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Political trust in multi-level and global governance

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Do individuals trust multi-level and global governance institutions, and to the extent they do, why? In view of pressing transboundary policy challenges, we need a firm evidence base on political trust in the international organizations (IOs) governing the globe, such as the African Union (AU), European Union (EU), Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Southern Common Market (Mercosur), United Nations (UN), and World Trade Organization (WTO). The main topic of this chapter is political trust in IOs.

These organizations are the core pillars of multi-level and global governance and are central to promoting cooperation on the big policy challenges of our time. Consider climate change, health pandemics, food insecurity, violent conflict, and more. To aid in this endeavor, IOs have been delegated increasing authority in recent decades. They exert political influence through a variety of mechanisms, such as norm diffusion, social shaming, policy change, peace diplomacy, and economic coercion (Barnett, Pevehouse and Raustiala, 2021). In this rules-based global system, IOs have a frontline role in helping states make the world more sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous.

As IOs have weak capacities to enforce norms and rules, the acceptance of and compliance with international norms and rules among populations tends to depend on their political trust. Political trust fosters a sense of belonging to any political institution and makes it more likely that individuals internalize and comply with the norms an institution promotes (Marien and Hooghe, 2011). This is particularly important for IOs, which cannot coerce actors into compliance (Hurd, 1999) and have been increasingly contested in recent decades, both by constructive forces pushing for a more equal and fair world order, and by nationalist populists seeking to undermine multi-lateral cooperation (Walter, 2021). When individuals distrust IOs, they may disengage and even favor that their states withdraw from IOs entirely. We have witnessed such dynamics during the Brexit vote in the UK, for instance, which has led the country to leave the European Union (Hobolt, 2016). For IOs to be effective and viable, they require political trust.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses how political trust is commonly conceptualized, measured, and studied in relation to IOs. The

section outlines central findings about political trust in IOs, pertaining to the patterns of political trust and the individual- and contextual-level determinants of variation in political trust in IOs. Central themes are the transposition of political trust from national to multi-level and global governance, and the challenges faced by the global system, including shifting global distributions of power, authoritarian diffusion, and the contestation of IOs among elites and mass publics.

The second section pursues the core purpose of the chapter, namely, identifying avenues for future research. It provides an assessment of how greater cross-fertilization between the literatures on political trust and International Relations (IR) can be achieved. This assessment is formulated in four research strategies. The first strategy is to draw more on the insights from theories of political trust to study the determinants of political trust in IOs. The second is to marry insights from both areas of research on the role of the ongoing wave of authoritarian diffusion to study the effects of political system features on political trust in IOs. The third strategy suggests incorporating the study of technological change and new media outlets more firmly into the study of IO trust. The fourth strategy suggests an extension of the object of study of political trust beyond IOs to newer forms of multi-level and global governance, such as trans-governmental networks, informal institutions, and private or hybrid governance arrangements.

The third, concluding section summarizes the chapter's message in three key points. First, political trust and IR theories could be more extensively combined to study political trust in multi-level and global governance. Second, more systematic inquiries are needed to explain how ongoing processes of authoritarian diffusion and technological change shape political trust in IOs. Third, we need more theorization and empirical study of political trust formation in the context of informal, private, trans-governmental, or public-private cooperation beyond the multilateral system. Ultimately, a better understanding of political trust in multi-level and global governance can contribute to a robust knowledge base for how contemporary societies can solve joint problems in the future.

Studying political trust in international organizations

Multi-level governance is on the rise. Governments around the world have delegated significant portions of authority to subnational and global and regional organizations for a wide range of functions (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019a; Zürn, Tokhi and Binder, 2021). There are two main types of multi-level governance: Type 1 and Type 2. Type 1 denotes a system of multi-level governance that is well developed at a limited number of levels and governed by a general-purpose organization. Examples are the polity of the EU or systems of cooperative federalism. Type 2 is rather emerging and fragmented, consisting of many task-specific institutions with overlapping memberships. Cases in point are global governance or systems of decentralized federalism (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019a; Zürn, 2020).

This chapter leaves political trust in subnational authority aside and hones in on the study of political trust in EU and global governance. Global governance refers to the system of organizations, processes, and structures at global and regional levels that develop and implement rules and norms for the management of collective problems (Weiss and Wilkinson, 2014). At the core of this system are the major IOs established in the post-1945 period, which include the EU, UN, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the Bretton Woods organizations. Based on this post-war system, a multilateral system of about 534 global organizations has developed (Pevehouse et al., 2020), of which about 35 are major regional organizations (Lenz, 2021). Since the end of the Cold War, global governance has become more complex mainly due to a rapid increase in informal, private, and hybrid governance arrangements (Barnett, Pevehouse and Raustiala, 2021).

