

Why do parties lack legitimacy? Explaining trust in political parties in Europe

Ann-Kristin Kölln, Aarhus University (koelln@ps.au.dk)

Danielle May, Aarhus University (danielle.may@ps.au.dk)

Paper prepared for presentation at the Danish Political Science Association Conference, 1-2 November 2018, Vejle fjord

Populism is on the rise, and disenchantment with established political parties is a widespread phenomenon in Europe. It seems that European citizens have lost their faith in political parties as institutions. In this paper, we study European voters' levels of trust in political parties and argue for political parties' ideological representation of voters as one important explanatory factor. Specifically, building on principle-agent theory and proximity voting theory, we argue that voters trust political parties more if party-voter ideological congruence is high because it reduces problems of adverse selection. To test our argument, we combine survey data from the European Social Survey (2004-2014) with party-level data on ideological positions from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). Using multilevel modelling, the results show that even after accounting for prominent individual- and country-level factors, higher party-voter ideological congruence increases trust in political parties. Overall, the findings indicate that political parties' ability to ideologically represent voters could partially account for voters' disenchantment with parties as institutions.

Introduction

Throughout Europe populism and anti-establishment parties are on the rise (e.g. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). Established political parties, that have existed throughout the 20th century, are currently experiencing some of their worst electoral results. The Dutch labour party, PvdA, and the French centre-right party, UMP, are just two prominent examples of 2017. At the same time, populist political parties that explicitly defy any established party structures, such as Italy's Five Star Movement or France's EnMarche!, are on the rise. These patterns seem to corroborate existing survey research from over a decade ago, which showed that citizens only regard parties as a 'necessary evil' (Dalton and Weldon 2005: 931). Mair (2013: 73) comes to similar conclusions based on a more recent analysis: political parties 'might well be accepted by citizens as necessary for the good functioning of politics and the state, but they are neither liked nor trusted'.

However, while the literature has already made great progress in understanding why niche and populist parties are successful (see for example Dahlström and Sundell 2012; Iversflaten 2008; Meguid 2005; Rydgren 2005), we know surprisingly little about the last part of Mair's damning conclusion: the lack of trust in political parties. Existing models investigating citizens' levels of institutional trust and their determinants usually group several measures, such as trust in parliament, politicians, parties, etc. to one index, arguing that they are all part of the same dimension (Uslander 2018; Zmerli and Hooghe 2011; Zmerli and van der Meer 2017). While this might be a viable and correct approach to study institutional trust, to the best of our knowledge, there is not a single study investigating citizens' trust in political parties alone. Related to this is another omission, namely that of a lack of knowledge about parties' influence on their own overall image. We know how mainstream parties' policy or programmatic shifts influence voters' perceptions and approval of them (see for example, Adams et al. 2011; Somer-Topcu 2015). And research has also shown that sociological explanations can account for the changing appeal of some political parties (see for example, Rydgren 2007). But we do not know yet if and in what way parties may influence their own overall image as being trustworthy.

In this paper, we make a first attempt to address both issues. Building on existing research on political trust and on the appeal of political parties, we argue that political parties' nature as representatives of voters can partially account for the variance in European voters' levels of trust in political parties. Specifically, we combine *proximity voting theory* with *principal agent theory* and contend that a high degree of party-voter ideological congruence has a positive effect on voters' trust in political parties because high ideological congruence minimises problems of adverse selection. If there is a closer match of voter-party ideological positions, voters trust parties more with their vote choice because they can be more certain that the party's actions will match their own preferences. This is part of the well-known mechanism of *ex ante* selection in principal-agent theory (see for example Sieberer 2011). Conversely, if party-voter ideological congruence is low, voters are more sceptical about the party's future behaviour and will consequently trust political parties less.

We support our argument with time-series cross-sectional data from Europe during the period 2004-2014. We combine individual-level survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS) with party-level data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES). Our initial results show that party-voter congruence has a positive effect on trust in political parties, even after controlling for important individual- and country-level variables. Effect sizes are small but in the expected direction and highly statistically significant. Our results also show another novel finding: extreme voters are more trusting of parties than moderate voters. In general, we observe the strongest effects on trust in political parties for the politically interested, the satisfied democrats, and for people feeling close to a political party. But also find that in contexts of low levels of corruption, trust in political parties amongst voters is substantially higher.

