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## **'It takes two to do the trust tango.' Politicians' trust perceptions and why they matter.**

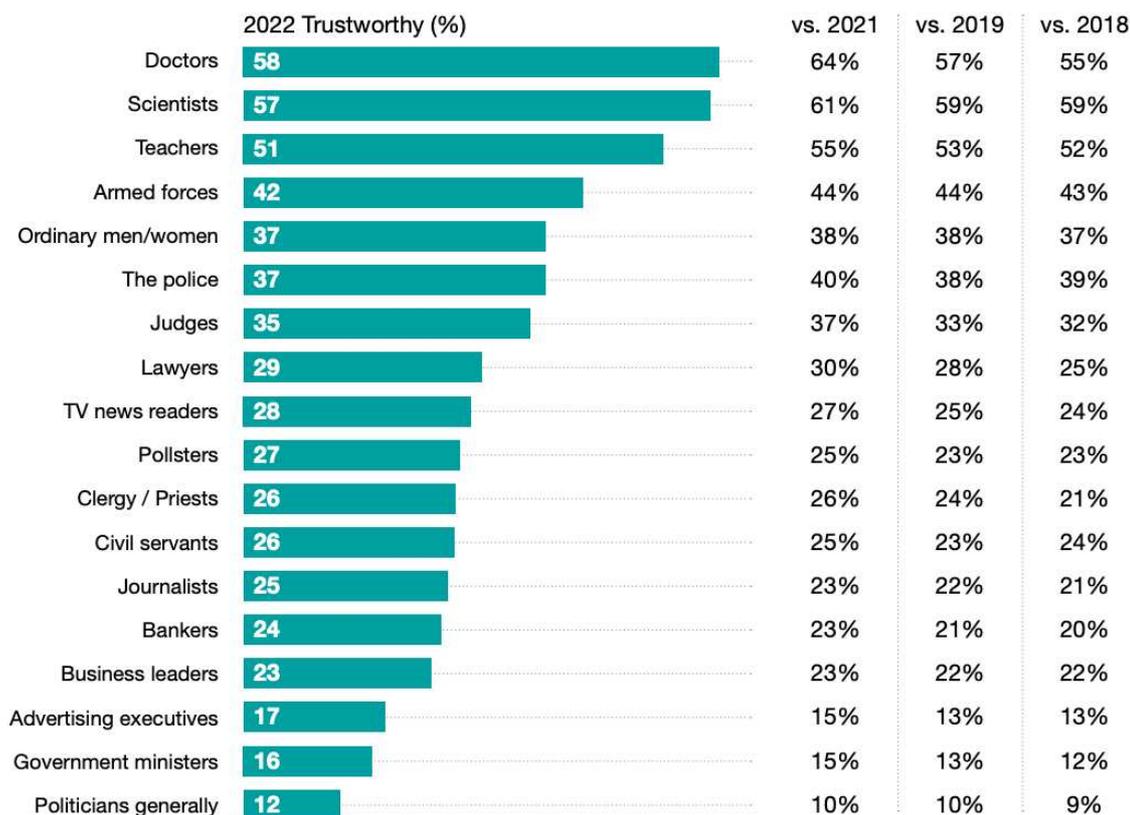
**Dr James Weinberg, University of Sheffield**

### ***Introduction***

Trust in politics has always been important, but it has taken on added significance in recent years as major political events, from Brexit to the election of Donald Trump as US president, have been characterised by low trust and increasing distrust (e.g. cynicism) and mistrust (e.g. scepticism) about politics and politicians. In 2022 the Edelman Trust Barometer went so far as declaring a 'collapse of trust in democracies'. Countries like the United States, Germany and the United Kingdom were all deemed to be existing in a state of 'default' political distrust and politicians were ranked by citizens in those countries as the least trustworthy group of societal leaders. An average of 66% of people, surveyed across 27 nations, expressed concerns that their political leaders were purposefully trying to mislead them. Other polls, such as the Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Monitor shown in Figure 1, confirm similar trends over time.

