



## 23/03/2023: Literature Review

### WP5: Legitimate Crisis Governance and Trust



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## How multilevel governance structures and crisis mitigating measures impact political trust: a systematic literature review.

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in 2020 as a health crisis, and which later became an economic and even political crisis (Boin et al. 2020), has shown that political actors like governments, leaders and courts were willing to take or endorse drastic measures to mitigate the spread of the virus. So-called lockdowns and other social restrictions were imposed on citizens without much public participation (Bol et al. 2021). Measures to counter the economic crisis that followed the health crisis were taken as a reaction to increasing demands of the public, though, sometimes, without parliamentary approval (e.g., Bursens et al. 2021). During the sovereign debt crisis as well, the EU imposed austerity policies on various countries without much public debate (Hartveld et al. 2013). At the same time, political systems are increasingly interconnected, forming a multilevel governance (MLG) structure. This means that local, regional, national and supranational levels of government each have their separate spheres of authority, but these levels also need to cooperate, hence the interconnectedness, and therefore become increasingly complex (Behnke et al. 2019; Biela et al. 2013). This interconnectedness of various levels is well expressed in times of crisis. Within the European Union (EU), for example, different levels of government were, in one way or another, involved in the mitigation of the pandemic (Lynggaard et al. 2022).

The absence of public participation in the mitigation of crises and the increasing complexity of political systems raise questions on citizens' perceptions of their governments such as, among others, their political trust. Indeed, political trust is seen as an important precondition for the functioning of a political system, especially in times of crisis (Schraff 2020). Research shows, for example, that political trust influences citizens' willingness to vaccinate (Wynen et al. 2022) or to comply with laws (Marien & Hooghe 2011). The concept of political trust, which is related to concepts of legitimacy of a political system, is even more relevant in complex MLG contexts, where different tiers of government directly or indirectly influence citizens' and where citizens can express trust in several levels simultaneously.

Political trust can thus be considered as important in both crisis and MLG contexts, and especially in times of crisis in a MLG system. That is why this paper examines the following question: How do crises mitigating measures and multilevel governance contexts impact political trust? Political trust being defined as a "person's belief that political institutions will act consistently with their expectations of positive



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behaviour” (Algan 2018). We study this question by means of a systematic literature review based on the PRISMA guidelines of 46 papers on crisis mitigating measures and/or MLG systems, and political trust, whereby political trust is the dependent variable. The goal of this research is to systematize and integrate knowledge of these distinct strands of research, searching for overlaps, in order to get more insight in the phenomenon of political trust. This review thus aims to bridge the gap between two different strands of research by searching for communalities in the way crisis mitigating measures affect political trust and how MLG contexts affect political trust.

This is even more relevant given the global scope of crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increasing pertinence of MLG structures. Both themes are extensively studied, but rarely in combination with political trust or in combination with each other (see for example Boin et al. 2020 for crisis governance, or Behnke et al. 2019 for MLG). The growing complexity and 'trans boundedness' of crises (Boin and Lodge 2016), however, require a stronger focus on the relationships between crises and MLG, as well as how they together affect political trust. This literature review is therefore a first step to determine the state of the art and to integrate findings with regards to political trust in both contexts.

This paper shows that there are some overlaps between the different strands of research, both in use of data and methods as in conceptions of and explanations for trust. There are, however, some gaps in the literature, especially with regards to the levels of government that are commonly studied. Research on the effect of crisis governance on trust focuses on the national level as the most important level, neglecting the MLG structure of most political systems. Additionally, the research on trust in MLG contexts focuses mostly on national and supranational levels of government. Literature on lower levels of government, especially the regional level, remains scarce. In both strands of research, various conceptualisations and notions of trust are used. Finally, literature on crisis governance focuses on the policies themselves and on how the implementation of a policy affects political trust. This literature, however, neglects the possible impact of the way in which measures were decided on political trust, for example whether the fact that decisions on measures were taken after intergovernmental consultations or without public participation affects political trust.

The paper consists of six parts and is structured as follows: the first part elaborates on the research strategy of the paper, namely how the systematic literature review is performed. The second part discusses the findings with regards to the dependent variable, political trust, while the third and fourth



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part assess the impact of respectively crisis governance and MLG structures on political trust. In a fifth part, the impact of crisis governance on political trust in a multilevel system is discussed by means of four articles dealing with the sovereign debt crisis, and related austerity policies, in the EU. The paper concludes with a discussion of similarities between the two kinds of research and of the gaps in the literature, finally also providing avenues for further research.

## **1 Research strategy: a systematic literature review**

To conduct the research and to establish the state of the art in the literature on crisis governance and/or MLG and political trust, a systematic literature review was performed following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) scheme. This method was initially developed for research related to health care as clinicians need to be kept up to date with their field, and later evolved into the PRISMA statement which is increasingly used by researchers of various research fields. The statement consists of a checklist of 27 items and a flow diagram which guides the search and review process with attention for transparent analysis and reporting (Page et al. 2021). In the following, we elaborate on the search and review strategy used for this paper following the guidelines of the PRISMA statement.

### *Literature search*

We conducted the search in October and November 2022, so articles published after November 2022 are not considered in this review. We searched for literature on crisis governance or on multilevel systems, and their effects on political trust in three well-known databases: Web of Science, Scopus and Proquest. More specifically, we searched for literature on trust (not on political trust), crisis OR multilevel/federal/decentral/intergovernmental/subnational/local/supranational governance.<sup>1</sup> We included trust as one of the search terms and not political trust, as many articles use terms like institutional trust or trust in government, which are forms of political trust and thus relevant for the study. To identify as much literature covering different levels of government as possible, we included a whole range of indicators of MLG structures instead of only using 'multilevel governance'. We also decided to look for 'crisis' instead of 'crisis governance' for the same reason. We found a total of 7137 publications in the three mentioned databases. In order to identify publications that were missed in the other databases, we also ran a search of Google Scholar. This double check yielded twelve additional results, so 7149 articles. The entire search was finished on the sixteenth of November 2022.



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Because of the high number of publications found ( $n = 7149$ ), we chose not to include additional databases like JSTOR and/or look for more publications in specific journals. The downside of this approach is of course that we might have missed some interesting articles highly relevant for this study. A check of JSTOR based on our search terms, however, did not yield additional results. Also, to control whether we actually studied separate strands of literature, we performed an additional search in the three databases by using the search terms 'trust', 'crisis' AND 'multilevel', and all its derivatives as indicated above, AND governance. This resulted in a total of 190 publications, of which, after further analysis of the results as explained below, only four were eligible for the study. This might indicate that the strands of research are treated separately in the literature.

### *Eligibility criteria*

Articles from databases were included in the screening process if they complied with the following criteria:

- Search terms/key words: publications need to deal with trust and multilevel governance or crisis governance, so we searched for 'trust', 'crisis' and 'multilevel governance' (and derivatives). As mentioned before, an article should be about (political) trust, and crisis or multilevel governance.
- Research domain: the paper needs to be published in a journal that is related to political science or legal research.
- Year of publication: publications of the last fifteen years are included (2008-2022). That way publications on the financial crisis that erupted in 2008 are also included and the literature on trust and crisis is not limited to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Publication type: both articles and book chapters are included, if they are published in peer-reviewed journals or in academic books.
- Language: only articles in English were considered for the study.