Overall, our findings provide first results that trust in political parties is not only determined by individual- and contextual-level factors but also by the political parties and their representative performance. These results have important implications for the literature on political representation and party politics in Europe (see for example Dalton et al. 2011; Rohrschneider

and Whitefield 2012; Mair 2013) but also for studies on institutional trust. Our results indicate that parties' performance as representative agents of citizens' preferences could account for why European voters seem to have little faith in political parties as democratic institutions.

Theory and hypothesis

Beliefs in the legitimacy of democratic institutions are important for the stability of modern democracies. The overwhelming majority of the literature on political legitimacy focuses on either regimes and states (famously Weber 1980, more recently Keman 2014; Peters 2017; Tyler 2006; van Ham et al. 2017), or on individual politicians (Bos and van der Brug 2010). Legitimacy of parties, on the other hand, is either largely missing from the literature or is interlinked with political institutions more broadly. Yet, data from the European Social Survey indicates that trust in parties does not go hand in hand with trust in other political institutions. On an 11 point scale, parties and politicians are the only two political institutions to receive an average trust rating of below four. This is not to say that trust evaluations of political parties are completely disconnected from attitudes towards institutions, indeed there is a reasonably strong correlation ($r = .7$) between trust in parties and parliaments. But the consistently lower trust ratings for parties indicate that party legitimacy is not the same as the legitimacy of parliaments and other political institutions.

Our aim is to investigate what factors explain this variance and make citizen evaluations of trust in parties distinct. One of the few scholars who has examined party-specific legitimacy in theoretical depth is Ignazi (2017) in his latest book tellingly titled "Party and Democracy: The Uneven Road to Party Legitimacy". In line with Mair (2013), he argues that political parties are drifting further away from citizens and closer towards the state. Legitimacy in Ignazi's (2017: 263) view is an 'intangible yet fundamental property' of which parties are increasingly devoid. However, neither Mair (2013) nor Ignazi (2014; 2017) measures, let alone tests, to what extent parties' legitimacy has suffered or what the determinants could be.

In order to fill this void, we follow the literature and conceptualise legitimacy through trust (see, for example, van Ham et al. 2017; Keman 2014; Levi et al. 2009). According to Weber (1980, see also Peters 2017), legitimacy beliefs have different sources and trust is one of them. We build on this conceptualisation and conceive of trust as an important source of legitimacy beliefs for the case of political parties. Theoretically and relatedly, we conceptualise the relationship between citizens and parties as one of a principal and her agent. The principal-agent framework is regularly used to describe and understand relationships in parliamentary democracies (see for example Müller 2000; Sieberer 2011; Strøm 2000; Strøm et al. 2003). According to this literature, the relationship between voters, parliamentarians, governments, ministers, and bureaucrats can be understood as a chain of delegation and accountability. The underlying idea is that what connects these actors are processes of delegation and accountability because voters delegate power to parliamentarians who, in exchange, are accountable to voters. The same goes for the relationship between parliamentarians and governments, or ministers and bureaucrats.

Political parties also find a natural place in this framework because they ‘reduce transaction costs’ and ‘help overcome the dilemma of collective action’ (Müller 2000: 309). Müller (2000: 310) further argues, however, that the ‘legitimacy of parties in Western constitutional systems varies’ from delegation step to delegation step, and that parties are most appreciated in the first step. That is, they are most appreciated and indeed ‘necessary’ (Müller 2000: 3010) in the relationship between voters and members of parliament (MPs). It is in this first step where parties’ programmes allow voters as principals to select parties as agents that match their preferences. Because as previous analyses show, if we did not have political parties and their programmes, but only individual MPs instead, democratic representation and delegation work would be highly difficult (Kölln 2015).