These events are set against decades of academic research that have shown the benefits of political trust. Where citizens believe in the trustworthiness of their politicians, then they are also more likely to vote for incumbent and mainstream political parties, more likely to support public policies that require sacrifice or compromise, and more likely to comply with the law. Yet despite the widespread assumption that political trust is responsive to what politicians do and say, we know very little about how politicians themselves - as the central actors in representative democracies around the world - actually appraise, cope with, and subsequently perform in a low-trust, high-distrust environment.

**Figure 1.** To trust or not to trust? Politicians fare poorly against other groups.



**Q:** Please look at this list of different types of people. In general, do you think each is trustworthy or untrustworthy in your country? **Source:** Ipsos Global Trustworthiness Monitor: Scores presented here are based on a 22-country average covering only those countries which have participated in all previous waves of the survey. The figures differ slightly from the 28-country average presented elsewhere. Note that Russia was included in previous waves but has been omitted from 2022, meaning the 2022 figures do not reflect the same sample as 2021 or previous waves.

This blind spot in existing research is not only substantively intriguing but also theoretically puzzling, not least because trust is an inherently relational concept that requires us to think about the attributes and actions of a trustor (e.g. the public) *and* a trustee (e.g. politicians). Indeed, the relational quality of trust is particularly salient in democratic politics insofar as reciprocity, accountability and cooperation are central to the representative ties that bind citizens and politicians. It would make sense, for example, to presuppose that political trust might only engender effective representational politics, and distrust might only stimulate responsiveness and change, when politicians share in common understandings of these terms and accurately perceive the trust or distrust placed in them.

So what do politicians think about trust and does it matter? Between 2019 and 2022, I attempted to tackle this research gap by conducting surveys, experiments and interviews with voters, local politicians and Members of Parliament (MPs) in the UK as well as samples of national representatives in other democracies suffering from low or declining levels of political trust such as Canada and South Africa. This project informs a new book on the topic of politicians' trust perceptions titled [\*Governing in an Age of Distrust\*](#) and I use the rest of this article to spotlight three of the most salient findings.

### ***Spotlight 1 – Politicians are reflective about trust, but not necessarily reflexive***

In both interviews and surveys, politicians showed an understanding of trust as an important social and political resource that arises when representatives prove themselves to be trustworthy. In other words, the public will place faith in politicians and make themselves vulnerable to laws, policies, or manifestos when they can also see certain trustworthy characteristics in their politicians. And like most academic studies of trust, interviewees were able to distil trustworthy characteristics into three key categories of competence (i.e. delivering policy), benevolence (i.e. putting citizens' interests first) and integrity (i.e. demonstrating moral probity). As one Canadian MP stressed:

'[O]ur whole system, our markets, our democracy, our economy, our mechanism of trade, everything is built on trust. So it's about faith, honesty, responsibility and a confidence that [politicians] will [...] behave honourably in the way that they say they're going to behave. And that you can count on them to do that. When that is no longer the case, then everything systematically starts to crumble.'

Politicians in different countries also openly acknowledged that their democracies face a crisis of trust and even highlighted politicians' behaviour, and more precisely their lack of trustworthy characteristics, as one key reason for this situation. In other words, politicians appear to be able to accurately reflect upon and narrate the story told by mass opinion polls. Talking in 2021, politicians in the UK and Canada reflected on specific scandals involving high-profile breaches of Covid-19 laws, which they believed showed a stark lack of integrity and benevolence. For example:

'I do think that breaches of coronavirus rules by politicians and their advisors, I think that did a huge amount of damage. And I think people haven't recovered from that. I think people are still very sceptical [...] and believe that it's very much one rule for [the public], one rule for [politicians].' UK MP.

Reflecting on the 'Covid years' and the premiership of his predecessor, Rishi Sunak would later express similar sentiments in his first public speech as UK Prime Minister: 'I understand too that I have work to do to restore trust after all that has happened.' By the time of his first Conservative Party Conference in autumn 2023, trust would still be polling as a 'top ten' issue for voters in the UK.

