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# What is political about political trust?

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**Abstract.** The resurgence of populism and the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic have consolidated an appeal to the language of trust and distrust in the political arena, but any reference to these notions has often turned into an ideological and polarized debate. As a result, the possibility of developing an appropriate picture of the conditions for trust in politics has been undermined. To navigate the different demands for trust raised in the political arena, a notion of political trust must cover two partially unfulfilled tasks. One is to clarify what trust means when referring specifically to the political context. The other is to connect political trust to other notions that populate the debate on trustworthiness in the political arena—those of rational, moral, epistemic, and procedural trust. I will show how the political categories I use to define the scope of a political notion of trust function as normative leverages to develop politics-compatible versions of rational, moral, procedural, and epistemic trust.

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**Keywords.** political trust, conflict, legitimacy, moral trust, political realism

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## 1. Introduction

The language of trust and distrust has permeated political discourses in recent times, especially with regard to events such as the resurgence of populist movements or the need to react cohesively to the pandemic of Covid-19. In 2018, the *Washington Post* headlined “After his gusher of lies, can anyone trust Trump?” (Rubin 2018). Apparently somebody can, as “a quarter of the country won’t get the coronavirus vaccine. Half of them trust Trump’s medical advice” (Bump 2021). Recently, the same newspaper related trust to rationality, when asking: “The new CNN is more opinionated and emotional. Can it still be ‘the most trusted name in news?’” (Barr 2021). Many have also linked trust to expertise, while others have raised doubts about the appropriateness of such a link: “‘Trust the science’ is the mantra of the Covid crisis—but what about human fallibility?” (Simons 2021) headlined *The Guardian*. Last but not least, the language of distrust has been used by populists to underestimate the opinions of the elite—see, for example, Williams Davies’ (2018) report in *The Guardian* on “Why we stopped trusting elites.”

These examples illustrate how politicians, voters, and the media have appealed to the most diverse notions of trust—moral, epistemic, and so on—to describe political events or justify their political stances. While one would

think that raising moral and epistemic concerns enriches the political debate beyond considerations of pure *Realpolitik*, it frequently created confusion and favored polarized ideological narratives. In fact, the opinion of experts has often been either sanctified as the only source for taking valid political decisions or vilified as a voice protecting the interests of the elite. Similarly, the possession of moral qualities has been either praised in its purest form as an indispensable trait of any politician worthy of the name, or ridiculed as a quirk of naïve political figures.

The ideological and polarized character of the debate has often undermined the possibility to put into focus the political problems we have been facing. However, questions such as to what extent, according to which standards, and for the sake of which objectives can politics be legitimately called to intervene with—or even supervene over—the stances put forward in other spheres, are fundamental to determine whether there are appropriate grounds for citizens to trust politicians and institutions, or whether trust is grounded on some distortive narrative.

To bring some clarity and offer a conceptual key to navigate the different demands for trust raised in the political arena, a notion of *political* trust seems to be required, one that indicates what trustworthiness amounts to when regarding political relationships in particular, as distinct from other types of relationships: among friends, between students and teachers, patients and physicians, and so on.

While scholars have so far addressed various aspects of the relationship between political trust and some other

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aspects of politics, such as political participation, voting behavior, compliance, and so on (Gabriel 2017; Bélanger 2017; Hooghe 2018; van Deth 2017), or inquired into what specific type of trust democracies need (Warren 1999, 2017, 2018; Cohen, 1999; van der Meer 2017), little has been said regarding what is political about political trust and how political and other notions of trust can relate.

Accordingly, the notion of political trust I will argue for covers two tasks. One is to connect a more general meaning of trust with its political scope of application; that is, to clarify what trust means when referring specifically to the political context. The other is to connect such political notions of trust to other notions that can enrich the debate on trustworthiness in the political arena—specifically, the notions of *rational*, *moral*, *epistemic*, and *procedural* trust.

To develop such a notion, I will proceed as follows. In section 2, I will present some candidate cases of trust, which I will select by matching the main categories we find in the philosophical literature with some episodes taken from real politics.<sup>2</sup> In section 3, I will define the scope of the application of the notion of political trust and highlight its political traits. In section 4, I will return to the candidate cases of trust presented in section 2—rational, moral, procedural, epistemic—in light of the notion of political trust developed in section 3, showing how they are to be reinterpreted when informing us about political phenomena. The last section concludes the argument.