Conceptualizing political trust and legitimacy at the global level

Increased authority at the European and global levels brings questions about political trust to the fore. As elaborated above, IOs usually cannot rely on fear or coercion to enforce norms and rules, and so depend upon public trust to foster a willingness to accept and internalize IOs' authority (Hurd, 1999). This reasoning mirrors assessments from national political institutions, for which political trust is similarly vital (Zmerli, 2014). In relation to European and global governance, this issue has mainly been talked about in terms of IO legitimacy.

Drawing from the study of legitimacy at the national level (Weber, 1922/1978; Tyler, 2006), legitimacy has been defined in a variety of ways. It can be understood as public acceptance of an organization's authority or the belief that an institution ought to be obeyed for motives other than fear or material self-interest (Hurd, 1999). From this perspective, people abide by the rules of an institution even if it were to make decisions that go against their self-interest (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006). Alternative definitions exclude the notion of acceptance and other concepts of behavior, defining legitimacy as the perception of appropriately exercised authority (Tallberg and Zürn, 2019). Such studies usually invoke the distinction between the study of 'sociological legitimacy,' which is interested in public beliefs and which is in focus in this chapter, and 'normative legitimacy,' which develops the principles underpinning IOs' right to rule based on philosophical reasoning (Dellmuth et al., 2022).

There is a burgeoning and by now quite substantial literature on IO legitimacy beliefs, which draws from and speaks to political trust research. In IR, political confidence has often been used to measure IO legitimacy, both in relation to elite and mass attitudes (e.g., Johnson, 2011; Persson, Parker and Widmalm, 2019; Voeten, 2013; Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021; Scholte, Verhaegen and Tallberg, 2021; Dellmuth et al., 2022). Others have argued that legitimacy is a multidimensional belief system (Bernauer and Gampfer, 2013; Dellmuth and Schlipphak, 2020).

Political trust, as defined in this book, refers to people's basic evaluative and affective orientation to the institutions and actors governing their polity (Citrin and Stoker, 2018), where trust reflects the belief that the actor would produce preferred outcomes.

(Easton, 1975). This definition overlaps with the notion of legitimacy but is not synonymous (Thomassen, Andeweg and Van Ham, 2017). While legitimacy perceptions are commonly assumed to be grounded in moral convictions, independent of short-term satisfaction with outcomes (Buchanan and Keohane, 2006; Hurd, 2007: 30; Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2024), political trust can be based both on moral considerations and utilitarian evaluations of outcomes. When citizens base their beliefs on moral convictions, they accept the rules and requirements of political institutions when they are seen as conformant to their 'own sense of what is right and proper in the political sphere' (Easton, 1975: 451; Suchman, 1995: 574; Steffek, 2023). In contrast, when people's legitimacy beliefs include self-interest, institutions are judged on the basis of whether they yield a specific payoff, which tends to be a function of the performance of an institution (Dalton, 1999; Dellmuth and Schlipphak, 2020).

There is a large and still increasing literature on political trust in and public support for the EU, which likewise is a positive orientation that can be based on self-interest (see Hobolt and De Vries, 2016, for an overview). Moving beyond the distinction between moral and self-interested considerations when forming political trust, this literature has emphasized the affective component of political support (Dalton, 1999; see also Citrin and Stoker, 2018). From this vantage point, attitudes toward IOs can reflect affective polarization in terms of stereotyping and out-group prejudice (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2021).

Patterns of global political trust and legitimacy

Political trust varies chiefly across organizations, across geographies, and over time. At the organizational level, there is evidence from the years 2017 to 2019 that IOs with profiles in human security tend to enjoy more political confidence than IOs with mandates in economic governance, both among elites and mass publics. This is found among both elites – that is, people who hold leading positions in society that strive to be politically influential (Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021) – and mass publics in relation to three economic IOs (International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, WTO) and three human security IOs (International Criminal Court (ICC), UN, World Health Organization (WHO)) (Dellmuth et al., 2022: chs. 3 and 7). There might be a similar mechanism at play when people evaluate judiciary and police institutions at the national level, which provide security rather than resource distribution, and which tend to enjoy higher levels of trust than government (e.g., Böhlinger and Boucher, 2024).