### *Screening and selection of literature*

Of the initial 7149 publications, 46 were considered for this study. In the following, we will go deeper into the selection and screening process. This is also presented in figure 1. First, using the tools of the databases themselves, we checked for research domain, year of publication, publication type and language. As Scopus and Proquest do not allow for detailed searches based on the research domain, we searched for publications in the fields of social sciences and law. For Web of Science, we were able to



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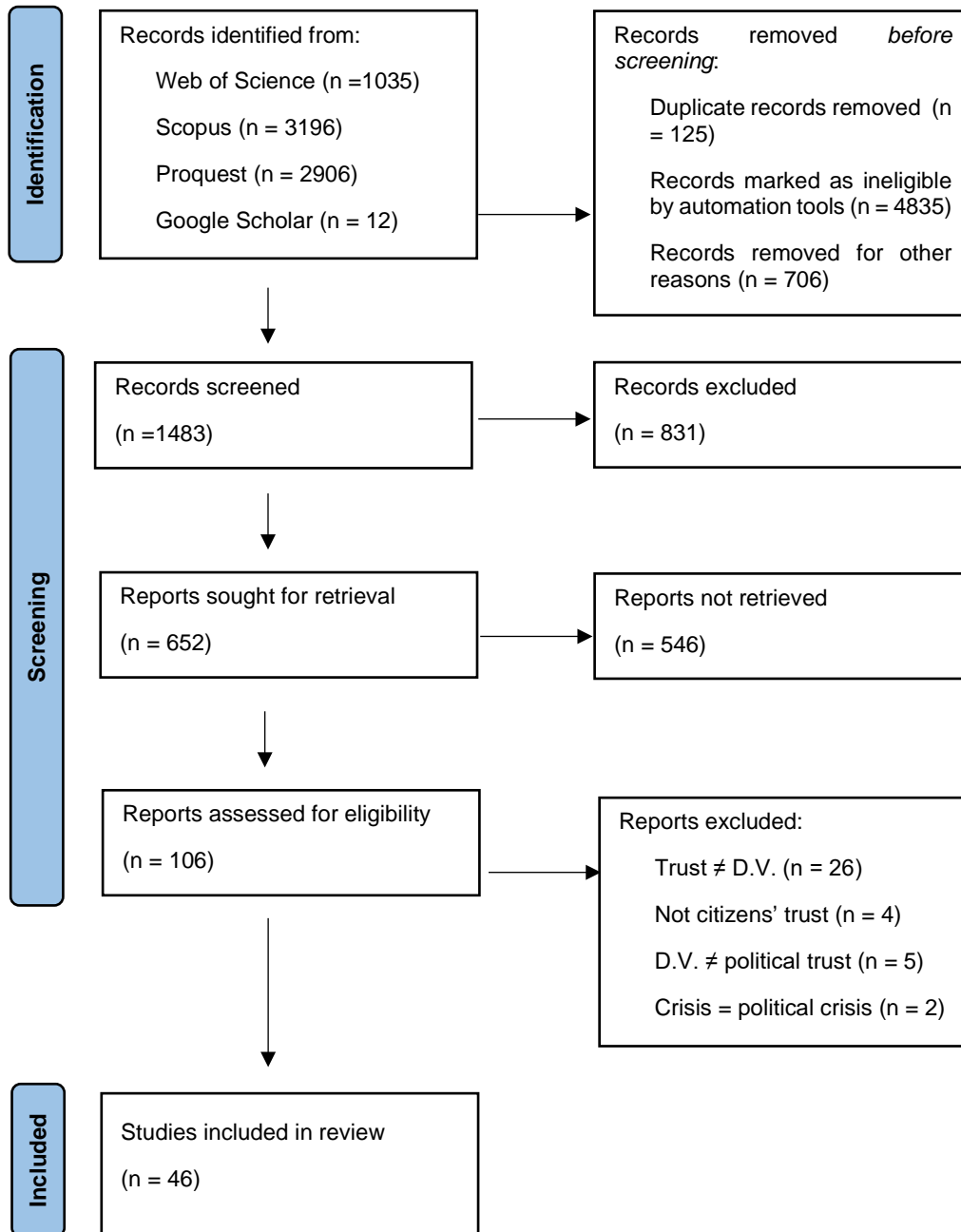
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search for publications in the fields of political science in a broad sense, also including for example public administration, and law. Indeed, our research focuses on political trust and its determinants, which are concepts related to political science and, to an increasing extent law, which looks at legal processes influencing political trust. This resulted in a total of 1483 publications.

Figure 1. The identification of literature through databases







The number of publications was narrowed down by applying the eligibility criteria ( $n = 4835$ ), by controlling for the keywords as explained in the eligibility criteria ( $n = 706$ ), and by removing duplicate records ( $n = 125$ ). This was done by (search) tools available on the websites of the databases. After this second step, we ended up with 652 publications, which were screened based on their title. For this purpose, an additional set of criteria was used. Publications need to deal with political trust, which included trust in political institutions or trust in governments, and political trust needs to be the dependent variable. Publications about, for example, interpersonal, interorganisational or social trust were excluded, as well as publications on political trust as independent variable, for example articles about the effect of political trust on willingness to vaccinate (Wynen et al. 2021). Also, the focus needed to be on citizens' trust and not on politicians' or governmental trust. Finally, publications with MLG or crisis as dependent variable were excluded, as well as articles about political crises or about the effect of crisis in general and not of the crisis mitigating measures. When the title could not rule out a publication based on these criteria with certainty, we included it to be further examined based on the abstract. We ended up with 106 publications which were screened based on their abstract.

The same criteria used to examine the publications based on their title were used to screen the abstracts, after which sixty more publications were excluded from the analysis. Publications were mainly excluded in this final stage because political trust is not used as a dependent variable ( $n = 26$ ), MLG or crisis measures were used as dependent variables ( $n = 23$ ) or the dependent variable was not trust in a political institution ( $n = 5$ ). In total, we ended up with 46 eligible publications. Twelve of the publications deal with MLG and political trust, thirty with crisis governance and political trust, while only four deal with the combination of MLG and crisis governance. All but two publications are journal articles, the other two being published book chapters. The articles were published between 2011 and 2022 in a variety of journals, but all related to political science. The set contains two papers based on a literature review, and 44 empirical papers of which 43 use a quantitative analysis of survey and panel data, and of which only one employs a qualitative analysis. The quantitative studies employ quantitative cross-sectional ( $n = 29$ ) or quantitative longitudinal analyses ( $n = 14$ ), with some of the articles being based on cross-sectional longitudinal analyses ( $n = 8$ ). Most of these quantitative papers are based on (existing) surveys or panel surveys, though two articles rely on survey experiments – split ballot and different treatments experiments.



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Furthermore, four of the papers compare the effects of crisis governance on political trust in two or three different states. Differences between states are based on a wide variety of variables, ranging from the nature of the political system in Austria and France – consensual vs. majoritarian – (Kritzinger et al. 2021), to different public health policies to mitigate the pandemic in Sweden and Denmark (Nielsen and Lindvall 2021) and opposite socio-economic performance in Haiti and Chile (Cisterna et al. 2022). Similarities are found in the timing and kinds of crisis mitigating measures (Kritzinger et al. 2021), the institutional and psychological level (Nielsen and Lindvall 2021) and the kind of crisis that affects the countries. All other papers, both on MLG and crisis measures, are either based on quantitative studies in one country (n = 18) or on quantitative studies in multiple countries such as all EU member states or a large set of countries around the world (n = 24). In the case of the latter, comparisons are sometimes made between sets of countries based on different characteristics, such as degree of press freedom (Gozgor 2022), number of COVID-19 related deaths (Rieger and Wang 2021) or debtor vs. credit countries (Armingeon and Ceka 2014). These comparisons are, however, never on the country level nor embedded in a comparative research design. Other authors treat the multiple cases as a whole in their analysis (e.g. Torcal 2014; Brosius et al. 2021).

Because it is possible that we missed some interesting articles following the strict eligibility criteria and search terms, we checked the three databases based on publication date and using broader search terms. Firstly, extending the period in which the articles were published to twenty years does not significantly alter the number of publications eligible for this study. Not even when taking into account studies on, for example, 9/11 or the Madrid 2004 terrorist attacks. Going back in time even further did not seem useful for a study focusing on the state of the art on a certain topic, but some publications will be mentioned nevertheless because of their value for more recent research. We did not, however, include them in the review. Extending the search terms to include references of ‘legitimacy’ or ‘support’, both sometimes used interchangeably with trust or trust being used as an operationalization of these concepts, does not lead to extra publications eligible for this research when applying the same criteria used for this literature review or when comparing the definitions of legitimacy and support that are used.

## 2 Political trust, the dependent variable

Before going into detail about the ways political trust is operationalized in the studied literature, it is important to know what it is or how it is defined in the literature, and why it is important or relevant for



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political scientists. One of the most cited definitions of political trust is based on Easton's (1975) work on political support. He defines political trust as the belief of members of a political system "that their own interests would be attended to even if the authorities were exposed to little supervision or scrutiny" (Easton 1975). In similar veins, OECD guidelines define trust as a "person's belief that political institutions will act consistently with their expectations of positive behaviour" (Algan 2018), and Norris (2017) defines it as the reflection of "a rational or affective belief in the benevolent motivation and performance capacity" of a political institution. Political trust is thus characterized by a specific set of objects or trustees, namely political institutions, individual political actors or political systems (van der Meer and Zmerli 2017). Furthermore, following the abovementioned definitions, political trust is relational, in the sense that it entails a subject/trustor that trusts and an object/trustee that is trusted, and situational, meaning that it is characterized by a "certain degree of uncertainty about the object's future actions" (van der Meer and Zmerli 2017; Newton 1999; van der Meer 2016). Indeed, political trust is dependent on the actions by the object or the contexts in which the trust relation exists. As Hardin (2000) puts it, A trusts B to do X.