## 2. Candidate scenarios of political trust

### 2.1 The object of trust

Before delving into the distinction between different objects of trust, a few methodological premises are in order. Scholars have provided several definitions of trust, which can roughly be divided into two groups: those who depict trust as a *belief* and those who depict trust as an *attitude*. In this article, I focus on the first type of definition. An example is Russell Hardin's conception of trust as a "three-part relation: A trusts B to do X" (Hardin 1992: 506)<sup>3</sup>. I employ this definition to capture trust-giving as a choice regarding a specific task, which may or may not occur depending on the specific person involved. In fact, this definition captures those cases in which A *decides* to trust B, as opposed to those cases in which A happens to trust B because of habit, or from a generalized trustful attitude<sup>4</sup>, or from an uncritical internalization

of a belief that is spread in A's surroundings<sup>5</sup>. Importantly, the choice to trust someone can also be made on affectual grounds, without affecting the legitimacy of the trust relation.

In addition, trust can be granted to political agents as well as to institutions. In the first case, where trust is granted to a political agent, there is a set of predicaments that we can typically ascribe to political agents, such as personal characteristics, intentions, actions, and beliefs. In the case of trust given to institutions, the types of ascribable predicaments are instead functions, structural characteristics, and purposes. Depending on the object of trust, the set of realizable political outcomes can change. For example, we can trust a political agent to win the presidential election, but we trust institutions to restrict the room for the arbitrary power of agents, or to channel their political actions within acceptable patterns.

While such distinctions between objects of trust have analytical value, the scope of influence of these two objects of trust is not so easily distinguishable in everyday politics. Political agents and institutions interact in various ways: institutions restrict politicians' options, but the latter can also conceive of their political mission in terms of promoting institutional change and renewal. In addition, institutions are made of agents and are not only a set of rules and procedures. Finally, we tend to appeal to similar families of considerations to ground our trust in politicians and institutions, although there are some exceptions. In this article, I will analyze cases that involve agents as trustees as well as cases in which institutions are granted trust. With these premises in place, we can now move to the grounds for trust.

### 2.2 The grounds for trust

A first case is what I call *rational trust*, the rationality of which lies in some facts that the one who trusts knows about the trusted and their circumstances of action, leading the one who trusts to think that the trustee will act according to their expectations. Russell Hardin's account falls into this case: "You trust someone if you have adequate reason to believe it will be in that person's interest to be trustworthy in the relevant way at the relevant time," where the "adequate reason for such an expectation will typically turn on past experience to a large extent and on likely future incentives" (Hardin 1992: 505).<sup>6</sup>

Rational trust may map political cases such as a citizen

2 Of course, these scholars should not be taken as supporting the political outcomes I will focus on, and neither should their accounts be regarded as necessarily leading to those outcomes.

3 Other examples of tripartite notions can be found in Cook & Santana (2018) and Newton, Stolle & Zmerli (2018).

4 See, for example, the account proposed by Eric Uslaner, for whom trust "does not depend upon experience and is not about any particular person or any particular thing" (Uslaner 2018: 7); rather, it is a kind of attitude and has a "moralistic" character grounded in "the belief that 'most people can be trusted'" (Uslaner 2018: 6; 2002: 21).

5 Such a restriction to the scope of investigation is not motivated by the conviction that trust in political circumstances is given solely as a result of a choice. However, I assume that the normativity assessing political choices is qualitatively different from the normativity assessing political scenarios that result from other factors, such as habit, attitudes, uncritical stances and so on, and as both types of normativity cannot be addressed in the space of this article, I leave the latter for further investigation and focus on the former.

6 See also Hardin (1991). A similar idea is included in Schmitz (2002), where the notion of deserving is linked to the past behavior of the agent.

supporting a candidate for a second mandate because in the first mandate the candidate realized many of her electoral programmatic points. The citizen subsequently expects her to do the same again and therefore grants her with trust (and a vote). Rational trust can also map cases where trust has been granted, for example, to emerging politicians, or new political parties which have a strong incentive to successfully represent their voters to consolidate or increase their political support<sup>7</sup>.

A second case is one of *moral trust*, where trust is granted due to the possession on the part of the trusted of some moral qualities, typically some form of goodwill or moral competence (Jones 1996)<sup>8</sup>. Of course, the type and the intensity of the goodwill and moral competence required changes depending on the situation, the evaluation of which provides a correct picture of the domain of optimism one can reasonably have: “For example, the optimism we have about the goodwill and competence of strangers does not extend very far” (Jones 1996: 7). Conversely, “when we trust a friend, the competence we expect them to display is a kind of *moral* competence. We expect a friend to understand loyalty, kindness, and generosity, and what they call for in various situations” (Jones 1996: 7).

