

Political Trust, Individual-level Characteristics and Institutional Performance: Evidence from Finland 2004-2013

Elina Kestilä-Kekkonen
School of Management,
FI-33014 University of Tampere
E-mail: elina.kestila-kekkonen@uta.fi
Tel. +358(0)50-408 6215

Peter Söderlund
Department of Political Science,
Åbo Akademi University
P.O. Box 311
FI-65101 Vasa
E-mail: peter.soderlund@abo.fi
Tel:+358(0)6-324 7251

ABSTRACT

Several scholars agree that low political trust has fundamental negative implications for society at large. However, the field lacks in-depth case studies on both differences between individuals in political trust (cross-sectional) and changes of political trust over time (longitudinal). This study explores to what extent 1) long-term individual characteristics and 2) short-term evaluations of institutional performance explain political trust. It employs repeated European Social Survey data for Finland between 2004 and 2013. The results suggest that evaluations of institutional performance have a strong impact on political trust both in the short- and long-term. In particular, satisfaction with government affects the fluctuations in political trust, and simultaneously dampens the effect of economic performance. In contrast, satisfaction with democracy, social trust and some socio-demographic variables (political interest and age) are showed to explain differences only at the individual-level and they do not predict over-time variations.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars have defined political trust as a basic evaluative orientation of how governmental institutions, political parties and actors operate against the backdrop of one's normative expectations (Stokes, 1962; Hetherington, 1998; Miller, 1974b). High political trust is considered a requisite for the functioning of democracy as well as broader social and economic processes. Trust serves to make institutions work effectively, facilitates social and economic exchange, diminishes transaction costs in markets and reduces the need for control and supervision (Listhaug & Ringdal, 2008). In the long run, the lack of political trust may affect both the legitimacy and stability of democratic regimes (Easton 1965), prevent effective implementation of policy reforms (Hooghe & Zmerli, 2011) or even increase willingness of citizens to engage in illegal behavior (Marien & Hooghe, 2011). Given that several scholars agree that low political trust has fundamental negative implications to society at large, the factors that cause its declines or fluctuations *in both the long and short run* should be carefully detected.

Some scholars have argued that political trust in established democracies has slowly, but surely, eroded over the past decades (Norris 1999; Dalton 2004), while others have claimed that these are instead fluctuations whereby decline is followed by recovery (Bovens & Wille, 2011). Several explanations for both constant decline and occasional fluctuations of political trust have been offered. Rising education levels and emergence of post-materialist values, negativity bias in the media as well as increasing bureaucracy have been seen to erode the political trust slowly but surely, while the way governments are managing the economy, the degree of issue representation, the in-out dynamic of elections and more general evaluations of incumbents should contribute to temporary peaks and downfalls of political trust (Listhaug 1995). Much focus has been on the role of social capital and cultural traditions as a basis of political trust, as well as in institutional performance models. First, citizens with different abilities and attitudes interact with each other on a daily basis, which may affect levels of social and political trust irrespective of short-term system failures (social capital theory) (Zmerli & Newton, 2011). Second, the scholarly debate has concerned whether political trust is formed early in life and stable in the long term (cultural theories). Third, it has been discussed to what extent citizens are affected by the environment in which they operate and whether these impacts are intrinsically short-term (institutional performance theories) (Hetherington 1998; Mishler & Rose 2001).

This study explores to what extent 1) long-term individual characteristics and 2) short-term evaluations of institutional performance explain political trust. It contributes to the literature by providing better understanding of both differences between individuals (cross-sectional) and why political trust changes over time (longitudinal). In terms of cross-sectional differences, the aim is to assess the relative impact of personal characteristics, social capital and evaluations of institutional performance based on the economic and political development. Citizens with different abilities and attitudes have different levels of political trust irrespective of short-term system failures. Yet citizens are affected by the political and economic environment in which they operate, whereby differences in institutional performance are likely to explain fluctuations in trust. As regards the longitudinal approach, the fact is that political trust varies over time. From an explanatory perspective, the question

is if the impact of individual characteristics changes over time. Another question is if evaluations of institutional performance co-vary with changes in political trust.

There is a wealth of knowledge on general trends of political trust and support, based on large-scale comparisons of European countries (Norris 1999; Dalton 2004, Listhaug & Wiberg 1995). Given their general focus, these studies fail to take into account the particular political and economic development of a single-country where the trust is formed and maintained over longer period of time. An advantage of a single-country study, but by employing longitudinal comparison, is that many variables related to political culture are kept constant. This study employs repeated survey data for Finland between 2004 and 2013. A benefit of selecting Finland as a case is that levels of political trust have fluctuated over the years, but not as radically as in countries such as Spain, Greece and Portugal. Levels of political trust in Finland are, in European comparison, high as in other Nordic countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden (Listhaug & Ringdal, 2008). Finland seems to deviate, however, in some aspects from its Nordic neighbors: the Finnish citizens trust political institutions more than the average European, and are somewhat more satisfied with governmental policies. In European comparison, however, they display relatively negative views of the political elite (Kestilä, 2006). Fluctuations in political trust in Finland may be the function of the economic downturn after the 2008–2009 economic crisis, as well as a political scandal that unfolded around the same time. Increasing discontent has also become apparent following the recent massive support for the True Finns party.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we examine critically the concepts of political support and political trust. This discussion revolves around the fact that political trust is a complex concept and a result of several indicators that may or may not measure the same underlying phenomenon. Second part reviews the most common individual- and contextual-level predictors of political trust in previous studies. Then we present our data and the variables, after which we analyse multiple waves of the European Social Survey between 2004 and 2013 by multivariate methods. The fourth and final part provides discussion and some concluding remarks.