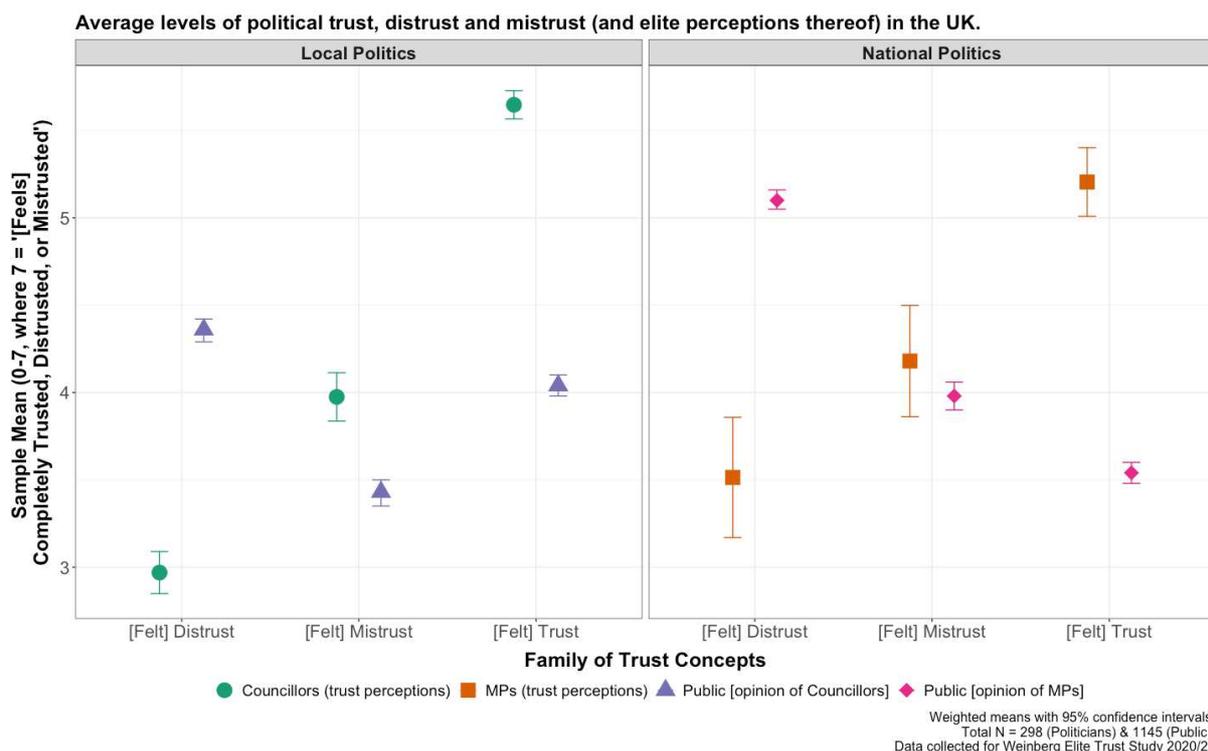
In South Africa, negative appraisals of political competence during the pandemic were deeply interconnected with more worrying concerns about political integrity and, specifically, corruption allegations.

'[P]eople really wanted to trust [the Government], they really wanted to believe in them. They gave them a chance. But almost a year later we've got no vaccines, our hospitals have failed. We're sitting at an expanded unemployment rate now of close to 50%, which is unprecedented in any democracy, or non-war time democracy. People are literally starving.' South African MP

Yet when they were asked to answer a sequence of 24 survey questions about the public's judgements on *their own* trustworthy characteristics, elected politicians in different countries *did not* make accurate appraisals of the low-trust, high-distrust civic culture seen in polling statistics. For example, more than 60% of UK respondents believed that the public sees them as competent at governing, whilst more than 70% of sampled MPs in Canada and South Africa claimed that the public sees them as honest.