Moral trust may cover cases such as that of populist politicians who demand the people’s trust because of their moral qualities (as opposed to those of the elite): populists have insisted on their commitment to fulfill the people’s requirements (goodwill), on their sincerity and, more broadly, on their moral standing (moral competence)<sup>9</sup>. Moral trust can also map cases in which politicians justify their political action in terms of the trust they place in citizens. Populists again offer an example when they claim that the people, and only the people, possess the moral standing necessary for conducting political affairs (Canovan 1999: 2004). Moral trust may also map cases of trust in institutions, although what triggers trust in this case is some kind of moral competence rather than a notion of goodwill. For example, we might grant trust to a political party because it embodies the moral principles we believe in, or trust an institution that works for increasing social equality within a certain political context.

A third type of trust—*procedural* trust—is based on the confidence that the existence and well-functioning of some procedures will guarantee the protection of human rights and the maintenance of the democratic character of the political order because these procedures guarantee that policy-making is justified in terms of an achieved consensus among the parts.

Procedural trust more typically applies to institutions. For example, populists often appeal to direct democracy as the only trustable institutional setting, because its proce-

dures uniquely allow people to have their voices heard (Stanley 2008). In contrast, liberals grant trust to the institutions of representative democracy due to their unique ability to achieve consensus through the fulfillment of some democratic procedures. For instance, Michael Mackenzie and Mark Warren argue that deliberative mini-publics fulfill two “trust-based roles”, that is, they “serve as *trusted information proxies* to guide citizens’ political judgements in situations characterized by limited information” and “as *anticipatory publics* to guide policy-makers in rapidly developing policy areas” (Mackenzie & Warren 2012: 96). One could also appeal to procedural trust to show the trustworthiness of a politician who strictly complies with the rules and procedures established in her political and social environment.

Finally, there is a fourth type of trust—*epistemic* trust—which is usually granted because of some recognized expertise or scientific competence the one who is trusted possesses on the topic on which trust is demanded. Epistemic trust often combines with some form of moral trust, which involves the availability of the expert not only to accurately analyze the matter at hand from a scientific point of view, but also the willingness to provide a truthful and transparent report of the matter to non-experts. An example of this is Paul Faulkner’s testimonial account, in which “A trusts S to  $\varphi$ ” amounts to “A’s believing S or accepting S’s testimony to  $\varphi$ ” (Faulkner 2020: 332). Similarly, other scholars have linked the notion of trust to truthfulness, sincerity, and accuracy, or to contrasting deception, lying, and manipulation (O’Neil 2012, Williams 2002, Baier 1986).

Epistemic trust can map political scenarios in which experts, as well as institutions<sup>10</sup>, are called to suggest which decision to take regarding a given problem at the political level and are often considered the guarantors of the trustworthiness of such decisions. The political reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic has provided us with plenty of examples in this sense: experts were asked about when and where to wear masks; when to open and close schools, public offices, and public events; whether to implement mandatory vaccination for some categories and so on.

It seems that the political realm contains plenty of cases of trust and distrust, and these cases can be summarily traced back to some of the conceptions developed in political and moral philosophy, as well as in epistemology. Yet does the possibility of figuring out these political examples show that the cases of rational, moral, procedural, and epistemic trust are *ipso facto* cases of political trust? To respond to this question, we need first to define the scope of the notion of political trust and the extent to which it has a political character, and then verify how those cases fall into that casuistry.

### 3. The political scope of the notion of trust

To the extent that the notion of political trust we are looking for is a normative notion, understanding the terms of its

7 This case has similarities with the account offered by Pettit (1995), who argues that the trusted will have an incentive in keeping her good reputation and therefore act trustworthily.

8 For other accounts of trust that ground the notion on morality see also Baier (2009), Lenard (2012) and O’Neill (2020).

9 See, for example, Müller (2017), Canovan (2004) and Rosanvallon (2008).

10 For example, consider the role of the European Medicines Agency (<https://www.ema.europa.eu/en>) during the pandemic for taking political decisions.

political character requires us to clarify the terms of its political normativity. To do so, I borrow some methodological commitments developed in the literature on the nature of political normativity, and I use them as assumptions for developing my proposal. These assumptions draw the boundaries of the political scope of the notion of trust, and by doing so inform the very notion of political trust.

### 3.1 Conflict and political trust

The first assumption regards the conflictual character of the political realm. Scholars have emphasized that conflict and disagreement are ineliminable elements of politics, and that they pervade a wide range of topics and spheres. As individuals and groups, we have different interests, preferences, and worldviews; we are guided by a large variety of conflicting emotions in our decisions and actions and we disagree about values and principles, including moral ones (Philp 2007, Newey 2001, Hampshire 2000). Some scholars claim that we cannot find moral resolutions to the conflictual character of politics precisely because moral principles are not excluded from the scope of disagreement, (Sleat 2021, Hall & Sleat 2017, Sleat 2016b).

