POLITICAL TRUST AND ELECTORAL CHOICE IN ESTABLISHED AND NEW DEMOCRACIES

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Abstract
This paper examines the consequences of political cynicism on citizens’ voting behaviour in contemporary democracies. While political cynicism is often assumed to reduce people’s involvement in electoral politics, others suggest that political disaffection may fuel electoral support for ideologically extreme political parties. What explains people’s choice between abstention and voting for an anti-system party, however, is not well understood in the existing literature. Using public opinion survey data collected as part of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project between 1996 and 2001, we simultaneously study both effects in 12 established and newer democracies. We find that political trust generally reduces abstention and extreme right voting in both types of political regimes. However, the results also show that in countries with longer democratic experience the effect of political trust on abstention is non-linear, and its impact on extreme right support – conditional on economic evaluations.

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Introduction

Popular system support has long been viewed as a key attribute of enduring and successful democracies (Lipset 1959; Powell 1982, Linz and Stepan 1996). As David Easton (1965) put it “democracy thrives on popular support and withers in its absence”. Positive public attitudes toward the political regime have been widely believed to be crucial for the quality, stability, and legitimacy of democratic regimes, in part because support for the political system is assumed to stimulate citizens’ active public involvement in political process (Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000). Yet the precise nature of the relationship between political trust and political behaviour is not well understood in existing research. Scholars have theorized that growing cynicism about government may deter conventional political participation and have interpreted falling voter turnout and declining party membership in established democracies as signs of citizen disenchantment about politics (e.g. Hay 2007; Dalton 1999, 1996). However, increased disaffection with the status quo of a political system may also lead to increased support for anti-system parties. Moreover, the relationship between political trust and political participation may be non-linear, as there are strong reasons to suspect that critical citizens (Norris 1999) are more involved in politics than highly trusting individuals.

Below, we argue that political cynicism may affect voting in two important ways. Specifically, it may encourage citizens to withdraw from the electoral process or provide incentives to express their dissatisfaction by voting for anti-system parties. We hypothesize that political trust reduces both abstention and extreme right support, and that this effect is significantly conditioned by citizens’ economic evaluations. Moreover, we posit that the impact of political trust on abstention in established democracies is non-linear, as electoral participation is likely to increase with political trust, but then decline among the most trusting citizens. In newer democracies, however, where the reservoir of good will towards the political system is still relatively low and elections involve high stakes, the effect of political trust is likely to be limited to a direct and linear effect on electoral behaviour.

We examine these propositions using the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) project data collected between 1996 and 2001 in 13 established and newer democracies. We find that political trust indeed reduces both abstention and extreme right voting in both types of regimes. Moreover, the results reveal that in countries with long experience of democratic governance, the relationship between political trust and abstention is non-linear, as individuals with the most positive attitudes towards the system are not significantly more likely to vote for mainstream parties than citizens with moderate levels of
support for the system. What is more, we find that the negative impact on extreme right
ing voting is particularly pronounced among those who have positive evaluations of the
economy. This is not the case in newer democracies, however, where political trust has a
direct negative effect on electoral abstention and where economic evaluations play an
important direct role in determining the electoral fortunes of extreme right parties. Taken
together, these results confirm that political trust plays an important and complex role in
shaping citizens’ electoral behaviour and that this is true for both old and new democratic
regimes.

Our paper is designed to contribute to research on political trust and voting behaviour
in several ways. First, on a theoretical level, we seek to extent the study of political trust by
focusing on its consequences rather than causes, that is, by using political trust as a key
independent rather than dependent variable. Second, the few studies on the electoral
consequences of political trust that exist often focus on the link either between political trust
and electoral participation, or between political trust and vote for a particular party or
candidate. Both decisions, however, are part of a single choice set in elections of many
democracies and thus should be studied jointly. By simultaneously analysing the impact of
political trust on abstention and extreme right vote relative to electoral support for other
parties, we are able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the role that political
trust plays in shaping people’s voting behaviour in contemporary democracies. Third, we add
to existing studies by highlighting the complex and varied role that political trust has along
with economic evaluations on electoral behaviour. Finally, our analysis breaks a new ground
by going beyond single case studies and by putting existing arguments to a more demanding
empirical test against a varied and extensive sample of old and new democracies.

We proceed as follows: the next sections discuss present and elaborate our argument,
describe our data and measures, present our analyses, and discuss the findings. We conclude
by summarising the findings, discussing their implications, and by offering suggestions for
future research.