This raises the possibility of a 'trust gap' in our democratic politics, which can be quantified by comparing politicians' scores for survey measures of [perceived] trust, distrust, and mistrust to answers given by the public, at the same time, to an edited version of the same survey. Despite some variation in perceptual accuracy, UK politicians' average perceptions of public trust were substantially higher than the public's actual trust and their perceptions of public distrust were substantially lower (Figure 2). UK politicians also perceived higher levels of public mistrust than is actually the case, which suggests that politicians harbour inflated notions of how much the public monitors them. These gaps existed regardless of whether politicians' perceptions were compared to voters of their own party or voters with similar socio-economic status.

**Figure 2.** Evidence of a trust gap in UK politics.



This is an important and concerning discovery. Ultimately democratic responsiveness, or ‘good’ representation, relies on the accuracy of politicians’ perceptions of what citizens want. In fact, representative democracy should sustain itself *because* rational vote-seeking politicians naturally try to ascertain public preferences and act accordingly. By a similar logic, a representative may well misperceive the policy preferences of the nation, or a specific subset of voters, but they will rarely advance a policy unless they also feel in command of enough personal cachet to act. In this respect, it is political trust (or rather accurate perceptions thereof) that should facilitate or stimulate appropriate and proportionate governance. For example, one might expect that higher levels of perceived distrust go hand in hand with higher levels of policy responsiveness as politicians seek to mitigate their professional vulnerability by doing more to tackle negative public opinion. Conversely, higher levels of perceived trust, not accurately reflected in the trust judgements of the public, may lead politicians to make unrealistic demands of citizens or neglect public opinion in the policy-making process.

**Spotlight 2: Trust perceptions as a political heuristic**

The assumptions presented above suggest that the significance of the trust gap depends on one key question: do politicians actually draw on feelings of being trusted (‘felt trust’) to make decisions in political office?

To answer this question, politicians were randomly allocated to a range of hypothetical scenarios that might occur in their professional lives and asked to make decisions about how

to behave. These scenarios ranged from ordinary votes on legislation to media appearances and even political scandals. Each scenario was also varied in terms of the level of public risk (e.g. how much a decision or event might impact the population) and personal risk (e.g. how much a decision or event might impact a politicians' career prospects) involved.

Statistical analysis of politicians' responses supported the assumption that trust perceptions act as a heuristic. Put simply, politicians draw on beliefs about how much they are trusted or distrusted to reach decisions in situations of uncertainty or risk, whilst felt mistrust appears to have no consistent effect on politicians' behaviour.

To elaborate:

1. Feelings of being trusted become relevant when politicians face risky decisions that are primarily defined by policy outcomes. Specifically, high levels of felt trust reduce risk-taking that might negatively impact the public. Felt trust thus inhibits rash decision-making by making politicians more attuned to the potential losses versus potential rewards inherent in their policy choices.
2. Feelings of being distrusted become relevant when politicians face risky decisions that are primarily defined by individual electoral outcomes. Specifically, high levels of felt distrust reduce risk-taking that might negatively impact a politicians' career prospects.
3. When facing blame or anticipating repudiation for political mistakes, feelings of being distrusted increase politicians' preferences for blame avoidance behaviours. This includes agency strategies (e.g. delegating high-risk decisions to third parties), policy strategies (e.g. supporting legislation to get on the right side of popular opinion in spite of lacking personal conviction), and presentational strategies (e.g. problem and responsibility denial when things go wrong).

Although these findings demand replication in a wider range of comparative contexts and across a greater number of political scenarios, ideally using observational behaviours rather than survey experiments, they highlight the importance of the felt trust concepts as a tool for understanding politicians' risk sensitivity and contextual choices.

