On the interplay of (dis)trust, conspiracy beliefs, and populism: Fueling political divides

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Abstract

Across the globe, trust in political institutions is eroding, while societal polarization is deepening. Against this backdrop, worldviews grounded in an us-versus-them narrative—most notably conspiracy beliefs and populism—are gaining traction. Drawing on theoretical insights and empirical findings, this essay argues that declining political trust creates fertile ground for alternative belief systems that challenge the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Although distinct in content, conspiratorial and populist worldviews are closely linked by a shared foundation of institutional distrust, and they often converge in rhetoric, psychological dispositions, and behavioral outcomes. The essay further outlines how these forces may interact bidirectionally, fostering self-reinforcing cycles of political disengagement and democratic backsliding. In light of these dynamics, restoring political trust—through increased transparency, institutional accountability, and structural reforms such as greater economic equity—emerges as a crucial priority for sustaining democratic resilience and preventing further societal fragmentation.

Keywords: political trust, conspiracy beliefs, populism, trust repair

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> *Democracy does require basic bonds of trust between its citizens ... [it] breaks down when the average person feels their voice doesn't matter; that the system is rigged in favor of the rich or the powerful or some special interest.*
>
> — Barack Obama, State of the Union address of January 12, 2016

Trust is not only fundamental to well-functioning social relationships; it also serves as the cornerstone of democratic governance and societal stability. Echoing President Barack Obama's observation as summarized in his State of the Union address (Obama, 2016), scholars have emphasized that "political trust … functions as the glue that keeps the system together and as the oil that lubricates the policy machine" (van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017, p. 1). Yet, political trust—including trust in parliaments, governments, and political actors—has been on a steady global decline over the past several decades (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). In the United States, for example, only 23% of US Americans in 2024 reported trusting the federal government to do what is right "just about always" or "most of the time"—a figure that has remained consistently low for over 15 years (Pew Research Center, 2024). Some scholars have therefore characterized the current times as an "era of distrust" (Kirk & Schill, 2024).

As political trust declines, alternative belief systems that challenge institutional legitimacy—such as conspiracy theories and populism—gain momentum (Bergmann & Butter, 2020; van den Bos, 2018). In essence, distrust in political institutions functions as an affordance for resistance, withdrawal, and defection. Simultaneously, the proliferation of conspiracy beliefs and populist rhetoric can further undermine trust in democratic institutions, generating a self-reinforcing cycle of distrust and polarization. This essay investigates the intricate relationship between political (dis)trust, conspiracy beliefs, and populism, exploring

how their interaction exacerbates political divisions. I argue that systematic efforts to rebuild political trust—for example, through enhanced transparency, accountability, and economic equity—are urgently required to safeguard democratic values and prevent deepening societal fragmentation.

Political trust

Broadly defined, trust encompasses positive expectations about others' intentions and behaviors, accompanied by a willingness to make oneself vulnerable to those actions (e.g., Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 1998; Thielmann & Hilbig, 2015). In other words, "trust means deferring with comfort and confidence to others, about something beyond our knowledge or power, in ways that can potentially hurt us" (Whyte & Crease, 2010, p. 412). A central feature of trust is its relational nature: One party (the trustor) places trust in another party (the trustee), whose actions may have significant consequences for the trustor. Importantly, trustees are not limited to individuals; organization and institution can also serve as objects of trust. Although institutional trust differs in key ways from interpersonal trust (e.g., Hardin, 2013), the former is arguably shaped by the perceived trustworthiness of individual representatives within those institutions (Latusek & Cook, 2025).

The focus of the current essay is on *political trust*, a specific form of institutional trust directed towards political actors such as parliaments, governments, and political parties. Political trust refers to "citizens' assessments of the core institutions of the polity and entails a positive evaluation of the most relevant attributes that make each political institution trustworthy, such as credibility, fairness, competence, transparency in its policy-making, and openness to competing views" (Zmerli, 2014, p. 4887). In line with this conceptualization, scholars have widely acknowledged the importance of political trust as a foundation for well-functioning, resilient democracies (e.g., Berg, 2021; Dalton, 2004; Dodsworth & Cheeseman, 2020; Kirk & Schill, 2024; van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017).

