Why Trust as Trust Can. A vignette study on the determinants of citizens’ trust in the European Commission

Running Head

Why Trust as Trust Can.

Abstract

This paper analyses the determinants of citizens’ trust in the European Commission. We first identify four predictors of citizens’ trust in political institutions; namely political participation, value congruence, accountability and performance outcomes. We then test our propositions with a quasi-experimental research design. This procedure allows us to scrutinize the factors which influence attitudinal political trust for the European Commission and its behavioral consequences. Our analysis shows that value congruence exerts the strongest influence on all our trust measures while the more output-related antecedents such as the European Commission’s perceived performance and accountability exert a much weaker influence than previous political science research on trust would suggest. Political participation finally does not impact on attitudinal political trust but exerts a significant influence on citizens’ trust behavior.

Key Words

Political trust | Value congruence | Political Participation | European Commission | Factorial survey
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Introduction

According to several indicators citizens’ trust in governmental institutions in the US and in Europe is faltering (for instance see Edelman Trust Barometer, 2017; Eurobarometer 85, 2016; Christensen & Lægreid, 2005). The European Union (EU) is no exception: Since the beginning of the European sovereign debt crisis in 2009, all European institutions have been suffering from a strong and continuous decline of citizens’ trust, with the European Commission being worst affected. Very recently, the decline of citizens’ trust in the EU culminated in the “Brexit”, which many commentators perceived as ‘Incarnate Trust Defeat’. Further, the official handing over of UK’s letter of EU-resignation took place within the realm of EU’s celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome, the hitherto manifest of the EU being a trusting and value-based community of states.

Low political trust is problematic for a number of reasons. First, low levels of political trust undermine a system’s legitimacy and acceptance (Hetherington, 1998) and as a consequence undermine citizens’ willingness to make material or ideological sacrifices (Chanley, 2002; Hetherington & Husser, 2012, p. 312). Furthermore, it has been argued that decreasing trust in European institutions threatens effective governance as well as an efficient functioning of the community per se (Hix, 2013; Levi, 1998; Tyler, 2001), strengthens anti-European movements (Rudolph & Popp, 2009) and might even lower compliance with EU regulations (Fard & Rostamy, 2007; Scholz & Lubell, 1998; Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Degoe, 1996). Hence, the question of what determines political trust in European institutions is of utmost topicality.

In this paper we focus on the question of what makes citizens trust the European Commission (EC). First, the EC is at the center of the EU’s political system; it is generally considered to be the most visible supranational body representing Europe and the ‘European idea’ (Hartlapp, Metz, & Rauh, 2014; Hix, Noury, & Roland, 2007; Kassim et al., 2013). In line with this, neofunctionalists and supranationalists see the European Commission as a core driver of integration (Stone Sweet & Sandholtz, 1997). Second, due to its monopoly of legislative initiative, it is a powerful actor in EU legislative decision making with considerable influence on EU policy outcomes (Hörl, Warntjen, &
Past research has scrupulously documented the degree of political trust in EU’s institutions (for instance Boomgaarden, Schuck, Elenbaas, & de Vreese, 2011; Hudson, 2006). Furthermore, various authors have extensively discussed and lamented the consequences of declining trust (e.g. Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Nye Jr, 1997). However, our knowledge on the predictors of political trust in EU institutions still remains limited (for exceptions see Delhey, 2007; Fischer & Hahn, 2008; Hix, 2013; Hudson, 2006). One reason for neglecting this important part of the puzzle might be due to methodology. Most empirical research on trust in the EU relies on survey data as provided most prominently by the Eurobarometer. While such data perfectly allows for macro-level and cross-country comparisons over time, it is less suited for micro-level analyses for two reasons. Firstly, trust is mostly measured by single-item indicators and hence psychometric properties are difficult to establish. Bruter (2003, p. 1154), for instance, has argued that Eurobarometer data may show that two individuals ‘feel European’ - this feeling, however, can derive from various sources. Hence, as a measure it is very noisy. The same argument applies for trust judgments. Secondly, Eurobarometer studies oftentimes suffer from a bias of simultaneity (cf. Tiemann, Treib, & Wimmel, 2011). Thirdly, due to the non-randomized nature of observational survey data, there are clear limits to causal inference. In this study we therefore conduct a factorial survey in order to analyze the cues of citizens’ trust in the European Commission. While the experimental nature of factorial surveys allows us to test for causality, the survey nature of this research design is suitable for using measurement instruments with valid psychometric properties. Moreover, it paves the way for linking micro- and macro level analysis, because we are able to control for individual-level differences.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, we review the concept of political trust and differentiate political trust from related concepts such as generalized trust, political confidence, political legitimacy and public support. We then introduce our distinct causal model of political trust which builds on insights from both organizational as well as political science. Based on a multidisciplinary literature review, we incorporate four trust antecedents into our model. We propose that political trust is
determined by political participation, perceptions of value congruence, performance outcomes, and the attributability of performance outcomes. We test our hypotheses by means of a clustered OLS regression for perceived institutional trustworthiness and clustered logit modeling for behavioral consequences of trust. We use our own factorial survey data gathered from a sample of German citizens. While we find that while most of our hypothesized determinants do matter for political trust, value congruence – by far exerts the strongest influence.