In much of the (theoretical) literature on political trust as well as in literature reviewed in this paper, political trust is related to concepts of political support and, less often, political legitimacy. In some instances, political trust is seen as a source of political support (Thomassen et al. 2017). Easton (1975) for example treats political trust as a source of diffuse political support, which can be defined as more abstract feelings towards the nation-state and its agencies. This diffuse support is the opposite of specific support which relates to incumbent political actors responsible for decision-making. Other authors see political trust as a component or indicator of political support (Dalton 2004; Norris 2017; Thomassen et al. 2017). Diffuse support is then measured by trust in various political institutions, while specific trust is measured by trust in political authorities and actors (Thomassen et al. 2017). The latter approach is most common in the reviewed literature dealing with political support. Armingeon and Ceka (2014) and Ares et al. (2017) for example study trust in political systems and in various political institutions within these systems to make claims about diffuse support for these systems. Other authors see political trust as somewhat in the middle between specific and diffuse support and treat it as an indicator of both depending on how political trust is measured. Hartevelde et al. (2013) and Torcal (2014), for example, follow that approach as they measure trust in various political institutions ranging from incumbent leaders or representatives (= specific) to governments or political systems (= diffuse).



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Despite the close interrelation between both concepts, they are distinct, though not always treated as such in the literature (Schraff 2020; Erhardt et al. 2022). Van der Meer and Zmerli (2017) argue that the uncertainty aspect of political trust, i.e. subjects do not know or at least face some degree of uncertainty about the object's future behaviour, sets it apart from more diffuse attitudes of political support like patriotism or national pride, which are more affective (Armingeon and Ceka 2014). Political support, on the other hand, has also some kind of utilitarian or specific aspect as it also depends on performance by political institutions or actors (van der Meer and Zmerli 2017).

The same counts for the distinction between political legitimacy and political trust, which are sometimes equated in the literature as well (O'Sullivan et al. 2014). Other authors study trust as an aspect of legitimacy (Grimes 2006). Easton (1975), however, made a distinction between political trust and political legitimacy by treating them as different kinds of political support. Legitimacy refers to a normative judgment of political systems, related to norms and values, while trust implies an instrumental judgment on the regime's performance (Easton 1975; Thomassen et al. 2017). Most of the literature investigated in this review, however, studies political trust on its own, not in relation to the concepts of political support or legitimacy.

When discussing the motivations for research on political trust, much of the literature refers to its importance for the functioning of a political system. Indeed, there is a "widespread conviction that a reservoir of political trust helps preserve fundamental democratic achievements" (van der Meer and Zmerli 2017), especially in times of economic, social and political crises as it is seen as a prerequisite of a successful government response to crises (Schraff 2020). It is believed that political trust helps in maintaining stability, viability and legitimacy of the political system, and it is seen as a necessary precondition for democratic rule (e.g. Easton 1975; Norris 1999; Dalton 2004). However, scholars started investigating these assumptions only recently and research remains rather scarce (van der Meer and Zmerli 2017). Marien and Hooghe (2011), for example, argue that political trust determines citizens' law-abiding and rule-complying behaviour, while Dalton (2004) found that low political trust generates support for democratic reform. Political trust is also believed to influence voter turnout, vote choice, public participation and policy preferences (e.g. Dalton 2004; Norris 2011). Devine (2022), on the other hand, argues that the effect of political trust on the abovementioned features is only weak or moderate, and thus that the effect of political trust on such features is smaller than is often assumed in the literature. However, research on the recent COVID-19 pandemic found that political trust influenced vaccination

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intention and compliance with restriction measures (Wynen et al. 2022; Jennings et al. 2022). Indeed, citizens with higher political trust were more inclined to comply with restriction measures and to be vaccinated (Wynen et al. 2021). Political trust thus seems to play an important role in political systems, which, to be clear, Devine (2022) does not dispute.

Despite the common dependent variable in all the articles under review, political trust, authors use different terms to refer to it. We already mentioned authors who write about (diffuse) political support (n = 9) like Armingeon and Ceka (2014), Bol et al. (2021) and Schraff (2020) when studying, among others, political trust. It stands out that only four authors explicitly mention that they study political trust (e.g. Muñoz 2017; Davies et al. 2021). A total of seventeen authors, among others Dominioni et al. (2020) or Baekgaard et al. (2020), mention trust in (political) institutions as their dependent variable, while sixteen refer to trust in government (e.g. Wolak 2020; Kritzinger et al. 2021). Of course, this is only how the authors refer to political trust in their writings, and not how they operationalize it. However, it already shows that there are different aspects about political trust, and that there is no uniform way in the literature to refer to it. This makes comparison between studies difficult, as authors who claim to study the same thing, take a different approach. This becomes even more problematic when looking at the operationalisations of political trust.

The specific object of political trust, namely political actors and institutions, which distinguishes it from other kinds of trust (e.g. social trust), can be – and is – operationalised in various ways. Most articles measure trust in government (n = 32). However, this measure is not unambiguous, as Bol et al. (2021) rightfully point out. It can refer to both the institution of the government and to the incumbent government, depending on how citizens understand it. This is especially important in studies linking trust in government to notions of support, as it can be interpreted as respectively diffuse and specific support (Bol et al. 2021; see also Easton 1975; Norris 2017). The same holds for trust in parliament, which is used in twenty articles as operationalisation of trust. Trust in the legal system is studied in only five articles, despite being an important aspect of political trust. Also, the nine articles about (diffuse) political support measure different aspects of political trust as indicators of such support, ranging from trust in parliament and government to trust in political systems (n = 2). This indicates that the measurement of political support is still not straightforward and that it depends on how diffuse support is defined, which makes comparison, again, difficult. These articles do not study more specific forms of trust – trust in a less abstract object – as could be expected, but also few other studies on political trust in this review do it.

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Only five measure trust in politicians, four measure trust in political parties and only three mention trust in political leadership. Political trust thus seems to be associated with more abstract notions of political institutions than with specific political actors. Note that the total ( $n = 71$ ) is larger than the number of articles under review as some authors measure trust in more than one institution.

The question then is if different authors who study political trust by measuring trust in different political institutions are actually studying the same thing. Indeed, Schneider (2017), for example, found that political trust differs depending on the institutions that are evaluated. She found four cluster of political trust: trust in central political institutions like the national parliament, political parties or national government; trust in local and regional institutions like subnational parliament or governments; trust in protective institutions like the armed forces and police); and, finally, trust in order institutions like courts (Schneider 2017). Especially the finding that trust in subnational political institutions differs from trust in more central, national political institutions will be of interest in the following part(s). The findings of Coromina and Kustec (2020) are in line with the argument of Schneider (2017). They distinguish three clusters and argue that trust in order institutions like the police or courts is most often the highest, while trust in central institutions is generally the lowest (Coromina and Kustec 2020). These differences in trust in various institutions are thus important to consider when studying political trust and comparing publications on that topic.

Despite the differences between the various studies, there are also some similarities. We discuss two. A first similarity concerns the data that are used to measure the variables that affect political trust, but also to operationalise political trust as it often stems from the same source (e.g., survey questions). Almost all articles are based on survey data ( $n = 43$ ). Two of the other articles are literature reviews and the only qualitative study uses textual analysis of newspaper articles (Miller 2016). Furthermore, many authors use Eurobarometer ( $n = 12$ ) or European Social Survey ( $n = 5$ ) data, which are large  $n$  studies conducted on a regular basis and which contain a lot of different variables. Secondly, and to some extent related to the use of survey data, is the fact that all but one reviewed research focus on political trust, and not on related but distinct concepts like political mistrust (= the absence of trust) or political distrust (= the opposite of trust). Indeed, indicating that one does not trust a particular institution, does not necessarily mean that they distrust that institution (Cook and Gronke 2005). This distinction is often not made in surveys and thus not in the (empirical) literature (van der Meer and Zmerli 2017). However, investigating concepts like





mistrust and distrust could provide a different understanding of political trust and how it is maintained or how it evolves.