ON THE CONCEPT OF POLITICAL TRUST

In recent decades there has been increasing debate both in academia and media whether the relationship between citizens and the state has fundamentally changed, and in case it has, what the consequences of this change are for representative democracies in Western Europe (e.g. Fuchs & Klingemann 1995). The responses to these questions depend significantly which elements of political system we focus on when evaluating this relationship.

Scholars have for decades examined the level of both specific and diffuse support of the political system and their interaction by following David Easton's footsteps. According to Easton (1965, 1975), specific support describes the citizens' object-specific evaluations of the performance of particular political authorities, institutions or the implementation of policy outputs (Miller, 1974a; cf. Citrin, 1974). Diffuse support of the political system, on the other hand, "refers to evaluations of what an object is or represents – to the general meaning it has for a person – not what it does", thus

encompassing the effect it has on the entire political system and its fundamental arrangements (Easton 1975: 444, see also Weatherford 1992; Dalton 2006: 251). These two elements of political support are considered to interact since the lack of specific support may in the long run increase the distance between the citizens and the political system and thus have more persistent consequences on the system support (e.g. Bowler & Karp 2004). Easton's (1965; 1975) classic differentiation between specific and diffuse support is, however, rather unclear, particularly as to the satisfaction with the policy outputs: he does not directly categorize political institutions and actors according to the type of support they enjoy and consequently, political institutions may be objects of both specific and diffuse support simultaneously (e.g. Torcal & Montero 2006; Bellucci & Memoli 2012). Norris (1999) has clarified this conceptual confusion of Easton by identifying five levels or objects of political support. Although her classification mainly follows the original Eastonian idea, it specifies it further by placing the different elements of political system on a continuum ranging from diffuse support to specific, i.e. support for political community, regime principles, regime performance, political institutions and political actors.

How, then, is political support conceptually and empirically separate from political trust? According to Hardin (1999, 26) '[...] to say that I trust you means I have reason to expect you to act, for your own reasons, *as my agent* with respect to the relevant matter'. When approaching the concept of trust from this perspective, it becomes clear why some scholars argue that political trust is only related to specific support, and lack of it does not, then, have any permanent consequences to the political system (Citrin 1974; Lipset & Schneider 1983). Trust is, thus, about performance – when the political system performs well so should the level of trust increase. For others, political trust and diffuse support are interconnected, and loss of confidence will challenge the legitimacy of the political system (Miller 1974a; 1974b; Miller and Listhaug 1990; Grönlund & Setälä, 2007). In his seminal work Easton (1975, X) pointed out that 'diffuse support for the political authorities or regime will typically express itself in the form of trust or confidence in them'. He cites Gamson (1968) who defines trust as 'the probability...that the political system (or some part of it) will produce preferred outcomes even if left untended'. However, neither trust nor political support is unconditional: both are given in a specific political context to specific actors and institutions over specific domain (e.g. Levi & Stoker 2000). We concur, thus, with Hetherington (1998), who argues that distinction between specific and diffuse support has analytical value but in reality the trust index contains elements of both types of support. Since (more or less) permanent institutions are always operated by incumbents, this makes separation of the political support and political trust rather artificial.

Consequently, we treat political trust here as a one-dimensional variable (cf. e.g. Fischer et al. 2009) Hooghe (2011) presents two likely explanations that support the idea of one-dimensionality. First, it is assumed that the political competence of the citizens does not allow them to distinguish all the institutions in the standard survey battery: they tend to focus on the most visible actor or institution in daily politics and generalise this attitude to concern also other institutions and actors. Second, citizens may believe that trustworthiness of all political institutions and actors will significantly overlap. Since the citizens basically share the norms of same political culture, the second explanation has its merits.