Conversely, political *dis*trust has been identified as "a danger for the healthy functioning of democratic systems" (Bertsou, 2019, p. 218). Whereas political distrust is commonly conceptualized as a lack of political trust, some scholars argue for its conceptual separation, noting that a lack of trust does not necessarily equate to distrust, and vice versa (e.g., Bertsou, 2019; Lahusen, 2024; van de Walle & and Six, 2014). However, given that it is unlikely for an individual to simultaneously trust and distrust the same institution—which would support a conceptual separation—I herein join those scholars who adopt a unidimensional perspective, viewing trust and distrust as opposite ends of a single continuum (e.g., Cook & Gronke, 2005; van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017).

It is also worth noting that some theoretical traditions—particularly liberal political theory—regard distrust as a necessary feature of democratic vigilance (see, e.g., Hardin, 2013). This form of *liberal distrust* reflects the idea that citizens should maintain a healthy skepticism to guard against potential abuses of power, rather than placing blind faith in political institutions and leaders. However, in established democracies where institutional safeguards such as checks and balances, legal oversight, and public accountability mechanisms are already in place, this form of distrust may no longer serve its original protective function. In this view, liberal distrust (understood as a form of vigilance) should be distinguished from political distrust in the broader sense, the latter of which may impair effective governance and erode democratic norms (Bertsou, 2019).

Taken together, I concur that political trust is essential for democratic governance and that its erosion poses significant risks. The following sections elaborate on this argument by examining the relationship between political (dis)trust and two counter-hegemonic belief systems: conspiracy thinking and populism.

Belief in Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories describe "attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more

powerful actors" (Douglas et al., 2019, p. 4). At their core, conspiracy theories express a profound suspicion that powerful entities—such as governments, corporations, or elites—operate covertly to pursue harmful or self-serving agendas. In this sense, distrust of powerful others constitutes a defining feature of conspiratorial thinking (Pierre, 2020).

Supporting this conceptualization, empirical research consistently documents a robust inverse relation between conspiracy beliefs and trust. Specifically, individuals with a heightened *conspiracy mentality*—a dispositional tendency to interpret events as the result of conspiracies (Bruder et al., 2013; Goertzel, 1994; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Wood et al., 2012)—tend to report lower trust in others in general (e.g., Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Brotherton et al., 2013; Golec de Zavala & Federico, 2018; Miller et al., 2016; Thielmann & Hilbig, 2023), as well as lower trust in political institutions in particular (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018; Pummerer et al., 2021; Richey, 2017; Swami et al., 2010). More broadly, individuals with heightened conspiracy mentality are systematically less likely to trust high-power information sources (e.g., governments, mainstream media), while exhibiting no such aversion to low-power sources (Imhoff et al., 2018). Relatedly, meta-analytic evidence suggests that conspiracy beliefs are associated with subclinical paranoia (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018), a trait marked by suspiciousness, hypervigilance, and the tendency to interpret others' actions as threatening or deceitful. Nonetheless, paranoia is conceptually distinct from conspiracy beliefs: whereas the former entails the perception of personal threat from many, the latter posit collective threat from a few targeting the broader population (Imhoff & Lamberty, 2018; van Prooijen & Van Lange, 2014).

Given the close association between conspiracy beliefs and (political) trust, the question of directionality of this relationship naturally arises. On the one hand, low levels of trust may predispose individuals to adopt conspiratorial beliefs. For example, a person skeptical of political integrity may be particularly receptive to theories alleging political corruption. According to the Two-Component, Socio-Epistemic Model of Belief in Conspiracy Theories

(Pierre, 2020), distrust acts as a catalyst for epistemically biased information processing. In this view, a lack of trust in traditional institutions—such as the government or polity more broadly— facilitates selective exposure to narratives that oppose mainstream epistemic authorities, including conspiracy theories. Paradoxically, such distrust may foster—not prevent—misinformation: "the distrust mindset … is precisely what leads people to embrace disinformation that offers an alternative narrative to mainstream accurate information" (Mayo, 2024, p. 3). Distrust may thus serve as fertile ground for conspiratorial thinking.