As a conclusion, the review so far indicates that there are many ways to conceptualise, as well as to use – on itself or as component of political support – and operationalise political trust. This makes it difficult to make one-on-one comparison between various studies, despite the presence of similar results and similar explanations (see further) for the absence or presence of political trust. There are for example large differences between trust in government and trust in legal systems, the latter being more resilient, and within measures of trust in government itself, i.e. whether it is treated as trust in the institution of government or as trust in the incumbent government. It is difficult to assess how citizens view these concepts and whether they differentiate between types of political institutions at all (see Hooghe 2011). Future research should try to delve into these questions. Furthermore, because there are so many different notions of and aspects to political trust, future research would benefit from an overarching framework to which research can be tied, which in the current literature on political trust and crisis governance or MLG is rather absent. Indeed, only nine studies relate it to concepts of (diffuse) political support, despite the existence of various frameworks (e.g. Norris 2017; Thomassen et al. 2017; Dalton 2004; Easton 1975). Therefore, it becomes difficult to assess what studies on political trust as an isolated concept are investigating, especially when they are not explicit about it.

### 3 Political trust in a multilevel governance structure

Moving to the independent variables, or rather contexts in which trust is formed, we first discuss the influence of MLG structures in this part, then the context of crisis and more particularly crisis measures in the next one, and we discuss some results of articles dealing with both crisis governance and MLG in the part before the conclusion.

Multilevel governance systems are characterized by interdependent and interconnected governing institutions located at different levels of authority, both vertically and horizontally. The EU is a prime example of such a system. It is a complex environment with multiple institutions (governments, parliaments, councils etc.) at multiple levels (local, regional, national supranational), and with multiple connections between the levels and the institutions. The EU is also a system in which citizens can participate in various ways, the best example being elections for various levels of government, and in which they are affected in various ways. MLG systems, like the EU, erupted mostly because of the



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disintegration of the national level, whose powers are increasingly eroded through processes of decentralisation and globalisation (Muñoz 2017). Indeed, some competences are decentralised to local and/or subnational levels (devolution), while others are integrated in supranational or international institutions (globalisation), sometimes both at the same time, which leads to a MLG structure in which various levels have different powers.

Research shows that citizens, when evaluating political institutions and expressing political trust, differentiate between different actors and institutions (Proszowska et al. 2022; Wolak 2020; Fitzgerald and Wolak 2016), though some suggest that this is not necessarily the case (e.g., Hooghe 2011). The increasing relevance of MLG systems then almost logically leads to the question whether citizens distinguish between various levels of government and if so, what explains the differentiation and which mechanisms lie behind it? That is the question that underlies much of the literature on trust in MLG systems and which is answered by two strands of research. One of them studies trust in separate levels, and the other studies trust in nested levels, which considers the interconnectedness of the multiple levels. We will shortly discuss the findings in literature on separate levels first and then turn to the findings with regards to trust in nested levels.

When looking at every level separately, it stands out that the local (and regional) levels are trusted more than any other level (Wolak 2020; Muñoz 2017; Fitzgerald and Wolak 2016). This is often explained by referring to the typically small size of lower government levels (e.g., Muñoz 2017). This would enhance responsiveness of political institutions and actors, as well as foster direct contact with representatives. Furthermore, the small size of lower levels of governance means they are more open to public participation. Additionally, the lower levels of governance have competences that influence citizens in the most direct way. In sum, the proximity of these levels plays a role. With regards to the highest levels of governance, like supranational governance, scholars argue that these are not necessarily less trusted than national governance levels. The large size of higher levels of governance is associated with more capacity and more policy output, relating trust to performance evaluations (Muñoz 2017). However, research on trust in nested governance levels shows that trust in supranational institutions is often determined by trust in national institutions (e.g., Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Dominioni et al. 2020).

Within the literature on trust in interconnected MLG systems, the main debates are about whether citizens, when making trust judgments, take the other levels into account, if that influences their trust in



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each governance level and which mechanisms then explain trust. In other words, whether they make independent or dependent judgments when expressing trust in a particular level (Muñoz 2017). Firstly, the literature that stresses independent evaluations argues that trust is level specific. Citizens judge political institutions “on their own turf”, without taking cues from other levels (Proszowska et al. 2022; Proszowska 2021). This is often explained by mechanisms of subjective rationality such as responsiveness and performance evaluations (Proszowska et al. 2022; Wolak 2020; Fitzgerald and Wolak 2016). Citizens, especially but not only those with higher political sophistication, evaluate a governance level by assessing its responsiveness, whether the political institutions react to certain events in an appropriate way, and by assessing its (economic) performance (Proszowska et al. 2021; Hartevelde et al. 2013). This means that trust in each governance level is based on citizens’ perceptions of responsiveness and performance, and not on objective indicators, hence the term ‘subjective’ rationality (Armingeon and Ceka; Proszowska et al. 2022). This subjective rationality thesis is found both in a European (Proszowska et al. 2021, 2022; Wolak 2020) and in an American (Fitzgerald and Wolak 2016) context, in three levels of government.

Other mechanisms that might explain the level-specificity of trust are identity or cognitive minimalism, i.e. not or randomly making trust judgments (Zaller 1992). Proszowska et al. (2021), when studying trust in the Netherlands in three levels of governance (local, national and supranational), show identity or cognitive minimalism have no effect. By contrast, Hartevelde et al. (2013), who based their study on survey data in 28 European countries but only on trust in the national and supranational level, argue that emotional attachment partly overrules rational arguments. Hobolt (2012) for the EU, and Talving and Vasilopoulou (2021) for the national level as well found that there is a relationship between one’s identity, EU or national, and trust in the corresponding governance level. They found, however, no evidence for the cognitive minimalism thesis. Citizens do not randomly express trust in different governance levels.

However, literature on the level-specificity of trust does not ignore the influence of cue-taking from other levels and related trust spillovers (e.g., Dominioni et al. 2020; Ares et al. 2017; Muñoz 2017). Citizens express trust in a governance level dependent on their trust judgments of (an)other level(s), which requires less knowledge about all different levels (Muñoz 2017). Indeed, because of the complexity of MLG systems, citizens take cues from other levels they are more familiar with to evaluate other, less familiar, levels (Brosius et al. 2020). This cue-taking has two possible outcomes: either trust in different levels is the same (trust spillovers), or it is different (compensation). The former is explained in the literature by three potential mechanisms. Following the logic of extrapolation, trust is the same in all



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governance levels because both governance and trust are compound (Harteveld et al. 2013). Trust in each level is the same and has as a common source, as it is the result of a general trust attitude (Harteveld et al. 2013). Another explanation for trust spillovers originates in research on lower levels of government. The logic of cognitive proximity states that trust in higher levels of government is based on trust in the closest, local level (Wolak 2020; Proszowska et al. 2022). Finally, trust spillovers can be explained by the mechanism of institutional saliency. Trust attitudes for all levels are based on trust in the most salient, i.e. the national, level (Ares et al. 2017; Armingeon and Ceka 2014).

The compensation mechanism, trust in different levels differs, is most often found in studies on the national and the supranational (i.e. the EU) levels. The underlying logic is that because governance levels are incompatible, so is trust. Following the compensation hypothesis, one level is used as a benchmark to which all other levels are assessed (Dominioni et al. 2020). For example, Muñoz et al. (2011) argue that on a country level, citizens compensate their lack of trust in the national institutions, based on the perceived performance of these institutions, by putting more trust in the EU level. They found that in countries in which citizens perceive the national level as corrupt, trust in the EU is higher than trust in the national level (Muñoz et al. 2011). Dominioni et al. (2020), who also work on the EU MLG system, add to the literature on trust spillovers and compensation that these mechanisms work in two ways. Not only is trust in higher levels dependent on trust in lower levels of government, as is often assumed in the literature, but it is also the other way around (Dominioni et al. 2020). Trust attitudes with regards to the EU might also impact trust in the national level institutions. This bidirectionality of trust spillovers is not yet studied for lower governance levels or outside of the EU system.

The review indicates that trust in a MLG system is dependent, namely that citizens take cues from more familiar levels to express trust in other levels, mostly through trust spillovers. Besides, citizens in a MLG system, especially those with more political knowledge, can and do differentiate between various levels of governance when expressing trust, indicating that trust is to some extent also level specific. Indeed, trust can be explained to a large extent by citizens' performance evaluations of a governance level. There are, however, some limitations to the generalizability of these results. First, the reviewed literature mostly stems from EU studies ( $n = 8$ ). Secondly, because of that, much of the literature limits its focus on trust in two levels of governance, most notably the national and the supranational/EU level ( $n = 8$ ), while studies on the lower levels remains scarce ( $n = 4$ ). Thirdly, the regional level is, apart from one study on the United States (Fitzgerald and Wolak 2016), completely overlooked in the literature on trust in MLG systems,

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despite the increasing relevance of such levels and of federal systems in general (Schakel et al. 2015). Finally, only few studies mention the existence of both low-high and high-low dynamics of trust spillovers (Dominioni et al. 2020; Proszowska et al. 2022; 2021). As the EU becomes more salient, this reversed directionality of trust spillovers, from higher levels to lower levels, might become more apparent and thus worth investigating in more detail.