Party programmes and what they stand for allow voters to find the agents that best match their own preferences. From the perspective of principal-agent theory, it means that voting allows citizens to exert *ex ante* control and to minimize agency loss. Building on proximity voting theory

(see for example Downs 1957; Singh 2010), we assume that voters select a party and a programme that they believe will be closest to their own interests. With their vote choice, voters then delegate power to parties to act in their own interest. In other words, they trust parties to do x. Note how the conception of party-voter relationships in the principal-agent framework naturally fits with conceptions and sources of legitimacy beliefs.

Specifically, we contend that a close match between a party and its voters' ideological preferences is a source of trust that parties will act in voters' interests. If the distance between a voter's ideological position and her preferred party's position is large, the voter is more sceptic that parties will act in her interest. That is, voters are more likely to distrust parties if the party they voted for is ideologically more distant to them. However, the smaller the ideological distance between a voter and her party, the surer the voter may be in the delegation of power. Put differently, voters are more likely to trust parties if their preferred party is ideologically more proximate to them which should result in more confidence that their views are being represented by at least one political party. From this we can formulate the following hypothesis:

The closer the ideological match between voters and their preferred parties, the more voters trust parties.

Data and methods

To test our hypothesis, we require data with variation in party-voter ideological congruence and with survey measures of citizens' level of trust in political parties. In addition, we ideally need data that allow us to control for different contexts and time periods. The European Social Survey (ESS) Cumulative File (2004-2014) fulfills many of these conditions and is, to the best of our knowledge, one of the best data sources to test our hypothesis. Every other year since 2002, the European Social Survey has run in most European countries. The project is centrally coordinated with a common questionnaire and highly standardized methodology based on random

probability samples, making the resulting survey responses highly comparable across countries and time.

We match the survey data with information about political parties' ideological positions, obtained from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) trend file (1999-2014) (Polk et al. 2017; Bakker et al. 2015). The timing of the different expert surveys – 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014 – and the coverage of countries matches the ESS data relatively well. From both data sources we construct an individual-level data set that allows us to test our hypothesis. We can match parties and voters in a total of 19 countries and over 6 time points, which results in dataset with a total of 107 country-year observations and more than 100,000 individual survey responses.

The ESS also includes a measure of trust in political parties. It has asked the question "Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. [...] Political parties" with a response scale ranging between 0 (no trust at all) and 10 (complete trust). As mentioned, across time and space, this question receives the lowest score compared to all other political institutions and actors, including politicians.

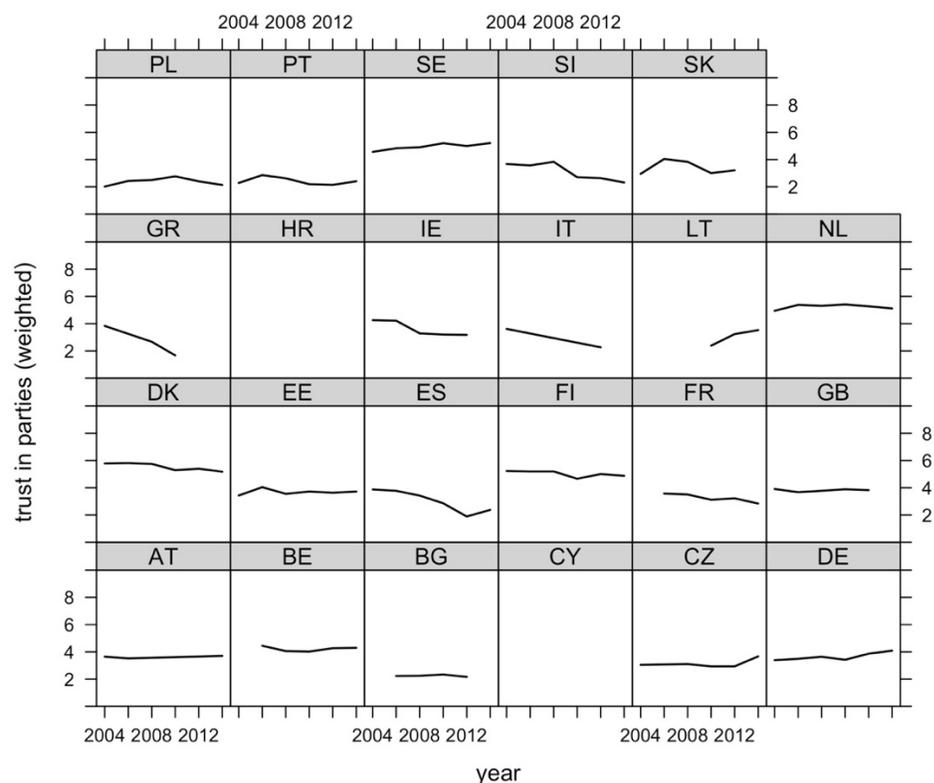
Figure 1 depicts the average levels of trust in parties in 19 European countries¹ from 2004-2014. Cyprus and Croatia averages are not shown because our dataset only includes one time point for each. Voters in Cyprus had an average level of trust in parties of 2.8 in 2012, and voters in Croatia had an average of 2.0 in 2010. For the rest of the countries, the graphs show declining levels of trust in parties in several instances, including Italy or Greece. They also show a general if slight improvement in trust in other countries, including Germany and Sweden. It is also obvious that citizens in some countries have generally higher levels of trust in parties, such as in Denmark, while citizens in other countries seem to have generally low levels of trust in parties, such as in Poland. Overall, and this is important for our purpose, we see variation within and across countries but no obvious pattern.