On the other hand, exposure to conspiracy theories may, over time, erode trust in institutional actors. This dynamic can be understood through the lens of belief updating (Kube & Rozenkrantz, 2020). New information that challenges one's prior beliefs can shape existing beliefs if integrated into one's broader belief system. Such integration—and corresponding updating—is more likely the weaker the prior beliefs are. By implication, a person with a moderate (rather than high) level of political trust may be susceptible to conspiracy theories and, in turn, adjust their prior beliefs downwards, that is, trust political institutions less. This should more likely occur when being exposed to the same conspiracy theory repeatedly, as repeated exposure may increase the perceived veracity of the respective claim (Béna et al., 2023). Evidence for the idea that exposure to conspiratorial narratives can indeed erode trust comes from a randomized experiment in which participants in the experimental condition saw a 15-minutes video clip on the Moon landing conspiracy (Kim & Cao, 2016). Besides an increase in the belief of the conspiracy theory following exposure, participants reported reduced trust in the government, both immediately after seeing the video and two weeks later as compared to before. Similarly, exposure to conspiracy theories regarding government involvement in major events reduced political engagement intentions, although it did not significantly affect institutional trust (Jolley & Douglas, 2014b). Then again, other research showed that exposure to anti-vaccine conspiracy theories decreased vaccination intentions via reduced trust in authorities (Jolley & Douglas, 2014a).

Taken together, the relationship between conspiracy beliefs and (political) trust appears to be bidirectional. However, current empirical evidence is more robust for the claim that low trust predicts belief in conspiracy theories than for the reverse causal pathway.

Populism

Populism is commonly defined as "a set of ideas that constructs society as divided between 'us' the pure people, and 'them' the corrupt and self-serving elites" (Obradović et al., 2020, p. 125). Central to this worldview is a profound distrust of elites—a feature that populism shares with conspiratorial thinking. Individuals endorsing populist views tend to perceive political, economic, and intellectual elites as inherently corrupt, self-interested, and thus unworthy of trust.

This alignment between populist appeal and institutional distrust has tangible behavioral implications. When individuals perceive the political system as untrustworthy, they may be more inclined to support "anti-system" or outsider candidates who promise to challenge the status quo. Indeed, empirical evidence demonstrates that low levels of trust in political institutions (Erisen & Erisen, 2025; Piazza, 2023), generalized distrust in others and society at large (Thielmann & Hilbig, 2023), and reduced trust in experts and science (Herrera & Trombetta, 2024) are positively related to populist attitudes. Similarly, lower political trust has been linked to support for populist parties within democratic systems (Geurkink et al., 2020), as well as for insurgent anti-establishment candidates such as Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Elections (Dyck et al., 2018). As summarized elsewhere, "political distrust behaviorally increases how gullible voters are to the simple alternative worldviews proposed by populists" (Herrera & Trombetta, 2024, p. 1).

However, not all forms of distrust yield the same political consequences. Fieschi and Heywood (2004) distinguish between a cynical view of politics, which tends to produce support for so-called *political entrepreneurs*—outsiders who challenge the political class from within the system—and genuine institutional distrust, which is more likely to foster support

for traditional populism, particularly of the radical-right variant. This distinction suggests that different types or intensities of political distrust may underlie support for different populist actors, highlighting the complex and multifaceted role of (dis)trust in shaping populist mobilization.

Paradoxically, the relationship between political distrust and populism also implies that individuals most suspicious of the democratic system may place their trust in populist leaders—figures who, ironically, may be more deceptive than those they seek to replace. As Müller (2022) notes, such leaders "can safely be assumed to be lying—maybe not all the time, but much more frequently than other politicians" (p. 607). The case of Donald Trump is particularly illustrative: Estimates suggest that he made more than 30,000 false or misleading claims during his first presidency alone (Kessler et al., 2021). Yet, his supporters often perceived him as someone who "tells it like it is" and reveals the truth behind closed doors.

Indeed, populist leaders actively capitalize on institutional distrust, positioning themselves as authentic alternatives to a corrupt establishment. Their deception is often reframed as truth-telling—an authentic performance in contrast to the perceived hypocrisy of the elite (Erisen & Erisen, 2025). By framing the political elite as malevolent and themselves as the sole voice of "the people," populist leaders construct a binary moral narrative that resonates strongly with disaffected voters. Notably, these narratives often fall on fertile ground: Evidence on *populist gullibility* shows that individuals with strong populist attitudes are more likely to endorse unfounded or obscure claims, including increased receptivity to bullshit statements and supernatural beliefs (van Prooijen et al., 2022). This brings the discussion back to conspiracy beliefs. Although conspiracy theories have been considered a "non-necessary element of populist discourses" (Bergmann & Butter, 2020, p. 340), they are frequently employed by populist leaders and widely believed by their supporters (e.g., Castanho Silva et al., 2017; Christner, 2022; Erisen et al., 2021; Thielmann & Hilbig, 2023; van Prooijen et al., 2022). In the following section, I further examine this intersection between

conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes, with a particular focus on (dis)trust as a key underlying mechanism of their overlap.