#### 4 Trust in times of crisis: the effect of crisis mitigating measures

The reviewed literature on the effect of crisis governance on trust focuses on three types of crises: economic, health and disasters. The latter category is, however, debatable as the literature does not agree on whether disasters can be qualified as crises. We nevertheless included it because this literature also provides insights in the effect of the management of such ‘crisis’ on political trust on the short term. Political crises, which can be a consequence of other crises (health, economic...) or their management, are often discussed as well but articles about these types of crises were not included in the review as they do not consider the effect of measures to mitigate the crisis on trust, but rather the effect of the crisis itself (e.g. Karlsson et al. 2021; Close et al. 2022). In total, six papers deal with measures taken in the context of an economic crisis, in case the sovereign debt crisis in the EU after 2008. Most papers deal with – what is at its roots – a health crisis (n = 21), which should not come as a surprise given the global scope and profoundness of the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is also one paper on the initial stage of the H1N1 epidemic in the US. The final, broader category, of disasters and events, consists of three papers with a different focus. Miller (2016), the only qualitative article, studies trust in government after hurricane Katrina in the US in 2005 and after the nuclear incident in Fukushima, Japan in 2011. Cisterna et al. (2020) study trust after earthquakes in Haiti and in Chile, both in 2010. Finally, and rather unrelated to the previous disasters, Dinesen and Jaeger (2013) study trust in the aftermath of the 2004 terrorist attack on a train in Madrid. We will discuss the three types of crises and the effects of the related crisis mitigating measures separately before drawing conclusions on the effect of crisis measures on trust by comparing the three strands of research.

Six of the reviewed articles about trust in times of crisis deal with the sovereign debt crisis in the EU and the related austerity policies that were implemented by the EU from 2009 onwards (Armingeon and Ceka 2014). This strand of research focuses mostly on two levels of governance, which were deemed the most salient during the crisis, the national and the supranational EU-level, which are studied separately. In





general, this literature found that the austerity policies led to a decline in trust in all levels of government, especially in the so-called bailout countries like Ireland, Portugal and Greece that needed to implement these policies (Proszowska 2021; Armingeon and Ceka 2014).

The literature broadly discusses three explanations for the differences in trust between levels of government as an effect of austerity policies. First, citizens' performance evaluations with regards to the economy and democracy are an important mechanism behind trust formation, especially on the national level (Haugsgjerd 2017; Torcal 2014). Generally, the better the performance of the national level is perceived the more the national political institutions are trusted. Haugsgjerd (2017), for example, found that citizens who perceived welfare state efforts as sufficient, and thus that the national political institutions performed better to mitigate the crisis, trusted these institutions more. Secondly, citizens base their trust judgments on mechanisms of responsibility attribution (Armingeon and Guthmann 2014). Biten et al. (2022), who studied the effect of the austerity measures on trust in the EU, found that people who believed the EU was responsible for the implementation of such measures trusted the EU less. Finally, personal experience and to a lesser extent ideological distance to the incumbent government also play a role (Armingeon and Ceka 2014). Citizens who were personally affected (Haugsgjerd 2017) or who live in regions which were affected by crisis mitigating measures (Lipps and Schraff 2021) tend to put less trust in respectively the national and the supranational level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to many studies on the effect of health-related crisis governance on trust all over the world and in different contexts, e.g., in more and less affected countries or in countries with less or more strict measures, but always focused on the national level. Previously, such research mostly focused on the H1N1 epidemic in 2009 in the US (Freitmuth et al. 2014). In general, all authors, writing about different countries, found an increase in trust at the onset of the pandemic, which lasted for approximately three to six months depending on the study after which trust levels decreased to pre-pandemic levels (e.g. Weinberg 2022; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Davies et al. 2021; Kritzinger et al. 2021). This temporary increase is most often attributed to a rally around the flag effect (e.g., Schraff 2020; Weinberg 2022), though there is no agreement about whether this rally effect is a consequence of crisis mitigating measures like lockdowns and other social restrictions (e.g. Bol et al. 2021) or of the crisis itself (e.g. Rump and Zwiener-Collins 2021; Schraff 2020). The rally effect is, nevertheless, thought to be a valuable explanation for the increase in trust, regardless of the specific cause, and is believed to extend to political



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institutions that were not directly involved in the management of the crisis (Hegewald and Schraff 2022; Esaiasson et al. 2021).

The literature discusses three possible mechanisms underlying the rally effect, of which only one proved to have a significant effect. Authors found less impact of a patriotism mechanism, which posits that in-group loyalty and cohesion increase when the in-group is under threat, and of the opinion leadership explanation, which suggests that, in times of acute crisis, focus on the political elites in power increases through, among others, media attention while at the same time there is less opposition or critique (Erhardt et al. 2022). Instead, many of the authors argue that the rally effect is driven by an emotional response, especially by anxiety, which leads citizens to pursue psychological safety behind political institutions they believe can act against the threat (Schraff 2020; Zwiener-Collins 2021; Baekgaard et al. 2020). If that is the case, it would mean that the usual cognitive processes of political trust formation lost relevance because of the uncertainty, especially in the first wave, regarding the pandemic (Schraff 2020). Later, a common argument goes, when the pandemic was seen as less threatening, trust returned to pre-pandemic levels because citizens, the media and the opposition started to criticize the measures and the overall handling of the pandemic, while also being confronted with its persistent nature (Weinberg 2022; Davies et al. 2021; Esaiasson et al. 2021).

Other research, however, argues that performance evaluation factors and not the emotional-related factors explain the temporal increase in trust. Belchior and Teixeira (2021), studying trust in Spain after the COVID-19 outbreak, argue for example that the cognitive assessment of political institutions was not suspended after the outbreak of the pandemic. Citizens considered far-reaching crisis mitigating measures as necessary, often comparing to the situations in other countries like Italy. The measures were therefore considered as responsive behavior of governments, which led to the increase in trust (Rieger and Wang 2022; Goldfinch et al. 2021; Groeniger et al. 2021). Rieger and Wang (2022), who based their study on 57 countries, even argue that the perception of an insufficient reaction towards COVID-19 is the most important factor for low trust levels at the onset of the pandemic. Finally, ideological distance towards the incumbent government and personal experience with COVID-19, at least after some time when the rally effect faded away, also played a role in assessing a political institution's trustworthiness (Belchior and Teixeira 2021; Baekgaard 2021; Goldfinch et al. 2020). The rally effect thus generated a short period of high trust in political institutions around the world, regardless of one's personal experience, ideology,





employment status, general lower levels of trust, support for populist parties etc., but these factors did resurface after a while and trust started to decrease to pre-pandemic levels (Hegewald and Schraff 2022).

A similar rally effect is not found after (natural) disasters like earthquakes or hurricanes (Cisterna et al. 2022; Miller 2016). On the contrary, the (little) reviewed literature stresses the importance of performance evaluations of political institutions managing the crisis and their responsiveness to the crisis (Cisterna et al. 2022; Miller 2016). Citizens also distinguish between various institutions on the same governance level when expressing trust through responsibility attribution mechanisms (Cisterna et al. 2022). A final important factor influencing trust is the personal experience with the disaster (Miller 2016). A rally effect similar to the one at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was found after the 2004 terrorist attack in Madrid and after the 9/11 attacks in New York (Dinesen and Jaeger 2013). This effect was fueled by anxiety, though patriotism played a more important role than at the beginning of the pandemic (Dinesen and Jaeger 2013). The latter is probably due to the clearer difference between the in-group, i.e. the country, and the out-group, i.e. people attacking a country, while the pandemic created a less clear in-group as everybody was or could be affected by the COVID-19 disease.