PREDICTING POLITICAL TRUST

(Socio-)cultural explanations

Citizen perceptions of the political system and its institutions (and even their performance) are contaminated by their image of political actors and processes, by their partisan loyalties (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse 1995) and to some extent their personal characteristics and attitudes. Furthermore, at the individual-level, political trust may be due to demands for accountability of decision-makers and policy responsiveness. Previous research seem to agree on the fact that at the individual-level, political trust of a citizen is significantly more affected by her experiences in political life and less so by personality and social characteristics (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

The evidence on the impact of socio-demographic characteristics on political trust is at best mixed (Citrin 1974; Mishler & Rose 2001; Newton & Norris 2000). There is robust evidence on the impact of personal well-being on interpersonal trust (Inglehart, 1999), which should, therefore, also enhance political trust. Yet, rather paradoxically, traditional socio-demographic background variables (age, gender and education) perform less well in the statistical models. Theoretically it could be argued that younger generations are more tolerant towards diversity, and they have thus stronger internalization of democratic principles (Catterberg & Moreno, 2005) which should increase their willingness to support democratic institutions. At the same time, however, it is widely acknowledged that rising education levels are related to increase in cognitive competence, growing criticism towards the political system and alienation of younger generations from political parties (Listhaug, 1995). Furthermore, party identification and strong partisan loyalties are seen as explanatory factors of political trust in several studies (Söderlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009; Banducci et al., 1999; Bowler & Karp, 2008). If a citizen becomes attached to a party that represents her interests and views, she also becomes more integrated to the political system and develops greater level of trust in it (Miller & Listhaug, 1990; Schmitt & Holmberg 1995; Holmberg, 2003).

In a similar vein, political interest seems to be a strong predictor of political trust (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007; Bäck & Kestilä, 2009; Anderson & LoTempio, 2002). As Catterberg and Moreno (2005) argue, since individual's interests are selective, they tend to see their areas of interests, including politics, in particularly favorable light, which fosters political engagement, and will spill-over to higher political trust. Indeed, individual attitudes seem to play more significant role in forming political trust than (most) individual characteristics. The rise of post-materialist cultures since the 1970s and increase in material well-being have significantly affected the level of political trust in established democracies. In economically advanced countries, the political agenda is dominated by issues that do not reflect post-materialist value priorities, i.e. values that emphasise quality of life and self-expression over physical and material needs (e.g. Borre, 2000; Bovens & Wille, 2011). This discrepancy has increased criticism and dissatisfaction of citizens with the political parties (Listhaug 1995; Levi & Stoker, 2000) and the attitudinal change may be reflected in increasing participation in informal political activities and/or increasing demands to formal political institutions. Indeed, as Mishler and Rose (1997, 419) put it: 'Democracy requires trust but also presupposes an active and vigilant citizenry with a healthy skepticism on government and willingness, should the need arise, to suspend trust and assert control over government'. The emergence of 'critical citizens' does not, however, mean necessarily that they

would be particularly distrustful since support for the principles of liberal democracy has been on the rise (Hooghe & Zmerli, 2011). Therefore, acceptance of democratic principles (over authoritarian ones) is also seen as a prerequisite of high political trust while corruption permissiveness should generally correlate negatively with it (Catterberg & Moreno, 2005; Moreno 1999, 2001, 2002). In contrast, citizens that locate themselves at the extreme ends of the left-right spectrum may develop negative attitudes towards the political system, particularly if they identify with parties that do not join any government coalitions (Anderson et al., 2005). This effect is amplified in less proportional political systems (Banducci et al., 1999).

Role of social capital

Another significant explanatory factor at the individual level is the amount of social capital, operationalised most often as social trust and organizational activity (e.g. Catterberg & Moreno, 2005; Grönlund & Setälä, 2007; Söderlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2009; cf. Levi & Stoker, 2001; Newton & Norris, 2000). Social trust can be conceptually divided to particular social trust, referring to trust in people that a citizen personally knows, and generalised interpersonal trust, i.e. trust in most people, even if not personally known by the citizen. Particular social trust forms the basis of generalised interpersonal trust which, in turn, strengthens the political trust of a citizen (Zmerli & Newton, 2011; cf. Uslaner 1999). It should be, however, noted that the causal arrows may point to opposite direction as well: a trustworthy government may also help to promote social trust and increase cooperation between citizens that further strengthens democracy (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Brehm & Rahn, 1997). A link of organizational activity on political trust is more indirect. Participation in different kinds of voluntary networks in a society should foster particular social trust, which would then spill over to generalized trust. Increased social trust would further lead to higher political trust and foster the link between citizens and the state (Stolle & Hooghe 2004). Stolle (2003), however, reminds us of self-selection bias: trusting people more often join voluntary associations.

Furthermore, aggregate-level social capital may have even more important underpinnings to political trust than individual-level social capital: Newton and Norris (2000: 71) argue that ‘the relationship between generalised trust and institutional confidence operates largely at the societal rather than at the individual level’. The rationale behind this relationship is the so called “rainmaker effect” (see van der Meer, 2003). According to Putnam, Pharr and Dalton (2000) civic engagement and generalised trust do not only make those people more trusting that have wide societal networks but also affect people outside the networks who are passive and less trusting in of other people. Thus, aggregate social capital may be an explanatory factor outside of the individual-level characteristics. In similar vein, citizens are likely to support institutions that are able to reduce corruption, remove restrictions on individual liberty and provide increasing freedoms (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Aggregate corruption is a potential explanatory contextual factor in explaining individual-level trust. These aggregate-level measures, however, are kept constant in an individual country study.

