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## Disentangling Political Distrust: What Do Citizens Mean and Think When Claiming to Distrust Political Institutions and Politicians?

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### ABSTRACT

Citizens' political trust has been studied since the 1960s and decreasing trust trends have caused numerous debates among political scientists. Despite lengthy analyses of data and investigations into the antecedents of trust, existing research has offered limited conceptual studies of distrusting attitudes. Hence, we have not yet had a clear understanding of what citizens mean when they claim to distrust their government, a politician or political institution and how they arrive at that judgement. This paper shifts the focus on *political distrust* and presents the analysis of popular narrative interviews conducted in three European countries; Italy, the UK and Greece. Assuming a micro-level research perspective to the study of distrust, it argues that political distrust is a dynamic concept understood in two time projections, a retrospective assessment of past events and a prospective estimation of future conduct, which determine expectations of negative outcomes for citizens. Further, it breaks down the concept of distrust to reveal the three evaluative dimensions it entails; a technical dimension, a moral dimension and a dimension of congruence. Finally, it is shown that, although expressions of distrust may take various shapes and forms across individuals, national contexts and the political objects being judged, they invariably maintain this conceptual frame. Distrust judgments characterise a dynamic reciprocal relationship between citizens and political agents and are therefore distinct from competing notions of cynicism.

### INTRODUCTION

Citizen trust in government and political institutions has been studied systematically for the past fifty years and decreasing trust trends in national and international surveys have often caused intense debates among political scientists. The theoretical importance of citizen trust in political institutions for the legitimacy and effective governance of democratic regimes has led many scholars to sound alarm bells over heightened political distrust and its possible implications (Hetherington, 2005). At the same time, others have remained unconvinced about the democratic significance of political distrust trends, which they interpret mainly as a symptom of citizen scepticism or a more cautious and critical stand against governments (Norris, 2011). The source of this confusion lies in part in the unclear conceptual grounding of political distrust and ensuing ambiguity in interpreting empirical data. It seems that despite lengthy analyses of available data, there is often little agreement in what citizens mean and feel when they claim to distrust their government, a politician or a political institution. In addition, further confusion originates from the isolated paths taken in investigating the causes of political distrust through micro-level and macro-level analysis (Levi & Stoker, 2000) and from a plethora of related concepts and measurement indicators which obscure our understanding of political distrust (Cook & Gronke, 2005).

This paper assumes a micro-level research perspective to the study of political distrust and presents the analysis and findings from popular narrative interviews with citizens in three European Union member states; the UK, Italy and Greece. The aim of this study is to uncover the meaning citizens assign to political distrust and illuminate the evaluative thought processes involved in the formation of distrusting judgements. This paper, therefore, is deliberately phrased in terms of political distrust and hopes to contribute to the field with a distrust-centred study, which explores the conceptual standing of distrusting citizen-state relations in their own right. Evidence suggests that by framing research – and especially measurement – solely in terms of political trust, one can overlook an entire realm of distinct meanings and expressions that have very real and significant implications for politics, from candidate success and policy effectiveness to democratic system performance. Existing theoretical work has already highlighted the detrimental effects distrusting attitudes may have for the legitimacy of governments and effective performance of institutions (Hardin, 2002; Braithwaite and Levi, 1998). Similarly, empirical research has tried to identify the practical implications of political distrust for citizens' political behaviour and policy effectiveness, including tax compliance (Hetherington, 1998; Scholz and Lubell, 1998). However, the plummeting levels of trust indicators cannot be understood nor interpreted accurately, when 'political distrust' has not been conceptually defined and operationally distinguished from the 'lack of trust' and other competing notions.

The analysis of empirical evidence reveals political distrust to be a dynamic concept understood in two time projections, a retrospective evaluation of events and a prospective assessment, which determine expectations of negative outcomes with a certain degree of conviction. Hence, I argue that distrust is very much distinct from the neutral state of 'lack of trust' that would denote no particular type of expectations or limited conviction. Further, the concept of distrust is broken down in the three dimensions of evaluation it entails; a technical dimension that is based on considerations of competence and ability to fulfil a certain role; a moral dimension that judges behaviour relative to a normative framework; and a dimension of congruence that considers the personal needs and best interests of the subject. These evaluative dimensions render political distrust a relational concept that is dynamic and makes a claim to reciprocity.

Finally, this paper considers the formation of distrusting judgments in response to political agents and the empirical evidence for spill-overs among different objects. It also finds that distrust relations between citizens and political agents give rise to explicit emotional responses and behavioural intentions. When political distrust spills-over to the diffuse or systemic level, the range of emotions shifts to profound anxiety, despair and insecurity. Political distrust is thus understood as a repeated trust game without the opportunity to terminate exchanges, where citizens are ready to reciprocate the untrustworthy behaviour they expect to receive. In this way distrust judgments are found to be distinct from other competing notions of cynicism or apathy that lack such particular expressions, responses and implications for citizen-state relations.