To conclude, it seems that different kinds of crisis and related measures generate different effects on trust. The austerity policies following the sovereign debt crisis led to lower levels of trust in national and supranational level institutions, while the far-reaching social restriction measures at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic created a short upsurge of political trust, also in (national) political institutions that were not involved in the management of the crisis. However, there are some overlaps between the mechanisms used to explain the effect of measures on trust in political institutions. The reviewed literature indicates that performance evaluations is an important factor in explaining trust, regardless of the crisis context, and thus that citizens rely on cognitive mechanisms to assess trust. It also seems that responsibility attribution and responsiveness play a role, especially when confronted with sudden, external events. The mechanism of responsibility attribution hints at possible differences in trust between governance levels, as citizens seem able to distinguish between political institutions. Ideological distance and personal experience also have an effect, while a rally effect is only found in the context of the pandemic or terrorist attacks, and scholars still debate whether it is a strictly emotional response or whether it is also fueled by cognitive mechanisms. Limitations or gaps in this strand of research relate to the governance levels that are studied, i.e. only the national level or only the supranational level but never lower levels of government; the focus on the EU or EU countries in studies on the effects of economic

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crisis measures; and the effect of how measures came into being – through intergovernmental dialogues, following ordinary parliamentary procedures etc. – on political trust.

## 5 Discussion: political trust in the EU MLG system in times of economic crisis

Before we reach the conclusion, we discuss four papers that studied trust in a MLG system in times of crisis to illustrate the common explanations and mechanisms behind political trust in both contexts, which may inspire future research as we will demonstrate in the final, concluding part. The four studies are all based on the sovereign debt crisis in the EU. Only Proszowska (2021) included the local level in her study, besides the national and supranational levels which are studied in all articles. The articles nevertheless show the added value of a MLG view on trust in times of crisis by combining explanations and mechanisms for trust formation in order to come to a more complete understanding of political trust.

In general, political trust in the national and supranational governance levels decreased as a consequence of the austerity policies imposed by the EU (Torcal and Christmann 2019). However, based on the one article of Proszowska (2021) that measures trust in the regional/local level (the levels are taken together), it seems that trust in lower levels of government increased or stayed the same. What then explains the variations in political trust between the different levels of governance? Combining the explanations in the reviewed literature leaves us with possible mechanisms that were already discussed in the parts about the MLG context and the crisis governance separately.

First, citizens seem to be able to distinguish between different levels of government, also in times of crisis. Proszowska (2021) argues that citizens are able to assign responsibilities to various levels of government and that they evaluate trust accordingly. This means that, in the context of the EU sovereign debt crisis, citizens who attributed the responsibility for the austerity measures to the national or supranational level trusted that level of governance less. This might also (partly) explain the increasing or equal level of political trust in lower governance levels. Indeed, citizens did not assign responsibility for the measures to political institutions at these levels of government and therefore did not change their trust attitudes towards them. Secondly, and related, citizens (to some extent) based their trust judgments on their evaluations of (economic) performance of the national level (Armington and Ceka 2014) or of the supranational level (Torcal and Christmann 2019), which are often fueled by personal experience (Lipps and Schraff 2021). However, there is no consensus in the literature about this effect of performance evaluations. Talving and Vasilopoulo (2021), for example, argue that economic evaluations have a limited



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impact on trust in the EU. They argue, and there is more consensus about this, that trust in the national government is the most important determinant of trust in the supranational level and that this linkage strengthens in times of crisis so that trust in the national political institutions becomes an even better predictor for political trust in the supranational level (Talving and Vasilopoulo 2021; Armingeon and Ceka 2014; Torcal and Christmann 2019).

The spillover effect found in much of the literature on trust in the EU MLG system is thus also, and even more, important in times of crisis, especially because citizens' evaluations of the EU political institutions and their performance play a less prominent, though not insignificant, role in times of crisis (Torcal and Christmann 2019). Talving and Vasilopoulo (2021) argue that this might be the case because citizens become more aware of the interconnectedness of the different levels in times of crisis. Armingeon and Ceka (2014) reason that the severe effects of the austerity policies on the national economy make citizens rely more on the evaluation of the national economic performance to assess their trust in the supranational level. They even argue, contra Proszowska (2021), that trust in the EU is unrelated to what the EU is doing, despite its involvement in the governance of the crisis (Armingeon and Ceka 2014). Besides the congruence spillovers, Torcal and Christmann (2019) also found compensation mechanisms whereby (the performance of) the national level is used as a benchmark against which the supranational level is evaluated. This mechanism is also used to explain the increasing or equal levels of trust in lower levels of government in contrast to the declining trust in higher governance levels (Proszowska 2021).

Identity also plays a role. Citizens with a national identity, and especially those with an exclusive national identity, tend to trust the national level more and the EU level less (Talving and Vasilopoulo 2021). This is even more pronounced in relation to the austerity policies, and especially among those who attributed the responsibility for these measures to the supranational level (Talving and Vasilopoulo 2021). Finally, the ideological distance between a citizen and the incumbent government also explains trust in a certain level. Interestingly, one's ideology per se, whether one tends to the left or the right of the political spectrum, does not play a significant role in trust judgments (Armingeon and Ceka 2014). It is important to note that the effect of ideological distance seems to indicate that people tend to evaluate the specific (incumbent) government or parliament, and not the respective institutions.

So, to conclude, the accounts of the effects of crisis governance in a MLG system show that there are a lot of relations between the mechanisms used to explain trust in times of crisis and trust in MLG context.



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For example, responsibility attributions fuel trust evaluations with regards to one level, which then might spillover to or be compensated in another level. At the same time, personal experience with the austerity policies affects one's perceived performance of a given governance level, which also might affect trust in other levels. In sum, citizens' trust judgments in complex MLG and crisis contexts seem to be influenced by both subjective, rational evaluations (responsibility attribution, performance evaluation) and less rational factors (ideological distance, identity, personal experience), which inform citizen's cue-taking (congruence, compensation). The question is of course to what extent these findings can be generalized to other (types of) crises (governance) or different MLG systems.

## 6 Conclusion: gaps in the literature and avenues for further research

The literature review is based on 46 articles, found in three databases, about political trust as a dependent variable in two distinct contexts that are increasingly relevant: multilevel governance systems and crisis governance contexts. Respectively twelve and thirty articles dealt with citizens' political trust in one of these circumstances, four dealt with both. As only three databases were searched and the criteria to include literature were quite strict, it is possible that some useful articles missed the final cut. Also, the fact that only three articles deal with political trust after a disaster, which is seen as a kind of crisis, is problematic to draw definite conclusions. The fact that these disasters are seen as kind of crisis might also be problematic in itself, as they do not refer to common definitions of crises (Boin and Lodge 2016; Boin et al. 2020). We were therefore guided by the keywords used in these papers to determine if it was defined as a crisis or not. We are, however, confident that the picture of the literature that is sketched in this paper reflects to a large extent the present state of the art in both strands of literature. The fact that we did not find many articles might also suggest that this research domain is still developing and underexplored, because, as we will demonstrate, much more can be studied.

The articles share some similarities with regards to their dependent variable (political trust, never dis- or mistrust), their analyses (quantitative cross-sectional), the data that are used (panel and single survey data) as well as the research domain (political science). The articles, however, do not share the same notion of political trust and identified different mechanisms underlying political trust formation. As mentioned, different authors employ different notions and different operationalizations of political trust. Some tie it to concepts of support, disagreeing on whether it is about diffuse or specific support, or legitimacy, while others use it as an isolated concept. The authors also operationalize it differently: from





trust in parliaments to trust in governments or in the legal system. Common between these articles is that they all refer to trust in political institutions and that they all identified similar control variables that influence political trust. Indeed, all studies that included age, education and gender as control variables found that they influence trust, and that the effect is the same, both in times of crisis and/or in MLG structures. Women and older people are generally more trusting, as well as people with a higher level of education (e.g. Talving and Vasilopoulo 2021; Rump and Zwiener-Collins 2021). Political sophistication also has a positive effect in the sense that people with more knowledge about the political system tend to have more political trust (e.g. Proszowska et al. 2021a; Harteveld et al. 2013).

The main findings about trust in political institutions in MLG and crisis contexts can be summarized in four points. First, there is no evidence for cognitive minimalism. Citizens do differentiate between governance levels when assessing their trust. In other words, they do not randomly attribute trust to political institutions. Secondly, political trust depends on citizens' evaluations and not on facts. Examples of this subjective rationality are the importance of perceived performance of the economy or of democratic institutions in citizens' trust judgments, as well as of perceived responsiveness and responsibility attribution. Thirdly, there is a strong emotional or non-rational component to trust, especially in times of crisis. A fitting example is the rally effect, mostly driven by anxiety, that many authors observed at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Relatedly, identity and ideological distance to the incumbent government play a role in trust formation processes as well. The effect of personal experience on trust is debated, but often used as an explanation for varying trust levels. Finally, in MLG systems, bi-directional trust spillovers from one level to another are a common explanation for similar (congruence) or opposite (compensation) trust levels between governance levels. These are explained by the abovementioned mechanisms, and by cue-taking from lower levels of government (cognitive proximity) or from the most salient levels of government (institutional saliency). Research, however, also shows that political institutions at various levels of government are judged on their own domain, hinting at the level-specificity of political trust.