Performance indicators

Certain social and institutional structures may either dampen or amplify fluctuations in trust levels in times of system failure (e.g. political scandals and corruption) or external shocks to the system (economic downturns). The macro-social and political context may maintain, erode or increase political trust, particularly in the long run by affecting the behavior of the political agents and citizen trust in institutions and actors. The most powerful predictors of political trust are individual-level attitudes on system performance, i.e. dissatisfaction with various policy outputs, political actors and general government performance. The impact of performance in different policy fields, however, tends to vary.

Economic performance is one of the most evident system outputs. Since politics and economy are closely intertwined, advocates of political economy perspective of political support argue that citizens' reactions to the performance of national economies and the government's effectiveness in managing economic affairs are crucial when a citizen evaluates the political system, also shown by empirical evidence (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Borre, 2000, Banducci et al., 1999; Bowler & Karp. 2004, Mishler & Rose, 2001; Anderson & LoTempio, 2002). Advocates of the political economy perspective of political support even argue that reactions to the performance of national economies and the governments' effectiveness in managing economic affairs are the most important predictor of system support. Consequently, political support is dynamic in nature and strongly influenced by the periodic fluctuations typical for Western capitalist economies (Clarke et al. 1993; Weatherford 1984). To state the obvious, the citizens may equally well take into account the outputs of other political sectors, for instance those produced by health and social services and education system, when evaluating the political system. These policy sectors are, however, rarely treated as separate predictors in analyses but grouped into wider category of general government performance.

Furthermore, the economic context may have both long- and short-term effects on political support. In the long term, accumulating attitudes of dissatisfaction with the economic development may lead to the erosion of support for the whole political system (Bowler & Karp, 2004). In economically more successful countries, short-term changes in economic performance may have only marginal consequences for political support: successful political and economic development acts as a shield that softens the attitudes although there might be temporary setbacks (Linde & Ekman, 2003). In Finland, the economic depression at the beginning of the 1990s naturally eroded the political trust of the citizens, but a slight increase of trust was observed again at the beginning of the millennium (Mattila & Sänkiaho 2005, 82–7; Newton & Norris 2000, 56). In 2007-2009, the global financial crisis hit Finland hard after a long period of steady economic growth. This was illustrated particularly by falling production numbers as well as a decrease in private investments (Freystätter & Mattila 2011). Implications of the Eurozone crisis in the fluctuations of political trust still remain largely unexplored, although the first analyses suggest that the incentives to punish government parties were stronger in the aftermath of the financial crisis, following the idea of economic voting (Söderlund & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2014).

Evaluations of *political performance* are affected by citizens' views on system responsiveness, in-out dynamics of elections and political scandals. First, if impact of post-material value change on political trust is indirect, an individual's attitude towards the democratic process as such may have more direct implications. System responsiveness may be in the simplest form to be defined in terms of congruence between the attitudes of constituents and of representatives on policy questions (Eulau & Karps, 1977; cf. Miller & Stokes, 1963). This congruence is hierarchical in character: the lower level of congruence relates to everyday political processes in a country, which are controlled by the structures of government at the higher level (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1995). The attitudinal congruence can be considered a parallel term to external efficacy i.e. 'the judgment that an individual and the public can have an impact on political processes, because government institutions will respond to their needs' (Miller & Listhaug, 1990: 358). Favorable positive attitudes on the functioning of political process (higher external efficacy) should lead, thus, to higher political trust. Furthermore, if a system is increasingly distrusted by the citizens, leaders and institutions may find it hard to act according to the normative expectations of the public (Hetherington 1998). To some extent, a citizen's internal efficacy, i.e. a feeling of personal political competence (Pollock 1983) may have some underpinnings to political trust since empirically it has been shown that it is the political ill-informed and uninterested citizens that are most distrustful (Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Listhaug & Wiberg, 1995).

Second, supporters of parties which enter government (electoral winners) tend to report higher satisfaction with the political system than supporters of opposition parties (electoral losers) (Anderson et al. 2005; Norris 2011) even when controlling for their satisfaction level before the elections (Blais & Gélinau 2007). The impact of *electoral winner – loser thesis* seems to vary, however, according to election type: Anderson & LoTempio (2002) find out, for instance, that the Americans' trust in government is strongly affected by the presidential election, but not the congressional contest. Furthermore, the effect may be amplified in case a citizen votes for an extremist party that practically never enters a government (Anderson et al., 2005). Thus, distance from the government position in specific issues may be crucial element of distrust: a study of Borre (2000) shows that particularly the issues that set cosmopolitan values of the ruling elite against the nationalist and isolationist values of the mass public feed effectively political alienation of the Danish citizens.