## THE TROUBLE WITH POLITICAL DISTRUST

Scholarly interest in political trust and distrust reaches back to Easton's (1965) influential distinction between *specific* and *diffuse* support, the former referring to attitudes towards politicians or incumbent authorities and the latter to attitudes towards the system or regime. Levels of diffuse support have been tied to institutional legitimacy and recognized as necessary for successful democratic governance (Almond and Verba, 1963; Gamson, 1968; Grimes, 2006; Gibson and Caldeira, 1995; Weatherford, 1992). Yet, political trust literature has been ambiguous in its approach to political distrust. It is commonly accepted that the dimension of political trust runs from high trust to high distrust or cynicism, and given the limited analytical focus on distrust itself, it is the theoretical work on trust that underpins much of the discussion around political distrust (Miller, 1974; Hetherington, 2005; Levi and Stoker, 2000).

Many definitions of political trust found in the research literature follow the rational-strategic approach to trust (A trusts B to do X). The view of trust as 'encapsulated interest' holds that individual trusters rationally evaluate the possibility of others acting in a trustworthy manner (Hardin, 2002; Hetherington 2005). A large body of work however, goes beyond the strategic calculation and points to the ability of trust to solve problems of collective action, which would be against the standard understanding of self-interest (Levi, 1997; Tyler, 1998). In this work, trust is considered to make a normative claim, based on shared values and ethical reciprocity (Rothstein, 2003; Blackburn, 1999; Uslaner, 2002; Fenton, 2000).

Still, political distrust has been conflated with political cynicism and alienation (Abramson, 1983). Miller has written that political distrust or cynicism "refers to the degree of negative affect toward the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations" (1974:952). His definition was criticised for not distinguish between disapproval of specific incumbent authorities and a diffuse attitude of dwindling support for the regime (Citrin, 1974; Miller, 1974b; Cook and Gronke, 2005). And further, it does not encompass the far richer connotations and wider implications political distrust entails, both for the citizens who express it and their political systems. Distrusting judgments entail a certain degree of vulnerability and risk in relation to a political agent, and although it might be a normatively appropriate response in cases of divergent interests or prior knowledge regarding an agent's motivations and capabilities, it sets in motion an elaborate cognitive and behavioural response mechanism researchers are still investigating (Marien and Hooghe, 2011; Schul et al, 2008; Tyler, 2006).

In 'Trust and Trustworthiness', Hardin argued that for the legitimacy and healthy functioning of democratic systems "it may suffice that government not be generally and deeply distrusted" (2004:158), although there was no elaboration of what 'general and deep distrust' might signify. In fact, most empirical research equates political distrust with the absence of political trust, due to the lack of data that capture distrust itself (Hetherington, 1998; Mishler and Rose, 2001; Marien and Hooghe, 2011). With most surveys offering dichotomous responses in the form of

‘tend to trust/tend not to trust’, it is highly possible that large-scale indicators of political distrust are capturing, at best a mixture of attitudes spanning from the lack of trust to extreme distrust, or at worst no distrusting attitudes at all. What Margaret Levi called “lack of trust, in the sense of standing back and failing to trust until given sufficient evidence or reasons for trusting” (1998: 96) has potentially a different meaning and implications than distrust.

The distinct paths taken by macro and micro level research have further complicated the empirical study of political distrust. Judgments of distrust can be approached by analysing characteristics of trustworthiness of the political target, meaning macro-level characteristics of the political regime or democratic and economic performance (Hooghe, 2011, Hardin, 1998), and by analysing individual attitudes and characteristics of citizens (Weatherford, 1992; Zmerli and Newton, 2011). In its effort to unravel the conceptual standing and meaning of political distrust, this paper takes a micro-level perspective, focusing on citizens’ perceptions, interpretations and evaluations of untrustworthy behaviour of political agents.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the case of contested social concepts such as ideology, identity, support and political distrust, political science research can benefit from in-depth qualitative insights, as much as from quantitative study (Bruter, 2005). Methodological literature on attitude measurement also suggests that in-depth exploratory interviews can provide a better understanding of the subjects’ worldview and expression of attitudes, necessary for subsequent elucidation of large-scale results (Oppenheim, 1992; Oskamp and Schultz, 2005). The present study follows a micro-level perspective and focuses on individual citizen’s account of political distrust via narrative interviews. Departing from the tradition of studying political distrust through available survey data, it seeks to break down the concept into its components and dimensions, and to analyse it in its own right, separating it from trust, as well as overlapping attitudes of cynicism and lack of confidence.