What, then, are the gaps in the literature that emerged from the literature review? We discuss four. First, studies on political trust and crisis governance neglect the subnational and supranational levels. Research however shows that, especially during the pandemic, crisis mitigating measures were taken at all levels of government, from the local to the supranational level (Lynggaard et al. 2022). We found no articles that study the effect of crisis measures taken at another governance level on political trust. Secondly,



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subnational levels are rarely included in studies on governance and trust in MLG contexts, despite the growing importance and relevance of these levels in MLG systems. Thirdly and related, studies on the impact of crisis governance on trust in MLG systems neglect the effect of crisis governance in MLG contexts with regards to crises other than the sovereign debt crisis. Finally, research on political trust in times of crisis neglects the actual policies and the policymaking process. This process of policymaking in times of crisis, i.e. how crisis mitigating measures came into being, are never taken into account despite the fact that, in severe crisis situations, the proper procedures are not always followed (Popelier 2020). This might also impact citizens' trust in certain political institutions.

These so-called gaps inform the avenues for further research. Given the increasing relevance and powers of subnational levels of government, this level deserves more attention, both in literature on political trust and crisis governance and on political trust and MLG. Secondly, and related to the discussion part, the effect of crisis governance on political trust in MLG systems deserves more attention. National or supranational level political institutions are not always the only ones taking crisis mitigating measures, but also lower levels of government can have an impact, directly or indirectly through intergovernmental discussion, as the reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic shows (Hegele and Schnabel 2021; Bursens et al. 2021). As this literature is only concerned with the sovereign debt crisis in the EU, which was a strictly economic crisis that mostly affected some bailout countries in the EU, more research is needed. Especially because crises are becoming increasingly complex, being different types of crises (health, economic, disasters, social...) at the same time. Furthermore, they need to be dealt with by more and more levels of government – local, subnational, national, supranational, international, global – as crises are increasingly transboundary (Boin et al. 2020; Boin and Lodge 2016). One only needs to think about recent (COVID-19) or ongoing (climate change, energy) crises to observe the disruptive, interconnected and complex nature of present-day crises.

Finally, research could delve into the question on if and how trust depends on how crisis mitigating measures are formed. Not only the nature of the decision-making procedures might have an effect, but also, taking the MLG context into account, the level at which a measure is taken, or if measures are taken through intergovernmental deliberations or not. The latter avenue for further research might benefit from insights from law studies, thereby moving the research domain of trust beyond political science. Whatever future research might investigate, this literature review shows that every study on political trust in MLG



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systems, in times of crisis or not would benefit from a clear conceptualization of all concepts to determine what one is studying, in which kind of crisis and at what governance levels.

The LEGITIMULT project in general, and work package 5 (WP5) of this project more specifically aim to address the gaps that are discussed in this paper by studying crisis measures taken at all governance levels, thereby focusing on a complex, global crisis, i.e. the COVID-19 pandemic. More specifically, this will be done by considering crisis governance at and trust in the subnational levels, but also by looking into the processes of (intergovernmental) decision making in times of crisis and how these different processes affect citizens' political trust. To this end, WP5 provides for a vignette experiment and a qualitative comparative analysis of a deliberate subset of European countries (e.g. federal vs. unitary countries) to study the prerequisites for political trust in various levels of governance, in different countries as well as in the EU. A guiding question in this research of WP5 will be to what extent the findings of this literature review can be transferred to research on the pandemic and to research on lower levels of government. Indeed, the explanations found in the literature, such as identity effects, responsibility attribution or performance evaluation, might inform the effect of COVID-19 mitigating measures on political trust in the lower levels of government. In sum, because political trust as an independent variable affects a set of other variables, not in the least the legitimacy of political systems, it is important to know what affects political trust as a dependent variable. The latter is the purpose of this literature review and, broader, of WP5 in the LEGITIMULT project.

## Footnotes

1. The full search string is: "trust AND (crisis OR crises) OR ((multilevel OR multi-level OR decentral\* OR subnational OR supranational OR intergovernmental OR federal\*) AND govern\*)"



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# LEGITIMULT

Legitimate Crisis Governance in Multilevel Systems

## 10/03/2023: Methodological note

### WP5: Legitimate Crisis Governance and Trust



Authors: Jakob Frateur, Peter Bursens, Susana Duarte Coroado, Patricia Popelier



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## LEGITIMULT Methodological Note WP5

WP5 focuses on the relationship between legitimate crisis governance and trust in different governance levels and aims to explain how different pandemic response measures taken at various levels of government and in different modes of interaction between levels affect citizens' trust in various government levels. Most studies take trust as independent variable and look at to what extent trust in government affects other variables such as compliance with COVID-19 related measures. WP5 takes trust in different levels of government as a dependent variable. Knowledge about which conditions affect trust will be one of the building blocks for the final stage of the project that will examine the trade-offs (between trust and other dimensions) that decision-makers face in order to implement crisis governance in a legitimate way.

The WP5 literature review, which focused on trust as a dependent variable, demonstrates that political trust is seldomly studied in contexts of crisis- and multilevel governance simultaneously. The research on this interplay is limited to studies of the governance of the economic crisis in the EU after 2008 and only focuses on trust in the national and the supranational levels. This is often also the case for separate studies on political trust in MLG systems, in which the local and regional levels are neglected or merged under the name of 'subnational governments'. Furthermore, in literature on crisis governance and political trust, only the effects of crisis-mitigating measures of the national levels are studied. As the pandemic prompted responses from various levels of government (Lynggaard et al. 2023), the COVID-19 crisis is an interesting case to study trust in various levels of government following these levels' crisis governance. The literature review also showed that there is little to no research on the effect of decision-making procedures on political trust. Here, one might expect that the more governments cooperate, the higher citizens' political trust. However, given the fact that there is not much research on this, our studies will mostly be explorative.

In order to address our research question and to address the gaps in the literature, WP5 applies a two-stage methodology, first providing for a vignette experiment and then a





qualitative comparative analysis of a deliberate subset of European countries (including different types of federal countries as well as unitary countries) to study the prerequisites for political trust in various levels of governance, in different countries as well as in the EU. This way of working enables us to study political trust at the individual level (vignette experiment) and at an aggregated country level (QCA).

## 1 Phase 1: Vignette survey (M3-M15)

Vignette studies are increasingly used in social sciences, to the point that it is almost a well-established research method (Steiner et al. 2016). The method consists of two components: 1) a vignette experiment, the core of the study, and 2) a more classic survey to test respondent-specific characteristics that generates additional and supplementary information to be used in the analysis (Atzmüller and Steiner 2010). The vignette experiment consists of “a collection of vignettes, that is, a set of systematically varied descriptions of subjects, objects or situations, in order to elicit respondents’ beliefs, attitudes or intended behavior with respect to the presented vignettes” (Steiner et al. 2016). In other words, respondents make judgments following a randomly assigned scenario/vignette which “represents a systematically varied combination of characteristics/factors” (Atzmüller and Steiner 2010).

By combining the survey experiment with a more traditional survey, and by querying a representative sample of the population, both the internal (causality) and external (generalizability) validity of the research are strengthened (Atzmüller and Steiner 2010; Aguinis and Bradley 2014). Therefore, a vignette study is suitable to understand causal relationships as well as to study interaction effects, i.e. how the treatment effects vary for different groups of respondents (Hainmüller et al. 2014). Furthermore, a vignette experiment allows to control and manipulate the conditions dependent on the goal of the study (Aguinis and Bradley 2014). By embedding the questions in a concrete and realistic context, it also allows to study intentions, attitudes and behavior of respondents in each situation or with respect to a certain object or subject, without being directly confronted with the situation, object or subject (Atzmüller and Steiner 2010). A survey experiment is thus a suitable





approach to study the conditions (= manipulable variables that possibly interact) under which citizens' political trust (= person's attitude) increases or decreases in a context of crisis (= concrete and realistic context), which is the goal of WP5 of the LEGITIMULT project.