¹ Country codes in Appendix 1

Figure 1: Average levels of trust in political parties across countries and time.

Source: ESS Cumulative file.

Note: Data are weighted using design and population size weights.



Our central independent variable is based on respondents' reported vote choice, their left-right self-placement, and their preferred party's position on the left-right scale. This also means that our unit of observation and analysis is voters and not all citizens. To construct our measure of ideological incongruence, we first coded a variable that indicated voters' preferred party's left-right position before calculating the distance to voters' own left-right position. The absolute value of the result measures party-voter ideological incongruence, where higher values mean a higher level of incongruence between a voter and her preferred party's ideological position. In this way, our measure of congruence includes both subjective perceptions of ideology (ESS survey respondents' perception of their placement on the left-right scale) and an objective ideological measure of each party as determined by the CHES country experts. We expect a negative

relationship of party-voter ideological congruence with trust, given our hypothesis. The variable ranges from 0 to 10, has a mean in our sample of 1.5 and a standard deviation of 1.2. What is extraordinary about the distribution of this variable is that almost 45 per cent of voters voted for a party whose absolute ideological distance from their own was ≤ 1 . It means that almost half of our European voters were able to find and subsequently vote for a party that closely matched their own ideological position. Since our measure is only based on voters and not all citizens, we cannot say anything about how ideological distances to parties affected non-voters.

To estimate our models we also include a number of important individual- and context-level variables identified by previous studies on institutional trust (see van der Meer and Dekker 2011). We include direct survey measures of gender (1 = female; 0 = male), age and age squared (measured in years), highest level of education (1 = less than lower secondary education – 5 = tertiary education completed), subjective feelings about household income (1 = very difficult on present income – 4 = living comfortably on present income), political interest (1 = not at all interested – 4 = very interested), satisfaction with democracy (0 = extremely dissatisfied – 10 = extremely satisfied), closeness to a party (1 = yes; 0 = no), and religiosity (0 = not at all religious – 10 = very religious). The expectation is that women, older people, the more educated and affluent, the more politically interested and more satisfied democrats, the party supporters and the religious are more trusting in political institutions, but this has never been tested before for political parties alone. In addition, we also compute a measure of ideological distance from the mid-point by taking the absolute distance of respondents' left-right self-placement from the mid-point of 5. Whether one's ideological placement on the left-right scale has any effect on political trust, and if so in what direction, remains disputed. Miller and Listhaug (1999: 365) find that right-wing supporters consistently display lower levels of political trust, while Hooghe et al. (2017: 214) find the exact opposite and claim right-wing supporters tend to have much higher levels of political trust. We know little about the effects of extreme ideological self-placement, whether left or right, upon institutional trust, let alone trust in parties. Because we do not have any firm theoretical or empirical insights, we only have a loose expectation for trust in political parties specifically, which is that those who hold more extreme

political views on a left-right scale might be more skeptical of political parties as institutions. In other words, we expect this variable to have a negative association with trust in political parties.