**Political Trust and Democratic Governance**

Engagement in electoral process shapes the attitudes people develop towards
democratic governance in their countries; conversely, political trust leaves a mark on
electoral behaviour. While social scientists have paid increasing attention to the former, they
have shown less interest in the latter. In particular, scholars have sought to understand the
impact that elections have on people’s support for various aspects of their political system by looking, for example, at the consequences of winning and losing (e.g. Anderson et al. 2005, Anderson and Guillory 1997), the nature and fairness of electoral procedures as well as policy choices available to citizens at the time of elections (e.g. Birch 2008; Tyler 1990). In contrast, less is known about how political trust influences citizens’ voting behaviour, that is, whether more cynical individuals are more likely to abstain or cast their ballot for a particular political party. What is more, we are mostly in the dark about whether the effects of political trust on electoral behaviour differ between established and newer democracies and about the sources of such differences – if they in fact exist.

Concern with the optimal functioning of political institutions and citizen attitudes about the political system has long played a central role in research on democratic governance. At least since the Weimar Republic’s descent into fascism, scholars have assumed that low levels of citizen support can pose serious problems for democracies because their functioning and maintenance are intimately linked with what and how people think about the political system (Lipset 1959; Powell 1982, 1986). As a consequence, a voluminous literature on political trust has emerged over the last few decades with a focus on the nature and causes of political trust. This literature is usually motivated by assumptions that positive public attitudes toward political regime foster voluntary citizens’ compliance with the law, increase their active involvement in politics, and thus play a crucial role in ensuring the quality, stability, and legitimacy of democratic regimes (Norris 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000).

Yet, in the absence of systematic research on the consequences of political trust for various aspects of democratic governance the precise nature and strength of these relationships remains unclear. While feelings of moral indignation have been theorized to be one of the driving forces behind political action (Gamson 1992), we do not know, for example, whether more trusting individuals are always more likely to vote, or whether some degree of criticism is necessary to uphold their continued engagement in electoral politics. What is more, while some disaffected voters may choose to abstain from voting, others might express their negative feelings towards the political system by voting for anti-system parties. Finally, little is known whether political trust operates on citizens’ voting decisions alone or in tandem with particular aspects of system performance, and whether this is equally true of established and newer democracies. Below we discuss each of these in turn.
Political Trust and Voting Behaviour

The primary question of our analysis is whether political trust is associated with more active citizen involvement in electoral politics and support for mainstream parties. We argue that political distrust or cynicism can affect the vote in two ways. The first possibility is that citizens voice their grievances by supporting an anti-system party or candidate, thereby signalling the political elites about their feelings. The second possibility is that citizens withdraw from the electoral process and abstain from voting. This perspective is consistent with previous research that distinguished between “dissident participation” and “alienated withdrawal” (Craig 1980),¹ and can also be described as a choice between “exit” (abstention) and “voice” (vote for a populist radical right party or another protest party), to use Hirschman’s (1970) terminology (cf. Leppink 2008).

We argue that positive people’s attitudes towards their political system generally reduce citizen support for anti-system parties and electoral abstention. We base this expectation on several findings in previous research. That political cynicism has consequences for people’s electoral behaviour has long been acknowledged by scholars of the U.S. politics. Specifically, it has been argued that citizens wishing to voice their discontent with politics do so either by voting for the major non-incumbent party, or by supporting a third party. In a study of the U.S. presidential elections, Hetherington (1999) found that this choice depends on the electoral context: in two-candidate races distrust is usually channelled through support for the non-incumbent party, whereas in races with three viable candidates – through third party support. Several other studies have revealed similar patterns (Levi and Stokes 2000). Indeed, political cynicism has been put forward as a key explanation for third party support in U.S. presidential elections. For instance, Peterson and Wrighton (1998) argued that abstention is usually the only way in which voters can channel their distrust in government, but occasionally third party candidates – such as Wallace in 1968, Anderson in 1980, and Ross Perot in 1992 – provide an alternative outlet for such feelings. Utilising data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) they found that third party voters were indeed more distrustful of government than supporters of the candidates of the two major parties. Even controlling for other factors that affect the vote, including feeling thermometer ratings of the three candidates, the effect of distrust on the vote remained significant (see also Southwell and Everest 1998; but see Koch 2003).

¹ While Craig (1980) focused on political mobilization and elite-challenging activities in general, his distinction can also be applied to electoral participation.
In Europe political cynicism has often been associated with support for extreme right-wing parties. While part of the appeal of these parties is geared towards voters with shared policy and ideological preferences – such as opposition to immigration – another part is directed at politically discontented voters who seek to express their protest against the existing political arrangements and ‘politics as usual’ (Van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie 2000; Bélanger and Aarts 2006). Moreover, some extreme right parties – such as Lega Nord in Italy, Front National in France, and Republikaner in Germany – have been found to attract more ‘protest votes’ than ‘ideological votes’ (Van der Brug and Fennema 2003). Perhaps the strongest argument in favour of the link between political cynicism and support for extreme right parties has been made by Hans-Georg Betz (1994) who argued that success of radical rightwing populism is rooted primarily in a deep-seated rejection of the core institutions of democracy, particularly an erosion of confidence in political parties and parliament, representing a crisis in the political system as a whole. Using evidence from responses to open-ended survey questions, Betz showed that voters who supported Lega Nord in Italy, National Front in France, and Freedom Party in Austria, casted their vote as a protest act, and that these voters came from a variety of social backgrounds (see also Lubbers et al. 2002; Van der Brug and Fennema 2003, Norris 2005, ch 7).