Third, media reports of leaders' misconduct in office have increased and are shown to affect strongly the political trust of citizens (Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Levi & Stoker, 2000; cf. Bovens & Wille, 2008). The effect of *scandals* is, however, often short-term: as the time passes, the influence of them should fade (Listhaug, 1995; Paxton, 2005). Importantly, however, a scandal involving a specific politician has broader consequences since it may affect the confidence of a whole institution, for instance, parliament (Bowler & Karp, 2008; cf. Hetherington, 1998). Since the beginning of 1990s, Finland has experienced only one wide-scale political scandal which could presumably have implications on the political trust of the citizens, and particularly on how they perceive the political actors. This was the scandal of electoral funding after 2007 parliamentary elections which significantly violated the credibility of the Finnish politicians. Several candidates did not report their sources of funding in time, which was required if the funding from a single donor reached the limit of 1700 Euros. In particular, it turned out that several known politicians of governmental parties received funding from the interest group *Kehittyvien maakuntien Suomi (KMS)*, considered as the lobbying organisation of

three influential businessmen. This led to several charges for both donors and politicians; especially the Centre Party, the National Coalition Party and to a certain degree the Social Democratic Party suffered from the scandal. (Bäck & Kestilä-Kekkonen, 2014). Over 70 per cent of the respondents in the 2011 Finnish National Election Study (Borg & Grönlund, 2011) replied that the scandal of electoral funding changed their opinion about politicians towards negative direction prior to parliamentary elections.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The aim of this study is to assess the effects of 1) long-term individual characteristics and 2) short-term evaluations of institutional performance on political trust in Finland between 2004 and 2013. Data are from the European Social Survey, which is a centrally coordinated cross-national survey of social and political attitudes in Europe involving face-to-face interviews with representative samples of persons aged 15 and over selected by random probability sampling methods.

The dependent variable is *political trust*. A political trust index was created by calculating the mean of three trust scores: (1) trust in the Finnish parliament; (2) trust in politicians; and (3) trust in political parties. Each variable was measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust). These trust variables are highly correlated with each other and thus convey essentially the same information. Cronbach' alpha for the three scores is 0.896 which indicates that the scale is highly reliable. Data for the five most recent rounds (ESS2 to ESS6) of the European Social Survey are used since trust in political parties was not measured in the first round (ESS1). In Finland, interviews were conducted between September and December in 2004, 2006 and 2010 and between September and February in 2008/2009 and 2012/2013.

Political trust is examined as being the function of individual differences and institutional performance based on the political and economic development. Thus the independent variables capture (1) individual-level characteristics expected to explain different levels of political trust (including social capital) and (2) evaluations of institutional performance related to the political and economic development. Detailed coding of the variables are presented in Appendix 1. The first category includes *gender*, *age*, *education*, *household income*, *political interest*, *social activity*, *social trust* and *party closeness*. The second category of variables is made up of *satisfaction with the way democracy works*, *satisfaction with government performance* and *satisfaction with the present state of the national economy*. *Satisfaction with the way democracy works* is a proxy for general responsiveness of the political system, since the data set did not include appropriate measures for external (nor internal) efficacy for all examined years. *Satisfaction with government performance* is more about the quality of governmental decisions and persons in government. *Satisfaction with the present state of the economy* is about retrospective evaluations about the economic development. *Trust in people* is also included to capture social distrust and to make sure that fluctuations in political trust are not only the result of general distrust rather than institutional performance.

Two sets of ordinary least squares regression models are estimated. First, separate models for each survey round are run in order to examine if the impact of the various variables differ over time. In

these models, the institutional performance variables are measured on the original 0–10 scale. Second, a pooled model for all five rounds is tested. The institutional performance variables (i.e. satisfaction variables) will capture both over-time variations in aggregate public opinion (mean component) and individual differences (variance component). This means that both cluster means and individual scores are used as predictors. The mean component is the aggregate of individual scores. Each ESS survey round spanned over several months. Means of responses are calculated for each month (see Appendix 2).¹ The mean components will then allow to estimate how much change there is in political trust when each independent variable's cluster mean increases one unit. Hence, the aggregate measures will provide information about if and to what extent political trust is higher (or lower) when overall satisfaction levels are improving (or worsening). The variance of responses around the mean is simply calculated by subtracting individual scores from their cluster means. Centering individual scores around the cluster means will allow to assess if and how interpersonal differences in evaluations of institutional performance affect levels of political trust.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents estimates from the first set of linear OLS regression models, by survey round. The results show that individual characteristics such as sociodemographic background matter less, whereas evaluations of institutional performance explain levels of political trust to much greater extent. But there are no clear evidence that the impact of individual variables increases or decreases over time. As regards the impact of individual variables, satisfaction with government performance has the greatest impact. A 1-point increase in satisfaction yields between 0.39 and 0.48 higher political trust (both measured on a 0–10 scale). Satisfaction with how democracy works and trust in people are significant predictors, but their impact is about half as large as government performance. Satisfaction with the national economy is not significant suggesting that the impact of economic performance is captured by other explanatory variables. Age and political interest are significant predictors. There is a curvilinear relationship between age and political trust: the youngest and the oldest have greater political trust, while respondents between the age of 55 and 60 report the lowest levels of political trust according to the estimates. The difference between 55- and 15-year-olds was about 0.7 points in the beginning of the period and about 0.5 points in the end of the period. In terms of political interest, there is a trust gap about 1 point between those who are very interested and not at all interested. Feeling close to opposition or government parties predicts greater political trust as well. Gender, education, income and social activity do not predict trust levels when controlling for other factors.