On the country-level we include measures of anticorruption (Corruption Perception Index), the country's GDP growth rate in that year (World Bank), the electoral system (1 = PR; 0 = not-PR), and whether a country is a post-communist country (1 = yes; 0 = no). Based on previous research (i.e. van der Meer and Dekker 2011), our expectation is that trust in political parties is higher in contexts with less corruption, a well-performing economy, a PR-system, and without a post-communist history. The first three factors have to do with the input and output of the political system. If the political system produces higher levels of corruption its institutions may not be trusted. The same goes for poor economic performance because this is a valence issue that everyone cares about. A PR-system tends to be associated with a consensus democracy that usually produces more satisfied and trusting citizens. Finally, past research has also shown that a post-communist history may make its current citizens more skeptical about how well political institutions are functioning.

To model these anticipated relationships, we estimate a multilevel model with random intercepts for countries, years, and country-years and with trust in political parties as our dependent variable.² We use full maximum likelihood to estimate our coefficients and computed all models using the package *lme4* in R (Bates et al. 2018). Since we also have a distinct time component with 6 time-points we are also modelling change over time in our models. We include a variable referring to survey year as fixed effects in our model (Singer and Willett 2003).

We begin by estimating an empty model, before successively including first only time, then additionally all individual-level measures, then all country-level factors, before finally our main variable of interest: ideological party-voter congruence. By successively building our model in this way, we are able to see what each step contributes to our understanding of variation in trust in

² A chi-square test showed that an empty model with only country and country-year effects did not fit the data as well as a model with country, country-year, and year effects. The same holds for a model that does not include country-year effects.

political parties. This seems particularly pertinent in this instance where so little is known about citizens' levels of trust in political parties.

Results

Table 1 reports the results of estimating an empty model with only a common intercept. It shows that the average level of trust in parties in these European countries between 2004 and 2014 was 3.5 on the 11-point scale. The random effects and their associated Interclass Correlation Coefficients (ICC) of Model 1 also show how the variation in levels of trust in parties is partitioned across the different analytical levels. For example, the results show that the largest variation in levels of trust in parties can be found on the country level: a total of 17 per cent. On the other hand, around 3 percent of the variation originates on the country-year level and less than 1 per cent on the year level. The rest of the variation, that is almost 80 per cent, lies between individuals. The results of Model 2 in Table 1 inform us about the development of trust in political parties in Europe over the period of analysis. As can be seen, the variable *year* has a negative and statistically significant effect on levels of trust in parties, indicating that European voters' trust in parties has been decreasing over time. Substantively, the coefficient means that with every additional year between 2004 and 2014, the average level of trust in political parties decreased by 0.04 units.

Taken together, these first results mean that European voters' trust in political parties is, on average, low and has been slightly decreasing between 2004-2014. Anecdotally, if it were the case that distrust in established parties drives the populist vote, we would have probably expected a stronger over-time trend, given the rise of populist and anti-establishment parties during this time period. However, it could also be that it is precisely this development that has counteracted a more pronounced downward trend in trust in parties, since if voters feel that their interests are being represented by anti-establishment parties they may report higher trust in parties in general. But these are only speculations.