So far we have discussed the effects of political cynicism on turnout and party choice separately. This reflects the way the topic has been treated in the literature, since studies on the electoral consequences of political cynicism mostly focus either on abstention or on party choice. An exception is a study by Bélanger and Nadeau (2005) that focused on three federal Canadian elections. They found that political distrust indeed negatively affected electoral participation, but the effects on party choice were considerably stronger. More specifically, they found that in the 1993 election discontented citizens voted relatively often for the Reform Party and Bloc Quebecois. This suggests that if voters are presented with choice options through which their political cynicism can be channelled, the effect on abstention weakens. Furthermore, individual-level differences also play a role. Building on Poguntke’s (1996) work on antiparty sentiments, Bélanger (2004) found that whether political cynicism leads to abstention or third party votes also depends on whether the feelings of discontent are directed at specific political parties or political parties per se (see also Gidengil et al. 2001).

2 To be sure, extreme right parties are not the only ones that can mobilize discontented or distrustful citizens. For example, the party that has been drawing support from mistrustful voters in Japan is the Communist Party (Kabashima et al. 2000). Unlike communist parties, however, extreme right parties have not been threatened by the decline of the communist ideology since the end of the Cold War and thus have been better positioned to draw their electoral support from the ones who are disaffected with politics.
Our expectations about the impact of political trust on support for anti-system parties and abstention are also consistent with several empirical regularities that emerge from the existing literature about the determinants of positive attitudes towards the political system. Generally speaking, this research has shown that the legitimacy of political system is a function of two main sets of factors, rooted both in the macro (or political system) level and the micro-level of individual citizens. Legitimacy, it has commonly been argued, is both a result of what political systems are and do – their institutions, processes, and performance – and how people come to form beliefs about them – that is, individuals’ experiences with, and their perceptions and beliefs about, the system. Specifically, people are more likely to support political systems that are based on fair and transparent institutions (Tyler 1990; Miller and Listhaug 1999; Levi 1997; Levi and Stokes 2000), enjoy durable and free of corruption governments, and does a better job protecting citizens’ political rights and at representing their views in the policy process (Harmel and Robertson 1986; Mishler and Rose 1997, 2001; Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Paskeviciute 2006).

Taken together, these findings suggest that more trusting individuals are more likely to endorse the status quo of a political system and participate in electoral process by voting for mainstream parties rather than political organizations that fundamentally challenge the existing rules of a political process. In contrast, individuals who harbour negative feelings towards the existing political arrangements are more likely to withdraw from elections or channel their dissatisfaction with the system via parties that articulate antiestablishment views.

**Political Trust, Economic Evaluations, and Democratic Experience**

When considering the impact of political trust as a determinant of voting patterns, the question arises whether this effect is uniform across different political contexts and varying economic situations. We argue that it is not; specifically, we expect that electoral consequences of political trust differ between established and newer democracies, and that they are conditioned by public evaluations of the state of the economy. Generally speaking, the arguments proposed above should apply to both types of political regimes. After all,

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3 Existing research also shows that electoral outcomes influence citizen support for the political system. Specifically, citizens who support winning parties tend to express more positive attitudes towards their democratic governance (Anderson et al. 2005; Anderson and Guillory 1997), and that this is particularly true for partisans and citizens with extreme policy preferences, as well as systems with less inclusive political institutions and high stake elections (Anderson et al. 2005).
extreme right parties are not uncommon in East Central Europe and in many ways resemble their counterparts in the developed West (Mudde 2005, 2007). We therefore expect that citizens in post-communist countries should similarly view extreme right parties and electoral abstention as channels for venting their political dissatisfaction as do individuals in established democracies.

One key difference between established and newer democracies, however, should emerge with respect to the shape of the relationship between political trust and electoral abstention. We posit that while voting generally increases with higher levels of political trust in both systems, it is likely to decline slightly among the most trusting individuals in countries with longer democratic experience. Thus, the relationship between political trust and voting turnout in established democracies should be non-linear, with most and least cynical individuals being more likely to abstain from voting, and citizens with moderate levels of trust – the most likely to turn out to vote on the day of elections.