This has two important implications. The first is the rejection of the idea that the “content (the ends to which it should be directed) and/or limits (which political actions are permissible)” of politics “are given by a set of pre-political moral values and principles, e.g., rights, autonomy, freedom, etc., that are taken to have antecedent authority over it” (Sleat 2016a: 34). This does not mean rejecting the role of morality in politics, but rather requires that the principles of political normativity accommodate moral reflections with the distinctive traits of the political realm. The second implication is the rejection of the idea that “the function of politics is to resolve conflict” (Sleat 2016a: 34), so that any theory that overlooks the conflictual dimension of politics, or claims to resolve it, is *ipso facto* not a theory of politics.

The conflictual character of politics informs the notion of political trust in two ways. The first is that political trust is not the same as moral trust, which is to say that the principles grounding and defining moral trust cannot be straightforwardly employed to define trust in political circumstances. Rather, those principles must be accommodated to respond appropriately to the circumstances and challenges characterizing the political sphere—what this entails will be addressed more specifically in section 4.

The second is that trust cannot be conceived of as indicating a condition of absence or resolution of conflict, as conflict is an ineliminable element of politics<sup>11</sup>. More specifically, conceiving of political trust as ‘A trusts B to  $\varphi$  because A and B have no conflict of interests or of perspectives’ might be politically inappropriate, especially if the scope of  $\varphi$  and the freedom of action granted to B by her political position become wider and the complexity of the political circum-

stances in place when trust is demanded increases. Take the example of a politician (B) campaigning for her election as governor of a state. In this circumstance,  $\varphi$  can vary from the implementation of a specific redistributive policy to the promise of ‘making America great again.’ While there can already be disagreement on how to implement redistributive measures—to whom to allocate resources, at which conditions, according to which principles, and so on—the disagreement gets wider and deeper when we are asked to define exactly what it means to ‘make a state great again.’ It is then easy to see how a demand of trust on the basis of a nonconflictual shared view of politics is at best unpolitical because it overlooks the fact that even among constituents that are like-minded there can be disagreement on more specific principles, policies, and views. In contrast, a relationship of political trust must take place despite the (at least potential) conflict between the parties involved in the relationship.

### 3.2 Legitimate coercion and political trust

A second assumption is that politics is the sphere in which power is searched for and exercised, by resorting to the legitimate use of coercion as the last rationale to obtain obedience (Weber 2004: 33). The search for power and the use of coercion are ineliminable elements of politics, even when the task of politics concerns the realization of some moral goals (Weber 2004: 84-90). This entails that any political normativity that aims at eradicating from politics the exercise of power and coercion is inadequate to deal with politics as it actually is (Bellamy 2010).

This assumption regarding politics informs the notion of political trust by throwing suspicion on conceptions that see trust as the virtuous substitute for the use of coercion: when the citizens trust their politicians, the latter can finally get rid of coercion and focus on administrating the public good effectively, rather than on searching for political power. According to this view, political trust is the confidence that the will of A coincides with the will of B. This is a variant of the notion ‘A trusts B to  $\varphi$  because A and B have no conflict of interests or of perspectives,’ but what counts here are the implications of such an account, as it suggests that due to a lack of a discrepancy between the wills of A and B, it is expected that A will obey B, and B will not need to exercise coercion or be preoccupied with the maintenance of her political power.

This conception of trust is controversial in several respects. First, it assumes that trust is a virtuous form of political relationship, while the use of coercion and the search for power are reprehensible activities or even signs of an act of raw domination on the part of the political authority. This is problematic for two reasons. One is that it precludes the possibility to make more sophisticated assessments of the trustworthiness of politicians based on an analysis of the motivations for which they search for power. As Weber recalls, political power is necessary to realize even the most noble cause, and searching for it is therefore a morally neutral activity. What makes a difference between a good and a bad politician is whether she searches for power for

11 I nonetheless believe that trust produces virtuous forms of conflict that flow into a deeper and more respectful understanding of diversity. But showing this would go far beyond the aim and scope of this article.

the sake of power itself or for realizing a cause (Weber 2004: 78). Therefore, a trustworthy politician will be one who can give us confidence that she will search for power in order to realize a cause, and a cause that we generally agree on. Moreover, this conception overlooks the fact that coercion is a necessary means in politics for practical purposes, namely, to achieve sufficient compliance and establish a stable political order even in cases in which most of the citizens trust their politicians and tend to comply with the rules in place.