Table 1. Multilevel modelling of trust in political parties; initial results. (N = 106145 respondents; 107 country-years; 23 countries; 6 years)

<i>Predictors</i>	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>
intercept	3.51	0.21	<0.001	78.82	28.06	<0.001
year				-0.04	0.01	0.01
Random Effects						
Residual Variance	3.84			3.84		
Variance Intercepts	0.14 _{cyear}			0.14 _{cyear}		
	0.84 _{country}			0.84 _{country}		
	0.02 _{year}			0.00 _{year}		
ICC	0.03 _{cyear}			0.03 _{cyear}		
	0.17 _{country}			0.17 _{country}		
	0.00 _{year}			0.00 _{year}		
Marginal R ² / Conditional R ²	0.000 / 0.206			0.003 / 0.207		
AIC	516802.564			516800.127		

In a next step, we include our survey measures into the model (see Model 1 in Table 2). All survey measures share a statistically significant relationship with trust in parties. Further evidence for the importance of the individual-level factors can be found in the sizes of random effects and the fit indices. The residual variance decreased from 3.84 to 3.02 compared to the empty model above. A substantial decrease can also be seen in the AIC model fit measure. At the same time, the total explained variance is increasing considerably. The fixed effects results of Model 1 show that female voters, older and more affluent voters and those that are religious, more politically interested, more satisfied with democracy, feel close to a party, and that place themselves further away from the ideological mid-point trust parties more. Only voters' educational level seems to have a negative relationship with trust in parties. However, most of the coefficients are

small in size, just like the over-time variable reported above. The three variables of political interest, satisfaction with democracy and feeling close to a party have the strongest relationship to trust in parties, ranging between 0.32 and 0.39. They mean that every additional unit of political interest or satisfaction with democracy or feeling at all close to a party increases levels of trust in parties by about a third of a unit. These are no small effects and indicate how a general involvement in the political process is related to trust in its political institutions.

Table 2. Multilevel modelling of trust in political parties; substantive results. (N = 106145 respondents; 107 country-years; 23 countries; 6 years)

<i>Predictors</i>	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Estimates</i>	<i>s.e.</i>	<i>p</i>
intercept	56.05	22.51	0.01	16.75	19.55	0.39	16.39	19.54	0.40
year	-0.03	0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	0.39	-0.01	0.01	0.40
female	0.12	0.01	<0.001	0.12	0.01	<0.001	0.12	0.01	<0.001
age	-0.03	0.00	<0.001	-0.03	0.00	<0.001	-0.03	0.00	<0.001
age squared	0.03	0.00	<0.001	0.03	0.00	<0.001	0.03	0.00	<0.001
education level	-0.03	0.00	<0.001	-0.03	0.00	<0.001	-0.03	0.00	<0.001
subj. income	0.10	0.01	<0.001	0.10	0.01	<0.001	0.10	0.01	<0.001
pol. interest	0.32	0.01	<0.001	0.32	0.01	<0.001	0.32	0.01	<0.001
satisfaction democracy	0.36	0.00	<0.001	0.36	0.00	<0.001	0.36	0.00	<0.001
close to party	0.39	0.01	<0.001	0.39	0.01	<0.001	0.38	0.01	<0.001
religiosity	0.05	0.00	<0.001	0.05	0.00	<0.001	0.05	0.00	<0.001
ideological distance	0.03	0.00	<0.001	0.03	0.00	<0.001	0.03	0.00	<0.001
anticorruption				0.17	0.04	<0.001	0.17	0.04	<0.001
GDP				0.05	0.01	<0.001	0.05	0.01	<0.001

PR system		-0.22	0.19	0.23	-0.22	0.19	0.25
Post-communist		-0.07	0.22	0.74	-0.07	0.22	0.76
ideological incongruence					-0.03	0.00	<0.001
Random Effects							
Residual Variance	3.02		3.02			3.02	
Variance Intercepts	0.04 _{cyear}		0.04 _{cyear}			0.04 _{cyear}	
	0.36 _{country}		0.18 _{country}			0.18 _{country}	
	0.01 _{year}		0.00 _{year}			0.00 _{year}	
ICC	0.01 _{cyear}		0.01 _{cyear}			0.01 _{cyear}	
	0.10 _{country}		0.06 _{country}			0.06 _{country}	
	0.00 _{year}		0.00 _{year}			0.00 _{year}	
Marginal R ² / Conditional R ²	0.236 / 0.327		0.301 / 0.349			0.301 / 0.349	
AIC	491196.563		491174.420			491148.517	