The goal is to explore the meaning of political distrust as an attitude area and to allow citizens to elaborate on the judgements involved in their decision-making and attribution of distrust. For this reason, narrative interviews offer the most promising methodological choice. As Ronald Barthes notes, “narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society” (1993: 251) and is, therefore, largely a universal competence. Systematized as a research tool that aims to reconstruct events from the interviewee’s perspective, narrative interviews do not only offer the recounting of events as a list, but comprehensively connect them in time and meaning (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000; Bauer, 1996). Further, narrative interviews are rich in indexical and non-indexical statements, the former being based on personal experiences and the latter reflecting the interviewee’s evaluative system (Bruner, 2000). Both can offer important insights into the thought processes involved in political distrust, showing what types of information citizens use, how they evaluate them, the way they interpret events and choose to explain them to a third party (Bryman, 2012). Finally, this methodological tool was chosen to allow citizens to

use their own language when expressing distrusting attitudes, to offer personal interpretations of untrustworthy behaviour and account for their significance.

### **Research Context**

Narrative interviews were carried out with 48 citizens in the UK, Italy and Greece during the summer/autumn 2013. Interviews were conducted with the help of only a handful of thematic headings to trigger thoughts and ideas on political evaluations and distrust. The UK, Greece and Italy were selected as cases for qualitative study because of the particularly interesting recorded trends of political distrust, both in magnitude and volatility. They further represent nations from a relative homogenous group of Western European established democracies allowing for comparative European perspective. Sixteen interviews were carried out in each country, with interviewees being selected from three different national geographies and representing a balanced sample in terms of gender, age, socioeconomic and educational background. The interviews had average length 60mins (40'min-70'max), depending to a certain extent on the willingness and ability of the speaker to express their views on politics uninterrupted for extended periods of time. Narrative interviews were a well suited methodological research tool in all three countries. Following Jovchelovitch and Bauer's (2000) systemisation, the researcher managed to pose as an 'outsider' with limited information about the current situation and recounted events. Hence, despite contextual differences, the uninterrupted nature of the narrative process is seen to work effectively through the transcripts, as one thought process triggers another and interviewees attempt to make sense of their views and judgments, encouraged at times by the interviewer.

The following paragraph offers some background information regarding the national context and state of public affairs during the interviewing period. In the summer 2013 in Italy Berlusconi's trial for economic and tax fraud charges – not personal scandal – were underway and on the forefront of every political discussion. Also, at that time, Italian politicians were struggling to form a government following the inconclusive results of the July national election, where none of the two big coalitions achieved the required majority on both houses, and the anti-systemic 'Five Star Movement' of Beppe Grillo gathered 25.5% of the vote. The on-going coalition talks between the centre-left (PD) and centre-right blocks (Pdl) and the political bargaining over the nomination of a Prime Minister, frustrated many citizens who had been hit hard by the economic crisis and were looking for quick reforms. In Greece, citizens had already been exposed to three years of plummeting economic indicators and imposition of harsh austerity measures by their National government and the tripartite European Commission, ECB, IMF group. The timeline of the financial crisis comes across clearly in the narratives of Greek people. The economy is central in many narratives, but so are considerations of blame and responsibility for the state of the country. In this respect, the popular appeal of the extreme-right Golden Dawn party also features in discussions, although interviews took place in the weeks preceding the legal detainment and prosecution of certain Golden Dawn MPs. Finally, in the UK, although the economy was at the forefront of political discussions, so was policy on immigration, welfare and benefits. Considerations of political trust and distrust prompt references to the Iraq war and potential involvement in Syria.

All interviews were transcribed in the original language and then translated by the researcher. Content was analysed in a stepwise procedure of text reduction (Bauer, 1996). Thematic analysis of narrative content provided manageable amounts of information and allowed for the identification of common issues, thought processes and reactions. Condensed interview material was also coded in items of narrated events, interpretations, as well as emotive, cognitive and behavioural responses. The analysis of narrative content in the following chapter explores the meaning of political distrust and tries to identify its conceptual status, evaluative dimensions and implications.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### (i) The Meaning of Political Distrust

#### Distrust as Expectation

The first aspect of political distrust judgments identified through the interview data is that political distrust is not static. It is a dynamic evaluation with an inherent time dimension that is projected both in the past and into the future. Citizens' expression of political distrust reveals a meaning of expectation. An interviewee in Italy thinking about the country's politicians claims:

“So, then we say "these will never look out for my own good, in fact, they will even ruin my life!" (I-2112)

Distrust is encapsulated by the expectation of untrustworthy behaviour, a behaviour that gives rise to negative and unpleasant outcomes for the citizen. Interviewees claiming they “expect nothing good from them [politicians]” (G2109), or even stressing that they “do not believe what they [politicians] say” (I-1104) anticipate the actions of a political agent to be untruthful and harmful. Equivalently, trust in politicians or institutions is equated with the expectation of a certain type of behaviour that falls within the scope of the proper functions of the system and of what a ‘good politician’ is. Another interviewee explains in which case they will trust and which case they will withhold trust:

“I will trust a politician to respond to me if I send him a letter, but I don't trust him to act on it. Why do I say that... Because a good politician has to respond to all letters that they may get or requests they may get from the public.” (UK-1204)