*a. Research setting and sample characteristics*

The goal of task T5.3, more specifically, is to identify the conditions under which citizens put trust in different government levels in times of crisis, with a focus on the measures that are taken and the level at which these measures are taken, controlled for individual traits. Additionally, we study if the involvement of other levels in decisions taken by a particular level and the decision-making process in general matter for citizens' trust. In order to identify the conditions that determine citizens' trust, a vignette survey will be conducted by a specialized firm in (at least) four countries. Several firms who operate across Europe (such as Kantar, Bilendi and IPSOS) will be asked for quotes before contracting one single firm to collect the data. The goal is to obtain the data by the end of June 2023. As it now stands, the survey will be conducted in countries that differ in the nature of the MLG system, with Belgium as an example of a competitive federal system, Germany as example of a cooperative federal system, Spain as example of a regionalized system and France/the Netherlands as example of a unitary system. This will generate a representative sample based on age, gender and education of at least 2000 respondents (after checking for non-response), so at least 500 respondents per country. Depending on the costs, it could also be possible to study 4000 respondents, so 1000 respondents per country. 500 respondents, however, should be enough to measure medium effects, though 1000 respondents per country would, of course, be more convenient as it is then also possible to study smaller effects. The results of this study will provide input for the broader question of LEGITIMULT on the determinants of legitimate crisis governance.

The selection on the pandemic response measures to be included in the survey will be based on data available from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, a global panel database of pandemic policies (Hale et al. 2021). The database captures government policies







related to closure and containment, health and economic policy for more than 180 countries, plus several countries' subnational jurisdictions. The pertinence of this data for the design of the survey and the selection of cases is twofold. First, it makes possible to select the most widely adopted measure to make sure respondents relate to a certain extent to real life situations. Second, it also guarantees that those measures were indeed implemented in the countries where the survey will be conducted, so it is closer to the respondent's reality.

### *b. Research design*

Our research question for the vignette experiment concerns the variables that affect, in times of crisis, citizens' trust in various government levels to take a particular measure. We investigate how the kind of measure, the level of government and the way in which the decision is taken affect citizens' political trust in different levels taking different measures in different ways. As mentioned, this will be done by a survey experiment based on vignettes which differ from each other in these three aspects. The scenario of our vignette experiment will be based on the COVID-19 pandemic without mentioning COVID-19 explicitly. We nevertheless opted for measures based on the Oxford tracker as these could enhance the realism of the scenario. An example of such a scenario could be the following:

*A highly contagious and possibly deathly virus is rapidly spreading throughout your country. Research in other, already affected, countries shows that it affects the whole population and that it spreads through the air. Reports say that there are already deaths that can be attributed to the disease.*

Our dependent variable is political trust, which is operationalized by trust in different levels of government to take particular measures. Each vignette will be assessed by the respondents based on a scale-based question regarding their trust in the government level that is given in the vignette. For the independent variables, that change in each vignette, we use the following operationalization:

- Type of measure (2): restriction (lockdown) and economic (budget for support of businesses) measures. These were the most frequent types of measures by governments around the world. While restriction measures affected people's





fundamental rights, which might have a large impact, positive or negative, on their political trust, economic measures were more supportive and thus likely to be received mostly just positively. Our study will delve into this difference and relate this to the level of government that took the measure and the way in which it was taken. We did not select other kinds of measures like organizational measures because these are not expected to affect individual citizens but rather broader systems, like the health system in a particular country and are therefore far less or even not relevant when studying citizens' trust.

- Level of government (4): local, regional, national and supranational. While there is ample research on trust in the national and the supranational level, trust in the regional and local level is less often studied. This vignette will contribute to this. It is important to note that not every level can take evenly meaningful measures of every type. That is why, in the vignette survey, there will be no vignettes on the supranational level enforcing a lockdown or on the local level making budget available for the financial support of businesses (see table 1).
- Mode of interaction between government levels (2): after consulting or without consulting other governments. One of the hypotheses is that citizens' trust in a particular government level is also impacted by the way such a level acts when adopting measures. While there is no literature on this yet, we expect that the extent to which a government goes solo or consults with other levels matters for citizens' trust when a such a government adopts policies to fight COVID and its social-economic consequences.

|          |                      | Restrictive | Economic |
|----------|----------------------|-------------|----------|
| Local    | With consultation    | ✓           | ✗        |
|          | Without consultation | ✓           | ✗        |
| Regional | With consultation    | ✓           | ✓        |
|          | Without consultation | ✓           | ✓        |
| National | With consultation    | ✓           | ✓        |
|          | Without consultation | ✓           | ✓        |

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|               |                      |   |   |
|---------------|----------------------|---|---|
| Supranational | With consultation    | X | V |
|               | Without consultation | X | V |

Table 1. Number of vignettes. Total of **12 vignettes**: (4x2x2)-4 implausible vignettes OR 3x2x2

In total, there are 12 vignettes as for each kind of measure, one governmental level will not be considered. These vignettes will be divided across groups of respondents that each evaluate a subset of the vignettes. The exact numbers of groups and vignettes will be established when the questionnaire will be elaborated, but we aim that each vignette is assessed 200 times.

The respondents will also need to answer regular survey questions, the answers to which are used as extra layer of information with regards to the effect of the treatment. That way, we can study whether and why different groups of respondents react differently to the treatment. These variables are selected based on the findings of the literature review. More concretely, we will ask scale-based questions on respondents' social trust, political sophistication, levels of political trust, standard demographics etc. These will help us to analyze the results from the vignette experiment. Indeed, the literature showed that people with a higher degree of political sophistication tend to express more political trust in times of crisis, but also across all government levels. Social trust as well is seen as an important prerequisite for trust in crisis governance measures and for political trust in general. In order to compare the levels of political trust in different government levels, we need a pre-treatment measure of respondents' trust in each government level. Finally, age, gender and education also play an important role. Older women of higher education, which is related to political sophistication, put more trust in government. This is the case in contexts of crisis governance and in MLG systems. By controlling for these, and other variables, we can assess what the impact of our treatment variables really is and if the effects differ for people with different political sophistication, social trust, political trust etc.

## 2 Phase 2: Qualitative Comparative Analysis (M15-M21)





After we measured the effect of several variables – type of measure, level of government and mode of cooperation – on individual citizens’ trust in their governments to take certain measures in times of crisis, WP5 will study in a second stage which conditions determine political trust in MLG systems in times of crisis, and its governance, at an aggregated level through a qualitative comparative analysis (QCA). QCA is a research method designed to compare cases without neglecting the complexity of the cases themselves (Rihoux and Ragin 2008). It does this by transforming complex cases into specific combinations of conditions that are linked to a certain outcome (= dependent variable, in this case political trust) (Rihoux and Ragin 2008). The core question then is which conditions are necessary and/or sufficient to produce an outcome (Rihoux and Ragin 2008), in our case high or low political trust in MLG systems in a context of crisis governance. We will thus be able to understand which combination(s) of conditions determine higher or lower political trust. The conditions (= independent variables) under study will be selected based on the relevant literature and on the database created in WP1. Possible conditions are the presence/absence of intergovernmental cooperation, the level of government that took most of the decisions or the kind of measures taken. The QCA output will tell us what kind of measures have been taken in what kind of multilevel structures that spur specific levels of citizens’ trust in specific government levels.

As QCA is in essence a method for comparison, we will compare up to fifteen countries. The exact countries under study will be selected based on the dataset that is constructed in WP1. However, the type of multilevel governance – federal, regionalized or centralized systems – will be an important determinant for the case selection. The case selection will then further refine the conditions that will be included in the analysis. In contrast to the vignette survey, we will not collect data ourselves, but we will rely on existing public datasets like the Eurobarometer surveys, the regional (RAI) and local (LAI) autonomy indexes, the Oxford COVID-19 government response tracker (Hale et al. 2021), International IDEA’s COVID-19 global monitor and the like. As these do not contain a variable on trust in a government level to take a certain measure, the dependent variable of the vignette experiment, we will focus





on the political trust in different levels of government as dependent variable. This difference in dependent variables might be interesting for the final goal of the project with regards to legitimate crisis governance.

### 3 Ethics and data management

The survey experiment based on vignettes will need approval from the ethics committee of the University of Antwerp as it involves participation of citizens in a survey. A document to obtain this approval will be drafted before implementing the survey. We will distribute the survey only after we obtained approval of the ethics committee. The joint LEGITIMULT ethics plan will also be taken into account when drafting the survey.

With regards to the management of the data, especially the data obtained through the survey in phase 1, we will adhere to the principles laid down in the LEGITIMULT data management plan, especially the guidelines with regards to anonymization and safe deposition of the data will be considered. The data management plan of the University of Antwerp has similar guidelines as the ones formulated in the LEGITIMULT data management plan. Also, through the University, we have access to repositories where we can safely deposit the data, in addition to the repository of the project.



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