, could vary based on the distance of the one to the decision-making process.

Specifically, to COVID-19 restrictions, research has shown that the length of the imposed restrictions matters more to the public than their intensity (Gollwitzer, Platzer, Zwarg & Görtitz, 2020). In their decision-making, we hypothesise that politicians are relatively more concerned with feasibility than ordinary voters, who focus more on the desirability aspects of problems and solutions. This may lead to reduced levels of political trust when the public perceives the politicians as unwilling or incapable of delivering solutions that voters deem necessary. Therefore, a direct comparison of perspectives on the same issue from a sample of politicians and a sample of the general public would shed some light on whether construal level can be seen as an explanation for reduced political trust in challenging times.

Political cynicism in general public and politicians

Political cynicism, represented as a negative stereotype about political actors or political systems, becomes the self-maintaining base for motivated reasoning to seek out and interpret information to confirm their initial attitude (Kunda, 1990; Taber et al., 2009; Taber & Lodge, 2006). It has been shown that individuals scoring high in political cynicism are more likely to interpret ambiguous information negatively. It reflects political actors involved negatively (Dancey, 2012) so that it would confirm the initial cynical attitudes and ultimately reduce political trust.

However, as political cynicism is an attitude about social outgroup (political actors), levels of cynicism intuitively should fall for those involved in the politics. However, some researchers point to a different pattern, e. g., political involvement is positively associated with political cynicism as cynical citizens can be prone to be politically involved (Mou, Miller, Jalette, 2011). Therefore, the comparison of political cynicism in public and political actor samples seems fluid and might be influenced by involvement and other factors.

Role of political trust in compliance with restrictions during COVID-19 pandemic

Numerous empirical studies have shown that political trust forecasts multiple desirable public behaviours such as paying taxes (Alm & Torgler, 2006) or participating in joint restraint in case of social dilemmas (Tyler & Degoey, 1995). Political trust also relates to willingness to support civil liberties (Davis & Silver, 2004); however; it has also been found that a lack of such trust promotes populist voting behaviour (Hetherington, 1999), which in the context of a pandemic might lead towards both lack of trust in government as well as reduced compliance with restrictions set in place by such distrusted entity. Further on, one may assume that higher levels of political trust might help with decisions on specific behaviour, leading to desirable outcomes (Rudolph, 2017; Rudolph & Popp, 2009). More specifically, during the COVID-19 pandemic, political trust and trust in government would convey a willingness to comply with restrictions set in place by the government.

As an extension of our first prediction, those with higher political trust than those with lower results should indicate higher compliance with restrictions in the past and future. However, this does not mean that overall political trust also propels trust in government, especially in the time of the pandemic, as the government is a more specific entity than public administration. Therefore, our last prediction is that while there might not be significant differences between the national sample and political actor sample in regards to trust in government during the COVID-19 pandemic, political actors should have higher scores in political trust in public administration and lower scores in political cynicism, they also should indicate higher overall intent to comply with restrictions, which are set in place by the government.

Methodology

Sample

A nationally representative sample of Latvian adults were surveyed via face-to-face computer-assisted interviews in August 2021 ($N = 1000$; 55.2% women and 44.8% men; with the following age distribution: 18–24 years – 9.7%, 25–34 years – 17.8%, 35–44 years – 18.7%, 45–54 years – 19.6%, 55–64 years – 19.2%, and 65–74 years – 15.0%). In addition, a sample of active political actors ($N=100$) in Latvia was also where surveyed. Sample consists of individuals actively involved in politics (e. g. elected state officials, deputies of the Saeima, officials of political parties). At least half of the sample participants represent the political parties elected in the 13th Saeima.

Materials and Procedure

Professional interviewers surveyed the respondents from a nationally representative sample from a market research company at their places of residence. The participants were selected using a stratified random sampling method (random route procedure). Respondents from the sample of active political actors were surveyed by phone. Participation in this study was voluntary and without any remuneration.

Participants received the same questionnaire composed of the following measures in both samples. First, participants were asked about their general trust in public administration. They were presented with the statement “To what extent do you generally trust or do not trust the Latvian public administration system as a whole?” and asked to rate their trust level on a 10-point scale ranging from “do not trust at all” (1) to “trust completely” (10). Next, participants answered questions about their general trust in people, where they were asked, “Overall, do you think that most people can be trusted, whether or not they have proven their trustworthiness?” and the participants indicated their responses on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “completely disagree” (1) to “completely agree” (7).

To measure the participant’s level of political cynicism, we used an index that was composed of the answers to 3 questions ($\alpha = .75$) “Latvian politicians engage in politics mainly driven by personal interests”, “Latvian politicians engage in politics, mainly to pursue the interests of certain groups that may not coincide with the interests of society as a whole” and “Latvian politicians get involved in politics, thinking mainly about the public interest” (reverse-scored). The participants indicated their responses on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “completely disagree” (1) to “completely agree” (7).