Second, obedience because of trust, and obedience because of coercion, capture two distinct political phenomena<sup>12</sup>. In fact, trusting someone does not coincide with agreeing with this person. I can trust my governors and the democratic institutions in general and be persuaded that most of the time they are demanding my obedience to realize causes that I value, but can nonetheless disagree with some of the policies they implement or views they endorse. Such disagreement might push me to non-compliance with those policies and regulations, or encourage me towards protests and forms of civil disobedience, but it still does not undermine my trust in the institutions in place, and in the politicians occupying the offices. In this case, the extent of my trust in institutions and governors is independent of my willingness to obey. For example, my protesting against a policy *p* can be motivated not just by my disagreement with *p*, but also by the expectation (procedural and moral trust in institutions) that my perspective will be listened to, and that my objection will be taken into consideration for possible policy adjustment.

Another example, similar to the previous one, shows that obedience because of trust, and obedience because of coercion, capture two distinct political phenomena. In fact, we comply every day with rules and policies that help maintain the political order, and we do so independently of whether these policies were promulgated by the politicians or the institutions we trust. Most of the time, we obey rules without even wondering about their origin; sometimes we comply with rules even when we distrust the politicians and the institutions that promulgated and supported them. This shows that while there can be cases in which trust has a beneficial effect on obedience and therefore makes it possible to employ lower levels of coercion, the latter cannot be replaced by trust to guarantee compliance.

### 3.3 Political contexts and political trust

A third assumption is that politics is a complex sphere, which can be interpreted with the tools of political philosophy but is not reducible to philosophical arguments. Therefore, political normativity must accommodate the analysis of the historical, cultural, and political contexts in which it is supposedly applied (Jubb 2016, Floyd 2011, Williams 2005). Similarly, the definitions of rational, moral, procedural, and epistemic trust provided in section 2 suggest that trustworthiness can

12 This does not preclude the possibility that when trust towards governors is spread, there is little need to resort to coercion to obtain compliance. Weber suggests a similar correlation when linking obedience to the belief in legitimacy (Weber 1978).

be measured against some objective criteria, even though they may be informed by a rational, moral, or procedural conception of trust. However, when someone trusts someone else, she is doing something more complex and multifaced than just applying her preferred theoretical conception of trust. For example, I might know little or nothing about a person's past behavior or present incentives, but nonetheless decide to trust her. Alternatively, I might reasonably know that two politicians are both trustworthy according to my favorite conception of trust, but I must still choose one at the next elections. To make this choice I will probably take my favorite conception of trust and plug in my worldviews, preferences, interests, and some knowledge of the political, social, economic, and cultural circumstances in which I find myself, as well as elaborating more specific criteria to guide my judgement. Put radically, selecting a criterion for trust is less of a philosophical decision than a matter of worldviews, sets of preferences, and external circumstances. Besides, even among people holding the same broad conception of trust there might be enormous differences in the way in which they interpret its more specific requirements.

Furthermore, a notion of political trust must make room for two elements. The first is an appraisal of the diversity of contexts within which the notion is employed, including resources at disposal, capabilities of the political actors, interests and preferences of the agents, and so on (Philp 2010). One way to do so is to distinguish the *concept of trust* and *conceptions of trust*, where the different conceptions of trust are shaped accordingly to the characteristics of a given political context while responding to the framework provided by the concept of trust<sup>13</sup>. The second is a sense of the emotionality that may accompany or even drive the agents' decisions to trust others or political institutions. For example, J. David Lewis and Andrew Weigert define trust as the "functional alternative to rational prediction for the reduction of complexity" (Lewis & Weigert 1985: 969) and draw a map to show how, by changing the levels of rationality and emotionality involved, different types of trust take shape (Lewis & Weigert 1985: 973). Accordingly, the notion of political trust must not exclude cases in which an individual decides to trust a political agent or an institution on emotional grounds.

### 3.4 The aim of politics: good and bad cases of trust

A final assumption is that while political normativity should

13 Elsewhere, I make a similar move when conceptualizing political progress: conceptions of progress vindicate the variability of normative standards for progress according to the variability of the political contexts under assessment (Cozzaglio & Favara 2022). Forst uses the distinction between concept and conceptions of trust not only to underline the contextual aspects of the notion of trust, but also to allow for interdisciplinarity in interpreting the notion itself. In addition, the distinction allows a vindication of the normative dependence of the concept of trust on other normative concepts: the concept of trust is "normatively neutral" (Forst 2022: 4) while conceptions of trust "mark the point for a normative specification" (Forst 2022: 5).

be sensitive to political facts and avoid grand theories that overlook the variations among political contexts, a normative theory of politics must nonetheless be able to show the difference between a political relationship and a relationship of raw domination, because “might does not imply right” and “power itself does not justify” (Williams 2005: 5). On this difference Bernard Williams hinges the rise of a demand for legitimacy as a demand for an “acceptable” solution to the “first political question in Hobbesian terms” as the question of “securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation” (Williams 2005: 3). Importantly, this solution is not once and for all but is rather a matter of constant negotiation (Williams 2005: 3) and will always be unsatisfactory for some among those subjected to the political authority—Williams argues that legitimacy is a ‘scalar’ notion (Williams 2005: 10).

