

Political Trust, the Challenges Faced by Democracies, and Democratic Innovations

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Abstract: *This special issue focuses on trust in political institutions, the challenges faced by democracies, and democratic innovations. Modern representative democracies encounter multiple challenges and criticisms associated with the quality of democracy and representation. Even though public opinion polls reveal a long-term trend of decline or low levels of trust in the most important representative bodies and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, citizens still believe that democracy is the most suitable form of government. In recent years, with the aim of responding to these challenges debate has intensified with regard to various democratic innovations, changes in media, the education system, together with new approaches to deal with the different system problems. Alongside all of this, new technologies and artificial intelligence have emerged as a particular challenge to democracy and representation. In this special issue, we look at various aspects of trust in representative institutions and citizens' satisfaction with the functioning of democracy, and in addition the challenges of and opportunities for increasing political trust.*

Keywords: *democracy, political trust, democratic innovations, artificial intelligence, social media*

Introduction

The most recent studies and reports show that modern representative democracies encounter multiple and increasing challenges. The quality of elections has been falling rapidly, electoral turnout has been shrinking, incidents of protests and riots are on the rise, while the quality of democracy is declining. Such descriptions not only apply to authoritarian countries but also to countries where the quality of democracy has traditionally been high (International IDEA 2024). Simultaneously, longitudinal public opinion polls around the world reveal a long-term trend of decline or low levels of trust in political institutions. Ever since 1990, trust in parliaments, governments and political parties has been

falling in democratic countries, especially those in Central and Eastern Europe. This growing political distrust is accompanied by populism and the success of illiberal political candidates (Valgarðsson et al. 2025). When citizens have low levels of trust in political institutions, this may be a sign that they perceive the political and economic system as well as decision-makers to be unresponsive and doubt that they are acting in line with their interests (Mikhaylovs-kaya & Rouméas 2024). Yet, trust is not decreasing in all institutions and civil services, which reveals the dissatisfaction of citizens in particular with how politics and policies are made. Public support for democratic principles and forms of government at the same time generally remain high and stable around the world (Valgarðsson et al. 2025).

Several solutions have been proposed to solve the problems described above. These include changes or reforms to systems (political, economic, media etc. systems), and alterations to regulation, while scholars have also promoted the introduction of democratic innovations and participatory democracy tools. Some proposed solutions address particular challenges, while others attempt to deal with several at once, e.g., democratic innovations have been suggested to deal especially with the decreasing political participation and political trust (Theuwis, van Ham & Jacobs 2025). Meanwhile, new technologies, artificial intelligence (Fink-Hafner 2025) and social media (Baboš & Vilagi 2024) have become pressing challenges for democracy, representation and political trust.

This special issue focuses on different aspects and challenges concerning trust in political institutions, the challenges to do with democracies and democratic innovations, along with the (potential) relationship between them.

The relationship between political trust and democracy

The political trust–quality of democracy relationship is important, albeit complicated. Democracy is a political system that builds and protects relationships of trust (Warren 2018). Political trust underpins democracy as a political system (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). However, the democratic political system paradoxically emerged from distrust in elite power holders (Warren 2018). In general, literature assumes that citizens should trust political institutions when they are performing well. Likewise, when government fails to meet the needs of citizens their trust in political institutions is likely to fall (Hardin 1999).

Since one may assume that decreasing political trust indicates political institutions are performing poorly, the phenomenon of growing political distrust raises concerns. Political trust is needed for a functioning democracy, while declining political trust can undermine the quality of a representative democracy (van der Meer 2017). Scholars have also repeatedly expressed concern with the consequences of low levels of political trust for the stability of democratic

political systems (Mariën & Hooghe 2011). Yet, as already noted, the relationship between political trust and democracy is complicated.

Even though citizens who are satisfied with the functioning of democracy express higher levels of political trust, trust is not always higher in political systems where the quality of democracy is higher, suggesting that the way democratic performances are assessed does not always correspond to their actual democratic quality (Mauk 2021). Several factors explain the discrepancy between the quality of democracy and citizens' assessments of democratic functioning and their political trust. Citizens may obtain different information about the political system, which they process in different ways, and adopt different standards as to what the quality of the democracy should be (Mauk 2021).

Still, the absence of political trust is not necessarily detrimental to democracy (van der Meer 2017). In some ways, distrust is just as important for a democratic political system as political trust (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Scepticism of political institutions can foster political engagement and civic criticism, and the assessment of political institutions on their own merits (Hooghe, Mariën & Oser 2016; van der Meer 2017; van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). At the same time, some scholars claim the falling political trust seen in the last 20 years, especially in newer democracies such as countries in Central Europe, is an outcome of the disappointment that followed after hopes had increased upon the changes to the political system and is not necessarily a result of the emergence of a critical citizenry (Catterberg & Moreno 2006).

Only when distrust turns into general distrust and cynicism can it affect the quality of a democracy (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Disillusioned citizens may decide to withdraw from politics completely. General distrust thus raises fears that the very existence of a representative democracy and its institutions could be under threat (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017).

General political distrust potentially holds a number of consequences for all levels of the political system. On the macro level, it could undermine the system's stability or indicate a need to transform the institutions involved in the system. On the meso level, low trust can lead to the electoral success of new parties, especially populist ones. On the micro level, low political trust can encourage support for democratic reforms and undermines citizens' respect for the law (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Here, it is necessary to point out that blind trust in political institutions could also be a side effect of authoritarian governments, and accordingly growing political trust might not have an unequivocal impact. What we should strive for is a balance of scepticism and trust (Valgarðsson et al. 2025).