**Political Trust: A Concept Specification**

Although the topic of trust has been discussed in political science for more than four decades, we still lack a common understanding of the concept (see Beccerra & Gupta, 1999; Newton & Zmerli, 2011). In empirical research trust has been variously conceptualized as compliance (Scholz, 1994), confidence (Miller & Listhaug, 1990), satisfaction (Hetherington, 1998; Owen & Dennis, 2001), political support (Easton, 1967), institutional trustworthiness (Braithwaite & Levi, 1998), faith (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005) and/or political legitimacy (Scharpf, 2009; Thompson, 2005). However, it remains unclear whether these concepts should be considered as synonyms, antecedents or consequences of trust. In our view, trust has to be distinguished from faith and confidence as the concept of trust incorporates a perception of risk, whereas individuals who believe or are confident feel secure and do not perceive risks (Levi, 1998, p. 79). Additionally, in the more narrow confines of trust research, compliance, satisfaction, support as well as cooperation are seen as outcomes of trust (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995).

In order to define and analyze trust as a unique concept, we will follow Gary Goertz (2006) and distinguish three levels: (1) The basic level, (2) the secondary level and (3) the indicator level (we will discuss the indicator level in the measurement section of this paper). From a basic level perspective *trust* is relational in nature, i.e. it is a psychological state of willingness to be vulnerable based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another party (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). In line with Levi and Stoker (2000), we argue that trust
occurs if the trustor accepts the possibility of being disappointed by the trustee. Hence, trust is relational as A trusts B in the domain X (Hardin, 2004) and it is risky in the sense as trust is always resting on incomplete knowledge (Hardin, 2001, p. 11). Finally, this willingness to be vulnerable is tightly linked to positive beliefs about the other party: “the initial grant of trust depends on one persons’ evaluation that another will be trustworthy” (Levi, 1998, p. 78). In political trust the referent of individual trust expectations are institutional actors; i.e. we are interested in trust in political institutions, in our case the European Commission (see also Kotzian, 2011; McLaren, 2007).

On a secondary level political trust comprises two dimensions: citizens’ beliefs about trustworthiness and the behavioral consequence of trust, the actual risky investment. The literature distinguishes two types of a trustor’s beliefs about the trustee: goodwill trust and competence trust. Together these two form the overall trust judgment (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009; Lu, 2014; Mayer et al., 1995). Goodwill-based trust hinges on expectations regarding well-meaning intentions attributed to the trustee. It is dependent on expectations that the referent shows both, genuine care and concern for the well-being of stakeholders (here citizens) as well as an adherence to commonly accepted moral principles and values of the stakeholders/citizens. Competence-based trust is related to expectations of performance and ability (see also Das & Teng, 2001). It entails assessments of competencies and characteristics that enable the trustee to reliably meet its goals and responsibilities (Dekker, 2004; Sako, 1992). In a similar vein, Kotzian (2011, p. 33) argues from a political science standpoint and distinguishes different types of institutional trust which mirror the aforementioned categories. Firstly, institutional performance expectations, which we label competence trust, make people feel trust towards an institution just because it ‘does a good job, whatever it takes’ (p. 29). Secondly, there is a moral component of trust based on institutional honesty and rectitude, which we label value congruence (goodwill trust), because it is reasoned in terms of the ideological proximity of the trustor and the trustee (see also C. J. Anderson & LoTempio, 2002). Lastly, cultural values promote trust because there are certain values inherent in institutional behavior, which are
deeply rooted in society and promoted through social institutions such as family (*goodwill-based trust*) (ibid.).

The second facet of our secondary level trust conceptualization involves its behavioral component: the *risky investment*. Such an investment is seen as a trust token which enables trust relationships to develop. However, a *risky investment* is only understood to be ‘trust in action’, if it entails rather high costs or as Deutsch (1960) explicitly argues ‘if the trustee has more to lose than to gain’. The rationale is that if potential losses are higher than gains the expected behaviour of the trustee - positive trust beliefs - will drive the decision to trust/to invest.