How does this assumption about politics inform the notion of political trust? First, it indicates that trust should always be accompanied by distrust if we are to avoid illusions<sup>14</sup>: “A balance of trust and distrust, of hope and fear, of benevolence and misanthropy has underwritten this disorderly political nonsystem, and its liberal outcome. It has even preserved a degree of judicial impartiality” (Shklar 1984: 221). Shklar goes as far as praising the political role of misanthropes in creating institutions that protect the weakest among the citizens (Shklar 1984: 218).

Second, it shows that not all cases of trust are good cases of trust, and this is true both for decisions to trust based on emotions and for those grounded in beliefs. In fact, people might come to trust the political authority as a result of manipulative or deceiving attitudes. Accordingly, a notion of trust, while being sensitive to the most diverse stances permeating the political context, must include some normative standards that allow us to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable cases of trust—similarly to what Williams argues regarding acceptable and unacceptable solutions to the first political question. According to Williams, the parallel is cogent precisely because an unacceptable solution represents a situation in which the subject is not in a ‘political’ relationship with the authority, but rather in a relationship of domination. Similarly, I treat a case of unacceptable trust like a case of unpolitical trust, in the sense of ‘political’ used by Williams.

#### 4. The (other) faces of political trust: rational, moral, procedural, and epistemic

Now that the political scope of the notion of trust and some of its traits have been brought into focus, we can return to the scenarios mentioned in section 3 and see why and how they must take on a political character when used to capture political phenomena. Although each of these cases would deserve separate analysis, my task here is only to offer

14 This leaves open the question of whether trust and distrust are two sides of the same coin. While I suspect that distrust has its own logic, delving into this would lead me too far from the aim of this article.

some preliminary considerations that might inform a more thorough investigation. For each type of trust, I will show which of the political categories I introduced in section 3 function as normative leverages to develop politics-compatible versions of rational, moral, procedural, and epistemic trust.

##### 4.1 From rational to political trust

We saw that rational trust is grounded either on past behavior or the future incentives affecting the reliability of the trusted. For example, we said that cases of this type occur when citizens support politicians for a second mandate. Imagine a voter who supports a second mandate for an incumbent President of the United States: during her first mandate, the president realized many of the objectives contained in her electoral program, and the voter expects her to do the same during her second mandate. However, the re-elected president soon finds herself in a minority position within the Congress and turns to be a lame duck, thereby being less able than expected by her trustful voter to realize most of her political program. Does this example show that rational trust has no place in politics? It does not. What it does show, however, is that the rationality implied in the decision to grant trust must be of a political kind; that is, it must consider the political context under assessment (e.g., that a portion of the senators are elected later than the president, and that the mandate of the Senate is longer than the that of the House of Representatives); the characteristics of the political sphere (e.g., that it involves collective rather than individual decision-making and agency); the importance of holding power for realizing a cause, and the incalculability of the circumstances, variations, and outcomes of other agents’ actions.

To consider these factors when deciding whether to grant someone with trust is not simply a matter of including additional aspects into the decision, or of having a more informed picture of the situation. Rather, it means to reason politically; to include considerations pertaining to the conflictual character of politics (e.g., the disagreement among members of the Congress, and the existence of a conflict of power); and to realize that the specific features of the context can dramatically change the way in which the notion of rational trust should be interpreted in the specific case at stake (e.g., the peculiarity of the electoral system and the specificity of worldviews and preferences held by citizens and politicians at that particular point in time). Most importantly, considering these aspects entails a recalibration of the centrality given to other characteristics of the agent, such as her goodwill, intentions, and personal qualities, as well as putting into question whether a reliable link can be drawn between past and present circumstances; between the incentives of reaching a certain outcome and the feasibility to do so.

##### 4.2 From moral to political trust

Moral trust is grounded on the goodwill, or, more broadly, the moral competence, of the trustee. I previously discussed



the case of trust granted by a citizen to a politician based on the latter's moral qualities, as in the case of the narratives delivered by many populist movements. There are two political objections to these examples of trust.

The first develops from the assumption that we might consider some moral qualities to be more important in the political sphere than in the private one, and vice versa. For example, we might get very irritated by the paternalism of a friend but accept a certain dose of paternalism from the state if it is to protect human rights and preserve the economic, social, and political stability of the political order. Or we might agree that the standards for morally just parents are not the same as for morally just politicians: being morally just parents involves (among other things) loving your children equally, while being a morally just politician does not require any sentiment of affection. This ultimately requires that we adapt our moral considerations to the characteristics of the political context qua political, as a sphere in which circumstances, relationships, and even the emotions involved are not the same as the ones that characterize our private sphere. Thus, the first objection warns us that private morality is not straightforwardly applicable to the political sphere; in other words, private morality does not coincide with political morality.