We derive this expectation from real-world observation that there is usually a lot more at stake in elections of newly created democracies than in countries where elections have become part of the routine political process. Electoral debates in democratizing societies often focus on such fundamental issues as constitutional structure, institutional design, or – as was the case in post-communist societies – a complete restructuring of the economy. As a consequence, the outcomes of voting results have direct consequences for a wide range of formal and informal practices of democratic governance and highly consequential policy decisions. In contrast, elections with long experience of democratic governance rarely result in such fundamental changes that significantly alter the lives of the majority of their citizens. In fact, research shows that citizens in established democracies tend to consider politics unimportant to them, or at least much less important than other aspects of life such as family, work, friends, leisure time, or religion (e.g., van Deth 2000). This implies that individuals with particularly high levels of political trust may not see the need to participate in each and every election in their country and believe that the system will continue function well even without their repeated involvement. The perspective that moderate levels of political trust might be most conducive to electoral participation is consistent with Pippa Norris’ (1999) notion of critical citizens, whose more sceptical evaluations of democratic governance in their country are usually attributed to higher aspirations to democratic values and principles. Taken together, these considerations lead us to expect that the impact of political trust on voting turnout in established democracies is non-linear: while political trust should generally reduce people’s incentives to abstain on the day of elections, its effect is likely to decline and
even reverse among more trusting individuals. In newer democracies, however, where elections often involve high-stakes and result in consequential policy decisions, more trusting citizens are likely to remain significantly more engaged in electoral process compared citizens with lower levels of political trust.

In addition to the non-linearity of the relationship, we posit that the effect of political trust is likely to be mediated by economic evaluations. Perceptions of the state of the state of the economy have been long known to play an important role in shaping people’s voting behaviour (e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmeier 2000; Pacek and Radcliff 1995). Economic performance can be conceptualized as a form of system performance that might help to erode or strengthen the effect of political trust on people’s electoral behaviour. After all, the consequences of political cynicism have been commonly assumed to be particularly harmful at the time of economic crises. We therefore hypothesize that the negative impact of political trust on abstention and extreme right support should be particularly pronounced among citizens who have positive perceptions of the state of the macro-economy. Conversely, the impact of political trust should be significantly reduced among individuals who believe that the economy in their country is in trouble.

Data and Measures

To test our hypotheses we rely on the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data collected between 1996 and 2002. This collaborative project is one of the cross-national surveys that include items of political trust in addition to measures of vote choice and economic evaluations, as well as a number of other factors long assumed to be important determinants of electoral behaviour in previous research. The relevant survey items and a sufficient number of cases were available for 12 countries with identifiable extreme right parties. To identify radical right parties we relied on Norris (1995), Mudde (2007), and Golder (2003) classifications. These are the Flemish Block and the National Front in Belgium, the Progress Party and the Danish People’s Party in Denmark, the Republicans and the German People’s Union in Germany, the Centre Party and the Centre Democrats in the Netherlands, the Progress Party in Norway, the Swiss Democrats, the Freedom Party, the Lega, and the Vigilance in Switzerland, the National Religious Party (Mafdal) in Israel, the New Zealand First in New Zealand, the Republican Party in the Czech Republic, the Hungarian Justice and Life Party in Hungary, the Greater Romania Party and the Romanian National Unity Party in Romania, the Slovene National Party in Slovenia, and the Ukrainian National Assembly in Ukraine.
democracies from East Central Europe: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, and Ukraine.\footnote{Iceland and the U.S. were dropped because they do not have extreme right parties; Sweden, Spain, UK, Portugal, Australia, and Poland were dropped because the CSES data did not allow us to distinguish extreme right parties from other minor parties. Finally, Denmark was dropped due to missing values on one of our key controls – the religiosity variable.}

To measure vote choice, we use the CSES recall question in the post-election interview. Respondents were asked if they voted, and if so, for which party. In the analyses below we combine the answers to both questions into a single choice variable that includes abstention, vote for an extreme right party, and vote for any other party as its three alternatives. This enables us to jointly analyse abstention and voting for extreme right parties in a single choice set and thus avoid drawing potentially erroneous conclusions about the electoral consequences of political trust that might result from excluding abstention from vote choice models (Bélanger and Nadeau 2005, 129; see also Lacy and Burden 1999, 234).

Following previous research, we relied on several survey items to measure our key independent variable of interest – political trust. The CSES asked respondents whether politicians or political parties know or care what ordinary people think, whether it makes any difference who people vote for or who is in power, and whether respondents are satisfied with the way democracy works in their country. With respect to the first four items respondents could express their views on a five-point scale, while satisfaction with democracy item is a four-category variable.\footnote{In terms of face validity these items appear to be appropriate items to measure political cynicism. As argued above, one important criterion is that different political objects are clearly specified. Note that the first two items refer to political actors, whereas the latter three focus on the political system in a more general sense, while none of the items is directed solely at the incumbent government.} To create a single index of political trust, we first dichotomized each of the trust variables and then calculated an average value for each respondent based on these five items. The resulting variable ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating a more trusting response (for details on question wording and variable coding, see appendix). To test whether political trust also has a non-linear effect on voting behaviour, we also included the squared term for political trust in addition to the additive term of this variable.