In Model 2 we then add our four contextual measures. They do not seem to affect the individual-level coefficients but they do reduce the country-level variation in trust in parties and increase the overall explained variance. Overall, a model including these additional contextual measures seems to fit the data even better, as indicated by the AIC fit statistic. This is interesting because only two out of our measures seem to be related to trust in parties. Specifically, the results show that only a country's anticorruption level and its GDP growth rate have positive and statistically significant relationship. The sizes of these effects are quite different, however. While a country's GDP growth rate tends to have a positive effect of a magnitude similar to religiosity, anticorruption levels have effects of three times that size. But this predictor of trust in parties is still substantially weaker (about half the magnitude) than some of the individual-level variables, such as political interest or feeling close to a party. Having a PR-system or a communist history does not seem to matter. In sum, it means that a context of higher levels of GDP growth rates and more so low levels of corruption increase voters' trust in parties but individual-level factors are still the main driver of trust in parties.

Finally, we add in Model 3 our variable of party-voter ideological incongruence to test our hypothesis. As predicted, this variable shares a negative and statistically significant relationship with trust in political parties. After controlling for everything else, this measure of party performance seems to still add something to our understanding of variations in trust in political parties. Further evidence for that can be found in a lower AIC fit statistic compared to Model 2, indicating an even better fit with the data. Substantively, the effect is small with an effect size of 0.03 but with that it is still on the same level as many of the individual-level factors. In this context it is also important to point out that adding our measure of party-voter ideological incongruence did not change any of the other coefficients.

To better understand the effect sizes, Figure 2 shows the effects of our main variable of interest alongside the variable's distribution on the x-axis. As can be seen, voters who voted for a party that was very close to themselves on the left-right scale and thus had zero or very little party-voter incongruence trusted political parties the most – on average, around 3.8 on the 11-point scale. However, trust in parties decreases with an increasing gap in party-voter ideology. It suggests that voters trust parties more when they are ideologically closer to them, just like our theory proposed. Again, effect sizes are admittedly small but they are still on the same level as many individual-level factors. Plus, it has to be borne in mind that our dependent variable measures trust in *any* political party and not – as we would have liked – trust in the party voted for. The potential for an individual party-measure is also suggested by the coefficient of feeling close to a party. Respondents who felt close to a party (however defined) had, on average, a level of trust in parties of around 3.9 (see Figure 3), whereas those that did not feel close to a party had an average level of trust of 3.5. As pointed out above, this is and remains the strongest predictor of European voters' trust in parties.

Figure 2. Effects of ideological party-voter congruence on trust in political parties, based on Model 3, Table 2.

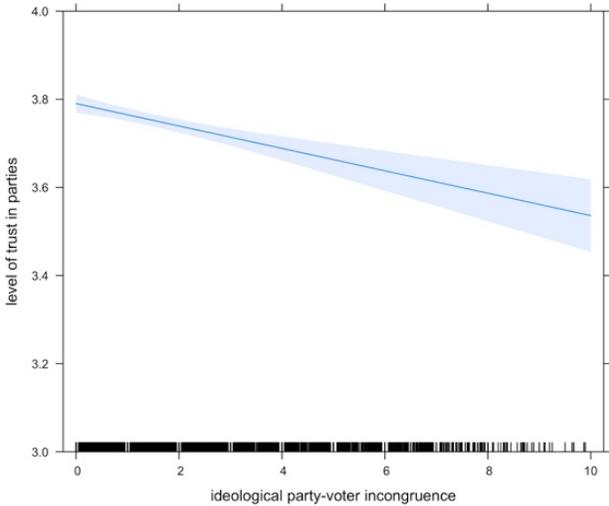
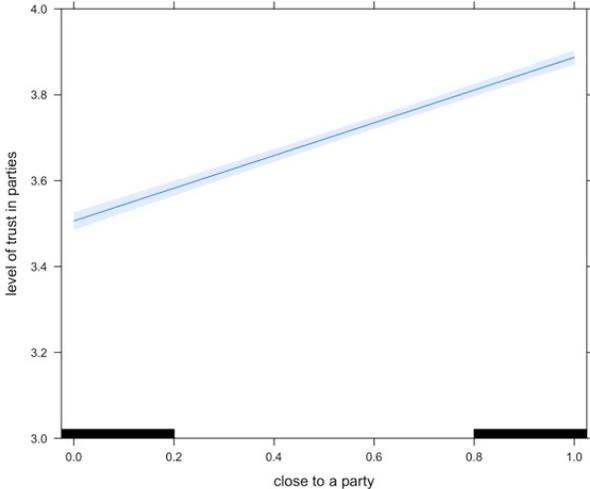