The level of political trust is influenced by various factors, macro- and micro-level causes linked to an individual's views and status, as well as systemic variables. Political trust is positively influenced by well-being, political socialisation, higher level education, the holding of democratic views, and the political interests of citizens (Catterberg & Moreno 2006). Trust also increases

with macro-level causes, a fair electoral system and procedures for forming government, functioning of the government, procedural fairness, economic performance, inclusive institutions, procedural fairness of state bureaucrats with respect to citizens and inclusive and non-discriminatory welfare arrangements (van der Meer 2017; van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Beyond the characteristics of government, social capital associated with vibrant civil societies spills over in accountable political institutions, leading to increased political trust (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017). Likewise, corruption, political radicalism (Catterberg & Moreno 2006), political scandals, and the reduction of politics to entertainment can contribute significantly to the decline in political trust (van der Meer & Zmerli 2017).

Notwithstanding the long interest in changing levels of political trust and the trust–democracy relationship, understanding of the causes and impacts of political trust remains quite weak and not supported by robust findings, leaving evidence about its consequences partial and fragmented. The results of a recent meta-analysis show that political trust is weakly to moderately related to voter turnout, voter choice, policy preferences, and compliance, but not to informal participation. Trust is strongly related to what people expect from their political systems and governments, as well as how they interact with them (Devine 2024). Recently, the rising hopes of being able to effectively deal with the issue of political trust along with some other important aspects of democracy have been attributed to democratic innovations.

Understanding political trust and the search for solutions

This special issue offers important insights into the challenges of contemporary democracies, the issues involved in the declining political trust, and possible solutions. We approach these questions by looking at social media, artificial intelligence, the role of democratic innovations, the importance of the political and economic context, interpersonal traits, and the growing importance of conspiracy beliefs.

The changing economic and welfare context are important for understanding the problem of political (dis)trust. While considering the case of Slovenia, Marko Hočevár (2025) shows how political and economic context, such as the weakening of trade unions, the EU's stronger role in policymaking processes, and the shrinking differences between political parties in their social and economic policies following the global financial and economic crises have led not just to the high levels of political distrust shown in public opinion surveys or decreasing voter turnout, but in instability of the party arena as well. Slovenia is no exception to this. The declining trust in politics has been a common European trend that has only been added to by the polycrisis structural setting and the changes in power relations and political goals (Hočevár 2025).

Apart from context, personality traits also impact levels of interpersonal and institutional trust. Personal experience and anticipated adherence to norms are key drivers of trust. However, some population segments may remain distrustful, irrespective of efforts to build trustworthiness. As Cigáneková and Lukáč (2025) present, conscientiousness, openness and agreeableness are positively related to trust in certain institutions. Interpersonal trust is positively related only to openness and agreeableness, while neuroticism is negatively associated with both institutional and interpersonal trust. Yet, as these two authors mention (Cigáneková & Lukáč 2025), even though personality traits are not the only factor explaining levels of trust, they play a role.

Further, conspiracy beliefs produce an important negative impact on trust, as shown by Olszanecka-Marmola, Marmola and Niedbała (2025) with the case of Poland. Conspiracy theories often function as a compensatory control mechanism in response to complex and ambiguous situations that generate uncertainty. The Internet and social media have critical roles in disseminating misinformation and reinforcing conspiracy beliefs. Olszanecka-Marmola, Marmola and Niedbała (2025) also conclude that collective narcissism and populism drive generic conspiracist beliefs, whereas interpersonal and institutional trust have no significant effect when it comes to older adults in Poland.

Világi and Baboš (2025) deal with another challenge to the quality of democracy that has proven to be important recently: decreasing political participation. Some believe that solutions to these issues can be found in exploiting the potential held by new technologies and social media. Social media as a new form of communication offer a novel space for citizens to engage in political issues and the potential to encourage deeper democratic engagement. Analysis of Facebook comments on political leaders' posts in Europe reveals that the majority of Facebook interactions reflect low-effort and expressive engagement rather than deliberative participation. Only a small share of comments may be understood as forms of civic engagement or political participation. Contextual factors, such as economic development, political culture, institutional trust, and media literacy, have a significant influence on how citizens interact with political content online. This shows that a trustful environment is a prerequisite for citizens to become motivated to engage expressively online. While Facebook provides a space for public expression, this is not adequately exploited also because political leaders do not use it to promote participatory behaviour.

In recent times, the rapid development and use of artificial intelligence raises questions about how AI impacts political participation, elections and trust. Danica Fink-Hafner and Katarina Kaišić (2025) illustrate the complex relationship of the mutual impact of trust in AI technology on political trust and the impact of political trust on trust in AI technology. This relationship may be direct and two-way, but also indirect. What is potentially worrying is that the current fast development of AI may interfere significantly with the

present global trend of declining democracy in the direction of favouring authoritarianism.

A potential way for increasing political participation and developing political trust is to use the mechanisms of democratic innovations, as described in the article by Krašovec et al. (2025). Decision-makers, civil servants and representatives recognise that democratic innovations are connected to trust. However, in analysed interviews this connection was not further elaborated. This might also reflect the complexity of the interactions between democratic innovations and political trust (Addeo, Fruncillo & Maddaloni 2025). When it comes to use of democratic innovations, there is greater support for participatory practices in policy-making than in decision-making processes, while reluctance was more evident among civil servants and politicians than representatives of civil society, as shown by Krašovec et al. (2025). Addeo, Fruncillo and Maddaloni (2025) at the same time propose that for democratic innovations to be able to reactivate political participation they must be embedded in a broader project of institutional reform and democratic culture-building that integrates education, territorial networks, and institutional reform.

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