To examine whether the impact of political trust is conditioned by respondent’s economic evaluations, we rely on a variable tapping people’s perceptions of the state of the economy in their country. This variable is measured using survey question: “What do you think about the state of the economy these days in [country]? Would you say that the state of the economy is very good, good, neither good nor bad, bad or very bad?” We recoded the
variable so that it ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values (on a five-point scale) indicating a more positive response.

Our multivariate analyses include a range of other variables known to be consistent determinants of voting behaviour in previous research. Specifically, we use variables capturing citizens’ socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, marital status, income, employment status, and attendance of religious services. In addition, we take into account respondent’s party identification and left-right self-placement. Finally, to control for macro-level effects, we include country dummy variables. Details on coding procedures for all variables are listed in the appendix.

Results

To examine the effects that political trust has on voting behaviour, we rely on individual level data from 12 established and newer democracies and multinomial logit estimation technique. Recall that our dependent variable has three choice categories: abstention, voting for an extreme right party, and voting for any other party. We use the latter as a reference category; hence, the coefficients presented below indicate the likelihood of abstaining or voting for an extreme right party relative to voting for any other party.

We proceed with our analyses in the following three steps. First, we report the direct effects of political trust along with traditional controls and country dummies in separate models for established and new democracies. Second, we additionally include a squared term for political trust to test whether the relationship between people’s legitimacy beliefs and electoral abstention is non-linear in countries with longer experience with democratic governance. And finally, we add an interaction term for political trust and economic evaluations to analyze the extent to which economic evaluations condition the impact of political trust on citizens’ electoral behavior.

The results from the direct effect models, shown in Table 1, indicate that political trust has a consistent negative and highly statistically significant effect on both electoral abstention and voting for extreme right parties. What is more, they show that the effect of political trust on abstention in new democracies is slightly stronger than in established ones, while the results with respect to extreme right voting are almost identical for both types of regimes. Thus, our findings so far suggest strongly that political trust is a useful resource in activating citizens’ electoral engagement, but also in discouraging them not to vote for anti-system political parties.
Control variables show some interesting patterns as well. Specifically, while economic evaluations have no effect on voting turnout, they are significantly related to extreme right vote, particularly in newer democracies where the coefficient is almost twice as large as in established democracies. Thus, individuals with positive evaluations of the macro-economy are less likely to support extreme right but are no less likely to stay at home on the day of elections compared to citizens who vote for more mainstream parties. In contrast, unemployment tends to increase electoral abstention but has no detectable effect on voting for radical right, which is more strongly related to gender and ideology (that is, being male and right-wing). Finally, in line with previous research, we find that voting is more common among wealthier, better educated, married, religious, and individuals who report being close to a particular party.

Further, our indirect effects models, shown in Table 2, reveal that the impact of political trust should not be considered in isolation. Specifically, we find that the effect of people’s attitudes towards political system in established democracies is non-linear: while abstention generally decreases with higher levels of political trust, the rate of change is reduced among the most trusting individuals. This is not the case in newer democracies, however, where the squared term for political trust falls short of the conventional levels of statistical significance, while the additive term remains highly significant both in substantive and statistical terms.

Furthermore, the results show that political trust interacts with people’s perceptions of the economy in shaping their support for the extreme right: individuals with more positive evaluations of the political system and the state of the economy are more likely to refrain from voting for radical right. The results also indicate that the additive terms of these two variables become statistically insignificant once we add the interaction term, suggesting that it takes both high levels of political trust and positive economic evaluations to reduce the chances of voting for extreme right and that political trust has no effect on electoral behavior among those who have the most negative evaluations of the economy. This interactive effect, however, is not present in newer democracies, where radical right support is driven primarily by economic evaluations.
The substantive effects (calculated holding other variables at their means and dichotomous measures at their median values) further reveal the extent to which political trust affect electoral behavior alone and in interaction with economic evaluations (Figure 1). Specifically, the probability of abstention in established democracies declines from .583 to .309 as we move from the lowest to the highest value of political trust (a change of .274). In comparison, the difference in the scores between the least and most trusting citizens in new democracies is .310 (.554 vs. .244). This larger difference in emerging democracies is in part due to the fact that the relationship in established democracies is non-linear. The figure shows that the effects are of similar magnitude at the lower end of the political trust scale, but then diverge among citizens with positive attitudes towards their political system.