Next, the participants were asked to indicate their trust in the government during the COVID-19 pandemic by answering to question, “To what extent do you currently trust or distrust the government during the COVID-19 pandemic?”. In addition, questions about compliance with COVID-19 restrictions in the past and future: “To what extent have you complied with government restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic over the past year?”, “If the epidemiological situation in COVID-19 deteriorates, to what extent will you comply with government restrictions?”. The participants indicated their responses to all three questions on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from “completely disagree” (1) to “completely agree” (7).

Lastly, participants were asked: “When using the state budget funds to solve topical problems, it is necessary to consider several things, which I will mention to you immediately. Please rank these things in order of importance: Budget limitations; Industry needs; Desirability of solution.”

In addition to all measures, we asked the participants to indicate their age and gender for demographical data.

Results

To test our predictions, we first conducted nine one-way ANOVAs. Within each analysis, responses of participants who did not answer questions or answered as “hard to say” have been eliminated. In the first prediction, we considered that general trust in public administration would be higher in the case of active political actors sample than in a representative population sample. Our analysis showed that in the case of the general trust in public administration, there was a significant difference between groups, $F(1, 1069) = 68.16, p = .000$, reflecting a pattern that in the political actor’s sample ($M = 6.51; SD = 1.71$) to a larger extent than in the representative sample group ($M = 4.61; SD = 2.24$) the participants were more trusting towards public administration, therefore confirming our first prediction. Please see Table 1 for illustration.

In the second prediction, we considered a similar pattern regarding general trust in people. Such general trust in people will be higher in the case of active political actors sample than in a representative population sample. Analysis showed that in the case of the general trust in people, there were significant, yet smaller differences between groups than in the case of general trust in public administration, $F(1, 1054) = 6.84, p = .009$. In the political actor’s sample ($M = 4.32; SD = 1.33$) to a more significant extent than in the representative sample group ($M = 3.86; SD = 1.71$), the participants were more trusting of people, confirming our second prediction. Please see Table 1 for illustration.

In the third prediction, we considered the opposite pattern to appear regarding political cynicism. Political cynicism will be lower in the case of active political actors’ sample than in a representative population sample. Our analysis showed that, indeed, there was a significant difference between groups, $F(1, 1024) = 71.04, p = .000$, reflecting the pattern that the political actor’s sample ($M = 4.19; SD = 1.31$) to a significantly smaller extent than representative sample group ($M = 5.44; SD = 1.42$) consider political actors motivation to be cynical. Please see Table 1 for illustration.

As for attitudes and behaviour regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, we predicted that trust in government and past and future behaviour would significantly differ between the groups. We predicted that the political actor sample would score higher in all variables. Therefore, political actors would trust the government and indicate more compliant behaviour regarding restrictions both in the past and future if the situation worsens. These predictions were supported by the responses from participants, wherein in case of trust towards government $F(1, 1098) = 9.22, p = .008$ and when regarding future behaviour $F(1, 1001) = 8.85, p = .003$ the difference was statistically significant. However in case of past behaviour, the difference

between the groups was not statistically significant $F(1, 1093) = 2.71, p = .100$. Please see Table 1 for illustration.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way Analyses of Variance of Trust in Public Administration, Trust in People, Political Cynicism, Trust in Government During COVID-19 Pandemic and Behaviour Regarding COVID-19 Pandemic

Measure	Population		Politician		F	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD		
Trust in public administration	4.61	2.24	6.51	1.71	68.16***	.060
General trust in people	3.86	1.71	4.32	1.33	6.84*	.006
Political cynicism	5.44	1.42	4.19	1.31	71.04***	.065
Trust in government during COVID-19	3.44	1.82	4.01	1.62	9.22*	.008
Behaviour regarding the COVID-19						
In the past	5.83	1.43	6.07	0.95	2.71	.002
In the future	5.43	1.81	5.98	1.16	8.85*	.009