**What determines trust?**

There are numerous studies looking at the determinants of trust (or more precisely trust-related constructs) in political institutions. Yet, as we have already outlined, the literature is highly fragmented due to its heterogeneous theoretical conceptualizations. In addition, the trust referent also differs strongly as political trust is studied in relation to government, administration, political parties and political leaders. Finally many studies rely on single- or few-case analyses, thus cannot be analyzed by means of a quantitative meta-analysis (see also Welch, Hinnant, & Moon, 2005). Hence, we have conducted a multidisciplinary qualitative review of the literature on citizens’ political trust. The in-depth analysis of our qualitative review shows, that five variables have been analyzed recurrently in the literature and seem to be of high importance for political trust. Trust was found to be positively influenced by the perceived performance of the incumbent government (e.g. Miller & Listhaug, 1990; Nye, Zelikow, & King, 1997), the possibility of political participation (e.g. Espinal, Hartlyn, & Kelly, 2006; Hetherington, 2005) as well as through openness and responsiveness, for instance through E-Government structures (Parent, Vandebeek, & Gemino, 2005; Welch et al., 2005). In addition, trust was shown to be negatively affected by the emergence of corruption (Wroe, Allen, & Birch, 2013) and poor performance (i.e. poor macroeconomic situation or widespread dissatisfaction with policy-outcomes, Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008).
These five factors can be clustered broadly into two topics: Firstly, citizens’ involvement and, secondly, performance expectations (note that these topics structurally mirror Scharpf’s (1970) well-known notions of input- and output legitimacy). (1) Citizens’ involvement is strengthened by E-Government structures and political participation as both directly or indirectly facilitate public involvement, ameliorate the quality of governmental information management and as a consequence should heighten a government’s perceived proximity to the electorate. In addition, and in concord with theoretical models of political trust determinants (e.g. Kehoe & Ponting, 2003), citizens’ involvement also strengthens value congruence as participation and intensive communication facilitates value approximation processes. (2) All other factors are related to citizens’ evaluations of a government’s performance. If citizens evaluate a government’s performance (either political or economic) as positive, they develop trust and vice versa. Of course, citizens have to know about what the government’s actions and responsibilities. Therefore, accountability or attributability of results is an important condition for trust.

To summarize, we thus expect that citizen’s trust in government is directly shaped by two ‘input factors’, namely (I) political participation and (II) value congruence, and two ‘output factors’ namely (III) performance outcome and (IV) attributability of performance.

**Political Participation.** We argue that political participation promotes political trust through two main avenues: it increases citizens’ control over government and signals citizens’ partnership in the governance process.

First, political participation provides citizens with some degree of control. Hence, by being able to vote on practical issues or to elect representatives, more "trusted" individuals are selected into institutions and untrustworthy behavior can be sanctioned. This control function should strengthen trust in institutions to decide in the citizens' interest even in those issues which are not under direct citizen control (see Bauer & Fatke, 2014; Freitag & Ackermann, 2015; Schneider, Teske, Marschall, Mintrom, & Roch, 1997; Slovic, 1993). Second, political participation leads to identification as it...
signals the institution valuing citizens’ opinions by means of public involvement and possibilities of voice (Tyler, 1990) The link between participation, identification and political trust is addressed by Doteuchi (2002) who finds that direct political participation in municipal governments enables people to feel a stronger connection to their town’s civil society. Additionally, Bøggild (2015, see also Allen & Birch, 2015) argues from a procedural fairness perspective, stating that an electorate highly values the ‘rules of the game’, when it comes to the people’s decision to trust politicians. Finally, Cheema (2005) shows that ‘the possibility of being heard’ is key to trust in public institutions (see also Persson, Esaiasson, & Gilljam, 2013). Based on these arguments we suggest:

**H1:** Political participation is positively related to citizens’ trust in the European Commission.

**Value Congruence.** Trust is also driven by ideological concerns. More precisely, perceived congruence of citizens’ and government values should reflect positively on trust. This positive effect of value congruence has been extensively discussed in organization science research (Edwards & Cable, 2009; Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998; Jones & George, 1998; Siegrist, Cvetkovich, & Roth, 2000; Williams, 2001), but recently gained some momentum in political science too (M. R. Anderson, 2010; Esaiasson, 2010; Nelson & Garst, 2005). In this respect, people tend to appreciate those policies and candidates, wherein they perceive the greatest match of values (Katz & Hass, 1988; Kinder, 1998; Nelson & Garst, 2005, p. 490). Shared core values act as a clear token for a more community-based relationship rather than an exchange-oriented one (see also Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Accordingly, shared values enable citizens to differentiate between ‘us and them’, whereas ‘us’ refers to that entity, which shares the same core values and agrees on what should be considered ‘right and wrong’. Shared values thus create a ‘community-feeling’ (Kehoe & Ponting, 2003; Sitkin & Roth, 1993) where those which are seen to belong to the same community are expected to behave more trustworthy and to deserve more trust than those who are not. A lack of value congruence, on the other hand, is expected to create faultlines and distrust (Bouckaert, Van de Walle, Maddens, & Kampen, 2002; Jones & George, 1998) Thus, we suggest:
H2: *Value congruence between the European Commission and the citizens is positively related to citizens’ trust in the European Commission.*

**Performance outcome.** Any government that performs well is likely to garner more public trust as performance signals competence and in addition it also signals goodwill in the sense that the citizens’ wellbeing is furthered by a well-performing government. As such citizens’ trust (and distrust) can also been seen as a rational response to governmental outcomes (Chanley, 2002; March, 1989; North, 1990). A government that produces wanted outcomes will be seen as more trustworthy. This relationship between performance and trust has been demonstrated recurrently, particularly when it comes to economic indicators: people evaluate performance according to their own financial status and their perception of the state of the economy as a whole (Espinal et al., 2006; Fiorina, 1978). The more successful the government performs to meet people’s needs – e.g. economic growth rate or the sufficient provision of public goods (for instance Alesina & Perotti, 1995; Van de Walle & Bouckaert, 2003), the higher their trust (Citrin & Green, 1986; Hetherington, 1998). Other studies show that political performance - more broadly and in the sense of ‘being effective’ in task accomplishment (e.g. combatting corruption, Lu, 2014; Mishler & Rose, 2001) or legislation (e.g. safeguarding domestic security, Chanley, 2002) - also has a positive effect on political trust. Thus we propose:

H3: *Performance of the European Commission is positively related to citizens’ trust in the European Commission.*

**Attributability of performance outcomes.** Attributability of outcomes means that citizens perceive their Government as unambiguously accountable for a certain result. A clear communication of ‘who is responsible for what’ enables citizens to evaluate outcomes and to distinguish those aspects, which are under control by the government from those that are not. This transparency ena-
bles citizens to update their expectations quickly and thereby promotes trust (Hupe & Edwards, 2012; Lu, 2014; Tomkins, 2001; Velez, Sanchez, & Alvarez-Dardet, 2008). In addition, attributability of outcomes also reduces citizens’ perceived risk in making themselves vulnerable towards a regulatory body as it creates a sense of ‘being in control’ over decision-making processes and hence, the way how to influence decisions becomes more transparent too. We consider this mechanism to be particularly important in the context of multi-level EU governance, where it often remains unclear which level holds responsibility for which outcome - especially considering the common practice of so-called ‘blame games’, where national governments claim policy success for themselves while shifting the responsibility for disagreeable policies to the European level (Bouckaert et al., 2002). Thus, we postulate:

**H4:** Attributability of performance outcomes is positively related to citizens’ trust in the European Commission.

**Research Design**

**Motivation for vignette study.** We test our hypotheses with a quasi-experimental (factorial) survey design, also known as ‘vignette study’. In a nutshell, vignette studies operationalize covariates as hypothetical, but very realistic short stories on whose basis respondents are asked to make a respective judgement. Due to the randomized composition of each short story, we are able to assess causality of trust drivers, while external validity is assured via the survey-style nature of our data collection procedure.

Vignette studies are primarily used to study human decision making in complex situations, i.e. to analyze how individual make informed choices given a set of predefined decision properties and alternatives (Carroll & Green, 1995; Hainmueller, Hangartner, & Yamamoto, 2015). In political science vignette studies still are used rather rarely, but for example Tomz and Weeks (2013) or Green and Gerber (2003) have called for a greater application of vignette studies for at least three
reasons: First, vignette studies follow an experimental logic. As in a randomized controlled trial the independent variables, i.e. the decision properties, are varied randomly and respondents are randomly matched with these different decision situations. Hence the possible threats of endogeneity, spurious correlation or omitted variables present in survey studies and many other research designs can be mitigated (Tomz & Weeks, 2013).