The EU, which has exceptionally high authority and an elected legislative body, has been less trusted among the general public in its member states than general-purpose IOs, such as the AU, Mercosur, and the UN, in their respective member states during the years 2007 to 2013. The comparatively low levels of trust in the EU can in part be explained by economic insecurity following the years after the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, which many have blamed the EU for (Talving and Vasilopoulou, 2021). Generally, regional integration in the EU has brought about economic winners and losers, which people blame the EU for, rather than individual politicians or decision-makers (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). Economic dissatisfaction has also brought about

an increasing vote share of right-wing populist parties in the European Parliament, which has risen ‘from a low of 1 percent in 1982 to a historic high of 12.3 percent in 2016’ (Broz, Frieden and Weymouth, 2021: 470). Cultural factors also matter for this development, as people are increasingly skeptical toward immigration and globalization, and distrust IOs (e.g., McLaren, 2012; Inglehart and Norris, 2017).

With regard to geography, the distinction between creditor and debtor countries has proven useful in the EU. Considering the years between 2004 and 2016, political trust in the EU fluctuates most among debtor countries, while trust is relatively stable among creditor countries (Foster and Frieden, 2017). Outside the EU, the patterns are more variegated. One source of geographical variation is ‘guilt-by-association,’ whereby unfavorable perceptions among elites and mass publics about the influence of a particular state in an IO can undermine their trust in that IO. This is found particularly in Russia and Japan in respect of US influence in the IMF, UN, and World Bank (Johnson, 2011). Moreover, evidence suggests that elites and broader populations in Brazil and Russia trust the IMF less than in countries with different historical experiences with the organization (Dellmuth et al., 2022).

A more recent but swiftly increasing literature has revealed that political trust also varies across subnational areas. This literature uses mainly data on EU support and trust to show weaker trust in the EU in poorer subnational areas (Ejrnæs et al., 2023) and areas suffering from long-term economic decline (Lipps and Schraff, 2021). However, such patterns vary considerably over time (Mayne and Katsanidou, 2023). By contrast, global-scale analysis using World Values Survey data from 2017 to 2022 suggests that political trust in six major supranational organizations is higher in poorer areas when compared to richer areas. This pattern is observed only on the basis of democracies in the global sample (Dellmuth, 2024).

On average, political trust also varies systematically over time. There is increasing distrust in IOs and populist nationalism (Foster and Frieden, 2017; Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019b). While these dynamics underpin the ongoing backlash against globalization, it is important to note that when looking at political trust in isolation, we rather see that political trust in IOs fluctuates in the short and medium term, without showing a consistent pattern of long-term decline (Walter, 2021; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023). These aggregate patterns of trust in IOs are in line with evidence on the stability of political trust from individual-level panel data, which suggests that political trust is a quite stable predisposition but fluctuates somewhat over the life course (Devine and Valgarðsson, 2024).

Causes of global political trust and legitimacy

The main debate hinges upon the individual and contextual determinants of political trust in IOs. It has featured five categories of individual-level determinants: domestic political trust; socio-economic status; social identification; political ideology; and cue taking. Moreover, there is evidence that contextual factors, mainly the procedures and performances of IOs, shape political trust and related attitudes. The key findings across the support, trust, and legitimacy literatures are briefly synthesized here, as

encompassing reviews have been provided (Hobolt and De Vries, 2016; Walter, 2021; De Vries, 2022; Steffek, 2023; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2026), though not with a focus on all three indicators in relation to IOs at the same time.

Key to understanding the variation in political trust in IOs is the extrapolation of political trust from the national to European and global levels. Domestic political trust is typically used as a benchmark in the formation of attitudes toward the EU (e.g., De Vries, 2018; Lipps and Schraff, 2021) or as a heuristic when evaluating the EU (e.g., Hartevelde, van der Meer and De Vries, 2013; Armingeon and Ceka, 2014). This transposition of political trust from domestic to global levels can also be observed in relation to other IOs, both among elites (Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021; Dellmuth et al., 2022) and mass publics (Johnson, 2011; Voeten, 2013).