As an expressed judgment, political distrust does not only project into the future in the form of expected action; it also extends in evaluations of the past. Political distrust assumes a retrospective reflection of events, information and evidence from the citizens' cognitive and affective reservoir, which are processed and interpreted in a negative manner. The retrospective evaluation of the actions and operations of political objects appears to be an integral part of the decision to mistrust. Another interviewee, explains his lack of faith in the whole political class by stating:

“I did not lose faith in someone because I never had faith. I felt that those who governed us had as their priority to serve their own, personal, interests and the interests of those they collaborated with.” (G-3105)

In this case, the perception of himself as being outside the group of people whose interests and wellbeing politicians would seek to protect has been shaped over the years through his experience as a citizen and creates a negative baseline of political expectation. Both time projections inform citizens' expectation and subsequent stance towards politicians and institutions. Crucially, political distrust is not a reflection of the inability or unwillingness to make a decision, and hence to neither trust nor distrust, as seen through the earlier quote. Withholding judgment, either due to lack of sufficient information, conflicting evidence or even personal choice, is expressed in terms of not having positive or negative expectations with any degree of conviction. Distrust however, denotes evaluations and expectations of clearly negative outcomes from the operation of the political agent in question.

### **A Dynamic Process of Distrust**

Often, the retrospective evaluation and a prospective judgment regarding the type of behaviour the citizen expects to receive from a political agent, is an instinctive thought process. Yet, the narrative interview gives the interviewee the space and flexibility to retrace their thoughts and explain their judgement step by step. When probed to elaborate on what he means in particular instances of trust betrayal, a citizen explains:

“If people let you down then you can deal with this afterwards, don't you? You deal with the consequences and you use that to form your future judgement.” (UK-2106)

Other times, and especially in the case of stronger and diffuse political distrust, this process is conscious. For example, an interviewee from Greece notes that, for her “the problem now is that, for all the times we have been fooled, even when someone will try to jump-start things, people will not have faith anymore. People don't believe anymore.” (G-2209) This dynamic aspect of distrust, is echoed throughout narratives and reveals a continuous process of action and reaction; a process of being betrayed by untrustworthy behaviour and reacting by setting a negative baseline for future expectations. Citizens appear to think of political distrust in terms of past indications of untrustworthiness and use them to update expectations for future behaviour. They often use instances of untrustworthy behaviour as evidence to explain their decision to distrust and even justify future course of action. In this way, it becomes clear that citizens' understanding of political distrust is relational and characterises a dynamic process of interaction between the citizen and state institutions or the citizen and her political representatives.

It is important to note that although ‘untrustworthiness’ and ‘distrust’ are conceptually distinct, most citizens refer to ‘untrustworthy behaviour’ in their accounts of political distrust. Similarly, many discussions of political trust often focus on trustworthiness and have attempted to elucidate the link between the two

(Levi and Stoker, 2000). Through popular narratives, citizens seem to understand untrustworthiness and trustworthiness as attributes of the political object being evaluated – not of the citizens themselves. However, individuals decide to distrust based on their *perception* of untrustworthiness, their perception of past untrustworthy actions and their expectation of being at the receiving end of further untrustworthy behaviour. In other words, whereas untrustworthiness would be the primary focus of macro-level research, individual-level research focuses on the citizens' perspective, their perceptions of untrustworthiness and their decision to distrust. Hence, mentions of untrustworthy behaviour in this study refer to citizen's perception and distrust characterises the ensuing relationship, between the citizen and a political object.

### **Three Dimensions of Distrust: Technical, Moral and Congruence**

What is deemed as trustworthy and untrustworthy behaviour invariably depends on the particular evaluating processes of every citizen. Although cognitive evaluations are expected to vary between individuals and between national contexts, a comprehensive pattern for evaluating untrustworthiness emerges, once narrative information is condensed and coded according to recounted events and offered interpretations. Interview data indicate that judgments of political distrust are based upon three different evaluative dimensions: a technical, a moral and a congruence dimension.

In line with earlier conceptual work on political trust, which points to a strategic evaluation of the capacities and competences of the political agent in deciding whether they can be trusted, the technical dimension of political distrust includes all considerations and evidence of incompetence and inability to perform. For institutions, it involves a belief that they are 'not functioning' according to their mandate and for individuals the conviction that they are 'not doing their job'. This dimension also includes evaluations of political promise fulfilment, the accord or discord between words and actions, the ability to deliver results, perceived accountability and responsibility for failures. For example, thinking about the political response to the financial crisis in Greece an interviewee explains his disappointment:

“Because even in the beginning of the crisis we expected a different approach, a little better management of things, some more actions rather than words, and ultimately what did we see? Words only.” (G-1102)

The second evaluative dimension of distrust depends on moral considerations about the practices of a political agent. While the normative aspect of political trust and distrust has been discussed in earlier conceptual work (for example, Uslaner, 2002), it has scarcely been included or measured in European empirical studies. It is therefore important to note the prominence of moral claims embedded in judgements of political distrust. Interviews reveal that citizen accounts of political distrust almost always include an ethical dimension, where the actions, decisions or behaviour of the political object in question are judged to violate shared normative values or accepted notions of fairness and justice. The violation of shared normative values takes the form of betrayal, deception and manipulation and is

often expressed in terms of having been lied to, being tricked or fooled. Such behaviour is thought to be objectively 'wrong' or 'bad', and subsequent judgements are based on strong ethical claims of dishonesty and lack of integrity on behalf of political agents.