Results from three pooled models are presented in Table 2. According to Model 1, sociodemographic background, political interest, participation in social activities and party closeness explain 15 percent of the variation in political trust. Model 2, which adds variances in evaluations of institutional performance and trust in people, explains 52 percent. Compared to the first model, the effects of

¹ A total of 21 clusters (months) were created: September to December in 2004, 2006 and 2010; October to January in 2008/2009 (17 observations 19–30 September included in the October cluster and 19 observations 1–February included in the January cluster); September to January in 2012/2013 (9 observations 1–4 February included in the January cluster).

household income, social activity and closeness to a government party largely vanish. The impacts of age and political interest are reduced but remain quite large. Adding the cluster means for the evaluations in Model 3 only increase the explained variance by 1 percentage point.

The most interesting findings are for evaluations of institutional performance. The variables are decomposed into their mean and variance components in Model 3. Satisfaction with government performance best predict political trust. Both aggregate changes in satisfaction with government (mean component) and higher individual values (variance component) predict levels of political trust. This implies, first, that as monthly means for satisfaction with government performance go up, the political trust score also increases. Second, individuals who report greater satisfaction with government performance also report greater political trust. A one point change in the monthly mean for satisfaction with government performance increases on average political trust by 0.85 points. An individual who reports a one point higher score for satisfaction with government performance has on average 0.44 points higher trust.

Satisfaction with democracy and trust in people explain differences in political trust at the individual level since the coefficients for the variance components are statistically significant. But in terms of effect size they are not as large as for satisfaction with government performance. Neither do they explain over-time variations since the coefficients for the mean scores are low and statistically insignificant. Satisfaction with the state of the national economy does not predict political trust. The coefficient for mean satisfaction with economic performance is negative when it was expected to be positive, and the coefficient for the variance components is zero. This does not mean that macroeconomic development was unimportant, but rather that satisfaction with government performance outperform satisfaction with the national economy. They are highly correlated and if satisfaction with government performance is excluded from the model then satisfaction with the national economy would be positively related with political trust, although not as strong as satisfaction with government performance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper we explored the relative impact of personal characteristics, amount of social capital and evaluations of institutional performance on political trust. Our purpose was to increase understanding of both differences between individuals (cross-sectional) and to explain why political trust changes over time in a country where variables of political culture are kept constant (longitudinal). In our longitudinal approach, we wanted to know if the impact of individual characteristics change over time and whether the evaluations of institutional performance co-vary with changes in political trust.

Our results show, first and foremost, the strong impact of evaluations of institutional performance on political trust both in the short and long term. In particular, satisfaction with government affects the fluctuations in political trust, and simultaneously dampens the effect of economic performance. Admittedly, these two measures are strongly intertwined. Satisfaction with democracy and social trust perform also well as a predictors but they seem to explain differences only at the individual-level and they do not predict over-time variations. In contrast, sociodemographic background variables have

only weak explanatory power. Nor there is evidence that importance of individual-level characteristics would increase or decrease over time. Only age, political interest and closeness to a government/opposition party have a stable impact of political trust of a citizen over time.

From a longitudinal perspective, it seems that fluctuations of political trust in Finland are only temporary and strongly related to how government performs (which can be contingent on both its handling of the economy and involvement in political scandals). While interest in politics and young or old age will cover the political trust of a citizen from these economic and political setbacks, the impact of other individual-level characteristics, including attitudes on system responsiveness and trust in other people, do not predict fluctuations in political trust in long-term. In other words, cultural theories as well as social capital theories have explanatory power in explaining the differences in political trust of the citizens at the individual-level but institutional performance theories are the strongest predictors of changes over-time.

Due to the limitations of data, we were not able to control for the impact of political events on political trust. In the aggregate level it seems that the scandal related to electoral funding in 2007 did not have an impact on the general trust level of the citizens in years 2006-2008 (see Appendix 2). However, a multidisciplinary approach combining media studies and political science which would concentrate on media follow up, political events and institutional performance would further enlighten why political trust fluctuates in both long and short term in an individual country.

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Table 1. Predicting political trust in Finland, by survey round.