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

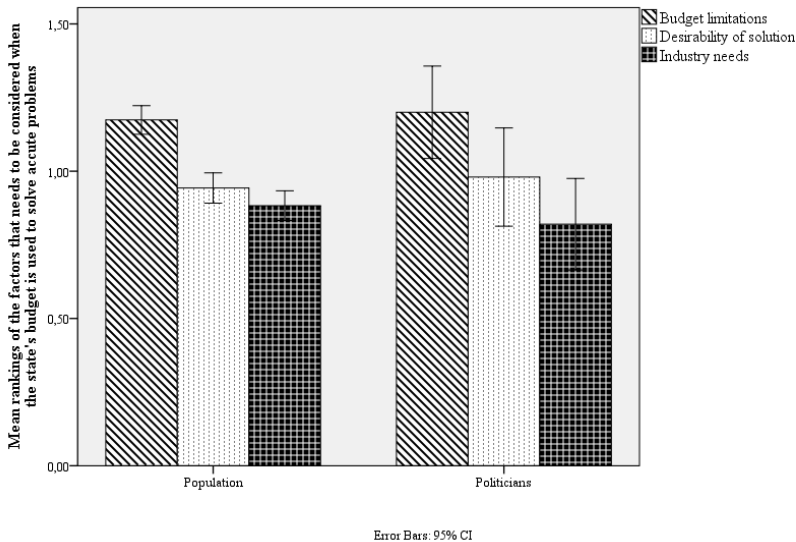


Figure 1. Comparison of Population and Politician Sample on Mean Rankings of the Factors that Needs to be Considered when the State’s Budget is Used to Solve Acute Problems

Lastly, we asked to rank “Budget limitations”, “Industry needs”, and “Desirability of the solution” in order of importance when using the state budget funds to solve topical problems. We asked to rank these factors in sequence of important after reading the following passage: “When using the state budget funds to solve topical problems, it is necessary to consider several things, which I will mention to you immediately. Please rank these things in order of importance.” We predicted that laypeople from the representative sample would put a higher importance on the desirability of the solution. In contrast, the political actor sample would prioritise budgetary limitations, showing significant differences between the groups. The results however show, that there were no differences between the groups when ranking these options: both samples have put budget limitations as first $F(1, 1098) = .10, p = .752$, followed by desirability of solution $F(1, 1098) = .55, p = .457$ and industry needs as third $F(1, 1098) = .181, p = .760$. Therefore, our prediction regarding construal level in assessment actions needed to be made in hush times is not confirmed. Please see Figure 1 for an illustration.

Discussion

Most of our predictions on how national sample results will differ from political actor sample results regarding trust, cynicism and behaviour during the pandemic have been supported. Political actors have significantly higher reported trust in the public administration and government during the COVID-19 pandemic, higher overall trust in people, and substantially lower reported political cynicism – distrust in political actors’ intentions for participating in politics. Moreover, political actors reported significantly higher commitment to comply with the possible restrictions in the future. These findings are in line with the previous research, where political trust has been highlighted as one aspect that is crucial to achieving public safety (Woelfert & Kunst, 2020). Further on, the results also support that involvement in politics promotes political trust (Hooghe & Marien, 2013) and reduces political cynicism, which contrasts with the notion of Mou and colleagues (Mou, Miller, Jalette, 2011).

While supported assumptions seem to provide rather intuitively foreseen results, the results that were not supported give insight into how public and political actors are alike. Firstly, there were no differences between both samples when asked about the past behaviour regarding COVID-19 restrictions. Also, there were no differences between the groups when asked to rank factors that need to be considered when the state’s budget is used to solve acute problems. These results contrast with the classic view of construal level theory, according to which temporal distance on attitudes

toward a policy should have been mediated by attention to different policy aspects (desirability vs feasibility, pros vs cons, self vs other) (Nakashima, Daniels & Laurin, 2017).

Herbert McClosky (1964) have stressed that those who are politically active and aware share greater agreement on democratic norms than the public. Despite the negative stereotypes about politicians in Latvian society, participants from the politician sample demonstrate a tendency to adhere to the normatively correct attitudes and behaviours rarely associated with this group in the public perception. Though different in some behavioural aspects, the agreement on essential decisions should be emphasised. It can be explained by research that shows political scientists to exaggerate the scale of gaps in decision-making and political attitudes between public and political actors alike (Kertzer, 2020). While to some extent politicians are not like the rest of us, it seems that this might be due to their virtues rather than sins.

Conclusions

Public discourse that the politicians are very different from the laypeople draws a wedge between these groups and in trust towards political administration and governments. In Latvian politics, political cynicism also has been noted as one of the most divisive issues. And to some level, our research supports these notions. However, our findings should be set in the current light to provide a way out rather than entrenching in the mud of distrust and providing bullets for populists. First – it seems that pure involvement in politics, even if it's not at the very top of the political stage, provides insight into processes and might promote trust in political administration and people. Furthermore, involvement might reduce cynicism and might promote intent to comply with policies to safeguard public safety. These findings emphasise the importance of action-based democracy, where individuals actively participate in political processes.

Secondly, it is important to note that there were remarkable similarities between the responses of laypeople and politicians about the way serious decisions must be made. Even though it is thought that laypeople would much rather have quick solutions for “any” price, compared to politicians who focus on the viability of it, our results show quite the opposite. Therefore, politicians should not be afraid to communicate the reasons behind even the most critical of the decision made, as there might be surprising support from the public. And in return, it might provide the necessary nurture for trust to grow.

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