This does not preclude the notion of moral trust to acquire a political character, but is a warning that a notion of moral trust cannot be straightforwardly applied to capture a political phenomenon. For instance, if moral trust is grounded on moral qualities that pertain to private morality, the notion cannot be used to grant political trust. Conversely, political morality can include a notion of moral trust that captures cases of political reliability, as long as it is centered on moral qualities that are commensurable to the very facts of politics so that political morality does not require actions or stances that are in contrast with what politics is in the first place.

This brings us to the second objection, namely, that possessing moral qualities does not necessarily help to overcome conflict and disagreement on what possessing those qualities implies when reacting to a given political issue. Consequently, while trust has a beneficial impact on compliance, there are cases in which the use of coercion proves necessary to achieve political goods, or more broadly, to maintain the political order. Addressing these issues amounts to including political considerations that concern the conflictual character of politics and the pervasiveness of disagreement, which extends beyond interests and preferences and also affects moral views and principles; in addition, it requires us to refrain from prejudicial moralistic attitudes that condemn any use of coercion as a morally reprehensible activity.

If this is sensible, then the notion of moral trust should be relocated to assess the use politicians make of coercion rather than their personal moral qualities. On this, Weber not only clarifies that a good politician is one who searches for power in service of a cause, but also one who fulfils the requirements of the ethic of responsibility, which requires politicians to calculate and take responsibility for the conse-

quences of the use of coercion (Weber 2004). Relatedly, we could conclude that a trustworthy politician is one who is aware of the political circumstances in which she is called to act and is willing to take the responsibility for the use of coercion that inevitably accompanies her political activity. Yet, interestingly, a trustworthy politician is not necessarily one who is devoid of moral aspirations, even if we develop the notion of trust in the footsteps of Weber's account. Weber concludes the *Lecture* by arguing that the politician who has a "genuine vocation" for politics is one who can combine the ethic of responsibility with the ethic of conviction (Weber 2004: 91-92). Accordingly, a political version of moral trust would additionally prescribe that a politician is trustworthy when she is able to realize some morally valuable objectives which are compatible with the circumstances of politics.

### 4.3 From procedural to political trust

Procedural trust is grounded on the confidence that the effective implementation of some procedures will guarantee the achievement of consensus over controversial issues, thereby preserving minorities' rights as well as the democratic quality and the stability of the political order. This is, for example, the idea behind institutions such as deliberative mini-publics; something which agonistic theorists have recently objected to by arguing that "harmonious solutions to disagreements are out of reach" (Westphal 2019: 189) and that we should aim at conflict regulation rather than conflict resolution. Thus, Manon Westphal suggests opting for *agonistic* mini-publics. These employ "conflict-oriented modes of selection" to recruit participants, conceive of dialogues as negotiations rather than as consensus-building moments, implement "procedural rules that prohibit attempts to convince the other side," and guarantee the possibility of equal contribution from each participant, thus serving the purpose of "politicizing agenda-setters" rather than of influencing policymakers on specific decisions (Westphal 2019: 201, 203).

Westphal argues that agonistic mini-publics implement procedures which bring about several advantages. First, they help to understand what it entails to hold conflictual positions, and they do it better than deliberative mini-publics in which non-partisan participants are recruited by random selection: "*because of their openness, non-partisans are likely to neglect what a taming of antagonistic conflicts requires, namely an acknowledgement of the gap between the positions as unbridgeable*" (Westphal 2019: 200). Second, agonistic mini-publics are supposed to modify the relationship between the parties involved because they are required to "change how they perceive each other's views and demands" (Westphal 2019: 201). Finally, they guarantee equal participation to all the parties and the "partial accommodation of their views" (Westphal 2019: 201).

The comparison between deliberative and agonistic mini-publics stimulates a reflection on the kind of institutions we should place our trust in as well as the kind of relationships between citizens we want to encourage through procedures of various kinds. On the one hand, we should be

suspicious towards procedures that claim trust in exchange for the promise to resolve conflicts among the parties. On the other hand, we should praise rather than condemn conflict as a means—in its institutionalized forms—to take the fact of pluralism seriously<sup>15</sup>. Thus, nonconflictual relationships are not necessarily the ones in which we should place trust. On the contrary, we should trust procedures that do not hide conflict but rather transform it into a source for a more thoroughly pluralistic political setting.