Second, vignette studies mimic complex decision situations as much more decision parameters are included than in laboratory experiments (Byers & Zeller, 1995, p. 334). In contrast to laboratory experiments, vignette studies thus allow for a more naturalistic setting, as more independent variables can be actively pitched against each other to identify their salience in an almost-field context (Gerber & Green, 2008; Sauer, Auspur& Hinz, Liebig, & Schupp, 2009). This fact offers great benefit to study value systems and socio-political judgements, such as political trust (Beck & Opp, 2001; Bøggild, 2015).

Third, vignette studies allow for a multi-level design, which mimics real decision situation in an externally valid way. The structural, situational and norm-related parameters of the decision context can be modeled in the vignette (the small decision scenarios used) while individual differences and their influence on decision making can be measured in the survey part of the study and hence can be analyzed as an additional influence on choices (Tiemann et al., 2011). In addition, measuring individual differences in the survey allows researchers to use reliable and valid scales, which can be analyzed with factor analyses and reliability tests.

In a nutshell, this method allows us give sound answers to our posed research questions: (1) whether and which trust antecedents identified in the literature matter (cf. Auspur& Hinz, 2015). Finally vignette studies allow for a more naturalistic setting than laboratory experiments, as more independent variables can be actively pitched against each other to identify their salience in an almost-field context (Gerber & Green, 2008; Sauer et al., 2009).

**Design of vignette study.** The aim of vignette studies is to measure covariates by means of hypothetical, but very realistic ‘short stories’, so-called ‘vignettes’, which verbalize the combination of
all covariates under scrutiny. These scenarios are designed, so that they mimic the conditions of real-world decision-making (Taylor, 2006). Respondents are confronted with these short “stories” and are asked to make an informed decision. In our case study participants were asked about their trusting beliefs in the European Commission and whether they were willing to act upon these beliefs. Vignette stories may be based on a third person, who acts out or witnesses each single covariate in order to account for possible social desirability biases and to mitigate other sources of noise. A sample of how we couched our variables in such a short story is provided in Appendix I.

Our vignette is composed of four covariates which is referred to as ‘dimension’, thus each vignette story comprises four dimensions corresponding to the four situational and norm-related factors, which were hypothesized as drivers of political trust. Due to reasons of our theoretical arguments and the semantic nature of our hypotheses, variables were designed dichotomously, which means that each ‘dimension’ contained two ‘levels’ of either presence or absence. The latter were manipulated and varied randomly and independently (Beck & Opp, 2001). This means: each vignette scenario comprises four random factors (incorporating two possible levels), resulting in a full 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 experimental setting. Hence, the total number of all possible combinations of factor levels encompassed 16 vignettes (Ω=16), the so-called universe of vignettes. To each study participant, three of these vignettes were randomly assigned and presented. By such random and independent variation of interdependent variables, the problem of non-orthogonality, which is a possible source of bias in conventional survey research, is fully countered (Byers & Zeller, 1995). This allows us to study each dimension’s impact on both political trust dimensions separately (Auspurg, Liebig, & Hinz, 2009, p. 62).

**Sampling**

Data was gathered from SoSci Survey Panel Munich, which is a convenient sample containing 84,721 potential interviewees. Only German citizens were surveyed online. Our gross sample was n=617, the net sample consisted of 540 interviewees. Thus the recourse was 87.52 %, the termina-
tion rate about 49.79%. Deducting all item- and unit-non response errors, the answers of 256 respondents remained. As mentioned above, we randomly presented three vignettes (out of $\Omega=16$) to each study participant. Due to the fact that every respondent was asked to answer one entire ‘set of vignettes’, consisting of three randomly assigned and independently varied vignette stories, we are able to analyze $n= (256*3)= 742$ ‘factorial cases’, which are treated as unit of analysis. Out of this fact, the multi-level structure of our data emerges (i.e. vignettes from one respondent are more similar to one another than vignettes from two different respondents).

As mentioned in the subsequent measurement section, descriptive statistics of our sample include age, political orientation, sex, educational level, and German Federal State of residence, amongst others. Compared to the national distributions of the latter characteristics from Federal Statistical Office of Germany, our sample predominantly consists of young cohorts (25-39 years), left-oriented voters (German Green Party, DIE LINKE) as well as of a disproportionate level of higher educated people (BA-/MA-degree).

At this point, it is significant to point to the quasi-experimental nature of our research design, again. The aim of our study is to assess causality and relative importance of the four trust cues and not so much representativeness and generalizability of results to the German populace. Predominantly, the survey style nature of our vignette study is meant to mime ‘real world conditions’, thus to mitigate weaknesses of external validity, contrary to the claim of large-n generalizability of results to a broader population.