The marginal effects of political trust and economic evaluations on extreme right support in established democracies are shown in Figure 2. They reveal that the substantive impact of political trust on voting for radical right is very small. Specifically, the probability of voting for an extreme right party (relative to voting for any other party) for an individual who thinks that the state of the economy is very good declines from .0121 to .0019 as we move from the lowest to the highest value of political trust (a change of .0102). What is more, the difference in the scores between an individual who has the most positive evaluations of the economy and the highest levels of political trust and an individual who has the most negative economic evaluations but the most positive views about the political system is .0109 (.0128 and .0019). In contrast, the probability of voting for radical right for an individual with the most pessimistic assessments of the state of the economy hardly moves as a consequence of different levels of political trust. Taken together, the results suggest that political trust plays an important role in reducing citizen electoral abstention in both established and newer democracies. Moreover, it helps to undermine support for extreme right, but only in established democracies and among citizens who are satisfied with the state of the economy.

Discussion

Elections are usually conceived of as a competition between parties that have different views about which policies should be adopted, or that differ in terms of their competence to run the country (e.g. see Downs 1957). This is reflected in the factors that are commonly
included in studies aiming to explain voting behaviour: ideological proximity, policy preferences, and evaluations of government performance. Others have emphasised the relevance of voters’ position in the social structure of society, such as their religious affiliation or social class position (e.g. Thomassen, 2005). Yet when citizens think about politics their primary thoughts and feelings are not always about the parties that represent their segment of society, or the ideological divisions that characterise political competition. For at least a part of the electorate the primary response to politics is presumably one of negative feelings towards politics as such (e.g. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), even if expressed as ritualistic or fashionable cynicism (Citrin 1974). Considering that feelings of moral indignation have often been theorized to be as one of the driving forces behind political action (e.g. Gamson 1992), it is surprising that when explaining voting behaviour such feelings are seldom included in voting behaviour models. After all, if negative attitudes towards political systems and its institutions exist, one would not expect voters to fully ignore these feelings when making an electoral choice.

While public attitudes towards their political system have been long assumed to play an important role for the functioning of democratic governance, most scholarly debates to date have focused on the causes of people’s legitimacy beliefs. In contrast, the consequences of people’s cynicism or trust in various aspects of their political system remain mostly uncharted territory: we still lack a general understanding how political trust is linked to choices people make at the time of elections, or their political behaviour more generally. Moreover, we do not know whether political trust interacts with system performance in shaping people’s electoral behaviour, and hence the extent to which it may help to counteract the detrimental consequences of economic crises for the functioning of democratic process.

Our study sought to contribute to this area of research by focusing on electoral abstention and voting for extreme right parties as two alternative ways to express voter dissatisfaction with the existing arrangements of the political system in their country. Several previous studies examined the impact of political trust either on voting turnout or on support for extreme right, but rarely on both choices at the same time. Moreover, most studies in this area of research focus on single-case studies (usually U.S. or Canada), and little is known whether their findings apply beyond the North American context. By simultaneously analysing the impact of political trust on abstention and extreme right vote relative to electoral support for other parties, we are able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the role that political trust plays in shaping people’s voting behaviour in
contemporary democracies and put existing arguments to a test against a varied and extensive sample of established and new democracies.

We argue that political trust reduces both abstention and extreme right support in both established and newer democracies, and that this effect is conditioned by economic evaluations. Moreover, the impact of political trust on abstention in established democracies is non-linear, as non-voting decreases with political trust, but then increases slightly among the most trusting citizens. In newer democracies, however, where the reservoir of good will towards the political system is still relatively low and elections involve high stakes, the effect of political trust is limited to a direct and linear effect on electoral participation.

We find that political trust indeed plays an important role in shaping citizens’ voting behaviour, and that this is true for both established and newer democracies. In fact, the similarity in the magnitude of the political trust effect on electoral abstention between the two types of regimes is striking, suggesting that the patterns of mass engagement in democratic politics in post-soviet societies and other democracies might be converging faster than we tend to assume. One important difference, however, relates the impact of political trust on electoral abstention at the higher levels of political trust. Specifically, we find that in established democracies most trusting people are not much different from those who have slightly more critical views. This implies that when it comes to voting turnout, a moderately critical stance towards the political system is all what is needed to ensure a continued participation in democratic elections and hence a well-functioning political regime. This finding also suggest that electoral abstention may not always signal alienation and withdrawal from a political process and instead may be a manifestation of satisfaction with the existing arrangements of a political system. Overall, however, the positive impact of political trust for electoral behaviour should not be underestimated, as it has a powerful impact on enhancing people’s engagement in democratic politics, particularly in countries with little democratic experience.