| Variable | ESS round | | | | |
|--------------------|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2004 | 2006 | 2008 | 2010 | 2012 |
| Constant | 1.04** | 1.11** | 1.45** | 0.72* | 0.70* |
| Female | 0.08 | 0.16* | 0.00 | 0.13* | 0.05 |
| Age/10 | -0.50** | -0.55** | -0.37** | -0.31** | -0.36** |
| Age/10 squared | 0.05** | 0.05** | 0.03** | 0.03* | 0.03** |
| Years of education | 0.02* | 0.00 | 0.00 | -0.01 | 0.01 |
| Household income | | | | | |
| Living comfortably | -0.05 | -0.17* | -0.08 | -0.20* | -0.06 |
| Coping | ref. | ref. | ref. | ref. | ref. |
| Difficult | -0.04 | 0.07 | 0.28* | -0.20 | 0.04 |
| Very difficult | 0.22 | -0.06 | 0.22 | 0.18 | -0.13 |
| Political interest | | | | | |
| Very | 0.50** | 0.23 | 0.23 | 0.34* | 0.23* |
| Quite | ref. | ref. | ref. | ref. | ref. |
| Hardly | -0.16* | -0.30** | -0.27** | -0.31** | -0.35** |
| Not at all | -0.63** | -0.81** | -0.90** | -0.70** | -0.84** |
| Social activities | | | | | |
| Much more | -0.33* | 0.22 | 0.04 | -0.06 | -0.09 |
| More | 0.08 | -0.04 | -0.04 | -0.01 | -0.01 |
| Same | | | | | ref. |
| Less | -0.02 | 0.00 | -0.07 | -0.08 | 0.02 |
| Much less | -0.21 | 0.14 | -0.29* | -0.23 | -0.20 |
| Close to a party | | | | | |
| Government party | 0.30** | 0.42** | 0.08 | 0.11 | 0.07 |
| Opposition party | 0.11 | 0.32** | 0.36** | 0.25** | 0.20* |
| No | ref. | ref. | ref. | ref. | ref. |
| Trust | | | | | |
| People | 0.14** | 0.17** | 0.16** | 0.14** | 0.19** |
| Satisfaction | | | | | |
| Democracy | 0.22** | 0.21** | 0.23** | 0.23** | 0.21** |
| Government | 0.40** | 0.48** | 0.39** | 0.47** | 0.47** |
| Economy | 0.03 | -0.02 | 0.00 | 0.01 | -0.01 |
| Observations | 1805 | 1730 | 1994 | 1719 | 1997 |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.489 | 0.544 | 0.485 | 0.550 | 0.574 |

Notes. Entries are OLS regression coefficients. ESS design weights were applied to correct for different probabilities of selection.

** p < 0.01; * p < 0.05.

Table 2. Pooled models: predicting political trust in Finland, 2004–2013.

| Variable | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | |
|--------------------------|---------|----------|---------|----------|---------|----------|
| | Est. | SE | Est. | SE | Est. | SE |
| Constant | 7.18 | (0.14)** | 6.21 | (0.11) | 1.41 | (1.12) |
| Female | 0.02 | (0.04) | 0.08 | (0.03)* | 0.08 | (0.03)* |
| Age/10 | -0.85 | (0.05)** | -0.39 | (0.04)** | -0.41 | (0.04)** |
| Age/10 squared | 0.08 | (0.01)** | 0.03 | (0.00)** | 0.04 | (0.00)** |
| Years of education | 0.02 | (0.01)* | -0.00 | (0.00) | 0.00 | (0.00) |
| Household income | | | | | | |
| Living comfortably | 0.18 | (0.04)** | -0.10 | (0.03)** | -0.11 | (0.03)** |
| Coping | ref. | | ref. | | ref. | |
| Difficult | -0.52 | (0.07)** | 0.01 | (0.06) | 0.01 | (0.05) |
| Very difficult | -0.86 | (0.12)** | 0.08 | (0.08) | 0.10 | (0.09) |
| Political interest | | | | | | |
| Very | 0.18 | (0.07)* | 0.31 | (0.07)** | 0.30 | (0.06)** |
| Quite | ref. | | ref. | | ref. | |
| Hardly | -0.37 | (0.04)** | -0.27 | (0.03)** | -0.27 | (0.03)** |
| Not at all | -1.38 | (0.07)** | -0.78 | (0.04)** | -0.78 | (0.06)** |
| Social activities | | | | | | |
| Much more | -0.15 | (0.10) | -0.07 | (0.08) | -0.06 | (0.07) |
| More | -0.07 | (0.05) | -0.02 | (0.04) | -0.01 | (0.04) |
| Same | ref. | | ref. | | ref. | |
| Less | -0.21 | (0.04)** | -0.06 | (0.03)* | -0.04 | (0.03) |
| Much less | -0.57 | (0.07)** | -0.17 | (0.08)* | -0.17 | (0.06)* |
| Close to a party | | | | | | |
| Government party | 0.60 | (0.04)** | 0.19 | (0.04)** | 0.18 | (0.03)** |
| Opposition party | 0.12 | (0.05) | 0.27 | (0.04)** | 0.25 | (0.04)** |
| No | ref. | | ref. | | ref. | |
| Trust: people | | | | | | |
| Mean (by month) | — | | — | | 0.22 | (0.20) |
| Variance | — | | 0.16 | (0.01)** | 0.16 | (0.01)** |
| Satisfaction: democracy | | | | | | |
| Mean (by month) | — | | — | | 0.00 | (0.10) |
| Variance | — | | 0.22 | (0.01)** | 0.22 | (0.01)** |
| Satisfaction: government | | | | | | |
| Mean (by month) | — | | — | | 0.85 | (0.11)** |
| Variance | — | | 0.44 | (0.01)** | 0.44 | (0.01)** |
| Satisfaction: economy | | | | | | |
| Mean (by month) | — | | — | | -0.27 | (0.08)** |
| Variance | — | | 0.00 | (0.01) | 0.00 | (0.01) |
| Observations | 9493 | | 9245 | | 9245 | |
| Adjusted R2 | 0.149 | | 0.521 | | 0.531 | |