Finally, it is noteworthy that we filtered respondents’ access to the study via their knowledge on the European Commission. This was done to ensure that only citizens take part in the study, who (1) know the basic functions and broad lines of the European Commission and (2) are able to differentiate the European Commission from the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council of the European Union.
Measurements

This section presents the third level, i.e. the indicator level of our trust concept. The independent variables political participation, value congruence, performance outcome and attributability of performance outcome were measured with ‘vignette stories’ (see Appendix I). The dependent variables goodwill and competence trust as well as the behavioral consequence of trust were measured with scales and items respectively.

**Political Participation.** The possibility of political participation was assessed as an institutionalized form of political involvement (Craig & Pencavel, 1995; Hetherington, 2005). In terms of the formulation of the first vignette dimension, we follow the general idea of Hix (2013), whereupon we gave respondents the hypothetical possibility to directly vote the EC’s President (respectively no right to vote, see also Elmelund-Præstekær, Klitgaard, & Schumacher, 2015).

**Value Congruence.** We measured value congruence with a hypothetical scenario concerning the central EU right for freedom of expression. More precisely, we developed a trade-off scenario paradigmatic for the then salient case of Hungary's transgression of this fundamental European principle. We forced respondents to either side with a non-intervention decision of the European Commission or with the support of an EC-decision of severely sanctioning Hungary and/or eventually excluding it from the European Union. The underlying tone is whether people condone the UN-principal of non-intervention or a value-guided endeavor of the European Commission. This drastic example was chosen in order to find out if value-congruence really matters, even at cost of other higher-level norms.

**Performance Outcome.** We measured performance outcome with a hypothetical scenario concerning EU internal market regulation. We decided not to focus on economic performance for at least two reasons: First, we wanted to mitigate measurement biases which may arise due to the respondents’ tendency to evaluate the national government instead of the European Commission (C. J. Anderson, 1998). Second, macro-economic policy is not the genuine task of the European Commission. Thus, we rather focus on one of the EC’s sui generis competencies: Harmonization of poli-
cy areas through regulation and further European integration (Hix & Høyland, 2011). We developed a vignette where the EC managed to regulate the internal energy market, i.e. providing citizens with various benefits from the setup of a Common European Energy market contrasted with a non-competitive nation state solution.

**Attributability of the performance outcome.** We measured performance outcome attributability by means of an internal market regulation scenario concerning food safety. Food safety is predominantly ensured by European regulation already. However, participants were confronted with two scenarios, where one of them brought in attributability of the regulation by means of an EC quality tag on the respective products, whereas such a tag was absent in the other scenario. The quality seal ensures minimum standards of quality and food safety and, in case of a disease or bad quality, the customer unambiguously recognizes the EC as supervisory authority, which should have undertaken more efforts in order to guarantee what was promised.

**Political trust.** Political trust in the European Commission was measured as a decomposed index of (1) goodwill trust (two facets: benevolence and integrity expectations) and (2) competence trust, rooted in ability expectations (Mayer & Davis, 1999, see also Bøggild (2015) for a distinction between moral and pragmatic trust). In line with the work of Searle and colleagues (2011) all items have been adapted to the institutional level and translated into German. The full questionnaire is listed in the Appendix I.

We performed principal axis analysis (promax rotation) as well as structural equation modeling to evaluate the measurement model. Cronbach’s Alpha of the whole political trust scale (α= 0.95) is satisfactory, our CFA suggests, that a one-factor model of political trust (χ²=150.48 (Prob>χ²= 0.000); RMSEA: 0.144; CFI: 0.97, TLI: 0.95) is to be preferred over a two-factor model of goodwill- and competence-based trust (Perason’s correlation: r= 0.93).

**Behavioral consequences of trust.** We have operationalized the trust-based risky investment as percentage of overall taxes citizens’ are willing to direct to the European Commission (instead of devoting the same amount to national taxes). We have chosen this indicator as taxes, since
tax morale has often been linked to trust-based positive expectations in governments (Scholz & Lubell, 1998). More precisely, we follow the idea of the “slippery slope framework” rationale (Kirchler, Hoelzl, & Wahl, 2008), which is explicit on the positive relationship between trust as the psychological willingness to be vulnerable and trust-based risky behavior (i.e. tax compliance, see Gangl, Hofmann, & Kirchler, 2015; Gangl, Torgler, & Kirchler, 2015). In addition, taxes are arguably not depicting a low-cost situation. According to the aforementioned rationale of Deutsch (1960), the risky investment situation allows for a greater loss than gain because not only the financial endowment, but also ideological beliefs of the trustor are at risk, e.g. a pacifist’s tax endowment is used to finance joint armed forces. Therefore, a participant’s willingness to send his/her entire endowment of money is interpreted as a clear and unambiguous token for the trustor’s willingness to be vulnerable, based on positive expectation’s towards the trustee.