#### 4.4 From epistemic to political trust

Finally, epistemic trust is grounded on the recognized expertise of the trusted, be it a person or an institution. Politicians have often appealed to the experts' opinion to make or justify political decisions—the response to the pandemic of COVID-19 is just one of the most recent examples of this strategy: to mention one example, the decision to close shops, restaurants, and schools, and to implement restrictive measures on the freedom of circulation was taken on the basis of what a pool of experts—including epidemiologists, economists, physicians, psychologists and so on—recommended. Yet, what we learned from this experience is that decisions of this kind are not linearly derived from scientific knowledge. On the one hand, taking political decisions on how to react to the pandemic threat required technical knowledge of different kinds to understand the specific characteristics of the context in which those decisions were supposed to be taken.

On the other hand, it was clear that the scope and the grounds of a political decision went beyond what expertise in each single field could offer. This is mainly for three reasons. The first is that science is not devoid of conflict either: after all, in the past years we have witnessed respectable experts deeply disagreeing with each other on fundamental aspects concerning SARS-CoV-2. Note that this is not just due to the newness of the phenomenon we faced, but rather that scientific disagreement has its roots in the nature and structure of scientific knowledge itself<sup>16</sup>, so that “the community of experts cannot settle the disputes” (Christiano 2012: 45) between some truth sensitive theories and, consequently, a determinate political solution to a policy-making controversy cannot be straightforwardly derived.

The second reason is that a political decision includes more diversified variables than the ones considered by experts expressing their view on a scientific dispute. In fact, politicians are called on to make decisions in situations of conflict between different kinds of expertise— economic, medical, moral, etc. This requires paying attention to the context in which political decisions are taken: scarcity of resources, conflicting interests, reasons and emotions

driving individuals' actions—for example, how emotions such as fear and desperation affected individual and collective decisions during the pandemic.

The third reason is that politicians are called on to take decisions that express the values and views held by the citizens. This is because the aim of politics is to establish political relationships that are distinct from relationships of domination; that is, to establish a political order that is intelligible to those subject to it, that mirrors their value system, and that the subjects recognize as such without being manipulated in their belief. Christiano spells this out in terms of a division of labor, in which the citizens “choose the basic aims the society is to pursue”, while politicians must “elaborate an adequately wide array of different packages of basic aims” and “negotiate” them (Christiano 2012: 33).

This does not suggest that epistemic trust is unfounded in political circumstances, but rather that it should be granted within the limits of the competence experts have according to the division of labor that characterizes democratic political systems. Christiano argues that “the rationale for this division of labour is that expertise is not as fundamental to the choice of the aims as it is to the development of legislation and policy” (Christiano 2012: 34). This means that the political scope of epistemic trust must be aware that “specialized knowledge” that “imposes constraints on what means to the achievement of ends are selected and on how the consequences of the achievement of ends are assessed” (Christiano 2012: 42), without expecting such knowledge to inform us straightforwardly on the choices that pertain to the citizens on the one hand, and to the politicians on the other.

## 5. Conclusion

I have defended the claim that there is something genuinely political entailed in the notion of political trust, which is irreducible to, although not extraneous from, other forms of trust such as rational, moral, procedural, and epistemic. A notion of trust is political when it is shaped in response to four characteristics of politics: that conflict is pervasive and ineliminable; that the use of legitimate coercion is inevitable; that different political contexts can give rise to different demands, and that a political relationship is different from a relationship of raw domination. Accordingly, political trust should be granted when conflict is not hidden but rather channeled in a way that results into a more thorough defense of pluralism; when the use of coercive means is justified in terms of realizing a political cause that mirrors the value system in place in a given political context; when the notion of trust is compatible with the demands raised in different political contexts, and when the trusted agent or institution is in a political relationship with the truster, rather than in a relationship of domination.

In addition, I have proposed a first preliminary investigation of how the notions of rational, moral, procedural, and epistemic trust should be informed by the notion of political trust. Rational trust can inform political trustworthiness if

15 A starting point of reflection in this sense can be found in Andrew Sabl's account of democracy as a “forum for the play of antagonistic demands” (Sabl 2017: 374).

16 See, for example, the debate on peer disagreement in Enoch (2011) and Elga (2007) for the debate on peer disagreement, and the article by Christensen (2009) for navigating the broader debate on the epistemology of disagreement.

the prediction of future behaviors considers the persistence of conflict and the complexity of political contexts. A politically adequate notion of moral trust should assess the use of coercion in relation to a proposed objective, rather than the personal characteristic of the politician. Epistemic trust should reveal whether political decisions are also (but not only) taken on the grounds of scientific expertise, but we should resist the idea that expertise can replace politics. Finally, procedural trust should be placed in those institutions that improve citizens' representation by exploiting the benefits of political disagreement to enhance more pluralistic political settings.

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