Distrust as the link between conspiracy beliefs and populism

As outlined above, distrust—particularly towards political institutions and actors—constitutes a defining feature of both conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes. This shared foundation has been widely recognized at the conceptual level (e.g., Bergmann & Butter, 2020; Hendricks & Vestergaard, 2019; Müller, 2022; Pellegrini et al., 2024; van Prooijen, 2018) and is increasingly supported by empirical evidence. Several studies converge on the idea that distrust represents the psychological basis that unites conspiratorial and populist worldviews (Christner, 2022; Papaioannou et al., 2023; Thielmann & Hilbig, 2023).

In particular, in our own prior research (Thielmann & Hilbig, 2023), we showed that conspiracy mentality and populist attitudes share a common dispositional basis, characterized by a *sociopolitically flavored manifestation of generalized distrust*. This latent disposition was operationalized through various individual difference variables reflecting low trust in others and in society at large—namely, trust propensity, trait cynicism, dangerous and threatening social worldview, competitive jungle social worldview, and sensitivity to befallen injustice. Crucially, generalized dispositional distrust not only accounted for the shared variance between conspiracy mentality and populist attitudes, but also fully explained their joint association with aversive personality, as captured by the Dark Factor of Personality: "the general tendency to maximize one's individual utility—disregarding, accepting, or malevolently provoking disutility for others—, accompanied by beliefs that serve as justifications" (Moshagen et al., 2018, p. 656). These findings position dispositional distrust as a unifying psychological construct at the intersection of conspiratorial and populist ideation.

Complementary evidence further highlights the importance of distrust in accounting for the link between conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes. For example, across three studies

run in Greece, the UK, and the US, the relation between conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes was consistently mediated by political cynicism—a form of institutional distrust characterized by skepticism toward the motives and integrity of political actors (Papaioannou et al., 2023). By contrast, mediation via zero-sum thinking and feelings of powerlessness emerged less consistently, reinforcing the centrality of distrust in explaining the conspiracy-populism link.

Notably, the overlap between conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes extends beyond the dispositional level and is also shaped by broader sociopolitical dynamics, particularly those associated with ideological extremism and polarization. Conspiratorial thinking tends to be especially prevalent at the ideological extremes: Whereas it is more common on the far right, it is also present on the far left (e.g., Imhoff et al., 2022; Sutton & Douglas, 2020). In turn, it is precisely at the ideological extremes where populist narratives are most salient. By implication, the convergence of conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes is not only rooted in shared dispositional distrust, but is also amplified by radicalized political contexts in which distrust of mainstream institutions and elites is systematically cultivated. Taken together, this body of research underscores the central role of (dis)trust as both a psychological and sociopolitical nexus linking conspiracy beliefs and populism.

Restoring Political Trust

The theoretical considerations and empirical findings outlined above underscore the critical importance of political trust for the stability and effective functioning of democratic systems. Critically, however, contemporary developments suggest that political trust is often neglected or actively undermined by political actors, with potentially severe consequences for democratic governance. A recent example from Germany illustrates the recklessness with which some politicians gamble with trust: Only a few days after his party obtained the majority in the federal elections in Germany in 2025, Friedrich Merz, the likely new German chancellor, broke one of *the* core campaign promises by releasing the debt brake. This action

triggered widespread public backlash, with 73% of respondents in a national survey reporting that they felt "betrayed" by Merz and the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU). Similar examples are well-documented, consistently showing that political scandals severely undermine political trust (Bowler & Karp, 2004; Chanley et al., 2000; Maier, 2011; Moy & Scheufele, 2000).

Such breaches of trust are problematic because "trust is easily destroyed but slow to build" (Kirk & Schill, 2024, p. 16). In part, this is due to self-reinforcing cycles of distrust, wherein diminished confidence in institutions fosters the rise of populist figures, who in turn perpetuate further erosion of trust. As Herrera and Trombetta (2024) argue, "when trust falls below a certain threshold, the presence of populist politicians generates trust traps, where power cycles between traditional and populist politicians and political trust never recovers" (p. 31). Müller (2022) describes a similar dynamic, suggesting that "populists precisely refuse to see others as legitimate contenders for power. In fact, in one sense, there is no reason at all for them to properly engage with the other side in a conflict, because that other side does not belong" (p. 613). Overall, accepting a loss in political trust entails the risk for democratic institutions to lose their capacity to regenerate legitimacy.