Further, the moral dimension of distrust also includes evaluations of action that goes against notions of 'justice' and 'fairness'. For example, interviewees across all three countries referred to unjust laws that are too heavy on the weakest citizens, special privileges for certain social groups, the lack of punishment for wrongdoings among politicians and the institutionalised abuse of power. A citizen spoke about his loss of faith in politicians saying that:

"It will be restored only if these people who comprise the politics of our country manage to do something that is fair at last! Make those who have money pay, those that need to pay and owe billions to the state anyway." (G-3213)

In this evaluative dimension, perceived untrustworthiness is behaviour deemed to be 'wrong' and 'unfair', not solely according to the speaker in question, in a case of having been personally disadvantaged, but unjust according to the speaker's normative understanding of the world. Undoubtedly, normative frameworks differ between individuals to some extent, and so will their evaluations. What is particularly interesting is that political roles, positions of authority and institutional functions, are judged according to some kind of ethical understanding of the world and therefore evoke moral assessments when citizens decide to distrust political agents.

Finally, the third dimension of political distrust that surfaces from the interviews is one of congruence. The dimension of congruence has often been conflated with the moral one, and for this reason it has not been explored in existing research, although it appears to have strong implications for the meaning of political distrust and the possibility of reversing distrusting relations. Congruence refers to considerations of the speaker's personal interests and an expectation that the political object will protect or harm them. As mentioned earlier, political distrust characterises a relationship, and is formed in response to evaluations of untrustworthy behaviour. Consequently, it also depends on the perceived closeness of preferences, level of identification and reciprocity received from exchanges between the citizen and a political representative, party or institution. Whether the political object under evaluation cares about the citizen, whether they set out and intend to protect the citizen's best interests or harm them, are central considerations in the evaluation of what he or she perceives to be 'trustworthy'.

Such thoughts are particularly prominent in partisan evaluations, where individuals may trust a specific political party or politician to protect them, but also in the reciprocity expected in a rapport with a political institution or the political system in general. An earlier quote of the interview referring to clientelist relationships in explaining why he has no positive expectations from politicians captures this evaluative dimension. Actions and behaviour in line with the individual's personal preferences foster a closer relationship between the citizen and the political object in question, something that is presented as an indispensable part of political trust.

Similarly, evidence of behaviour contrary to the individual's preferences and expectations of future action that will harm their best interests marks a breakdown to the reciprocal relationship and is an inherent dimension of political distrust. Interview extracts show that representation of the citizen's interests is an important consideration:

“So you see all these kinds of agendas, that serve certain people, but in terms of what is important to me, I don't see stuff that is relevant for me and I don't see stuff that is relevant for people who are disabled or ill.” (UK-1210)

At this point it is important to note that although interview data indicates the presence of these three dimensions in the meaning of political distrust, these are not always entirely distinct and can give rise to different judgment outcomes depending on the speaker. For example, evaluations of congruence can often assume a moral or even technical dimension, as actions that violate one's own personal preference are also often thought to be 'objectively' unfair and wrong, or against the 'commonly agreed function' of the political agent. However, recognising that distrust judgments can be based on three of these dimensions, independently of how they are expressed, is a significant step forward in our understanding of the concept and formation of political distrust. Consider the following two extracts from the same narrative interview in Italy:

“But you shouldn't make an old poor man pay, who might not even have money to put a chair in his house, just because! Here you are, this has destroyed people....”

“That's what I mean by the loss of my identity. Because I have to go out and study for five years away from home, and then I have to get work experience abroad, to even be accepted for a minimum consideration for a job application, or for someone to see me. And then comes the first – [\*\*\*] in this case – who hasn't studied, they bought him a degree and when they went to interview him, he did not even know where the degree was bought from, so he couldn't even answer. And so, you give Italy to the hands of these people... It saddens me, and it really has been given to the hands of these people.” (I-3202)

The first extract clearly evokes sentiments of unfairness, referring to a housing tax policy that is perceived to be deeply unjust for the weakest in society and is evaluated through the moral dimension of distrust. In the second extract, however, the interviewee uses the example of a politician's son who undeservedly became a Parliamentarian, to express her distrust towards the political class. She describes a situation that goes against her personal interests, through the dimension of congruence, but also against her moral values and systemic rules, which result in the country being governed by incompetent and unworthy people. Similarly to this, experiences of corruption often evoke a combination of three evaluative dimensions of political distrust.