Control Variables. Because we aim to explain, why citizens trust the European Commission, We controlled for a number of individual differences and context factors, namely age, sex, educational background, political orientation, county of residence and the personal disposition to trust. Moreover, we included EU-specific variables such as personal interest in EU affairs and support for Germany’s EU-membership. Overall knowledge about the EC as a European legislative body was chosen to eliminate those respondents from the analysis, who did not have the knowledge required to understand the vignettes in the proper context.

Based on the findings of Gabel’s (1998) policy appraisal model, we included educational background (Education). Hereupon well-educated people tend to advocate the EU as a whole as well as its legislative bodies. Based on individually rational motives, Gabel (1998) shows, that poorly qualified people more often showed EU-skeptical tendencies, because the harmonization of internal markets led to an increase of labor market competition. Educational background was measured by one’s highest educational achievement.

The impact of a citizen’s political orientation (Pol.Orientation) is captured via the policy-shift model (Hix et al., 2007) assuming, that the greater the overlap of the national and supranation-
al policy model, the greater the respective endorsement for EU-integration. We argue that this also affects political trust and that centrist voters will tend to trust the EC more as opposed to party affiliates at both margins of the German policy continuum. Political orientation was measured via a respondents vote intention, i.e. “Sunday Question”.

We controlled for county of residence (Residence) following the idea of economic benefits (C. J. Anderson & Reichert, 1995). The model shows that beneficiaries of certain policies are more likely to support them. Hence, citizens living in ‘rural’ Federal states, which are likely to receive EU-structural and agricultural support, might trust the European Commission more than citizens of non-receiving states. This variable was measured by a median split of EU-subsidies.

We also controlled for personal interest in EU affairs (Interest), and the support for Germany’s EU-membership to account for a possible self-serving bias. Both aspects were measured directly and in accordance to the Eurobarometer’s wording.

We controlled for a personality trait variable: Disposition to trust. Disposition to trust has been shown to influence trust over and beyond positive expectations of the trustor (Bijlsma-Frankema, Sitkin, & Weibel, 2015). In addition it has been shown to matter strongly for abstract, less ‘experienceable’ trust objects such as institutions (Colquitt, Scott, & LePine, 2007; Freitag & Ackermann, 2015). Personal disposition to trust was measured with the multi-validated 8-item survey scale (7-point Likert) proposed by Costa and McCrae (1992).

Finally, we controlled for citizen’s knowledge on the European Commission (Knowledge) with the help of a first year exam question of an introductory class of Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Konstanz. The question was: Which of the following answers hold true? (1) The European Commission takes the initiative for European Legislation, (2) The European Commission is set up of 27 departments, each led by a Commissioners of a different member state (3) The German chancellor, Angela Merkel, is member of the European Commission (f), (4) Günther Oettinger is member of the European Commission, (5) The European Commission comprises 754 representatives (f). We then recoded answers (3) and (5), and built up a dummy of
whether or not this unit of analysis should be incorporated in the analysis.

**Analysis and Results**

We employed a simple OLS regression with clustered standard errors (SE) for citizen’s trust expectations and ordered logit-modelling with clustered SEs for the behavioral consequence of trust, i.e. *risky investment* (Long & Freese, 2006). The two methods not only account for the respective scaling of our dependent variables but also acknowledge the multilevel data structure emerging from factorial surveys in a parsimonious and ‘easy-to-interpret’ way. The fact that each respondent answered three vignettes violates the simple OLS assumption of independence, i.e. that the variance-covariance matrix of errors is diagonal and each non-zero element is the variance of error (see Dunning, 2012). Conventionally, multilevel mixed effects linear regression models comprising varying intercepts and slopes would mitigate these situations (cf. Auspurg & Hinz, 2015). However, our data does not allow for estimating varying intercepts and slopes, thus we follow the approach of Mäs, Mühler, and Opp (2005, p. 130), who argue for simple OLS, resp. logit modelling with clustered SEs on the context level as a suitable and efficient alternative. In this case, the clustering of standard errors on the respondent level (three vignettes are nested ‘within’ one respondent) is also suitable to account for the multilevel data structure in an even more parsimonious and simple manner. Moreover we coded our vignette dimensions as binary dummy variables in order to mitigate possible violations of the OLS linearity assumption as well as to increase efficiency of OLS, resp. linear logit model estimation (Byers & Zeller, 1995).