There is also much evidence for an effect of socio-economic status on IO trust. The mechanism driving the effect of socio-economic status on trust in IOs is perceived economic utility. As people evaluate IOs based on cost–benefit assessments, those who perceive their country or themselves to benefit from IOs may trust IOs more, while those who perceive their country or themselves to be on the losing side may trust IOs less (Dellmuth et al., 2022: ch. 6). Evidence for an effect of socio-economic status on political trust in IOs is found both in mass publics (e.g., Gabel, 1998; Edwards, 2009; Braun and Tausendpfund, 2014) and elite samples (e.g., Bauer, 2012; Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021; Tallberg and Verhaegen, 2020).

The evidence for the other three main determinants is patchier. Political trust is variably related to social identification with social groups across borders, and the importance of social identification depends on the time period studied (e.g., Carey, 2002; Hooghe and Marks, 2004). Political trust and political ideology are linked, but the direction and significance of the relationship vary across countries (Dellmuth et al., 2022) and over time (Van Elsas and Van der Brug, 2015). Political ideology appears to be particularly important for internationalist attitudes in the context of polarized public opinion, such as in the US (Brutger and Clark, 2023).

Moreover, cue taking can be effective, but experimental evidence suggests that this depends on the IO in question, the credibility of the sender, the political polarization of the context (e.g., De Vries, 2018; Ghassim, 2022; Brutger and Clark, 2023; Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023), and the domestic communication environment (e.g., Schuck and de Vreese, 2006; Brosius, Van Elsas and de Vreese, 2018). Cueing effects also depend on whether people perceive their home nation to benefit or lose from the governance of the IO (e.g., Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi and Cabrera, 2022; Schlipphak, Meiners and Kiratli, 2022).

Finally, the institutional features of IOs themselves matter for individual-level beliefs. Most notably, IO trust is shaped by the procedures and performances of IOs, both among elites (e.g., Verhaegen, Scholte and Tallberg, 2021; Jongen and Scholte, 2022; Panke, Polat and Hohlstein, 2022) and among mass publics (e.g., Anderson, Bernauer and Kachi, 2018; Bernauer, Mohrenberg and Koubi, 2020; Ghassim, Koenig-Archibugi

and Cabrera, 2022). More recent accounts have found that the role of an IO's social purpose (Lenz and Viola, 2017) and authority (Schlippak, 2021) matters for legitimacy beliefs vis-à-vis IOs, but evidence is still sparse.

Avenues for future research on political trust in international organizations

This section suggests four research strategies to advance knowledge on the patterns, causes, and consequences of political trust in multi-level and global governance.

The first strategy is to draw more on the literature on political trust to study political trust in IOs. The review in the previous section suggests that the EU literature has made some headway in studying political trust in various European political organizations, such as the European Parliament and the EU as a whole. However, many theories of political trust have not yet been applied to or further developed in the study of IOs other than the EU. Given that global governance is a looser, more complex, and less well-known governance system than the EU and the national context, and one that is becoming increasingly publicly contested (Hooghe and Marks, 2005; Zürn, 2020), this opens up for novel theorizing. Four main areas of future research are highlighted.

- The complexity of the EU makes it more difficult for people to hold decision-makers accountable, implying that dissatisfied people often blame the EU as a whole (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). We can expect a similar dynamic in the context of IOs, but scholars have yet to systematically examine when and why individuals correctly attribute blame or reward IOs for good performance, with consequences for IO trust.
- Despite increasing public contestation of IOs (Walter, 2021), global governance is communicated about less when compared to communication about domestic politics. There is room for more research on how far theories about elite cues and political trust formation hold in the context of IOs. As IOs are more diverse than national governments in terms of aims, governance, and structure, this complexity might be used strategically by elites and affect the effects of their cues on political trust in IOs.
- Multi-level and global governance issues are nowadays being talked about at the domestic level and increasingly being linked to domestic political issues (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2023). Future research could usefully expand the study of how the changing interlinkages between domestic and global political issues, as well as their framings, affect trust formation in both domestic political institutions and IOs.

The second strategy concerns the systematic study of the role of authoritarian diffusion and technological change for political trust in IOs. In the ongoing wave of autocratization, governments holding authoritarian values are hollowing out democratic structures to seize long-term power. Authoritarian and populist parties are fueling

the backlash against globalization (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks, 2019b). These issues could be studied as follows:

- Democracy fosters the ability of individuals to get information about IOs in a free communication environment, which enables them to base their political trust on correct information (Norris, 2022). Understanding authoritarian diffusion and the implications for how informed people are when developing IO trust is thus an important research agenda for the future. In authoritarian countries, governments are more likely to control the information environment than in democracies. Future studies could examine the effects of political systems on IO trust with global data.
- Autocracies and democracies differ in how far they delegate authority to and engage with IOs (Poast and Urpelainen, 2013). With the risk of oversimplifying, autocratic governments tend to pursue resources to secure their own power, while democracies are more prone to seeking cooperation for joint problem-solving. It has rarely been studied whether, how, and why governments' engagement with IOs affects elites' and mass publics' political trust in IOs.