## **(ii) Expressions and Attribution of Political Distrust**

## Targets of Political Distrust

Relations of distrust are formed in respect to various political agents and interact between specific and systemic levels. The list of untrustworthy political objects presented below, largely follows the categorisation of Almond and Vepra (1980) and Norris (1999), among others, for the study of political attitudes. Loosely ordered from the specific to diffuse level the following political objects of distrust are identified: (i) individual politicians, groups of politicians, the entire political class; (ii) an individual political party, governing parties, the entire party system; (iii) representative political institutions (iv) the political system including all institutions, process, players and outputs; and finally (v) other groups within the political community. This list does not include what is often referred to in the literature as the highest diffuse level of ‘regime principles’. The reason for this is that distrust as a relational concept involves the expectation of a certain type of untrustworthy behaviour. Hence, although it is evident that regime principles feature heavily in citizens’ evaluations of their political world, political distrust can never characterise the relationship between a citizen and a principle or ideal. Of course, other political attitudes, such as lack of support or cynicism, cannot be directed at regime principles.

Further, narratives show that multiple events, evidence and information can be considered simultaneously in the evaluation of a single object for various domains. It is found, therefore, that while political distrust can spill-over to and from the diffuse level, it is always grounded in the evaluation of particular information, evidence and events that give citizens the expectation of untrustworthy behaviour. Consider the following two interview extracts; the first refers to the inability of the judiciary to be fair in punishing abuses of power and what this means for the citizen, while the latter shows the interviewee’s thought process in evaluating new information and updating future expectations, in this case attributing blame to one specific politician and ring-fencing trustworthiness at the systemic level.

“So there is mistrust even in those who should be the ones trying to keep the boat on a straight course [...] And this gives a sense of impartiality and it gives people a sense of distrust, which then reverberates through everything, it reverberates through the institutions.” (I-1104)

“That was when the public system, that was when the British system was really let down. And I think it was Tony Blair and Alistair Campbell who were manipulating that because they wanted to go to war with Iraq. And I never ever understand why we did that. It was wrong, at every level to start invading Iraq [...] That was terrible. It was a disgrace.... Well you hope that the system will prevent that from happening again. And I think the fact that David Cameron wasn’t able to get involved in Syria was a really positive thing.” (UK-1209)

Citizens expect that instances of corruption, revelations of scandals, money appropriation or any other wrongdoing should be caught and result in the same – if

not more severe – consequences for politicians as for any other citizen, so as to deter such actions in the future. When this expectation is not met, citizen distrust spills-over to other institutional players and to the system in place, which fails to impose punishment. Citizens are, thus, unable to distinguish between politicians who engage in damaging practices, further fuelling the expectation of a system that operates in an incompetent, unethical and harmful manner. Further, political distrust towards institutions and the general political system evokes even stronger expectations of distrust for the future, as citizens realise that replacing individual inappropriate politicians will not change the way the system operates. This can be reversed, as the second quote indicates, when new events are interpreted in a positive way that encourages citizens to update their evaluations.

### **The Emotive Expressions of Political Distrust**

A little explored aspect of political distrust is the distinct emotional responses it evokes. Expressions of political distrust are often accompanied by negative emotional reactions of anger, sadness, despair, confusion and distress. All three evaluative dimensions, technical, ethical and especially considerations of congruence can give rise to anger, sadness or disappointment when expressed at the specific level. A Democratic Party supporter in Italy speaking about the disappointing PD-Pdl coalition, which promised to reform the electoral system and then dissolve, declares “[s]o, if once more you have fooled us, I think that in the next election there will be a cataclysm!” (I-1206)

When such views of having been repeatedly ‘deceived’, ‘manipulated’ or ‘fooled’ spread to the systemic level, the emotional state of citizens moves to fear, insecurity and even despair. One of the interviewees explains that after so much lying, “it is truly clear that there is always something underneath that we do not know about and we are being played like dumb pawns.” (G-3206) While for another, insecurity at the institutional level, linked to the actions of the national parliament, is even greater:

“I don’t know what the dawn will bring for me. Today they say one thing, tomorrow they change it to another. They change the laws every day. Every day there are new laws!” (G-2111)

Fear and uncertainty are omnipresent in expressions of diffuse political distrust. This is part of the particularity of political distrust compared to other forms of distrusting relations. An established relationship of distrust between a citizen and a political object denotes a certain degree of conviction about future expectations, yet these are expectations of a negative or harmful nature. In the case of politics, whereby you cannot entirely remove yourself from that relationship, as it might be possible in the case in a professional exchange or interpersonal rapport, citizens recognise they are still being affected in a multitude of ways by an untrustworthy politician, political class or political system despite their wish not to be. Even if a citizen distrusts a specific political party and decides not to vote for them or vote for their opponent, it is still possible that this party will be chosen to govern their country, city or council. More importantly, even when citizens accept a malfunctioning legislature, and laws written by parliamentarians with disregard to the best interest of the citizen, there is still fear and uncertainty about how these

operations will affect the citizen's life. Another interviewee elaborates on his view of a broken political system and explains:

“we have a great fear, because we know that politicians cannot change this situation, and hence they think more about their best interest than of the welfare of the people.” (I-2112)

An expression of such diffuse political distrust by citizens is frequently accompanied with a behavioural intention of removing oneself from the citizen-state relationship by physically moving away from the country or refusing to abide by the rules of the rapport. This type of expression was found mostly, but not solely, in narratives from Italy and Greece, where it is no doubt related to the dire economic and employment situation many citizens faced at the time of the interviews. Although expressions of trust are seldom accompanied by strong emotive responses, they do entail expectations of stability and emotional security, which stand in sharp contrast to the anxiety of distrust. An interviewee explains his view of politicians by saying that “[t]hey are people who have got their own merit, they have been trusted into those positions haven't they? And if I didn't trust them, what is the alternative really? Worrying? Panicking?” (UK-3102) Therefore, political distrust is associated with fear and stress, and is seen as inhibiting feelings of security and other positive emotive states.

## DISCUSSION

This paper has conceptualised political distrust using micro-level data from popular narrative interviews in three European democracies, in order to disentangle the concept from notions of cynicism, alienation, support or confidence, but also from the notion of lack of trust. By identifying the retrospective and prospective aspects of political distrust and the three dimensions of evaluation for the establishment of expectations it attempted to define political distrust in its own right. The reciprocal nature of distrust sets it apart from attitudes of political cynicism, which can only describe the stance of citizens themselves. Similarly, although distrust can be expressed as, or result in, lack of political support, support does not characterise a reciprocal relationship on the basis of expectations. More importantly, measures of confidence, which tend to be conflated with indications of political trust in survey research, do not conceptualise the negative expectations entailed in political distrust and do not tap on the three distinct dimensions identified. Therefore, while it is highly possible that antecedents of distrust, or even political distrust itself could cause cynicism, alienation or lack of support, it is important to maintain they are conceptually distinct.

Finally, it is possible – and sometimes desirable – to withhold judgment towards certain political agents, yet this neutral state of ‘lack of trust’, is different from a state of distrust, with distinctive meaning, expression, emotional responses and implications. In the following two extracts, interviewees express their personal view of politicians in their country. Clearly, to equate these two evaluations would be conceptually misleading and could not help us interpret the political judgments if studied separately.

“Yes, they do a decent job but they [\*\*\*] up from time to time. And they [\*\*\*] up pretty badly, and when they do it sort of rebases everyone’s trust in the system. So you kind of know that things are not going go awfully wrong, but they are not going to go amazingly either” (UK-1105)

“Because the truth is that these people have destroyed us. These are not politicians! Neither their politics is politics! The only thing they know how to do is to grab money.” (G-3213)

Furthermore, the moral, congruence and technical dimensions of distrust are by no means novel. Considerations about technical competence, economic performance and institutional functions have been discussed at length and have featured as dependent variables in numerous empirical micro and macro-level studies, despite having focused only on indicators of trust. Similarly, the normative claims trusting relations entail, have found their way into existing analytical work, though they have been more difficult to capture empirically. Finally, the third dimension of congruence can also be traced back to Hardin’s (2002) notion of trust as encapsulated interest, bringing in the possibility of protection or harming of the truster’s personal interest. Nevertheless, these three dimensions have not been placed together as indispensable conceptual parts in judgments of political distrust, grounded in the analysis of qualitative evidence.

In addition, this paper maintains that judgements of trust and distrust are plentiful in the political lives of citizens. They do not only characterise the way citizen relate to various political objects, but also the way evaluations span various domains. This proves to be most intriguing when evaluations point to opposite conclusions. For example, a citizen can claim he has respect for Tony Blair as an “impressive chap” and “competent politician”, and at the same time add that his “lying point blank in our faces in regards to the war in Iraq” (UK-1105) was against his normative expectation and personal preferences. Similarly, many interviewees evaluate the European Union as a positive normative attempt to bring different voices around the continent together, but resent the fact that they perceive it as harming their best interest as British, Greek or Italian citizens. This potentially explains why it might be possible to both trust and distrusts a politician or party at the same time, and suggests that measuring such judgments on distinct dimension would prove to be highly beneficial.

Overall, citizens appear able and willing to synthesize and weigh information that will lead them to trust or distrust. The extent to which citizen perceptions of trustworthy or untrustworthy behaviour correspond to the reality of a politician’s, government’s or political system’s performance, is an altogether different, yet extremely interesting question. It requires further research that could bridge empirical micro-level studies of political distrust to macro-level research on untrustworthiness. What the analysis of interview data has shown is that citizens’ political distrust is highly contingent on a number of factors. These include the citizen’s normative framework, their understanding of the rules and responsibilities of a particular political role and their ability to assess success or failure. It is also a function of their personal preferences, identification with particular groups and

interests, which could also potentially include many of their personality characteristics.