Our results also show that political trust helps to reduce voting for extreme right parties. However, its effect is substantively small and limited to those who are satisfied with the state of the economy and live in established democracies. In contrast, extreme right support in newer democracies is affected directly by economic evaluations rather than in interaction with people’s attitudes towards the political system. This difference between established and newer democracies might be due to several reasons. First, in the absence of accumulated reservoir of good will towards the political system, economic performance of a system provides citizens of new democracies with a useful and easily accessible standard to
evaluate their governments and to decide how to vote at the time of elections. Second, it may also be the case that extreme right parties in newer democracies are less able to differentiate themselves as anti-system parties from other parties compared to their counterparts in established democracies, especially since the left-right division in post-communist societies usually represents significant disagreements about the fundamental arrangements of a political system (e.g., Whitefield 2002, Whitefield and Evans 1998; Kitschelt 1995). Thus, support for extreme right parties in newer democracies might be driven more by issue concerns – particularly economic evaluations, as our results suggest – rather than clearly articulated anti-establishment views.

Overall, however, the limited effect of political trust on radical right vote is not entirely surprising in light of previous research. Several studies found that the very presence of protest parties in a political system may help to increase people’s trust in democratic governance because these parties provide people with an opportunity to air their dissatisfaction with a political system instead of leaving these negative feelings unexpressed (e.g., Miller and Listhaug 1990)\(^7\). Thus, while political distrust may lead people to support extreme right parties in the first place, ability to cast a vote for such party and belief that this party actively engages in communicating people’s feelings about the system to the establishment helps to increase supporters’ trust in the political regime, hence reducing the observed relationship between political trust and extreme right vote.

When interpreting the results, it is also important to keep in mind that extreme right parties are not the only ones that may articulate anti-system views and mobilize discontented or distrustful citizens. Research shows, for example, that the Communist Party in Japan has been particularly successful in this respect (Kabashima et al. 2000). There are reasons to suspect that former communist parties in East Central Europe might play a similar role. Future studies would therefore benefit from developing a more accurate measure of anti-system parties that would allow for a more precise test of our ideas about the link between political trust and support for protest parties.

Finally, while this study focused exclusively of electoral behaviour, some citizens may choose to express their political dissatisfaction via unconventional forms of political engagement, such as protest or even violent action, rather than conventional types of action. Seminal work of Ted Robert Gurr (1970) in the early-1970s, for example, viewed protest as an expression of discontent with the conventional channels of representative democracy and

\(^7\) Mahr and Nagle (1995) and Evans and Whitefield (1995) make a similar point about the role of former Communist parties in East Central Europe.
the search for alternative ways to challenge the regime. Although these ideas received limited empirical support in subsequent studies of protest behaviour in established democracies (see, for example, Farah et al. 1979; Thomassen 1990; Norris et al. 2006), they might be useful to consider in developing a broader model of the consequences that political trust has on political behaviour across a wide range of democratic regimes.
References


Table 1. The Direct Effects of Political Trust and Economic Evaluations on Abstention from Voting and Support for Extreme Right Parties in Established and New Democracies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Established Democracies</th>
<th>Newer Democracies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstaining from voting</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political trust</td>
<td>-1.160*** (.126)</td>
<td>-1.391*** (.172)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic evaluations</td>
<td>-.327 (.168)</td>
<td>-.291 (.214)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-.129*** (.026)</td>
<td>-.074* (.033)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.017*** (.002)</td>
<td>-.017*** (.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.152*** (.021)</td>
<td>-.183*** (.030)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>.033 (.061)</td>
<td>-.074 (.084)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-.327*** (.068)</td>
<td>-.229* (.091)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>.452** (.146)</td>
<td>.283* (.168)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>-.053* (.021)</td>
<td>-.111*** (.030)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID</td>
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<td>-1.007*** (.094)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Left-right</td>
<td>.041** (.014)</td>
<td>-.004 (.018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.582*** (.197)</td>
<td>2.637*** (.282)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Voting for Extreme right** |                       |                   |
| Political trust             | -1.710*** (.166)      | -1.724*** (.382)  |
| Economic evaluations        | -1.058*** (.203)      | -2.013*** (.432)  |
| Income                      | -.130*** (.032)       | .049 (.072)       |
| Age                        | .001 (.003)           | -.015* (.006)     |
| Education                   | -.099*** (.026)       | -.038 (.058)      |
| Male                       | .185* (.078)          | .363* (.180)      |
| Married                     | .132 (.091)           | -.199 (.196)      |
| Unemployed                  | .377 (.202)           | .064 (.418)       |
| Religiosity                 | -.014 (.023)          | -.090 (.067)      |
| Party ID                    | -.180* (.078)         | .603*** (.182)    |
| Left-right                  | .211*** (.018)        | .114*** (.036)    |
| Constant                    | -3.062*** (.353)      | -1.620** (.574)   |