In light of these dynamics, systematic efforts to restore political trust are imperative. Bachmann et al. (2015) identify six key mechanisms for trust repair in institutional settings that can also be applied to the political domain:

1. *Sense-making* involves establishing a shared understanding of the causes behind a breach of trust and identifying who is responsible. In political contexts, transparent investigations and public inquiries can facilitate this process. However, although some evidence suggests that sense-making efforts may restore trust in institutions (e.g., in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis; Mueller et al., 2015), they are not without limitations. Paradoxically, investigations can further erode trust if they reveal misconduct that is more severe than initially assumed. Additionally, it is

crucial that these investigations are carried out by an independent third party that the public perceives as sincere; otherwise, they risk further diminishing trust.

2. The *relational approach* focuses on emotional repair through symbolic gestures, apologies, punishment of wrongdoers, or compensation. In political settings, this might entail resignations, formal apologies, or legal accountability—actions that signal genuine remorse and restore a sense of justice. Again using Germany as an example, the declining frequency of political resignations—now more the exception than the norm (Philipp, 2007)—thus raises concerns about the restoration of political trust.

3. *Regulation and formal control* draw on trust restoration through robust institutional mechanisms that prevent future violations. Strengthening anti-corruption frameworks, enhancing oversight, and empowering watchdog organizations are central to this strategy, as they demonstrate a commitment to transparency and accountability. As defined above, however, such mechanisms may primarily counteract liberal distrust (i.e., vigilance) rather than political distrust. Nonetheless, they are arguably an important pillar of well-functioning democratic societies.

4. Cultivating a strong *ethical culture*, modeled by political leaders and supported through informal controls, is essential for (re)building trust. Research shows that emphasizing political honesty and integrity can indeed increase political trust (Faulkner et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2020). By implication, media coverage should not only draw attention to politicians' dishonesty and unethical conduct—thereby capitalizing on negativity bias (Baumeister et al., 2001)—but also regularly provide positive examples of political integrity.

5. Establishing *transparency and accountability* involves open sharing of relevant information and creating mechanisms for holding individuals and institutions accountable. Complementary strategies include authentic political communication—

such as making partial promises and offering sincere explanations for failures—which have proven promising means to mitigate trust losses (Weinberg, 2024).

6. Finally, *trust transference* means that trust is transferred from a trustworthy third party to the discredited entity. For example, partnerships with trusted figures (e.g., respected civil society figures, international organizations, or nonpartisan entities) may support this process. Importantly, however, the effectiveness of this approach is contingent on the perceived legitimacy and credibility of the third party.

In addition to these six mechanisms, structural reforms are critical. Political trust is not solely a matter of institutional performance; it is also shaped by broader social and economic conditions. Evidence suggests that inequality—especially during periods of crisis—significantly erodes public trust (Algan et al., 2017). Thus, policies that address economic disparities and promote inclusive governance may mitigate the appeal of antiestablishment narratives and foster renewed trust in democratic institutions.

Conclusion

Political trust has long been regarded as the glue that holds democracies together. Yet today, it is at a historic low across many democratic societies. This erosion of political trust has coincided with a marked rise in conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes—indeed, evidence suggests that a deep-seated distrust is at the core of what unites conspiracy beliefs and populist attitudes. These developments pose a substantial threat to democratic stability and the legitimacy of governance. An illustration of this is the widespread belief among many Americans that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was fraudulent and that Donald Trump was the rightful winner (Pennycook & Rand, 2021)—a falsehood that culminated in the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol.

These dynamics illustrate how the decline of political trust can have tangible and far-reaching consequences, undermining core democratic norms and fueling anti-establishment

sentiment. As such, restoring political trust must be recognized as a strategic imperative. Although the path to trust recovery is complex and unlikely to yield immediate results, it is essential for preserving democratic resilience in the face of growing polarization, disillusionment, and institutional skepticism. Without a concerted effort to repair the trust deficit, the foundational principles of democratic governance may become increasingly vulnerable to erosion.

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