The third strategy implies linking the study of political trust in IOs to technological change. Artificial intelligence, digitalization, and the rise of new media are all phenomena that might affect IO trust. In particular, changes in information technology present challenges for individuals to gather correct and unbiased information about IOs to form trust independently.

- On online platforms and social media, the general public is nowadays confronted with a broader range of peer-to-peer communication, which many people are exposed to more than to news from traditional news media or political communication (Messing and Westwood, 2014). This new type of communication about politics can affect people's political perceptions and attitudes (Lewandowsky et al., 2019). Future studies could focus on different media outlets and the type of communication people engage in, as these choices or practices may contribute to shaping trust in IOs.
- Artificial intelligence affects how people are exposed to the content and intensity of political messages. Algorithms, which on some media platforms adapt to previous user behavior to customize content, can structure the information exposed to (Ecker-Ehrhardt, Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2025) and the ways in which people engage with the information (Nanz and Matthes, 2022). The role of such new technologies, through mechanisms such as machine learning, in shaping political trust in IOs, is largely unknown.

The fourth strategy implies an extension of the object of study of political trust beyond IOs to newer forms of multi-level and global governance. As described earlier, the past three decades have seen an increase in governance arrangements based on informality, market solutions, and public-private sector cooperation as a complement to classic multilateral cooperation (Barnett, Pevehouse and Raustiala, 2021). Such modes of

governance nowadays enjoy authority, raising the question of how trusted they are (Dellmuth and Tallberg, 2026).

- Informal governance arrangements, such as the G20 or the Shanghai Five, might be less politicized and raise fewer sovereignty concerns, given that they tend to have less authority than traditional multilateral organizations (Vabulas and Snidal, 2021). However, when trust in multilateral cooperation within IOs decreases, then elites may place hopes in informal governance instead, with implications for the democratic quality of global governance. The consequences of IO trust for political trust in informal governance are thus an important topic for future research.
- Private governance initiatives and public–private partnerships are often publicly visible through their activities, labels, and standards. Consider the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Renewable Energy Policy Network for the 21st Century (REN21). Such organizations are largely removed from state oversight, which has raised scholarly interest in their legitimacy (e.g., Nasiritousi and Verhaegen, 2020; Koliev and Bäckstrand, 2024). Yet, evidence about political trust and legitimacy in such initiatives is sparse and limited to elite samples.
- Moreover, private authority raises the question of how this exercise of authority affects the legitimacy of state interventions in markets, something that has rarely been studied (Amengual and Bartley, 2022). Future research could usefully study the consequences of the legitimacy of private governance institutions and companies themselves for political trust in government and in IOs. More broadly, we need to better understand how trust in private governance and trust in IOs are related.

Conclusions

This chapter has made three main points. First, political trust and IR theories have been combined to advance knowledge on political trust in IOs, but there remains much room for improvement. The study of political trust in the EU has made some headway, but theories of political trust at the national level have mostly not yet been extended to IOs. The complexity of global governance with respect to its aims, institutions, and structures opens up for novel theorization of the patterns and sources of political trust in both formal and informal IOs.

Second, some of the most profound changes of our times pertain to authoritarian diffusion and technological change. Both have affected domestic and global information environments and the availability of information about IOs, albeit in different ways. IOs themselves have adapted and professionalized their communication strategies and made efforts to self-legitimize (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2020). However, it remains an important question for future research as to how authoritarian diffusion and technological change, both combined and in isolation, influence political trust in IOs.

Third and finally, IOs enjoy moderate levels of political trust and legitimacy among both elites and greater publics, and there is a significant elite–citizen gap in IO

legitimacy (Dellmuth et al., 2022). It is unclear if this conclusion also applies to newer forms of governance, such as informal, private, or hybrid governance arrangements. Newer forms of global governance organizations are here to stay, complementing yet often challenging classic multilateral cooperation. How, when, and why they are trusted by elites and mass publics is largely unknown. Relatedly, scholars have yet to systematically study how and why trust in new governance arrangements may be related to political trust in IOs.

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