N 12,527  4,255
Log likelihood -6,237.374  -2,423.24
Pseudo Rsq .17  .13

Note: Results are multinomial logit estimates using voting for other parties as a base category and including country dummies (not shown). Numbers in parentheses represent standard errors; *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Established Democracies</th>
<th>New Democracies</th>
<th>Established Democracies</th>
<th>New Democracies</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abstaining from voting</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>-.154*** (.022)</td>
<td>-.184*** (.030)</td>
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<td>-.074 (.084)</td>
<td>.032 (.062)</td>
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<td>-.329*** (.068)</td>
<td>-.225* (.091)</td>
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<td>.281 (.168)</td>
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<td>-.053* (.021)</td>
<td>-.111*** (.030)</td>
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<td>-1.063*** (.069)</td>
<td>-1.009*** (.094)</td>
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<td>.042** (.014)</td>
<td>-.006 (.018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>2.632*** (.246)</td>
<td>2.993*** (.323)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voting for Extreme right</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political trust</td>
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<td>.011 (.609)</td>
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<td>-.621 (1.234)</td>
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<td>-1.998*** (.433)</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>.050 (.072)</td>
<td>-.130*** (.032)</td>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>-.015* (.006)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.040 (.058)</td>
<td>-.095*** (.026)</td>
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<td>.188* (.078)</td>
<td>.357* (.180)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.178* (.078)</td>
<td>.599*** (.182)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.115*** (.036)</td>
<td>.212*** (.018)</td>
<td>.115*** (.036)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>-1.694*** (.610)</td>
<td>-3.711*** (.410)</td>
<td>-1.618* (.663)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 12,527 4,255 12,527 4,255
Log likelihood 6,231.39 -2,421.14 6,227.58 -2,420.21
Pseudo Rsq .17 .13 .17 .13

Note: Results are multinomial logit estimates using voting for other parties as a base category and including country dummies (not shown). Numbers in parentheses represent standard errors; *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 (two-tailed).
Figure 1. The Effects of Political Trust on Voting Abstention in Old and New Democracies

Figure 2. The Effects of Political Trust and Evaluations of the Macro-Economy on Voting for Extreme Right in Old Democracies
Appendix. Measures and Coding

**Vote Choice.** Based on two CSES survey items: “Did respondent cast a ballot?” and “Party list voted for in a district.” Using these two items, we created a three-category variable: did not vote (0), voted for an extreme right party (2), and voted for any other party (3). To identify extreme right parties, we relied on Norris (2005), Mudde (2007), and Golder (2003).

**Political trust.** Index based on five CSES survey items: 1) “On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in [country]?” 2) “Some people say that political parties in [country] care what ordinary people think. Others say that political parties in [country] don’t care what ordinary people think. Using the scale on this card, (where ONE means that political parties care about what ordinary people think, and FIVE means that they don’t care what ordinary people think), where would you place yourself?” 3) “Some people say that members of Parliament know what ordinary people think. Others say that members of Parliament don’t know much about what ordinary people think. Using the scale on this card, (where ONE means that the members of [Parliament] know what ordinary people think and FIVE means that the members of [Parliament] don’t know much about what ordinary people think) where would you place yourself?” 4) “Some people say that it makes a difference who is in power. Others say that it doesn’t make a difference who is in power. Using the scale on this card, (where ONE means that it makes a difference who is in power and FIVE means that it doesn’t make a difference who is in power), where would you place yourself?” 5) “Some people say that no matter who people vote for, it won’t make any difference to what happens. Others say that who people vote for can make a difference to what happens. Using the scale on this card, (where ONE means that voting won’t make a difference to what happens and FIVE means that voting came make a difference) where would you place yourself?” Each of these items was first dichotomized: with respect to the five-point scale variables, we coded the top two categories (denoting a positive response) as more trusting (1), and the three bottom categories – as cynical (0); with respect to the four-point scale satisfaction with democracy variable, “very satisfied” and “fairly satisfied” were coded as a trusting response (1), and the other two as a cynical one (0). Using these dichotomized variables we then calculated an average value for each respondent. If values were missing on one of the five variables, the index was calculated using four items. Observations with missing values on two or more political trust items were excluded from the analyses.

**Economic evaluations.** “What do you think about the state of the economy these days in [country]? Would you say that the state of the economy is very good, good, neither good not bad, bad or very bad?” We reversed the original survey scale and recoded the variable so that it ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values on a five-point scale indicating a more positive response.

**Income.** 1-5 category survey item, with higher values indicating higher household income quintile.

**Age.** Number of respondent’s years.
**Education.** None (1), incomplete primary (2), primary completed (3), incomplete secondary (4), secondary completed (5), post-secondary trade (6), university undergraduate degree incomplete (7), university undergraduate degree completed (8).

**Male.** Male (1), female (0).

**Married.** Married or living together as married (1), otherwise (0).

**Unemployed.** Unemployed (1), otherwise (0).

**Religiosity.** Attendance of religious services: never (1), once a year (2), two to eleven times a year (3), once a month (4), two or more times a month (5), once a week (6).

**Party ID.** “Are you close to any political party?” Yes (1), otherwise (0).

**Left-Right self-placement.** “In politics people sometimes talk of left and right. Where would you place yourself on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?”