It is expected that general attitudes towards life may also shape attitudes towards politics. Narrative interviews show that while general life attitudes may influence feelings of mistrust in politics they are not incompatible with specific evaluations of political agents, institutions and the political system. For example, being aware of how a trusting attitude could be interpreted in a different way, an interviewee will specify, “I don’t want to be naïve, but I trust them to get on with it as long as they are scrutinised properly.” (UK-3102) Citizens consider themselves capable of reaching individual judgements for different circumstances, of evaluating different events and actors and of forming future expectations in many occasions. Since political distrust characterises a dynamic relationship, speaking solely about general trusting and mistrusting individuals limits our ability to understand political distrust. A younger interviewee from Italy elaborates on her initial claim of not having faith in the country’s politicians, saying:

“I see distrust a bit in the sense that ‘you made me loose it’ and so it is your fault. Not trusting might be because I am a person that doesn’t trust and maybe I do not trust you. But in the case of politics they made me loose my trust. I had it before.” (I-2213)

Finally, narrative interviews capture the reciprocal nature of political distrust and reveal a process of constant action and reaction, between perceptions of untrustworthy behaviour, distrusting attitudes, further untrustworthiness and so forth. This is what makes it extremely challenging to empirically distinguish between causes, consequences and political distrust itself. To put it differently, political distrust can be understood as a repeated ‘trust game’, where information is constantly updated and new events call for new action based on trusting or distrusting established relations – but where the citizen rarely has the option of terminating the ‘game’ and needs to continue ‘playing’ by modifying his behaviour and making decisions according to future expectations.

This is why it is important to both study political distrust in its own right, separating it from trust and the lack thereof, and to consider the implications it has for political behaviour and democratic governance. Although it is empirically extremely difficult to link attitudes to behaviour, interviews offer the citizens’ own explanation for their decisions in a coherent pattern of cause and effect. Whether it is by removing themselves from the democratic process of election altogether (removing their name from the electoral register or not exercising their right to vote), voting for anti-systemic parties (the Five Star Movement in Italy and Golden Dawn in Greece), or consciously standing up against the law and refusing to contribute any further to the citizen state relation (tax evasion or the Greek ‘I won’t pay’ movement), citizens appear to link their retrospective experiences of being let down and their prospective evaluation of the likelihood of being let down in the future to their chosen course of action. Empirical research has attempted to illustrate, with some success, the effects of lack of trust on tax evasion and the reluctance to comply with the law, which are in their turn understood to inhibit political actors from operating in a trustworthy manner and causing more distrust (Hetherington, 1998; Scholz and Lubell, 1998; Grimes, 2006). Future studies that

capture actual distrusting evaluations, could be even more effective in exploring the implications of political distrust. Narrative interviews further support such claims, by highlighting the reciprocal nature of distrust relations between the citizen and the political system. In the words of one interviewee summing up what distrusting means to her: “So in practical terms this is what untrustworthiness means, in the end you become untrustworthy as well, they pass it on to you...” (G-1204)

## CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to make a contribution to the academic study of political distrust by analysing citizen interviews in three European democracies. This alternative approach was chosen in order to disentangle the notion of political distrust and offer a conceptualization grounded in empirical qualitative evidence. The main argument presented is that when citizens express political distrust they are in fact expressing an expectation of negative or harmful outcomes derived from the operations of a political agent. The distrusting judgment entails two time projections, a retrospective interpretation of past actions and a prospective assessment of future untrustworthy behaviour. Further, interview evidence suggests that citizens evaluate untrustworthy behaviour via three dimensions: technical, moral and congruence. Although these dimensions of political distrust are not always expressed distinctly, it is important to identify them and recognise them as separate evaluating mechanisms. In this way we can conceptualise political distrust as a dynamic, relational phenomenon that assumes the meaning of negative expectations, and separate it from competing notions such as the lack of trust, apathy or cynicism. The three evaluative dimensions of distrust, as well as the way distrusting judgments spill-over from one political object to another, further illuminate the particular emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses political distrust gives rise to.

These conceptual characteristics were found in distrusting judgments across different citizens, across different national contexts and directed across different political objects, specific or systemic. With the possibility that these findings could be cautiously generalised beyond the three national contexts studied, this paper’s contribution to the current literature is a clearly defined concept of political distrust, which could be used to create more extensive and detailed measurement tools. Many political researchers have called for a better integration of micro and macro level studies of political trust and distrust. Empirical research and measurement instruments that are tailored to capture the unique dimensions and conceptual characteristics of distrust will allow comparative research to reach across national contexts and produce meaningful results. This paper represents a small step in this direction and will hopefully be accompanied by more studies that will focus on capturing and exploring political distrust. Then we could also turn our attention to considering ways to reverse strained citizen-state relations and assess their implications for democratic governance.

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