Notes. Entries are OLS regression coefficients with cluster-robust standard errors in parenthesis. ESS design weights were applied to correct for different probabilities of selection.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Appendix 1. Coding of variables.

| Variable | Coding and survey question |
|---|--|
| Political trust | Index calculated as the mean of three responses: trust in the Finnish parliament, politicians and political parties. Scale from 0 (no trust at all) to 10 (complete trust). Question: "Please tell me on a score of 0–10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust." |
| Female | 1=Female, 0=Male |
| Age/10 | 15–97, divided by 10 |
| Age/10 squared | As above, but squared |
| Years of education | 0–25 (top coded). Question: "About how many years of education have you completed, whether full-time or part-time? Please report these in full-time equivalents and include compulsory years of schooling." |
| Household income | 1=Living comfortably on present income, 2=Coping on present income, 3=Finding it difficult on present income, 4=Finding it very difficult on present income". Question: "Which of the descriptions on this card comes closest to how you feel about your household's income nowadays?" |
| Political interest | 1=Very interested, 2=Quite interested, 3=Hardly interested, 4=Not at all interested. Question: "How interested would you say you are in politics?" |
| Social activities | 1=Much less than most, 2=Less than most, 3=About the same, 4=More than most, 5=Much more than most. Question: "Compared to other people of your age, how often would you say you take part in social activities?" |
| Close to a party | 0=No, 1=Opposition party, 2=Government party. Questions: "Is there a particular political party you feel closer to than all the other parties?" Which one? |
| Satisfaction with the way democracy works | Scale 0–10, extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied. Question: "And on the whole, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Finland?" |
| Satisfaction with government performance | Scale 0–10, extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied. Question: "Now thinking about the Finnish government, how satisfied are you with the way it is doing its job?" |
| Satisfaction with the national economy | Scale 0–10, extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied. Question: "On the whole how satisfied are you with the present state of the economy in Finland?" |
| Trust in people | Scale 0–10, you can't be too careful to most people can be trusted. Question: "Using this card, generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" |

Appendix 2. Trust and satisfaction levels in Finland by month (European Social Survey).

| Year and month | Trust | | Satisfaction | | | N | |
|----------------|-----------|--------|--------------|------|------|-------|-------|
| | Political | People | Dem. | Gov. | Eco. | Min | Max |
| 2004 | | | | | | | |
| September | 5.1 | 6.4 | 6.4 | 6.2 | 6.5 | 166 | 173 |
| October | 5.3 | 6.5 | 6.7 | 6.2 | 6.6 | 875 | 917 |
| November | 5.3 | 6.6 | 6.7 | 6.2 | 6.4 | 631 | 647 |
| December | 5.5 | 6.5 | 6.9 | 6.3 | 6.8 | 272 | 278 |
| 2006 | | | | | | | |
| September | 5.3 | 6.7 | 6.5 | 6.2 | 6.7 | 154 | 160 |
| October | 5.3 | 6.5 | 6.7 | 6.2 | 6.7 | 724 | 742 |
| November | 5.3 | 6.6 | 6.8 | 6.3 | 6.8 | 728 | 743 |
| December | 5.4 | 6.6 | 6.9 | 6.4 | 6.9 | 245 | 250 |
| 2008 | | | | | | | |
| October | 5.2 | 6.5 | 6.4 | 5.9 | 6.3 | 687 | 713 |
| November | 5.3 | 6.4 | 6.6 | 5.9 | 6.1 | 795 | 812 |
| December | 5.3 | 6.5 | 6.7 | 6.0 | 6.0 | 393 | 403 |
| 2009 | | | | | | | |
| January | 5.3 | 6.4 | 6.4 | 6.0 | 5.8 | 258 | 265 |
| 2010 | | | | | | | |
| September | 4.7 | 6.6 | 6.1 | 5.5 | 6.1 | 452 | 464 |
| October | 4.8 | 6.5 | 6.4 | 5.4 | 6.1 | 816 | 839 |
| November | 4.8 | 6.4 | 6.2 | 5.4 | 6.0 | 422 | 434 |
| December | 4.7 | 6.3 | 6.3 | 5.4 | 5.5 | 139 | 140 |
| 2012 | | | | | | | |
| September | 4.9 | 6.4 | 6.8 | 5.8 | 6.0 | 373 | 380 |
| October | 5.3 | 6.6 | 6.9 | 5.9 | 6.0 | 767 | 790 |
| November | 5.2 | 6.6 | 6.8 | 5.8 | 5.9 | 580 | 590 |
| December | 5.3 | 6.7 | 6.8 | 5.8 | 6.0 | 120 | 123 |
| 2013 | | | | | | | |
| January | 5.4 | 6.8 | 6.9 | 6.0 | 6.1 | 304 | 313 |
| TOTAL | 5.2 | 6.5 | 6.6 | 5.9 | 6.3 | 10022 | 12174 |