### ***Spotlight 3 – The distrust stressor in political office***

Although we rarely pause to consider the personal impact of being a politician, it takes a huge toll on those who put themselves forward. As Jacinda Ardern, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, told the public earlier this year: *'I know what this job takes and I know that I no longer have enough in the tank to do it justice. It's that simple.'* Ardern's resignation speech not only spotlighted the long hours and sacrifices that politics demands; it was also suggestive of the

mental stress that accompanies the job of being a politician in an age of targeted public cynicism (i.e. distrust). Within weeks of Ardern stepping down, similar sentiments would surface in Nicola Sturgeon's resignation speech as First Minister of Scotland: 'there is a much greater intensity – dare I say it? – brutality to life as a politician than in years gone by.'

At its most banal, this 'distrust stressor' includes everyday expressions of cynicism that dominate public discourse and media sensationalism about politicians. Daily exposure to such rhetoric, especially where it was personally targeted, was mentioned by almost half of interviewees as a negative pressure on their mental health and wellbeing. Participants were unable to reconcile the time and effort that they invested in change-making as a politician with the blanket disregard of those they attempted to serve as well as their inability to alter what they saw as unjust victimisation.

*"I've never had a job in my life where people get to sling mud at me, and almost assassinate my character whenever the hell they feel like it, for no reason. Like sure, if I did something wrong, then okay, fine, I kind of brought it on. But to the best of my ability, I'm trying to be as good and do this job as well as possible. So with that, it really feels unjustified. It hurts and I think that over time really weighs you down."* Canadian MP.

At its extreme, the distrust stressor includes expressions of cynicism that manifest destructively as instances of violence, hostility and stalking. Whilst it is important to remember that not all instances of such behaviour are grounded in distrust, many *do* arise where citizens' anger, frustration, or despair at politicians' [perceived] incompetence, or their [perceived] lack of benevolence and integrity, bubble over into malign or sinister intentions. Another Canadian MP reflected:

*"It's like some people are absolutely going to despise you as an MP, and they are going to cause you a great deal of grief. And normally you can ignore it, until it crosses a certain point and they're doing things like, say, threatening your family, spray painting your building, threatening your employees. Those are the real stresses."* Canadian MP.

To test the link between perceptions of public distrust and politicians' mental health, participants were invited to complete the Personal Health Questionnaire 9 (PHQ-9), which is the most common screening instrument used to detect depression during clinical screening. Between one tenth and one fifth of each country sub-sample were suffering from moderately severe or severe depressive symptoms and further statistical analysis of politicians' survey responses showed substantial negative correlations between politicians' felt trust and their PHQ-9 scores, and substantial positive correlations with feelings of being distrusted. This

suggests that feeling trusted – whether warranted or not – might act as a psychological shield for politicians, whilst more accurate perceptions about negative public opinion may have destructive personal consequences for them whilst in office.

### ***Towards a new research agenda in political trust***

In *Governing in an Age of Distrust*, I reorient the field of political trust research in a way that gives equal consideration to public opinion *and* politicians' trust perceptions. In opening up this black box for the first time, I find merit in asking questions such as: do politicians make accurate appraisals of the trust placed in them? When does this matter for politicians' behaviour in office? How do politicians cope as the targets of a high-distrust civic culture? It is now incumbent upon colleagues working in this space to take up the task of theorizing this topic in more detail, engaging in replication studies across geographical and temporal contexts, and asking additional questions about the utility of studying politicians' trust perceptions. It is possible, for example, that issues of [felt] trust are of equal if not more importance *between* politicians who must put aside competition for vote, office, and policy success in order to facilitate goal accomplishment on behalf of the citizens they represent. At the same time, we can only hope to rebuild political trust – or rather break spirals of distrust – if we know that (a) our politicians agree on the nature of the problem and acknowledge their part in it, and (b) devise mechanisms that close the gap between actual public trust and politicians' perceptions thereof.

### ***Further reading:***

Weinberg, J. (2023). *Governing in an Age of Distrust. A Comparative Study of Politicians' Trust Perceptions and Why they Matter*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00323217231185706>.

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