The results of our analysis are shown in tables 1 and 2.

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**INSERT TABLES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE**

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The analysis shows that value congruence signaling actions exert a strong impact on both facets of
our trust concept: political trust expectations ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.01$) and its behavioral consequences ($\beta = 0.77$, $p < 0.01$). Political participation, however, was found to only exert a strong causal impact on the behavioral consequences of trust ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$). Attributability of the performance outcome affects both facets of our trust concept - albeit in a comparatively weaker way ($\beta = 0.35$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$). Lastly, performance outcome has no impact on the behavioral consequence of trust and exerts only little influence on the political trust ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < 1\%$). Additionally, three of our control variables are worth reporting: individuals with a high disposition to trust were more likely to show political trust ($\beta = 0.11$, $p < 0.05$), and older individuals showed consistently lower trust – both perceptually as well as behaviorally – than younger ones ($\beta = -0.11$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta = -0.19$, $p < 0.05$). Finally, we also find citizens’ support for Germany’s EU-membership as a salient trust promoter. In a direct comparison of our political trust facets, citizen’s trust feelings are more strongly ($\beta = 0.76$, $p < 0.01$) influenced by citizens’ EU-membership support, than their trust-based risky investment ($\beta = 1.43$, $p < 0.1$).

**Conclusion**

The aim of our study was to investigate which cues drive citizens to trust the European Commission. We first identified four determinants of political trust from the literature. We then tested which of these determinants apply to trust in the European Commission by conducting a vignette study. Factorial surveys open novel ways to (1) link the micro- and macro-level of analysis as well as to (2) assess political (institutional) trust by virtue of its psychometric properties.

Our results point out the importance of “input cues” for political trust. The presence of “input cues” for citizen’s trust in the European Commission seems to have a great impact on both, trust beliefs and trust actions concerning the European Commission. Moreover, we can show that citizens’ trust is strongest, if they find value congruence between their own beliefs and the actions of the European Commission. Finally, our findings also point to the relevance of individual level (personality) factors, such as citizens’ personal disposition to trust.
Against the backdrop of recent academic but also real-world advancements, our results bear implications for both, theory and practice. First, the strong impact of value congruence shows that this variable has to be accounted for in a much more prominent way in future research on political trust. For us this underlines that the European Commission is widely perceived to be the guardian and promoter of the European Union as a value-based community. Clearly, citizens seem to appreciate value-based actions of the European Commission.

Concerning political participation, our results strongly advocate a stronger democratization of the EU-polity. It is interesting to note, that political participation indeed seems to affect political trust as hypothesized by a number of scholars (Hetherington, 2005; Hix et al., 2007). However, this only holds with respect to the behavioral consequences of trust. We conclude from this that citizens are more willing to become vulnerable, if they may exert stronger control and influence on their representatives (Tyler, 2001). Importantly, we suggest that people attach a strong importance to how their money will be used and by whom.

We find two major limitations of our study necessary to address. First, our respondents stem from a non-random convenience sample. Thus self-selection mechanisms may affect the external validity of our results. Yet, we want to point to the strong internal validity of our quasi-experimental research design with a strong emphasis on theoretical replicability. Second, vignette studies require respondents to possess a good imagination and the ability to think in abstract ways. To mitigate this, we carefully executed cognitive pretests of our measurement instrument and inserted filters, as to make sure that our respondents were knowledgeable about the European Commission.

Our results offer some important practical pieces of advice for the European Commission in times of crisis. Far from being indifferent to the policy process, citizens appear rather willing to become interested in European policy-making. They seem ready to support an active and responsive Commission and the more value congruence they sense, the more they trust. The Commission should thus keep its ears open and carefully listen to what EU citizens have to say. Governing above citizens’ heads can lead to mistrust, as recent developments in the negotiations of the Transatlantic
Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) underline. Moreover, the case of TTIP and, of course ‘Brexit’, stresses that citizens actually care about what they trust to be basic European values. This clearly is in line with our findings. Future research should thus follow this lead and dig more carefully into the mechanisms behind trust. Our analysis shows that trust depends on both, citizens and the European Commission. It thus is not a static concept. But change for the better demands that both, citizens and EU officials remain capable and willing ‘to Tango’.

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