Figure 3. Effects of feeling close to a party on trust in political parties, based on Model 3, Table 2.



Conclusion

Parties are the least trusted of all political institutions in Europe. Given the likely connection between low trust in established parties and the rise of the vote share going towards populist

and 'anti-party' parties, it is imperative that we understand what factors are contributing to this loss of trust and ultimately, loss of legitimacy for political parties. Only by understanding these causes can parties shape their own image as being trustworthy.

In this paper, we took a first step by examining trust in political parties as a dependent variable in its own right, rather than interlinking it with other measures of trust in political institutions as has been the trend. Specifically, we combined principal-agent theory and proximity voting theory and argued that voters who have a high party-voter ideological congruence will show higher levels of trust in political parties. We constructed our central variable of interest by combining individual-level survey data with party-level data provided by experts.

The results of multi-level modelling on a large sample of voters in 19 European countries across six time points show that low ideological congruence between parties and voters has a statistically significant negative effect upon trust in parties, even after accounting for other established individual and country level explanatory factors. Effect sizes are admittedly small but of a similar magnitude as several individual-level factors. This supports our hypothesis, and suggests that if voters are able to find a party that closely matches their ideological preferences, they exhibit higher levels of trust in parties than those voters who have a weaker ideological link with their preferred party. This conclusion is in line with the proximity voting theory and the principal-agent framework, in which voters are the principals entrusting parties as their agent to act in their best interests. Importantly, it also suggests that political parties' performance as representative institutions may account for some of the lack of faith that plague so many parties today.

However, it must be pointed out that the lack of availability of data on trust in individual parties means that we cannot affirm this finding to the desired extent. Applying principal-agent theory to study the effects of party-voter congruence on trust implies actor-specific trust but our dependent variable measured trust in parties more generally. The measure of general trust in parties is not fine-grained enough to allow us to test this fully, but it does provide initial

indications in this direction. We also conclude that political interest, satisfaction with democracy, and feeling close to a party all have a strong and statistically significant effect upon trust in parties, which is line with previous studies on trust in institutions more broadly. Furthermore, we learned that voters on the extreme ends of the ideological spectrum are more trusting of parties than voters closer to the median point, an issue that has been debated but unanswered in existing literature.

In finding some answers, this paper also raises further questions. Are extreme voters more trusting of parties *in general*, or only of their preferred party? Could these effects perhaps be curvilinear? Are the effect sizes that we discovered for ideological congruence upon trust in parties replicable or even stronger when we consider attitudes towards individual parties? And to what extent are our main effects dependent on individual-level factors, such as political sophistication? What factors influence levels of trust in parties among all citizens, not only among voters? It is logical to assume that non-voters have even lower levels of trust in parties than voters, so this is an important avenue of exploration. Ultimately, it is our hope that future research will be aided by our cross-sectional survey (upcoming) that will provide insights into European citizens' trust in individual political parties across the ideological spectrum.

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Appendix 1: Country codes used in ESS data

AT: Austria
BE: Belgium
BG: Bulgaria
HR: Croatia
CY: Cyprus
CZ: Czech Republic
DK: Denmark
EE: Estonia
FI: Finland
FR: France
DE: Germany
GR: Greece
IE: Ireland
IT: Italy
LT: Lithuania
NL: Netherlands
PL: Poland
PT: Portugal
SK: Slovakia
SI: Slovenia
ES: Spain